Metis and the art of playing with contradictions

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ABSTRACT
The metics, or those who live in-between several different cultures, nations, races, ethnicities, or identities, have a major epistemological advantage: they are more likely to develop a way of knowing, different from Western rationality, that could help transform oppressive institutions and identities. I will call this way of knowing metis, and argue that it allows one to handle more effectively ambiguous and complex situations. I will define it as the art of playing with contradictions, and maintain that it generates new knowledge from the tension between divergent forces. Even though metis works with or through contradictions, it does not violate the principle of non-contradiction, and in this sense is not incompatible with rationality. In fact, rationality is unsustainable without metis. To elaborate these ideas I will rely on several concepts developed by Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa and Eastern European philosopher Merab Mamardashvili.

Mestiços e a arte de jogar com contradições

RESUMO
Os metecos, ou aqueles que moram entre culturas, nações, raças, etnias ou identidades distintos, têm uma vantagem epistemológica significante: eles são mais propensos a desenvolver um modo de conhecer, diferente da racionalidade ocidental, que poderia ajudar a transformar instituições opressivas e identidades. Chamarei esse modo de conhecer metis e argumentarei que isso permite lidar com situações ambíguas e complexas mais eficazmente. Vou defini-lo como a arte de lidar com contradições e sustento que ele gera novos conhecimentos proveniente da tensão entre forças divergentes. Mesmo que o metis trabalhe com ou por meio de contradições, ele não viola o princípio da não-contradição e, nesse sentido, não é incompatible com a racionalidade. De fato, a racionalidade é insustentável sem metis. Para elucidar essas ideias, vou utilizar vários conceitos desenvolvidos por uma escritora chicana, Gloria Anzaldúa, e por um filósofo da Europa Oriental, Merab Mamardashvili. Falando de diferentes contextos culturais e geopolíticos, ambos os pensadores afirmam que é epistemologicamente mais vantajoso posicionar-se entre as principais culturas e identidades.
Los mestizos y el arte de jugar con contradicciones

RESUMEN
Los mestizos, o aquellos que viven entre diferentes culturas, naciones, razas, etnias o identidades tienen una gran ventaja epistemológica: son más propensos a desarrollar una forma de conocimiento, diferente de la racionalidad occidental, que podría ayudar a transformar las instituciones e identidades opresivas. Llamaré a esta forma de conocer metis y argumentaré que le permite a uno lidiar más eficazmente con situaciones ambiguas y complejas. Lo definiré como el arte de jugar con las contradicciones, y sostendré que genera nuevos conocimientos a partir de la tensión entre fuerzas divergentes. A pesar de que metis trabaja con o por medio de contradicciones, no viola el principio de no contradicción, y en este sentido no es incompatible con la racionalidad. De hecho, la racionalidad es insostenible sin metis. Para desarrollar estas ideas me basaré en varios conceptos desarrollados por una escritora Chicana, Gloria Anzaldúa y un filósofo de Europa del Este, Merab Mamardashvili. Hablando desde diferentes contextos culturales y geopolíticos, ambos pensadores sostienen que es epistemológicamente más ventajoso posicionarse entre las principales culturas e identidades.

1. Introduction

How can a minor self or community survive or flourish in situations where the rules of the game are set by the major players? How can a metic find her way among structures and institutions that prioritize homogenous and stable identities? How does one locate a place from which to transform the dominant ways of knowing? To begin answering these questions I would like to bring into discussion metis – a way of knowing that is different from, but not incompatible with Western rationality. This way of knowing can be defined as the art of holding together contradictions. It is more accessible to the individuals and communities that find themselves in-between several cultures, races, ethnicities, languages, or established identities, because they are more likely to develop the skill of juggling oppositions and seeming contradictions. Metis helps generate more complex conceptions of the self and the world, because it engages with contradictions, and yet does not violate the principle of non-contradiction. As a result, metis enables one to subvert hegemonic knowledge-power systems, which, in some cases, might be more desirable than destroying them and building anew. In this essay, I do not discuss how to transform these hegemonic...
systems, and what might happen to those who are bringing about this change, but rather I focus on elucidating an epistemological position and a way of knowing that make such transformation possible.

Due to the limited nature of this project I confine myself primarily to the texts of a Chicana thinker Gloria Anzaldúa and an Eastern European philosopher Merab Mamardashvili, although there are rich bodies of literature – by Eastern European, Latin American, Chicana, Latina, Critical Race and other theorists – that could, and even should also be brought into this conversation. Even though Anzaldúa and Mamardashvili come from vastly different cultural and intellectual contexts, they share important epistemological ground: both created new concepts and styles of thinking from the position in-between several major cultures, languages, and identities; both were partial outsiders or internal strangers to Western culture, and recognized the epistemological advantages of their paradoxical position. In other words, both were *minor* thinkers, and “there is nothing … revolutionary except the minor” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986).

In the first section, I begin my discussion by introducing Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s term “minor” (1986) as well as Sandra Harding’s notion of strong objectivity (2004). I use both of these concepts to explain why a human being who positions herself in-between several cultures, pre-established identities, or languages, has an epistemological advantage over a “major” self. “Minor” is not the opposite of major. It escapes or falls through the cracks of social hierarchies, while having partial entry into some of the pre-established institutions or identities. For instance, an Eastern European self, being neither Russian, nor Ukrainian, neither European nor non-European, has access to all of these identities, and, moreover, has the ability to develop a “borderlands” point of view that leads to a more objective understanding of the world. I agree with Harding that the traditional Western conception of objectivity is not rigorous enough. Rather than abandoning the idea of objectivity, one must be more exigent of truth claims, for instance, requiring that they result from complex conversations between the selves and societies whose points of view diverge. *Metis* is a way of knowing that excels at such conversations.

In the second section, I explain the double origins of the term *metis*. It preserves the echo of the idea that in the ancient Greek culture rationality co-existed with another way of knowing called *mētis*. It also reminds one that *metis* is more readily accessible to metics, or those whose origins are mixed: a *mestiza* is more likely to develop *metis*.

To show that rationality is not the only child of Western civilization, in the third section I discuss the ancient Greek notion of *mētis* by relying on the work of two historians: Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1978). The culture that is considered to be the cradle of Western civilization was built around the idea that rationality cannot be sustained without another – polymorph, ambiguous, oblique, and more supple – way of knowing. The case of ancient Greece supports my claim that rationality needs other, less systematic and categorical ways of knowing.

The work of Merab Mamardashvili, a Soviet-era Georgian philosopher, allows me to identify the metic’s vantage point in the fourth section of this essay. Mamardashvili argued that his claims about Europe or Russia are more objective precisely because he did not belong to either European, or Russian, or even Georgian culture (2019). From his position in-between these three cultures, for instance, he articulated a much more objective definition of Europe. He pointed out that Europe is the process of complexity
and diversity, and so, an event that requires sustained effort, and only rarely coincides with the geopolitical entity that we know by that name.

The fifth section is dedicated to the ideas of Gloria Anzaldúa (1999, 2009, 2002; Anzaldua and Keating 2000) and contemporary Latina thinkers, including María Lugones (1987, 2006) and Mariana Ortega (2016), who explore several key features of the way of knowing from this “in-between vantage point.” I show that metis helps one arrive at an insight more quickly, precisely because it circumvents the more direct logical ways of thinking. It helps devise tactics to navigate unfavorable or dangerous situations. Metis enables shifts in understanding, and ways of life, and could even help one shift paradigms. More supple than reason, metis helps one better handle complex ideas and situations, and is resistant to dogmatism and oppression.

Although it is impossible to provide a precise, unambiguous definition of metis, one can attain a clear notion of it by focusing on the way metis works with contradictions. The sixth section is dedicated to this idea. Both Eastern European and Latina thinkers emphasize the significance of contradictions for this other, non-conventional way of knowing. Some of them note that metis “thrives on” and “sustains” contradictions. I argue, however, that metis does not violate the principle of non-contradiction, but plays with contraries and contradictories.

In the seventh section, I claim that metis is the skill or the art of holding together the divergent “horns” of being. Mamardashvili explores this idea of tension between the differently directed forces (2000) by reflecting on Heraclitus’ saying “They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre” (D. 51). I connect Mamardashvili’s discussion to a line from Mário de Andrade’s poem, “I’m a Tupi who plays the lute!” (1968), and argue that the one who is “at variance with herself” can more easily set off the arrow of thinking, or make resound a new idea. Reflecting on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s claim that “we, Western intellectuals” have to begin with the “vision’ of Zeno’s immobile arrow” (2011b, 141), i.e. with the impossibility of producing new knowledge, I argue that the metic’s metis might allow one to circumvent this epistemological impasse.

Before presenting my analysis of these ideas, I would like to acknowledge the position from which I am writing, as it both informs and circumscribes this essay. I grew up in Eastern Europe between three ethnicities, cultures, and languages, every one of which I could and could not call my own: the imperial Russian (the language and the culture of my biological father, who has been entirely absent from my life), the Polish (my mother’s dominant ethnicity), and the Ukrainian – the ethnicity of my maternal grandfather, the significance of which became clear to me during the Maidan Revolution. To further complicate things, I received my academic training in the US, and my technical or professional language – the language in which I write philosophy – is English. This means that apart from living in-between the Russian, the Polish, and the Ukrainian cultures, I am also stretched between the European culture and Eastern Europe.

By “Eastern Europe” I mean neither Ukraine, nor Poland, nor the sum of these or other neighboring countries, but an obscure, paradoxical place that is neither Europe, nor non-Europe, i.e. one of Europe’s others. Wedged between two imperial cultures – the Russian and the Western, Eastern Europe was constructed during the age of Enlightenment to play the role of Europe’s complement. Without being clearly or manifestly “Other,” Eastern Europe embodies everything that Europe does not wish to recognize as itself: lack of
refinement and sophistication, unenlightened, backward ways of life, and other more or less significant imperfections. Eastern Europe was constructed as an ambiguous place, a land of “nonsense and paradox” (Wolff 1994, 20, 95). It is not so much a geographical or geopolitical entity, as it is an abject place. It is not surprising that the nations aspiring to join the ranks of the major Western players have persistently tried to disassociate themselves from the idea of Eastern Europe, by, for instance, claiming to be Central European.

Precisely because of its ambiguity and obscurity – in-betweenness – Eastern Europe is epistemologically rich: those who are labeled as, or identify themselves as, Eastern European are better positioned to bring into being new ideas, kinds of selves, and political communities. This is why the way of knowing that I am here calling metis is more accessible to those who find themselves in ambiguous places.

2. Revolutionary minor

Major powers – nation states or individuals – have major advantages: military, economic, political. What about minor cultures or minor selves? I take the term “minor” from Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s discussion of literature. They call the process of writing “minor” if it takes place in-between several different languages or artistic styles. Franz Kafka, for instance, is a minor writer “caught between several languages [Czech, Yiddish, German, and Hebrew] and at home in none” (Bogue 1997, 105). Deleuze and Guattari note that Kafka’s writing is minor not because he focuses on the trivial, peripheral, and insignificant details of daily life. If majority “assumes a state of power and domination,” minority is not its opposite. Minor literature is not “the literature of minorities, the literature of secondary authors or small nations, the literature of the avant-garde – but a way of writing, a use of language” (Bogue 1997, 115). Minor does not mean lesser; it is not the contrary of major. The difference between the minor and the major cannot be quantified, and the two are not a part of an ordinal sequence. Instead, a minor language, culture, or self reveals the ways in which major powers are not as major as one might think: it brings out the groundlessness of autochthony, majority, and mastery.

How could a minor people or a minor self transform or even endure adverse geopolitical, economic, or military situations? After all, major cultures and nation states have ostensible advantages. How could a minor people or a minor self endure in adverse geopolitical, economic, or military situations, and, moreover, have the ability to transform them? A key advantage that outweighs the strengths of major players is, paradoxically, the fact that a minor player is disadvantaged – that she is in-between major cultures, ethnicities, or races, because this makes her more likely to develop a more objective understanding of herself, others, and the world.

As Sandra Harding demonstrates, the problem with the conventional conception of objectivity is that it is not rigorous enough: “it is too weak to accomplish even the goals for which it has been designed, let alone the more difficult projects called for by feminisms and other new social movements” (2004, 128). The communities and the selves who have access to several major cultures without fully belonging to any of them, can develop the kind of knowing that I call metis. This allows them to circumvent some of the impasses or antinomies that haunt Western rationality, as well as resist dogmatism and oppressiveness of traditional Western thinking. Metis is not incompatible with rationality, and it seems that
problems such as xenophobia, economic inequality, or global warming, could be addressed much more adequately if the two ways of thinking were to join forces.

3. Etymology of metis

Metis has mixed etymological origins: one of its “bloodlines” leads to the French métis and métisse, and their Spanish equivalents – mestizo and mestiza, all of which are derived from the Latin mixtus, or mixing. Historically, these terms referred to people of mixed white and American Indian origin, and carried pejorative connotations. They have been increasingly used as neutral descriptors of those human beings who have mixed origins. Anzaldúa re-appropriates the feminine mestiza,¹ and explores creative and revolutionary potentials of the selves who are racially, culturally, and linguistically mixed.

Metis’s other etymological line takes one back to ancient Greece: the Greeks distinguished between logos (the meaning of which was markedly different, at least until Aristotle, from what we came to know as traditional Western rationality), and the kind of intelligence that, for instance, allowed Odysseus to get an upper hand in his encounter with the Cyclops. The Greeks called this other way of knowing métis. The dominant Western approach to knowledge production renders métis invisible: “The concerns of abstraction, propositional knowledge, logocentric formulation, and ‘objective’ bases of knowledge” – objective in the weak sense – make métis invisible “because it cannot be formulated in terms of a definition or essence and because its ‘objects’ are changing, ambiguous situations that are not amenable to rigorous logical demonstration” (Raphals 1992, 3). Starting some time around the fourth century before our era, Greek, and later Western philosophers began suppressing, or became altogether oblivious to métis: it was “thrust into the shadows, erased from the realm of true knowledge” (Detienne and Vernant 1978, 4).

I use the term méti (which I spell differently from the French and the ancient Greek terms) to preserve the echo of the idea that rationality is not the only child of Western civilization, and that it co-existed with other ways of knowing in the ancient Greek culture. By calling this other way of knowing méti I also wish to allude to the fact that it is more readily accessible to metics, or those whose origins are mixed, and who find themselves in-between several races or cultures. A mestiza is more likely to develop méti.

4. Ancient Greek métis

Marcel Detienne’s and Jean-Pierre Vernant’s discussion of métis in ancient Greek society might strike one as having many convergences with several key notions developed by Eastern European, Chicana, and Latina thinkers, some of which I discuss below. Even so, I want to emphasize that the way of knowing I am proposing here is different from the ancient Greek métis: I am not claiming that these Greek ideas reappeared in Anzaldúa or Mamardashvili, or that these thinkers rediscovered what was known to the archaic Greeks. Instead, I wish to underscore that Western civilization suppressed a way of thinking

¹See Ortega (2016), Trianosky (2010), and Vargas-Monroy (2011) for an in-depth discussion of Anzaldúa’s use of the term mestiza.
that the Greeks considered as valuable as logos, and that today rationality is just as much in need of other ways of knowing as it was “in the beginning.”

Mētis helped reverse situations in which one of the parties had a “natural” or ostensible advantage over the other: it turned the tables on those who wielded greater physical, economic, or sociopolitical power. Mētis involved the ability to notice non-traditional ways of approaching a given situation. The Iliad contains a famous example of mētis: Antilochus enters a chariot race with inferior horses, but devises a maneuver that “enables him to reverse an unfavorable situation and to triumph over competitors who are stronger than he is” (Detienne and Vernant 1978, 12). He does not break the rules of this race even though afterward he is accused of cheating. Instead, he devises a tactic that throws his main rival, Menelaus, off balance: Antilochus makes a sharp turn with his chariot, and, instinctively, Menelaus reigns in his horses. This momentary delay allows Antilochus to win the race. Menelaus, of course, has no incentive to develop any such tactics – he knows that his horses are superior. Those who have a clear advantage are less likely to develop mētis – they need not question the status quo to survive or succeed.

Odysseus’ encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus is another well-known instance of mētis. Instantly sensing that he is in a precarious situation, Odysseus tells the giant that his name is Nobody, and later Polyphemus is obliged to tell other Cyclops that Nobody is attacking him. Hearing this, the giants return to their caves. The following morning another clever trick allows Odysseus and his companions to escape Polyphemus’ cavern.

Detienne and Vernant also point out that mētis is much more useful than rational or linear thinking when one is dealing with ambiguous situations – with what they call “shifting terrain” (1978, 14). When one’s circumstances constantly change, or when there is overwhelming or conflicting information, linear thinking that prioritizes unity is helpless or inadequate. According to Homer, mētis is “not one, not unified, but multiple and diverse” (Detienne and Vernant 1978, 18) and this is why it is much more effective in “the world of movement, of multiplicity, and of ambiguity. It bears on fluid situations which are constantly changing and which at every moment combine contrary features and forces that are opposed to each other” (Detienne and Vernant 1978, 20). To make sense of complex and fluid situations, thinking must become more “supple, even more shifting, even more polymorphic” than these situations (Detienne and Vernant 1978, 20).

Mētis enables one to change, adjust, or shape-shift. Octopus was particularly revered by the Greeks for embodying mētis: its supple body can take all kinds of shapes precisely because it does not have a shell – an ostensible advantage. Odysseus, one of whose epithets was polumētis, or “of much mētis,” was also called an octopus. Detienne and Vernant point out that if the goal of rationality is to be “straight, direct, rigid and unequivocal,” mētis is “pliable and twisted, … oblique and ambiguous” (1978, 46).

The rule of Zeus, unlike that of the Titans, was much more orderly and rational: Zeus systematized and categorized the universe. He made the gods specialize: Aphrodite, for instance, was the goddess of love, and Athena – the goddess of warfare. So when Aphrodite was wounded by a human in a battle over the city of Troy, the other gods ridiculed her: she should not have joined the fighting, overstepping the boundaries of her expertise. Still Zeus was aware that he could not maintain this rational order without relying on other ways of knowing, and to secure his reign he married Metis – the goddess of non-linear, polymorphic wisdom famous for her power of metamorphosis. When Metis became pregnant, the fear of losing the status of the major power to his offspring overwhelmed the son
of Kronos. Giving into this fear, Zeus swallowed his pregnant wife. Much can be said about what this myth reveals or suggests about the ancient Greek mindset. I only wish to point out that the culture that is considered to be the cradle of Western civilization was built around the idea that rationality has to align itself with or incorporate other ways of knowing such as métis.

5. Mamardashvili

The dominant Western way of producing knowledge is, for the most part, blind to its own limitations. It takes a metic to notice and bring them out into the open. A Soviet-era philosopher, Merab Mamardashvili (1930–1990), discerned several major limitations of Western and Russian cultures because he consciously positioned himself in the borderlines of these major powers. His mother tongue was Georgian (he was raised, and spent the final years of his life in Tbilisi), yet his professional, or philosophical languages were Russian and French, and he considered himself a citizen of an “unknown country” (2014). He argued that a thinker cannot belong to any existing nation or establishment – for only then she can get to know that she does not know; only then she can place herself at the point from which thinking begins.

Mamardashvili was acutely aware that being a fully enfranchised citizen of a specific, and especially of a major nation, necessarily limits the scope of vision: I have no incentive to question my origins and my place in the world, and I am not likely to experiment with my way of life. Those, on the other hand, who do not belong fully – whose accent or skin color gives them away as partial strangers – are more likely to develop an understanding of themselves and the world that is more objective. Mamardashvili, for instance, elaborated a more accurate notion of Europe precisely because he could never assume that he was European.

At the 1988 International Symposium on the European Cultural Identity in Paris, speaking extemporaneously in French, Mamardashvili noted: “For me, a Georgian, Russian is like Spanish would be for you [whose native language is French], so I have chosen this other Spanish, which French is for me – I will speak French” (2019). He was aware of his literal and metaphorical accent, but also of the fact that that this accent gave him access to a different, more profound understanding of Europe:

I wanted to say a few words regarding those concepts that have formed in me on the basis of the experience of … a human being who was born outside Europe, who lived in the hinterland and there became conscious of the history of his country and its culture. The lesson that I

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2See Lecture 6 of Mamardashvili’s Lectures on Proust (Merab Mamardashvili, Psikhologicheskaia topologii puti. [M. Prust. “V poiskakh utrachennogo vremeni”] [The Psychological Topology of a Path (M. Proust, In Search of Lost Time)], Moscow: Merab Mamardashvili Fund, 2014), as well as a short autobiographical text – Avtorskoe – intended to serve as a proem to this work, where Mamardashvili writes: “I am a Georgian, and will never be Georgian. I am also French, but I will never belong [в наколе не буду чужим]” (Psikhologicheskaia topologii puti [The Psychological Topology of a Path], 1041). Lectures on Proust are currently being translated into English by Alisa Slaughter and Julia Sushytska, and will be published by Ibidem academic press (distributed by Columbia University Press).

3Mamardashvili, “European Responsibility,” translated by Julia Sushytska and Alisa Slaughter, accessed March 11, 2019, https://www.mamardashvili.com/archive/interviews/responsibility-en.html#fn:3. This lecture was originally delivered by Mamardashvili in French on January 14, 1988 at an international symposium on cultural identity of Europe. The proceedings of the symposium were published in Europe sans rivage: Symposium international sur l’identité culturelle européenne. Paris, Janvier 1988 (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1988), 201–205.
derived from my experience is that I had there a privileged vantage point to see what a Euro-
pean cannot see. (2019)

In this lecture Mamardashvili defined Europe as the process of complexity and diversity, and argued that there is no Europe without such a process. Which is to say, if in a certain community this process is not taking place – if, for instance, a state refuses to be hospita-
ble to refugees, and so fails to engage in a complex conversation with strangers – then it is not Europe. If, on the other hand, a community that is not a part of geopolitical Europe is practicing complexity and diversity, then it is Europe. In this sense, the Ukrainian Maidan revolution was an instance of Europe.

It is impossible, as Mamardashvili pointed out, to understand Europe in this way if I think “from the center,” or assume that I fully and rightfully belong to a major culture.

6. Anzaldúa

What is this way of knowing from the in-between that I am calling metis? I will identify several of its features by drawing primarily on Anzaldúa’s writings, but also referring to more recent texts of Latina philosophers who discuss and extend her analysis. What follows is a sketch, or an approximation of metis because it is impossible to circumscribe or define precisely something that is by nature polymorphous, and excels at shifting shapes. Yet, as I show, there is one feature peculiar to metis – its signature, so to speak: metis produces or transforms knowledge by playing with contradictions.

Anzaldúa develops three notions that allow her to articulate a way of thinking different from traditional rationality: mestiza consciousness, la facultad, and conocimiento. In Borderlands/La Frontera she distinguishes what she calls la facultad from “white rationality” characterized by dualisms, hierarchical thinking, and the tendency to objectify beings (1999, 58–59). La facultad, Anzaldúa explains, is the ability to

see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is instant “sensing,” a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning.
It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that commu-
nicates in images and symbols which are faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. (Anzaldúa 1999, 60)

Metis does not rely on a logical chain of propositions to arrive at a conclusion or gain an insight. By skipping these intermediary steps, metis turns out to be more direct than ratio, even if the way in which metis proceeds is periphrastic and oblique. The ostensibly direct path is not the safest, as the eponymous character of Andrei Tarkovsky’s Stalker remarks, and, I would add, not the shortest one either.

Anzaldúa also points out that those ostracized and marginalized for being different, those “who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense,” or this way of thinking. It is “a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate” (Anzaldúa 1999, 60). She gives an example of walking into a house, and instantly knowing whether it is empty or occupied,

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4 The limited nature of this project does not allow me to engage fully with the rich scholarly literature on Anzaldúa, as well as include the important discussions of feminist scholars and philosophers of race on the epistemic practices that differ from traditional Western rationality. Several Eastern and Central European scholars recently contributed to these discussions, including Cerwonka (2008), Grzechnik (2019), Kynčlová (2011), Majewska (2011), Zygadło (2011).
or being able to discern the emotions – such as hate or fear – of those around her. Those who are disadvantaged within a major culture are more likely to develop such ways of knowing that helps them survive. In her recent book on the multiplicitous self – the self that inhabits places in-between several major cultures – Mariana Ortega dedicates a chapter to what she calls hometactics: minor, although not insignificant, maneuvers that help a mestiza “make do” in adverse situations (2016, 202, 205).

La facultad, however, is more than a source of survival tactics:

there is a deeper sensing that is another aspect of this faculty. It is anything that breaks into one’s everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one’s defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one’s habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception. This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people … . (Anzaldúa 1999, 61)

This way of knowing takes away “our innocence, … our safe and easy ignorance” (Anzaldúa 1999, 61). It reveals that what one ordinarily considers to be the limits of the world are the borderlands through which other features of the world (or the worlds of others) become accessible. Anzaldúa calls this deepening of one’s understanding a “shift,” and, I would add, could become as much as a paradigm shift.

In the seventh chapter of Borderlands Anzaldúa focuses on the notion of mestiza consciousness:

La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (1999, 101)

Metis frees thinking from pre-established patterns, takes on complex, conflicting information, and is therefore able to attain stronger objectivity – the point of view that is more wholistic and inclusive, or, to use Amala Levine’s terms, “integrative” and “expansive” (2008, 180).

In another text, Anzaldúa points out that the new mestiza, or the multiplicitous self, to use Ortega’s term, has “the flexibility, the malleability, the amorphous quality of being able to stretch” (Anzaldúa and Keating 2000, 132–133) because, as Ortega notes, mestiza consciousness “requires negotiation of multiple ideas and knowledge” (2016, 27). Serge Gruzinski in his book, The Mestizo Mind, discusses the same phenomenon: “Unable to decode information received from all sides in a linear way, people acquire knowledge and practices that – set against the data and impressions thus gathered in an occasional, random way – constitute ensembles that never close on themselves” (2002, 50). The need to juggle multiple ideas or events incites the metic to develop a way of knowing that is flexible, malleable, and open-ended. Metis is resistant to dogmatism precisely because it is never attached to one particular form. It requires “flexibility in social practices, fluidness of eye and perception, and an aptitude for combining highly diverse fragments” (Gruzinski 2002, 51).

In a late essay, Anzaldúa explores the notion of conocimiento. She explains that this term “derives from cognoscera, a Latin verb meaning ‘to know’ and is the Spanish word for knowledge and skill” (Anzaldúa 2002, 577). She points out that conocimiento is a knowledge closely connected with action. Moreover, it “is reached via creative acts – writing, art-
making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism – both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity)” (Anzaldúa 2002, 542). Anzaldúa’s embodied, social, and relational way of knowing is “a resistant form of epistemic practice” (Pitts 2016, 359). Andrea Pitts, in an essay that focuses on self-knowledge and self-ignorance, notes that “it is our collaborative interactions with others, including their distinct, materially rich histories and enacted practices of meaning-making, that frame and shape our understandings of, and ignorance of, ourselves,” and, I would add, of others (Pitts 2016, 359).

One of the seven stages of conocimiento identified by Anzaldúa is its critical aspect: “Skeptical of reason and rationality, conocimiento questions conventional knowledge’s current categories, classifications, and contents” (2002, 541). Its fourth stage involves a “conversion,” and the final is “the critical turning point of transformation,” in which “you shift realities, develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others, and find common ground by forming holistic alliances” (Anzaldúa 2002, 545). In a later section, I refer more generally to these stages as playing with the tension of differently directed forces.

According to Anzaldúa, conocimiento results from a complex process that includes rational thinking:

Information your sense organs register and your rational mind organizes coupled with imaginal knowings derived from viewing life through the third eye, the reptilian eye looking inward and outward simultaneously, along with the perceptions of the shapeshifting naguala, the perceiver of shifts, results in conocimiento. (Anzaldúa 2002, 542)

Because métis is expansive, and prioritizes inclusiveness, it also includes rationality (although not its dogmatic and oppressive versions). Why shouldn’t it, if some aspects of rational thinking could help attain deeper understanding, and help develop better ways of life?

In the quote above, Anzaldúa speaks of something that seems impossible, and even contradictory: the eye that looks “inward and outward simultaneously.” Cynthia Paccacerqua points out that the “affective logic of volverse una” underpins Anzaldúa’s entire corpus. She explains that volverse una is the “two-way movement” of turning or becoming – the movement that is contradictory, for it involves turning “inward” and “outward,” and results in a self that is “a singularly expansive whole” (Paccacerqua 2016, 336). This brings me to two claims that I make in the next sections: métis “has something to do” with contradictions, and yet it is not illogical or incompatible with logos.

7. Contradictions

Anzaldúa, Ortega, and Gruzinki, as well as many other scholars who write about the multiplicitious selves, discuss one aspect of this other way of knowing that seems to render it incompatible with classical Western rationality: métis thrives on contradictions.

Anzaldúa points out that the metic – the new mestiza, as Anzaldúa calls her – “sustains” contradictions, and develops “a tolerance” for them (1999, 101). She has to: a mestiza is “in all cultures at the same time,” her head “buzzes” with contradictions: “me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio” (Anzaldúa 1999, 99). Ortega also emphasizes the metic’s tolerance for contradictions (2016, 18). Gruzinski opens The Mestizo Mind by what he considers to be the
quintessential example of a contradiction – the final line from Mário de Andrade’s poem “O Trovador:” “I’m a Tupi who plays the lute!” (2002, 7). Gruzinski has a presentiment that the image of a person indigenous to the territory of present-day Brazil who is playing the colonizer’s instrument could help him understand his “feelings about certain regions of the Americas,” although he does not seem to know how exactly he might arrive at such an understanding (2002, 7).

If metis tolerates or sustains contradictions, then it is incompatible with rationality, the most fundamental axiom of which is the principle of non-contradiction. Aristotle maintained that this principle is the arché – beginning, origin, or source – of all other axioms, and consequently, of all thinking and knowledge. Here is one of his three formulations of this principle in *Metaphysics*: “It is impossible for the same thing at the same time to belong and not to belong to the same thing and in the same respect” (Aristotle IV. 3, 1005b20). Aristotle proceeds to say that I cannot make sense, or speak well if I refuse this beginning of all logos – in this context, speech or thinking. Moreover, I cannot deny this principle, for my denial requires me to rely on it. It follows that if I do not wish to accept this arché, I must remain silent, and therefore, become no more than a plant (Aristotle IV.4, 1006a15). This last remark inspired the European colonizers to liken the indigenous peoples to vegetables (Castro 2011a, 7).

Western rationality’s rootedness in the principle of non-contradiction is so deep that a way of knowing that sustains or even tolerates contradictions would not be offensive or unintelligible, but altogether indiscernible, or inaudible. Even the barbarians, even the Ocean of Stanislav Lem’s and, later, Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* were not inaudible, however strange or incomprehensible their attempts to communicate with the “civilized” human beings might have been.

The fact that Anzaldúa’s or Mamardashvili’s texts challenge traditional Western rationality indicates that they are not incompatible with the principle of non-contradiction. Which means that “being tolerant of” or “sustaining” contradictions cannot be taken literally. If so, how is one to understand the idea that a metic works with or through contradictions would not be offensive or unintelligible, but altogether indiscernible, or inaudible. Even the barbarians, even the Ocean of Stanislav Lem’s and, later, Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* were not inaudible, however strange or incomprehensible their attempts to communicate with the “civilized” human beings might have been.

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Better than those for whom it is not a question of life and death, the metic learns to recognize when two seemingly contradictory terms are merely a set of contraries. From her in-between she is more likely to notice the “middle term,” obscured by major cultures. For instance, from a purely logical point of view, non-Europe is the contradictory of Europe. A metic, however, is more likely to recognize that non-Europe can be more European than Europe, and that Europe is all too frequently the lack of Europe. Moreover, the existence, however nebulous, of Eastern Europe – of this middle term – confirms that Europe and non-Europe are contraries, and not contradictories.

Recall that contraries are, by definition, mutually inconsistent but not exhaustive – they allow for the middle term, whereas contradictories are mutually inconsistent and exhaustive: “the possibility of a middle between contradictories is excluded” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV. 4, 1006b20). Aristotle’s example of a contradiction is *a human and not a human* (IV. 4, 1006b30). The opposites that are contraries – the human and the divine, or the

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5 I am using Richard Hope’s translation (Aristotle 1960).
civilized and the barbarian – often seem to be contradictories, and metis uses the tension between them to generate new configurations of thought, or to trace out new paths for thinking. When Ortega writes: “contradictions can be used productively,” she is referring to this act of playing with contradictions (2016, 32–33).

The act of holding opposites together allows one to engage in a complex process of thinking. As Mamardashvili points out, “The ability to think complexly means the ability of the human to hold together at least two abstractions that exclude each other” (2000, 177). To play with contradictions is to engage in such complex thinking: to experiment with what appears to be untenable, or notice the regions of obscurity in what is presumed to be clearly established. To play with contradictions is to be irreverent, frivolous, and naive from the point of view of major cultures and identities.

It is not accidental that Gruzinski has a presentiment that the line “I’m a Tupi who plays the lute!” will help him gain an important insight. Thinking through this paradoxical statement involves challenging the dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonized is playing the colonizer’s instrument. Does this mean that the indigenous population has been thoroughly mastered? Or, perhaps, the exact opposite: has the colonized successfully undermined the colonizer’s authority by having mastered the master’s tool? Is the indigenous person using the instruments of oppression to subvert or undermine from within the power of the oppressor? The tension between the two seemingly incompatible phenomena generates these and other questions without, however, proposing any concrete solution. This tension drives thinking to its limits, and incites me to see these limits as vague and porous – as borderlands, and not rigid borders. Such tension could even trigger a shift in my perception, opening up a new way of understanding and living in the world. It is also not accidental that a Tupi is playing the lute – an instrument that uses the tension between differently directed forces to produce a melody.

Metis neither denies the archē of all thinking, nor is inaudible to the traditional Western rationality. It does, however, push logical thinking to the limit, revealing its dogmatic tendencies. Metis plays with contradictions in order to break one’s “defenses and resistance,” or “take one from one’s habitual grounding” (Anzaldúa 1999, 61). Such playfulness – far from being trivial or gratuitous – requires strenuous activity: the metic’s body and mind have to continuously sustain tension, even if such activity appears as its lack, which is why Mamardashvili often calls it amechania, or non-action.

8. Tension and back-turning harmony

Mamardashvili recognized the significance of playing with contradictions. He references a meticulously crafted text of Heraclitus that draws the reader into this thrilling and dangerous game: “They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement (harmonie) turning back on itself (palintropos), like that of the bow and the lyre” (D. 51).6 The lute, the lyre, and the bow have the same structure: they use the tension between opposites to produce new movement.

In his characteristic conversational style Mamardashvili notes:

6Translated by Charles Kahn (Kahn 1999, 64–65, 195–200).
Why does the arrow fly? It flies because the tensions of the ends of the bow are differently directed. For Heraclitus, the bow was also a symbol of a certain harmony – conjoining something in one, although differently directed forces are acting. Precisely their contradiction is the condition of something positive, some real event, phenomenon. (2000, 179)

The tension of the bow enables an arrow to fly; the tension of the lyre and the lute produces new harmonies. The flight of an arrow and a melody are born from the differences that pull strings in opposite directions. The same is true of human beings: they can “speak as one” only if they are “differently directed” – if they can think in several distinctly different ways, and if they recognize that they are at odds with themselves. To paraphrase Heraclitus and Andrade, “They do not comprehend how a Tupi agrees at variance with herself; she is an attunement turning back on herself, like that of the lute she plays.” Difference, not similarity, makes understanding possible. Inconsistencies and paradoxes set off “the arrow of thought,” which is not reducible to either one of the forces that set it in motion, or to their impossible sum. In this sense the knowledge sparked by tension is new, even though it was not created ex nihilo.7

As Nikolchina pointed out, sameness or similarity of opinion does not produce understanding:

while being transmitted between their interlocutors the respective utterances get transformed from something that makes sense to boredom – to a triviality that says nothing precisely because what it says looks so familiar. The very comprehensibility of the said produces incomprehension and even deafness. (2013, 53)

Words or messages “are not heard precisely to the extent that they look familiar” (2013, 53). Yuri Lotman, another “Eastern European” thinker, argued that “when conversing our interest lies precisely in the situation that makes conversation difficult and even impossible” (1992, 15).8 Several Latina feminists discussed the same idea. Lugones suggested that only complex conversations are worth having, because they “rule out reduction, translation, and assimilation” (2006, 81). She also pointed out that understanding “her journey requires a significant extension of my own intercultural journey” (2006, 81). I extend or stretch myself across a seemingly impossible distance, and this distance is, first and foremost, between the differences and oppositions that make up my own self. Cherríe Moraga urges to “push it a little more than you are comfortable with. If you are comfortable, something is wrong; if you are uncomfortable, then you are probably in the right place” (2015). This decisively uncomfortable and sometimes unbearable tension allows me to turn back on myself, and so turn toward the other. The tension allows me to know myself and the other more objectively. As Nikolchina pointed out, “Understanding is a state, a tension like the tension produced by the two opposite sides of the bow: it is something that emerges in the middle of the bowstring whose ends will never meet” (2013, 98).

The metic is palintropos, i.e. someone who turns back on herself, and polutropos – of many turnings. To survive she has to master the art of tension. Lugones’s concept of world-traveling helps one better understand this idea. The self that has entry into

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7Writing about Amerindian ontologies Viveiros de Castro notes that the idea of “creation ex nihilo is virtually absent from indigenous cosmogonies. Things and beings normally originate as a transformation of something else” (2004, 477). He explains that our Western notion of “creation/invention belongs to the paradigm of production,” and the Amerindian notion “of transformation/transfer belongs to the paradigm of exchange” (Ibid.). “Production creates; exchange changes,” writes Viveiros de Castro (2004, 478).

8Translation adapted from Nikolchina (2013, 53).
several different worlds – say, of U.S. academia, of the Russian imperial culture, and of Eastern Europe – belongs and, simultaneously, does not belong to these different “worlds.” As a result, such a self has to continuously confront and try to resolve contradictions, lest they tear her apart. Given that the art of playing with contradictions is central to the metic’s life, it is not accidental that Lugones’s famous example of a contradiction is being playful in one world, and not playful in another (1987, 95). Even if being and not being playful are not technically a pair of contradictory terms – they are said about the self in different contexts or “worlds,” i.e. they are said in different respects – it is sometimes barely possible to withstand the tension of this opposition.

Such tension is the origin of the metic’s epistemological advantage. Anzaldúa points out that “living in a state of psychic unrest, in a borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create” (1999, 95). bell hooks writes that “living as we [black women] did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from outside and in from the inside out … we understood both.” Those who have entry into several worlds, those who, by living between them, create new minor selves and worlds have a clear advantage when it comes to knowing and understanding.

Anzaldúa’s image of herself, or her back as a bridge can help further clarify this tension (Anzaldúa and Moraga 2015, xxxiv, xxviii, 254; 259 and Anzaldúa 1999, 236). She writes about having made a decision to become a bridge between women of color and “white people, lesbians, feminists, white men,” and points out that not everybody can or should attempt to fulfill that role: “It’s a tough job; not many people can keep the bridge up” (Anzaldúa 2009, 147). Moreover, not every opposition can be transformed into new knowledge – extreme tension might incapacitate or even destroy a metic. The life of the in-between is perilous, the tension of holding together the opposing forces is the source of great “psychic unrest,” to use Anzaldúa’s words. If a Tupi is the lute, the tension that runs through her and is a source of new melodies can also break her. The violence of the opposing forces is sometimes too great to be used productively.

9. Conclusion

Viveiros de Castro points out that “we, Western intellectuals” have to begin with the “vision’ of Zeno’s immobile arrow,” or with the impossibility of producing new knowledge (2011b, 141). Unless – and this is the metic’s epistemological advantage – “we” are “not-quite-Western-intellectuals,” but rather minor thinkers who fall through the cracks of classifications and dichotomies, and are able to circumvent major impasses. “We” have to begin with the impossibility of understanding, unless “we” are paradoxical beings who learn how to handle paradoxes; unless, for instance, instead of prioritizing the arrow, we direct our attention to the bow, the lute, and the lyre. If we do not focus on whether or not the arrow is immobile, whether or not it has left or has arrived, but instead play with the tension that makes the bow what it is – if we recognize and engage with our own differences and contradictions – we might bypass Zeno’s paradox, and, in the process, set off the arrow of thought. The metic, being a minor player, redirects her attention from the product to the activity of “complex thinking.”

9Quoted in Collins (2004).
Western rationality is merely a way of knowing. Moreover, unchecked by other ways of knowing, rationality tends to become dogmatic and oppressive. One needs to draw on other kinds of thinking to attain a more objective (in the strong sense) understanding of the world. Metis is one of these other ways of knowing. It by definition eludes being precisely defined. To paraphrase Deleuze, the definition of metis is unclear, but distinct. Metis exceeds, defies, and resists unambiguous boundaries, and cannot be exhaustively described or systematized. It can be, however, clearly differentiated from traditional Western rationality: unlike linear, logical thinking, metis thrives on the tension between things or beings that seem incompatible and inconsistent with each other. Metis’s “signature” is the act of holding together differently directed forces. This is why this way of knowing is more accessible to those who live the life of contradictions – the metics. Human beings who are “mixed” or multiplicitous are most likely to develop the ability to think “complexly.” Just like the bow, the lyre, and the lute, they are “differently directed,” and so, more likely to master the art of juggling differently directed forces. A Tupi who plays the lute is the lute: both the conqueror and the conquered; neither the conqueror nor the conquered. She is the harmony of that which continuously turns back on itself, trespasses and transforms itself. Agreeing at variance with herself she sets off the arrow of thought.

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