Introduction to the Second Edition
by Sonia Saldívar-Hull

In the 12 years since the publication of Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, women’s studies and Chicana/Latina studies have flourished in intellectual production if not in academic acceptance. Even in the face of growing backlash, most dramatically embodied in anti-affirmative action laws in California, the Hopwood Decision in Texas, and similar legislation under consideration in many other states, *Borderlands* is now in its second edition. This historically significant text continues to be studied and included on class syllabi in courses on feminist theory, contemporary American women writers, autobiography, Chicana/o and Latina/o literature, cultural studies, and even major American authors.

After my initial reading of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* in the summer of 1987, I, like many other Chicana academics, found myself compelled to engage its New Mestiza hermeneutics. Anzaldúa spoke to me as a fellow Tèjana, as a *mujer* boldly naming herself feminist as well as Chicana. Juxtaposed against other foundational texts on the Border, such as *With His Pistol in His Hand* by Américo Paredes and *Occupied America* by Rodolfo Acuña, *Borderlands* offered a view of our América through the lens of a woman-identified woman.¹ The feminism that *Borderlands* advocates builds on the gendered articulations of women like Marta Cotera and Ana Nieto Gómez, whose early feminist speculations appear in the anthology *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings.*² Chicanas were theorizing in the 1960s and 70s, and with Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga’s interventions in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, a transfronterista (that is, a transnational feminist, *a transfrontera feminista*) consciousness built new coalitions with other U.S. Latinas and U.S. women of color.³ *Borderlands*, a socio-politically specific elaboration of late twentieth-century *feminista* Chicana epistemology, signals movement towards coalitions with other *mujeres* across the U.S.-Mexico geopolitical border.
Borderlands focuses on a specific geographic locale, the U.S.-Mexico border, and presents a specific history—that of Mexican origin U.S. Chicanas. But as a treatise that is "above all a feminist one" (106), it opens up a radical way of restructuring the way we study history. Using a new genre she calls autobiografía, Anzaldúa presents history as a serpentine cycle rather than a linear narrative. The autobiografía she tells is a story in which indigenous icons, traditions, and rituals replace post-Cortesian, Catholic customs. Anzaldúa reconfigures Chicana affinities with the Catholic Virgen de Guadalupe and offers an alternative image: Coatllicue, the Aztec divine mother. In 1987, few U.S. mexicana scholars had invoked that name.

Borderlands' first essay/chapter, "The Homeland, Aztlan / El otro México," introduces the reader to a toponography of displacement. For the reader unfamiliar with Chicana/o history or the history of Northern Mexico's absorption by the United States in 1848, the text defines the border, politically and ideologically, as an "unnatural boundary" and hence posits a destabilizing potential in late twentieth-century Chicana cartography. She gives mestizos a genealogy that, as hybrid people, interpollates them as both native to the Americas and with a non-Western, multiple identity. The "lost land" she rediscovers or uncovers is always grounded in a specific material history of what was once northern Mexico. For the unschooled reader, she reviews the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, signed on Feb. 2, 1848, as the document that created a new U.S. minority: American citizens of Mexican descent. Anzaldúa's testimonio-like pedagogy offers knowledge that Anglo-centric schools tend to erase, interjecting a counter-narrative that tells of the appropriation of land by Anglo-Americans who did more than take territory: the process of absorption into the U.S. included the imposition of White Supremacy aided by the overt terrorist tactics of the Texas Rangers.

The nation-building discourse in "Homeland, Aztlan" revisits the story that other Chicano/a foundational novels of the 1930s and 40s had previously fictionalized. Like Caballero, by Jovita González, a recently recovered historical novel, Borderlands offers a critique of the process of incorporation of Mexicans during the Mexican American war of 1836. Similarly, the multiple identities in Borderlands mirror Américo Paredes' George Washington Gómez, a novel in which the protagonist's hybrid identity is at war with itself. While both of these historical fictions recover memory erased from the official story, Anzaldúa's autobiografía offers a new way to write History. Like Paredes, Anzaldúa boldly aligns Chicana territorial history with the early twentieth-century Mexico-Texano resistance fighters, the Seditionists, who polemicized against the Anglo invaders in their political manifesto, the Plan de San Diego. But history in this New Mestiza narrative is not a univocal discursive exercise—in this new genre, a moving personal narrative about her Grandmother's dispossession occupies the same discursive space as a dry recitation of historical fact, while lyrics from a corrido about "the lost land" butt up against a poetic rendition of an ethnocentric anglo historian's vision of U.S. dominion over Mexico.

Indeed, the Borderlands genre continually refuses stasis. Shifting from Mexico-tejana History, to personal testimonial, the text moves restlessly onward to a history of a larger political family. As she concludes the opening essay, the New Mestiza narrator emphasizes class alliances with Mexican border-crossers who labor in unregulated border factories, the maquiladoras, and brings to light the dehumanization of those Mexican workers who cross over to the U.S. where the Border Patrol hunts them as vermin. The mestizo workers are then "caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat" (3-4).

The New Mestiza chronicles much more than the history of a "third country" she calls the Border. The "closed country," as she also names it, is peopled with gendered undocumented crossers. Not only does Anzaldúa disrupt anglo-centric nationalist histories, she interrupts the Chicano nationalist agenda as she engages feminist analysis and issues. Underpinned by feminist ideology, the women's stories relentlessly expand previous androcentric history texts.

Anzaldúa continues this process in the next section, "Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan" ("Rebellions Movements and Traitorous Cultures"), as she moves to confront the tradition of male dominance within her community. It opens with a long epigraph in untranslated Spanish, a passage which serves as a Chicana proclamation in face of the war—a proclamation of independence for the mestizas bound within a male-dominated culture. When Anzaldúa addresses the men and male-identified women in her community in Spanish, it
is as if she is addressing the elders who refused to speak English. She appeals to those authorities as she declares:

Those rebellious movements that we have in our Mexican blood surge like rivers overflowing in my veins. And like my people, who sometimes release themselves from the slavery of obedience, of silent acceptance, rebellion exists in me on the surface. Under my humble gaze an insolent face exists ready to explode. My rebellion was quite costly—cramped with insomnia and doubts, feeling useless, stupid, and impotent. I’m filled with rage when someone—be it my mother, the Church, the Anglo culture—tells me do this, do that without considering my desires. I argued. I talked back. I was quite the loudmouth. I was indifferent to many of my culture’s values. I did not let the men push me around. I was not good or obedient. But I have grown. I no longer spend my life dumping cultural customs and values that have betrayed me. I have also gathered time proven customs and the customs that respect women. (37, my translation)

The passage ends in English, as if the language acquired as an adult is the language of feminist assertion: “But despite my growing tolerance, for this Chicana la guerra de independencia (the war for independence) is a constant” (37). This bilingual strategy implies that while the patriarchs of her youth may well be fluent English speakers, she will confront them directly in the language of her Chicana-mexicana-tejana traditions.

Dogmatic rules and assumptions prescribed Anzaldúa’s life as a child and young woman in South Texas, but now she understands that “rules” are man-made and can be unmade with feminist logic. She offers specific examples of how she was restricted even from a life of the mind and recounts her rebellious resistance to incorporation by the family and community customs. Her testimonio relates the limitations placed on many subaltern women under the rule of fathers and male-identified mothers. The feminist rebel in her is the Shadow-Beast, “a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities” (38). The Shadow Beast emerges as the part of women that frightens men and causes them to try to control and devalue female culture. Girls in the borderland are commonly taught to fear sexuality and learn that men value women’s bodies only. Their individuality is devalued and selfishness is decried. (In the borderlands of Anzaldúa’s youth, “selfishness” includes anything women want to do to improve their lives.) The New Mestiza consciousness—while it refrains static notions of the self—profoundly validates Chicana selfhood.

“Cultural Tyranny” in Anzaldúa’s South Texas is metonymy for patriarchy—the manner in which traditional culture works against women. Taking up the figure of Malintzin, Anzaldúa contests her place in Mexican mythology as the fallen Eve who “betrayed” her people by becoming Cortés’ mistress and the mother of mestizaje. By reclaiming and reconceptualizing Malintzin, she claims for women the mythical homeland of Chicano cultural nationalists, Aztlan. This new historian subtly prods Chicano males to understand feminist rebellion as twin to the racialized class rebellion advocated by the cultural nationalists. Anzaldúa redefines cultural identity through gender and sexuality. And the now-transformed nationalism and gendered Aztlan are rescribed as feminist theory and New Mestiza consciousness.

Part of the work of that mestiza consciousness is to break down dualities that serve to imprison women. Her articulation of Chicana lesbian theory does just that, as she declares herself both male and female. Again, she uses cuento and testimonio to present theory as she recounts the young neighbor of her youth who was outsider and labeled “one of the others,” half woman, half man. Refusing the condemnation of the labels, however, she strategically takes a feminist-nationalist turn to indigenous “tradition” that views alterity as power. The ultimate rebellion for Chicanas is through sexuality, and in Anzaldúa’s version of queer theory, this is specifically true for lesbians of color.

Similarly, Anzaldúa’s claim of the Indian part of her mestizaje avoids simplistic appropriation. The indigena in the New Mestiza is a new political stance as a fully racialized feminist Chicana. She appeals to a history of resistance by subaltern Indian women of the Americas and in that shared history narrates strong political affiliation: “My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman’s history of resistance” (43). This political alliance further strengthens her internal critique of Chicano cultural practices that deny the indigenous part of the mestizaje. Claiming all parts of her identity, even those that clash, she escapes essentialist categories and envisions one provisional home where she can “stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture” (44).
Armed with her feminist tools, Anzaldúa's narrator is prepared to “enter the serpent,” as she does in the following section, to explore the legacy of indigenous forbears. In keeping with this new feminism, the New Mestiza dramatically reclaims the female cultural figures that were marked traitors to the community. The first betrayal—denying the Indian in the Chicano—makes the second one easier to accept without question: the scripting of Malinali Tenepat (Malintzin) (44) and la Llorona (the woman who weeps for her lost or murdered children) into the whore of the virgen/whore dyad.12

By rewriting the stories of Malinali, la Llorona and the Virgen de Guadalupe, Anzaldúa is strategically reclaiming a ground for female historical presence. Her task here is to uncover the names and powers of the female deities whose identities have been submerged in Mexican memory of these three Mexican mothers. The New Mestiza narrates the pre-Cortesian history of these deities, and shows how they were devalued by both the Azteca-Mexica patriarchs and by the Christian conquerors. In presenting the origins of the Guadalupe myth, Anzaldúa offers new names for our studies—names that we must labor to pronounce: Coatlícuic, Cibuacoatl, Tonantsi, Coyolxauhqui.

Significantly, Anzaldúa employs the language of the Spanish colonizers when she narrates the invention of Guadalupe by the Catholic Church. The well-known Juan Diego version of the Guadalupe story is told in poetic stanzas, a presentation that underlines the historia's fictive character. The feminist revision, written in prose, authorizes itself as legitimate history. Anzaldúa's narrative then returns to Aztlan and Aztec history before the conquest with a critique that consciously ruptures the male Chicano romanticization of a vague utopian indigenous past. The reader enters a conversation between the New Mestiza scribe and those unreconstructed Chicano nationalists who, even today, refuse to accept the possibility that the Aztecs were but one nation of many and that they enslaved surrounding tribes.

La Llorona is another part of the virgen/whore dyad the New Mestiza reclaims, naming her the heir of Cibuacoatl, the deity who presided over women in childbirth. I do not believe it a simple mistake that this powerful female figure is then transformed into a woman who murders children rather than one who guides them into life. The centrality of la Llorona in Chicana oral and written traditions emerges in literature written by other contemporary Chicana feminists. In cuentos like Helena Maria Viramontes’ “The Cariboo Café,” and “Tears on My Pillow,” as well as in Sandra Cisneros' “Woman Hollering Creek,” a Chicana feminist transformation of the powerless wailing woman resonates with Anzaldúa’s revisionary project.13

Reclaiming and reinventing Coatlícuic, Malintzin, and la Llorona/Cibuacoatl in New Mestiza narratives elaborates the constantly shifting identity formation of Anzaldúa’s Chicana/mestiza feminist. In the next section, “La herencia de Coatlícuic / The Coatlícuic State,” Anzaldúa turns to consider the implications of such a reclamation for the developing consciousness of her New Mestiza. In a powerful, dramatic incantatory poem, the search for the erased histories of female ancestors and the yearning for visibility follow the alien and alienated subject-in-process as she constructs provisional identities:

She has this fear that she has no names that she has many names that she doesn’t know her names She has this fear that she’s an image that comes and goes clearing and darkening the fear that she’s the dreamwork inside somebody else’s skull. (65)

Rather than a reductive, essential self, the New Mestiza constantly migrates between knowing herself: “She has many names,” not knowing who or what she is: “the fear that she has no name;” and the fear of not owning who she is: a “fear that she’s an image that comes and goes . . . the dreamwork inside somebody else’s skull.” She is all of the above, a woman without an official history and the woman who constructs her own historical legacy.14 The Coatlícuic State precedes a spiritual and political crossing through which one arrives at a higher spiritual and political consciousness. The transformation involves facing her fear of change as she “tremble[s] before the animal, the alien, the sub- or suprahuman, the one that . . . possesses a demon determination and ruthlessness beyond the human” (72). Once she accomplishes the personal inner journey, the New Mestiza relies on the “ruthlessness” she has acquired when she emerges from the Coatlícuic State and takes on the struggle for social change. When she names all her names, once again she enacts the culmination of unearthing her multiple subjectivities: the “divine within, Coatlícuic-Cibuacoatl-Tlazolteotl-Tonantzint-Coatlaloqueub-Guadalupe—they are one” (72). As scholar Norma
Alarcón notes, the shifting identities, the multiple names are encapsulated in the New Mestiza’s other name: Chicana.15

The recovery project that leads to the political, feminist social awareness Anzaldúa calls New Mestiza Consciousness emerges in her discussion of the language of the Borderers. Not until midway through the prose sections of Borderlands, in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” does Anzaldúa begin to explain her use of multiple Chicana languages. The use of English/Spanish from the title page to the chapter headings and subheadings marks this new critical discourse. Throughout the text, in most of the chapter titles and subtitles, Spanish appears as casually as English. Readers who traverse these Borderlands are bound to face her strategy to reclaim the ground of multiple Mestiza languages. The multilingual text does not easily admit those who refuse full engagement with the linguistic demands of Border language.

New Mestiza Chicanas speak multiple Chicana tongues in order to enunciate their multiple names. Anzaldúa mixes Nahuatl, English and vernacular Spanish as a larger cultural critique of how the dominant group enforces domination through language. In “Wild Tongue” Anzaldúa focuses on how Chicanas are doubly punished for their illegitimate languages. Linguistic reclamation aside, her feminist point is that within the Chicana/o culture, language serves as a prison house for women, for whom not only assertiveness but the very act of speaking count as transgressions. She notes how males within the culture escape criticism for such transgressions.

She traces the origins of Chicano Spanish, a Border tongue, from sixteenth century usage: “Chicano Spanish is not incorrect; it is a living language” (77). Multiple Chicana languages allow for the multiple positionality of Coatllicue and the subject she names New Mestiza. She claims eight languages, ending with Caló, pachucan Spanish, the “secret language” of the barrio, the vernacular. Chicana language is a mestizaje as well: it breaks down all dualisms. Deploying the language of warfare in the “Linguistic Terrorism” section, she stresses that there is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience. The discussion culminates with a feminist note: “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence” (81).

The following chapter, “Tlilli, Tlapalli / The Path of the Red and Black Ink,” enacts the multilingual methodology of mestiza language. As Walter Mignolo tells us, Anzaldúa quotes a dialogue (in Borderlands 93) in Spanish from the Colloquios y doctrina christiana. The dialogue, which was initially recorded in Nahuatl and then translated into Spanish by Bernardino de Sahagún in 1565, “narrates,” according to Mignolo, “the moment in which the Spanish noblemen refer to the Tlaloc in the Temple (the wise men, those who can read the black and the red ink written in the codices).” He continues:

Anzaldúa’s languaging entangles Spanish, English and Nahuatl (the first two with a strong ‘literary’ tradition kept alive after the conquest; the third, which was and still is an oral way of language, was disrupted during and marginalized after the conquest), and her languaging invokes two kinds of writing: the alphabetic writing of the metropolitan center and the pictographic writing of pre-Columbian Mexican (as well as Mesoamerican) civilizations.16 Anzaldúa thus stages her writing within the larger context of the continent and its layered histories. When Anzaldúa deploys multiple languages as part of her New Mestiza methodology, she enunciates her writing as an act of self-creation within that context, a strategy she claims as a Nahuatl concept.

In the final prose section, “La conciencia de la mestiza,” Anzaldúa brings together the work of the previous essays and offers a working definition of a New Mestiza Consciousness. Above all it is a feminist consciousness, one that goes beyond filiation—the ties of “blood.” She moves beyond psychological examinations, leaping from “insecurity and indecisiveness,” (100) traveling with “mental nepantlism,” accepting her interstitial material existence, to a life committed to social action. She risks exposing the “work the soul performs” (101) as she attains a “differential consciousness,” to use Chela Sandoval’s notion of this other consciousness.17 Throughout the text, she labors to construct a new, activist subject who can re-inscribe Chicana History into the record, re-legitimize Chicano multiple linguistic capacities, and trace the ethnic/racial origins of Mestiza mexicanotexas. Paradoxically, it is only in that context that she can claim that “as a mestiza I have no country . . . as a lesbian I have no race,” and that as a feminist she is “culturallyless” (102).
“El camino de la mestiza / The Mestiza Way,” synthesizes the previous speculations and offers the requisite actions for the new subject, the New Mestiza, as she embarks on her life of action: “Her first step is to take inventory.” She “puts history through a sieve”; she communicates “the rupture . . . with oppressive traditions” and “documents the struggle.” Only after undertaking that process can she “reinterpret history and, using new symbols . . . shape new myths” (104). The text of the entire book is encapsulated here. She calls for a “new man” and reiterates: “the struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one” (106).

The second half of Borderlands reenacts dramatically the process of coming into (mestiza) consciousness and the practice of the mestiza way. The section, “Más antes en los ranchos” [Long ago in the ranches], invokes the oral tradition and prepares the reader to enter the poetic dramatizations. In “White-wing Season,” the South Texas hardscrabble lives of Mexico tejanas serve as backdrop for the cuentito (vignette) of a farm woman who accepts money from “whitemen” (124), allowing them to shoot white wing doves on her land. Slaughtered white wing doves, which are sport for the hunters returning to the Midwest, are juxtaposed against the Mexican woman’s need to accept the kill to feed her family. In “horse,” which Anzaldúa dedicates to the pueblo of her childhood in Hargill, Texas, the Chicano community rejects the gringo money offered as compensation when the sons of the white community wantonly torture a horse. What may appear as passive acceptance by the mexicano is actually a wisdom exhibited by these men who know that justice is beyond their reach in the borderlands of Texas: “the mexicanos mumble if you’re Mexican/ you are born old” (129).

“La Pérdida” [The Loss], continues the practice of New Mestiza consciousness by chronicling workers’ historias. “Sus plumas el viento” [Give Wind to Her Feathers] (132) records the everyday labor of subaltern women. A disturbing rape narrative like “We Call Them Greasers,” “Sus plumas el viento” tells the story of Pepita, a woman who is raped by her boss in the field, against whom she has no recourse. The narrative is a reverie, a memory of a childhood spent in the farm fields witnessing Chicanas like Pepita submitting to the white field boss’s sexual violence in order to keep their jobs. Further adding to her humiliation, Pepita also endures the Chicanos’ contempt as they spit on the ground when she emerges from her ordeal. Now bearing the mark of Malinche, the traitor to her race, Pepita projects herself onto the figure of the chuparrosa, the hummingbird. No longer the creature she remembers from the safe haven of her grandmother’s garden, the hummingbird now appears to her, in the context of the fields, as an object of violence: “the obsidian wind/ cut tassels of blood/ from the hummingbird’s throat” (139). The scribe longs to escape her class-mandated fate as manual laborer. She reads books; she searches for another possibility. The pluma, the hummingbird’s feather, becomes the quill that helps liberate the New Mestiza from las labores [the fields]. She imagines the possibility of escape, “If the wind would give her feathers for fingers/ she would string words and images together.” But even nature conspires against her dreams: “el viento sur la tiró su salvia/ pa’ tras en la cara,” [the southern wind blew her spit back in her face] (140).

The section, “Crossers y otros atraviesados” [and other misfits] focuses on the poetic sensibility, on lesbian sexuality, and on homophobic violence. “Yo no fui, fue Tete” (164), employs cholospeak, the barrio vernacular, as a gay man recounts a beating by his homophobic “brothers.” He recognizes fear and hatred in those crazed faces that stab him and curse him with sexual epithets. His pain intensifies because “mi misma raza” [his own people] make him an orphan, reiterating Anzaldúa’s assertion that like Chicana lesbians, this gay man is without a race (102). In contrast, “Compañera, cuando amábamos” [When We Loved] lyrically celebrates those muted afternoons when two women loved and made love: “When unscathed flesh sought flesh and teeth, lips/ In the labyrinths of your mouths” (168, my translation).

“Cibualtyol, Woman Alone” celebrates the goddess, antecedent of la Llorona, Serpent Skirt, the sexual goddess of childbirth. The New Mestiza mythmaker links Saint Theresa in “Holy Relics,” to other wailing women in “En el nombre de todas las madres que han perdido sus hijos en la guerra” [In the name of all the mothers who have lost their children in war]. Mestiza feminists take on the guise of the goddess in “Cibualtyol, Woman Alone” (195) as they are banished from traditional Chicano communities. The betrayal here is not by a female or by the multilingual Malintzin—the traitor is the community. The poem reenacts the New Mestiza’s struggle to retain
the “homeland” and yet negotiate multiple subject positions as well. The “Animas” section begins with “La curandera” (198), a dramatic allegory in which the traditional folk healer enters into the serpent and emerges with the knowledge, the healing yerbitas (herbs), which contribute physically, psychologically and intellectually to strong communities.

The final section, like the last section of the prose, is El Retorno [The Return]. “To live in the Borderlands Means You” (216) calls mestizas to action as they become aware of multiple positionalities, contradictions, and ambiguities. The mestiza with her hard-earned consciousness cannot remain within the self, however. The awareness of borderland existence spurs her to “fight hard” to resist stasis, “the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle,” as well as to continue her resistance strategies in the other war where the “gun barrel” and “the rope crushing the hollow of your throat” still exist. Survival may signify that “you must live sin fronteras (without borders)” and “be a crossroads” but to do so requires activism and not simply being born a racialized, gendered mestiza in the borderlands.


This transfrontera, transdisciplinary text also crossed rigid boundaries in academia as it traveled between Literature (English and Spanish), History, American Studies, Anthropology and Political Science departments, and further illuminated multiple theories of feminism in women’s studies and Chicana studies. It was—and remains—a defining statement on the inextricability of sexuality, gender, race and class for Chicanas and changed the way we talk about difference in sexuality, race/ethnicity, gender, and class in the U.S. Read within its historical context, Borderlands resists containment as a transcendent excursion into “otherness.” With this second edition, Borderlands / La Frontera continues to offer a radical (re)construction of space in the Americas where political struggles and alliances are forged only after risking conflicts, appropriations, and contradictions in the face of power and domination.

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Notes


4. In the essay, “Border Arte: Népanila, El Lugar de la Frontera,” Anzaldúa identifies border visual art as one that “supercedes the pictorial. It depicts both the soul of the artist and the soul of the pueblo. It deals with who tells the stories and what stories and histories are told. I call this form of visual narrative autobistorias. This form goes beyond the traditional self-portrait or autobiography; in telling the writer/artists’ personal story, it also includes the artist’s cultural history” (113). She continues that when she
creates art, such as an altar, she represents much more than herself, "they are representations of Chicana culture" (113). While her definition here targets visual artistry, I believe that it could well describe the Borderlands genre as well. In La Frontera / The Border: Art About the Mexico / United States Border Experience, ed. Natasha Bonilla Martínez. San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993.

5. See Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands / La Frontera: Cultural Studies, 'Difference,' and the Non-Unitary Subject." Cultural Critique, Fall 1994, 5-28. My reading was greatly influenced by her comprehensive study and by our numerous discussions about Chicana feminism(s), mestizaje, and Borderlands.


8. Caballero: A Historical Novel, Jovita González and Eve Raleigh. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1996. This novel was originally written in the late 1930s but not "recovered" until recently. (There is some question about the extent to which Eve Raleigh participated in the actual writing of the text.)

9. Américo Paredes, George Washington Gómez. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1990. This is yet another novel of the 1930s that was not published until this decade.


14. My reading of this passage is informed by Norma Alarcón’s brilliant discussion, "Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of 'The' Native Woman" in Cultural Studies, 1:3 (October 1990), 248-56.

15. In "Chicana Feminism," Alarcón explains: "the name 'Chicana,' in the present, is the name of resistance that enables cultural and political points of departure and thinking through the multiple migrations and dislocations of women of 'Mexican' descent. The name Chicana, is not a name that women (or men) are born to or with, as is often the case with 'Mexican,' but rather it is consciously and critically assumed ..." (250). In the short story in the Woman Hollering Creek collection, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," Sandra Cisneros also evokes those multiple Chicana/Mestiza identities.


Preface to the First Edition

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.

However, there have been compensations for this *mestiza*, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being "worked" on. I have the sense that certain "faculties"—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. Strange, huh? And yes, the "alien" element has become familiar—never comfortable, not with society's clamor to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd. No, not comfortable but home.

This book, then, speaks of my existence. My preoccupations with the inner life of the Self, and with the struggle of that Self amidst adversity and violation; with the confluence of primordial images; with the unique positionings consciousness takes at these confluent streams; and with my almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows.

Books saved my sanity, knowledge opened the locked places in me and taught me first how to survive and then how to soar. *La madre naturaleza* succored me, allowed me to grow roots
that anchored me to the earth. My love of images—mesquite flowering, the wind, Ebécatl, whispering its secret knowledge, the fleeting images of the soul in fantasy—and words, my passion for the daily struggle to render them concrete in the world and on paper, to render them flesh, keeps me alive.

The switching of "codes" in this book from English to Castillian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language—the language of the Borderlands. There, at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born. Presently this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first overture—to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos, apology blurring out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you—from the new mestizas.
The Homeland, Aztlán

El otro México

"El otro México que acá hemos construido
el espacio es lo que ha sido
territorio nacional.
Este es el esfuerzo de todos nuestros hermanos
y latinoamericanos que han sabido
progressar.

—Los Tigres del Norte

"The Aztecas del norte... compose the largest single tribe
or nation of Anishinabeg (Indians) found in the United States
today... Some call themselves Chicanos and see themselves
as people whose true homeland is Aztlán [the U.S. Southwest]."

Wind tugging at my sleeve
feet sinking into the sand
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash.

Across the border in Mexico
stark silhouette of houses gutted by waves,
cliffs crumbling into the sea,
silver waves marbled with spume
gashing a hole under the border fence.
Miro el mar atacar
la cerca en Border Field Park
con sus buchones de agua,
an Easter Sunday resurrection
of the brown blood in my veins.

Olga el llorado del mar, el respiro del aire,
my heart surges to the beat of the sea.
In the gray haze of the sun
the gulls’ shrill cry of hunger,
the tangy smell of the sea seeping into me.

I walk through the hole in the fence
to the other side.
Under my fingers I feel the gritty wire
rusted by 139 years
of the salty breath of the sea.

Beneath the iron sky
Mexican children kick their soccer ball across,
run after it, entering the U.S.

I press my hand to the steel curtain—
chainlink fence crowned with rolled barbed wire—
rippling from the sea where Tijuana touches San Diego
unrolling over mountains
and plains
and deserts,
this “Tortilla Curtain” turning into el río Grande
flowing down to the flatlands
of the Magic Valley of South Texas
its mouth emptying into the Gulf.

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a pueblo, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
plits me splits me
me raja me raja

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his
arrogance,
Yeimayá blew that wire fence down.

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again.

Yo soy un puente tendido
del mundo gabacho al del mojado,
lo pasado me estira pa’trás
y lo presente pa’delante,
Que la Virgen de Guadalupe me cuide
Ay ay ay, soy mexicana de este lado.

The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the
Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab
forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging
to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to
define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from
them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep
dge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by
the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a
constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its
inhabitants. Los atravessados live here: the squint-eyed, the
verse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the
half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass
over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” Gringos in the
U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands trans-
gressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not,
whether they’re Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, tres-
passers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only
“legitimate” inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those
who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.

In the fields, la migra. My aunt saying, “No corran, don’t run. They’ll think you’re del otro lado.” In the confusion, Pedro ran, terrified of being caught. He couldn’t speak English, couldn’t tell them he was fifth generation American. Sin papeles—he did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields. La migra took him away while we watched. Se lo llevaron. He tried to smile when he looked back at us, to raise his fist. But I saw the shame pushing his head down, I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders. They deported him to Guadalajara by plane. The furthest he’d ever been to Mexico was Reynosa, a small border town opposite Hidalgo, Texas, not far from McAllen. Pedro walked all the way to the Valley. Se lo llevaron sin un centavo al pobre. Se vino andando desde Guadalajara.

During the original peopling of the Americas, the first inhabitants migrated across the Bering Straits and walked south across the continent. The oldest evidence of humankind in the U.S.—the Chicanos’ ancient Indian ancestors—was found in Texas and has been dated to 35,000 B.C. In the Southwest United States archeologists have found 20,000-year-old campsites of the Indians who migrated through, or permanently occupied, the Southwest, Aztlan—land of the herons, land of whiteness, the Edenic place of origin of the Azteca.

In 1000 B.C., descendants of the original Cochise people migrated into what is now Mexico and Central America and became the direct ancestors of many of the Mexican people. (The Cochise culture of the Southwest is the parent culture of the Aztecs. The Uto-Aztecan languages stemmed from the language of the Cochise people.) The Aztecs (the Nahuaatl word for people of Aztlan) left the Southwest in 1168 A.D.

Now let us go.

**Tibueque, tibueque,**

**Vámonos, vámonos.**

**Un pájaro cantó.**

Con sus ocho tribus salieron
de la “cueva del origen.”
los aztecas siguieron al dios
Huitzilopochtli.

**Huitzilopochtli,** the God of War, guided them to the place (that later became Mexico City) where an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus. The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine. The symbolic sacrifice of the serpent to the “higher” masculine powers indicates that the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Spaniards and Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico and, with the help of tribes that the Aztecs had subjugated, conquered it. Before the Conquest, there were twenty-five million Indian people in Mexico and the Yucatán. Immediately after the Conquest, the Indian population had been reduced to under seven million. By 1650, only one-and-a-half-million pure-blooded Indians remained. The mestizos who were genetically equipped to survive small pox, measles, and typhus (Old World diseases to which the natives had no immunity), founded a new hybrid race and inherited Central and South America. En 1521 nació una nueva raza, el mestizo, el mexicano (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), a race that had never existed before. Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, are the offspring of those first matings.

Our Spanish, Indian, and mestizo ancestors explored and settled parts of the U.S. Southwest as early as the sixteenth century. For every gold-hungry conquistador and soul-hungry missionary who came north from Mexico, ten to twenty Indians and mestizos went along as porters or in other capacities. For the Indians, this constituted a return to the place of origin, Aztlan, thus making Chicanos originally and secondarily indigenous to the Southwest. Indians and mestizos from central Mexico intermarried with North American Indians. The continual intermarriage between Mexican and American Indians and Spaniards formed an even greater mestizaje.
In 1846, the U.S. incited Mexico to war. U.S. troops invaded and occupied Mexico, forcing her to give up almost half of her nation, what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California.

With the victory of the U.S. forces over the Mexican in the U.S.-Mexican War, los norteamericanos pushed the Texas border down 100 miles, from el río Nueces to el río Grande. South Texas ceased to be part of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Separated from Mexico, the Native Mexican-Texan no longer looked toward Mexico as home; the Southwest became our homeland once more. The border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100,000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land. The land established by the treaty as belonging to Mexicans was soon swindled away from its owners. The treaty was never honored and restitution, to this day, has never been made.

The justice and benevolence of God will forbid that . . . Texas should again become a howling wilderness trod only by savages, or . . . benighted by the ignorance and superstition, the anarchy and rapine of Mexican misrule. The Anglo-American race are destined to be forever the proprietors of this land of promise and fulfillment. Their laws will govern it, their learning will enlighten it, their enterprise will improve it. Their flocks range its boundless pastures, for them its fertile lands will yield . . . luxuriant harvests . . . The wilderness of Texas has been redeemed by Anglo-American blood & enterprise.

—William H. Wharton

The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it. Con el destierro y el exilio fuimos desueltados, destroncados, destripa-
dos—we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history. Many, under the threat of Anglo terrorism, abandoned homes and ranches and went to Mexico. Some stayed and protested. But as the courts, law enforcement officials, and government officials not only ignored their pleas but penalized them for their efforts, tejanos had no other recourse but armed retaliation.

After Mexican-American resisters robbed a train in Brownsville, Texas on October 18, 1915, Anglo vigilante groups began lynching Chicanos. Texas Rangers would take them into the brush and shoot them. One hundred Chicanos were killed in a matter of months, whole families lynched. Seven thousand fled to Mexico, leaving their small ranches and farms. The Anglos, afraid that the mexicanos would seek independence from the U.S., brought in 20,000 army troops to put an end to the social protest movement in South Texas. Race hatred had finally fomented into an all out war.

My grandmother lost all her cattle, they stole her land.

“Drought hit South Texas,” my mother tells me. “La tierra se puso bien seca y los animales comenzaron a morirse de se. Mi papá se murió de un heart attack dejando a mamá pregnant y con ocho buercos, with eight kids and one on the way. Yo fui la mayor, tenía diez años. The next year the drought continued y el ganado got hoof and mouth. Se cayeron in droves en las pastas y el bushland, panzas blancas balloonning to the skies. El siguiente año still no rain. Mi pobre madre vituda perdió two-thirds of her ganado. A smart gabacho lawyer took the land away mamá hadn’t paid taxes. No hablabas inglés, she didn’t know how to ask for time to raise the money.” My father’s mother, Mama Locha, also lost her terreno. For a while we got $12.50 a year for the “mineral rights” of six acres of cemetery, all that was left of the ancestral lands. Mama Locha had asked that we bury her there beside her husband. El cementerio estaba cercado. But there was a fence around the cemetery, chained and padlocked by the ranch owners of the surrounding land. We couldn’t even get in to visit the graves, much less bury her there. Today, it is still padlocked. The sign reads: "Keep out. Trespassers will be shot.”

In the 1930s, after Anglo agribusiness corporations cheated the small Chicano landowners of their land, the corporations hired gangs of mexicanos to pull out the brush, chaparral and cactus and to irrigate the desert. The land they toiled over had once belonged to many of them, or had been used communally by them. Later the Anglos brought in huge machines and root plows and had the Mexicans scrape the land clean of natural vegetation. In my childhood I saw the end of dryland farming. I witnessed the land cleared; saw the huge pipes connected to underwater sources sticking up in the air. As children, we’d go fishing in some of those canals when they were full and hunt for snakes in them when they were dry. In the 1950s I saw the land, cut up into thousands of neat rectangles and squares, constantly being irrigated. In the 340-day growth season, the seeds of any kind of fruit or vegetable had only to be stuck in the ground in order to grow. More big land corporations came in and bought up the remaining land.

To make a living my father became a sharecropper. Rio Farms Incorporated loaned him seed money and living expenses. At harvest time, my father repaid the loan and forked over 40% of the earnings. Sometimes we earned less than we owed, but always the corporations fared well. Some had major holdings in vegetable trucking, livestock auctions and cotton gins. Altogether we lived on three successive Rio farms; the second was adjacent to the King Ranch and included a dairy farm; the third was a chicken farm. I remember the white feathers of three thousand Leghorn chickens blanketing the land for acres around. My sister, mother and I cleaned, weighed and packaged eggs. (For years afterwards I couldn’t stomach the sight of an egg.) I remember my mother attending some of the meetings sponsored by well-meaning whites from Rio Farms. They talked about good nutrition, health, and held huge barbecues. The only thing salvaged for my family from those years are modern techniques of food canning and a food-stained book they printed made up of recipes from Rio Farms’ Mexican women. How proud my mother was to have her recipe for enchiladas coloradas in a book.

**El cruzar del mojado/Illegal Crossing**

“Ahora si ya tengo una tumba para llorar,” dice Conchita, upon being reunited with
her unknown mother just before the mother dies.
—from Ismael Rodriguez’ film, 
*Nosotros los pobres* ⁴²

*La crisis.* Los gringos had not stopped at the border. By the end of the nineteenth century, powerful landowners in Mexico, in partnership with U.S. colonizing companies, had dispossessed millions of Indians of their lands. Currently, Mexico and her eighty million citizens are almost completely dependent on the U.S. market. The Mexican government and wealthy growers are in partnership with such American conglomerates as American Motors, IT&T and Du Pont which own factories called *maquiladoras.* One-fourth of all Mexicans work at *maquiladoras*; most are young women. Next to oil, *maquiladoras* are Mexico’s second greatest source of U.S. dollars. Working eight to twelve hours a day to wire in backup lights of U.S. autos or solder minuscule wires in TV sets is not the Mexican way. While the women are in the *maquiladoras,* the children are left on their own. Many roam the street, become part of *cholo* gangs. The infusion of the values of the white culture, coupled with the exploitation by that culture, is changing the Mexican way of life.

The devaluation of the *peso* and Mexico’s dependency on the U.S. have brought on what the Mexicans call *la crisis.* *No hay trabajo.* Half of the Mexican people are unemployed. In the U.S. a man or woman can make eight times what they can in Mexico. By March, 1987, 1,088 *pesos* were worth one U.S. dollar. I remember when I was growing up in Texas how we’d cross the border at Reynosa or Progreso to buy sugar or medicines when the dollar was worth eight *pesos* and fifty *centavos.*

*La travesía.* For many *mexicanos del otro lado,* the choice is to stay in Mexico and starve or move north and live. *Dicen que cada mexicano siempre sueña de la conquista en los brazos de cuatro gringas rubias,* la conquista del país poderoso del norte, los Estados Unidos. *En cada Chicano y mexicano vive el mito del tesoro territorial perdido.* North Americans call this return to the homeland the silent invasion.

*A la cueva volverán* 
—*El Puma en la canción 'Amalia'*

South of the border, called North America’s rubbish dump by Chicanos, *mexicanos* congregate in the plazas to talk about the best way to cross. Smugglers, *coyotes,* *pasadores,* *engancheadores* approach these people or are sought out by them.

*¿Qué dicen muchachos a echársela de mojado?*

*“Now among the alien gods with weapons of magic am I.”* 
—Navajo protection song, sung when going into battle. ¹³

We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing la migración de los pueblos mexicanos, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán. This time, the traffic is from south to north.

*El retorno* to the promised land first began with the Indians from the interior of Mexico and the mestizos that came with the conquistadores in the 1500s. Immigration continued in the next three centuries, and, in this century, it continued with the *braceros* who helped to build our railroads and who picked our fruit. Today thousands of Mexicans are crossing the border legally and illegally; ten million people without documents have returned to the Southwest.

Faceless, nameless, invisible, taunted with “Hey cucaracho” (cockroach). Trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation. Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a border culture, a third country, a closed country.

Without benefit of bridges, the *mofados* (wetbacks) float on inflatable rafts across *el rio Grande,* or wade or swim across naked, clutching their clothes over their heads. Holding onto the grass, they pull themselves along the banks with a prayer to Virgen de Guadalupe on their lips: *Ay virgencita morena, mi madrecita, dame tu bendición.*

The Border Patrol hides behind the local McDonalds on the outskirts of Brownsville, Texas or some other border town. They set traps around the river beds beneath the bridge. ¹⁴ Hunters in army-green uniforms stalk and track these economic refugees by the powerful nightvision of electronic sensing devices planted
in the ground or mounted on Border Patrol vans. Cornered by flashlights, frisked while their arms stretch over their heads, los mojados are handcuffed, locked in jeeps, and then kicked back across the border.

One out of every three is caught. Some return to enact their rite of passage as many as three times a day. Some of those who make it across undetected fall prey to Mexican robbers such as those in Smugglers' Canyon on the American side of the border near Tijuana. As refugees in a homeland that does not want them, many find a welcome hand holding out only suffering, pain, and ignoble death.

Those who make it past the checking points of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano barrios in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in a no-man's-borderland, caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation, the illegal refugees are some of the poorest and the most exploited of any people in the U.S. It is illegal for Mexicans to work without green cards. But big farming combines, farm bosses and smugglers who bring them in make money off the "wetbacks'" labor—they don't have to pay federal minimum wages, or ensure adequate housing or sanitary conditions.

The Mexican woman is especially at risk. Often the coyote (smuggler) doesn't feed her for days or let her go to the bathroom. Often he rapes her or sells her into prostitution. She cannot call on county or state health or economic resources because she doesn't know English and she fears deportation. American employers are quick to take advantage of her helplessness. She can't go home. She's sold her house, her furniture, borrowed from friends in order to pay the coyote who charges her four or five thousand dollars to smuggle her to Chicago. She may work as a live-in maid for white, Chicano or Latino households for as little as $15 a week. Or work in the garment industry, do hotel work. Isolated and worried about her family back home, afraid of getting caught and deported, living with as many as fifteen people in one room, the mexicana suffers serious health problems. Se enferma de los nervios, de alta presión.15

La mojada, la mujer indocumentada, is doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness. As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain.

This is her home this thin edge of barbwire.
Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan

Esos movimientos de rebeldía que tenemos en la sangre nosotros los mexicanos surgen como ríos desbocanados en mis venas. Y como mi raza que cada en cuando deja caer esa esclavitud de obedecer; de callarse y aceptar; en mí está la rebeldía encimeta de mi carne. Debajo de mi humillada mirada está una cara insolente lista para explotar. Me costó muy caro mi rebeldía—acalambrada con desvelos y dudas, sintiéndome inútil, estúpida, e impotente.

Me entra una rabia cuando alguien—sea mi mamá, la Iglesia, la cultura de los anglos—me dice haz esto, haz eso sin considerar mis deseos.

Repele. Hable pa’ tras. Fui muy bocicona. Era indiferente a muchos valores de mi cultura. No me dejó de los hombres. No fui buena ni obediente.

Pero he crecido. Ya no sólo paso toda mi vida botando las costumbres y los valores de mi cultura que me traicionan. También recojo las costumbres que por el tiempo se han probado y las costumbres de respeto a las mujeres. But despite my growing tolerance, for this Chicana la guerra de independencia is a constant.

The Strength of My Rebellion

I have a vivid memory of an old photograph: I am six years old. I stand between my father and mother, head cocked to the right, the toes of my flat feet gripping the ground. I hold my mother’s hand.
To this day I’m not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, mi tierra, mi gente, and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me.

I was the first in six generations to leave the Valley, the only one in my family to ever leave home. But I didn’t leave all the parts of me: I kept the ground of my own being. On it I walked away, taking with me the land, the Valley, Texas. Gané mi camino y me largué. Muy andariega mi hija. Because I left of my own accord me dicen, “¿Cómo te gusta la mala vida?”

At a very early age I had a strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair. I had a stubborn will. It tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms no matter how unsuitable to others they were. Terca. Even as a child I would not obey. I was “lazy.” Instead of ironing my younger brothers’ shirts or cleaning the cupboards, I would pass many hours studying, reading, painting, writing. Every bit of self-faith I’d painstakingly gathered took a beating daily. Nothing in my culture approved of me. Había agarrado malos pasos. Something was “wrong” with me. Estaba más allá de la tradición.

There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts.

Cultural Tyranny

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being bociconas (big mouths), for being calleferas (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives?

The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a mujer mala. If a woman doesn’t renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a virgen until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us. As a working class people our chief activity is to put food in our mouths, a roof over our heads and clothes on our backs. Educating our children is out of reach for most of us. Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother—only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel total failures if they don’t marry and have children. “¿Y cuándo te casas, Gloria? Se te va a pasar el tren.” Y yo les digo, “Pos sí me caso, no va ser con un hombre.” Se quedan calladitas. Sí, soy hija de la Chingada. I’ve always been her daughter. No ‘tés chingando.

Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us). Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces. The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but does not die), by virtue of being in tune with nature’s cycles, is feared. Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man’s recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a frenzy of anger and fear.

La gorra, el rebozo, la mantilla are symbols of my culture’s “protection” of women. Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles. It keeps the girlchild from other men—don’t poach on my preserves, only I can touch my child’s body. Our mothers taught us well, "Los hombres nomás quieren una cosa"; men aren’t to be trusted, they are selfish and are like children. Mothers made
sure we didn’t walk into a room of brothers or fathers or uncles in nightgowns or shorts. We were never alone with men, not even those of our own family.

Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages: No hay que dejar que ningún pelado desgraciado maltrate a mis hijos. And in the next breath it would say, La mujer tiene que hacer lo que le diga el hombre. Which was it to be—strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming?

Tribal rights over those of the individual insured the survival of the tribe and were necessary then, and, as in the case of all indigenous peoples in the world who are still fighting off intentional, premeditated murder (genocide), they are still necessary.

Much of what the culture condemns focuses on kinship relationships. The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin—as sister, as father, as padrino—and last as self.

In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue. In the past, acting humble with members outside the family ensured that you would make no one envidioso (envious); therefore he or she would not use witchcraft against you. If you get above yourself, you’re an envidiosa. If you don’t behave like everyone else, a gente will say that you think you’re better than others, que te crees grande. With ambition (condemned in the Mexican culture and valued in the Anglo) comes envy. Respeto carries with it a set of rules so that social categories and hierarchies will be kept in order: respect is reserved for la abuela, papá, el patrón, those with power in the community. Women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants. The Chicano, mexicano, and some Indian cultures have no tolerance for deviance. Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants. Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common. The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe’s fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore subhuman, in-human, non-human.

Half and Half

There was a muchachita who lived near my house. La gente del pueblo talked about her being una de las otras, “of the Others.” They said that for six months she was a woman who had a vagina that bled once a month, and that for the other six months she was a man, had a penis and she peed standing up. They called her half and half, mita’ y mita’, neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrified, a work of nature inverted. But there is a magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity. Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures’ magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift.

There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the bieros gamos: the coming together of opposite qualities within.

Fear of Going Home: Homophobia

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuali-

ty. Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I made the choice to be queer (for some it is genetically inherent). It’s an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. In and out of my head. It makes for loquía, the crazies. It is a path of knowledge—one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our raza. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality.

In a New England college where I taught, the presence of a few lesbians threw the more conservative heterosexual students
and faculty into a panic. The two lesbian students and we two lesbian instructors met with them to discuss their fears. One of the students said, “I thought homophobia meant fear of going home after a residency.”

And I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear—that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage. Some of us take another route. We try to make ourselves conscious of the Shadow-Beast, stare at the sexual lust and lust for power and destruction we see on its face, discern among its features the undershadow that the reigning order of heterosexual males project on our Beast. Yet still others of us take it another step: we try to waken the Shadow-Beast inside us. Not many jump at the chance to confront the Shadow-Beast in the mirror without flinching at her lidless serpent eyes, her cold clammy moist hand dragging us underground, fangs bared and hissing. How does one put feathers on this particular serpent? But a few of us have been lucky—one on the face of the Shadow-Beast we have seen not lust but tenderness; on its face we have uncovered the lie.

Intimate Terrorism: Life in the Borderlands

The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey.

Alienated from her mother culture, “alien” in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.

The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can’t move forward, can’t move backwards. That writhing serpent movement, the very movement of life, swifter than lightning, frozen.

We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame (being a victim and transferring the blame on culture, mother, father, ex-lover, friend, absolves me of responsibility), or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control.

My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman’s history of resistance. The Aztec female rites of mourning were rites of defiance protesting the cultural changes which disrupted the equality and balance between female and male, and protesting their demotion to a lesser status, their denigration. Like la Llorona, the Indian woman’s only means of protest was wailing.

So mamá, Raza, how wonderful, no tener que rendir cuentas a nadie. I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture. I fear no betrayal on my part because, unlike Chicanas and other women of color who grew up white or who have only recently returned to their native cultural roots, I was totally immersed in mine. It wasn’t until I went to high school that I “saw” whites. Until I worked on my master’s degree I had not gotten within an arm’s distance of them. I was totally immersed en lo mexicano, a rural, peasant, isolated, mexicanismo. To separate from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own. Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because lo mexicano is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry “home” on my back.

Not me sold out my people but they me. So yes, though “home” permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home. Though I’ll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, conozco el malestar de mi cultura. I abhor some of my culture’s ways, how it cripples its women, como burras, our strengths used against us, lowly burras bearing humility with dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue. I abhor how my culture makes macho caricatures of its men. No, I do not buy all the
myths of the tribe into which I was born. I can understand why
the more tinged with Anglo blood, the more adamantly my col-
ored and colorless sisters glorify their colored culture’s values—
to offset the extreme devaluation of it by the white culture. It’s a
legitimate reaction. But I will not glorify those aspects of my
culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the
name of protecting me.

So, don’t give me your tenets and your laws. Don’t give me
your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three
cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve
and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to
fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is
denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making
a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my
own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.

The Wounding of the indígena-Mestiza

*Estas carnes indias que despreciamos nosotros los mexi-
canos así como despreciamos condenamos a nuestra madre,
Malinali. Nos condenamos a nosotros mismos. Esta raza venci-
da, enemigo cuerpo.*

Not me sold out my people but they me. *Malinali Tenepat,*
or *Malintzin,* has become known as la Chingada—the fucked
one. She has become the bad word that passes a dozen times a
day from the lips of Chicanos. Whore, prostitute, the woman
who sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos
spit out with contempt.

The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the
Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, *indias y mestizas,* police
the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. Male culture has
done a good job on us. *Son las costumbres que traicionan. La
indía en mi es la sombra: La Chingada, Tlazolteotl, Coatlícue.
Son ellas que oyemos lamentando a sus hijas perdidas.*

Not me sold out my people but they me. Because of the
color of my skin they betrayed me. The dark-skinned woman has
been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with mar-
rriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the
twentieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of
cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own
people (and in Mesoamerica her lot under the Indian patriarchs
was not free of wounding). For 300 years she was invisible, she
was not heard. Many times she wished to speak, to act, to
protest, to challenge. The odds were heavily against her. She hid
her feelings; she hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she
kept stoking the inner flame. She remained faceless and voice-
less, but a light shone through her veil of silence. And though
she was unable to spread her limbs and though for her right now
the sun has sunk under the earth and there is no moon, she con-
tinues to tend the flame. The spirit of the fire spurs her to fight
for her own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground
from which to view the world—a perspective, a homeground
where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample
mestiza heart. She waits till the waters are not so turbulent and
the mountains not so slippery with sleet. Battered and bruised
she waits, her bruises throwing her back upon herself and the
rhythmic pulse of the feminine. Coatlápueb waits with her.

Aquí en la soledad prospera su rebeldía.
En la soledad Ella prospera.
Entering Into the Serpent

Sueño con serpientes, con serpientes del mar,
Con cierto mar, ay de serpientes sueño yo.
Largas, transparentes, en sus barrigas llevan
Lo que puedan arebatarte al amor.
Oh, oh, oh, la mató y aparece una mayor.
Oh, con mucho más infierno en digestión.

I dream of serpents, serpents of the sea,
A certain sea, oh, of serpents I dream.
Long, transparent, in their bellies they carry
All that they can snatch away from love.
Oh, oh, oh, I kill one and a larger one appears.
Oh, with more hellfire burning inside!
—Silvio Rodriguez, “Sueño Con Serpientes”

In the predawn orange haze, the sleepy crowing of roosters atop the trees. No vayás al escusado en lo oscuro. Don’t go to the outhouse at night, Prieta, my mother would say. No se te vaya a meter algo por allá. A snake will crawl into your nalgas, make you pregnant. They seek warmth in the cold. Dicen que las culebras like to suck chiches, can draw milk out of you.

En el escusado in the half-light spiders hang like gliders. Under my bare buttocks and the rough planks the deep yawning tugs at me. I can see my legs fly up to my face as my body falls through the round hole into the sheen of swarming maggots below. Avoiding the snakes under the porch I walk back into the kitchen, step on a big black one slithering across the floor.
Ella tiene su tono

Once we were chopping cotton in the fields of Jesus Maria Ranch. All around us the woods. Quelite® towered above me, choking the stubby cotton that had outlived the deer’s teeth.

I swung el azadón® hard. El quelite barely shook, showered nettles on my arms and face. When I heard the rattle the world froze.

I barely felt its fangs. Boot got all the veneno.® My mother came shrieking, swinging her hoe high, cutting the earth, the writhing body.

I stood still, the sun beat down. Afterwards I smelled where fear had been: back of neck, under arms, between my legs; I felt its heat slide down my body. I swallowed the rock it had hardened into.

When Mama had gone down the row and was out of sight, I took out my pocketknife. I made an X over each prick. My body followed the blood, fell onto the soft ground. I put my mouth over the red and sucked and spit between the rows of cotton.

I picked up the pieces, placed them end on end. Culebra de cascabel.® I counted the rattlers: twelve. It would shed no more. I buried the pieces between the rows of cotton.

That night I watched the window sill, watched the moon dry the blood on the tail, dreamed rattler fangs filled my mouth, scales covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body. The serpent, mi tono, my animal counterpart. I was immune to its venom. Forever immune.

Snakes, víboras: since that day I’ve sought and shunned them. Always when they cross my path, fear and elation flood my body. I know things older than Freud, older than gender. She—that’s how I think of la Víbora, Snake Woman. Like the ancient Olmecs, I know Earth is a coiled Serpent. Forty years it’s taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul.

Coatlalopecuh, She Who Has Dominion Over Serpents

Mi mamagrande Ramona toda su vida mantuvo un altar pequeño en la esquina del comedor. Siempre tenía las velas prendidas. Allí hacía promesas a la Virgen de Guadalupe. My family, like most Chicanos, did not practice Roman Catholicism but a folk Catholicism with many pagan elements. La Virgen de Guadalupe’s Indian name is Coatlalopecuh. She is the central deity connecting us to our Indian ancestry.

Coatlalopecuh is descended from, or is an aspect of, earlier Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses. The earliest is Coatllicue, or “Serpent Skirt.” She had a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet. As creator goddess, she was mother of the celestial deities, and of Huitzilopochtli and his sister, Coyolxauhqui, She With Golden Bells, Goddess of the Moon, who was decapitated by her brother. Another aspect of Coatllicue is Tonantis.® The Totonacs, tired of the Aztec human sacrifices to the male god, Huitzilopochtli, renewed their reverence for Tonantis who preferred the sacrifice of birds and small animals.

The male-dominated Aztec-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects. Coatllicue, the Serpent goddess, and her more sinister aspects, Tlazolteotl, and Cihuacoatl, were “darkened” and disempowered much in the same manner as the Indian Kali.

Tonantis—split from her dark guises, Coatllicue, Tlazolteotl, and Cihuacoatl—became the good mother. The Nahua, through ritual and prayer, sought to oblige Tonantis to ensure their health and the growth of their crops. It was she who gave México the cactus plant to provide her people with milk and pulque. It was she who defended her children against the wrath of the Christian God by challenging God, her son, to produce mother’s milk (as she had done) to prove that his benevolence equaled his disciplinary harshness.

After the Conquest, the Spaniards and their Church continued to split Tonantis/Guadalupe. They desecred Guadalupe, taking Coatlalopecuh, the serpent/sexuality, out of her. They
completed the split begun by the Nahuas by making la Virgen de Guadalupe/Virgen María into chaste virgins and Tlazolteotl/Coatllicue/la Chingada into putas; into the Beauties and the Beasts. They went even further; they made all Indian deities and religious practices the work of the devil.

Thus Tonantzi became Guadalupe, the chaste protective mother, the defender of the Mexican people.

El nueve de diciembre del año 1531
a las cuatro de la madrugada
un pobre indio que se llamaba Juan Diego
iba cruzando el cerro de Tepeyac
cuando oyó un canto de pájaro.
Azó la cabeza vio que la cima del cerro
estaba cubierta con una brillante nube blanca.
Parada en frente del sol
sobre una luna creciente
sostenida por un ángel
estaba una azteca
vestida en ropa de índia.
Nuestra Señora María de Coatlaloqueub
se le apareció.
"Juan Diego, el-que-habla-como-un-águila,"
lavirgen le dijo en el lenguaje azteca.
"Para hacer mi altar este cerro elijo,
Dile a tu gente que yo soy la madre de Dios,
a los indios yo les ayudaré."
Estó se lo contó a Juan Zumárraga
pero el obispo no le creyó.
Juan Diego volvió, llenó su tilma
con rosas de castilla
creciendo milagrosamente en la nieve.
Se las llevó al obispo,
y cuando abrió su tilma
el retrato de la Virgen
abi estaba pintado.

Guadalupe appeared on December 9, 1531, on the spot where the Aztec goddess, Tonantzi ("Our Lady Mother"), had been worshipped by the Nahuas and where a temple to her had stood. Speaking Nahuatl, she told Juan Diego, a poor Indian

crossing Tepeyac Hill, whose Indian name was Cuautlaomiac
and who belonged to the mazebual class, the humblest within
the Chichimeca tribe, that her name was Maria Coatlaloqueub.
Coatl is the Nahuatl word for serpent. Lopeub means "the one
who has dominion over serpents." I interpret this as "the one
who is at one with the beasts." Some spell her name Coatlaloqueub (pronounced "Cuatlaxuhpe" in Nahuatl) and say that xoqueub means "crushed or stepped on with disdain." Some say it means "she who crushed the serpent," with the serpent as the symbol of
the indigenous religion, meaning that her religion was to take
the place of the Aztec religion. Because Coatlaloqueub was
homophonic to the Spanish Guadalupe, the Spanish identified
her with the dark Virgin, Guadalupe, patroness of West Central
Spain.14

From that meeting, Juan Diego walked away with the image
of la Virgen painted on his cloak. Soon after, Mexico ceased
to belong to Spain, and la Virgen de Guadalupe began to eclipse all
the other male and female religious figures in Mexico, Central
America and parts of the U.S. Southwest. "Desde entonces para
el mexicano ser Guadalupano es algo esencial/since then for
the Mexican, to be a Guadalupano is something essential."

Mi Virgin Morena  My brown virgin
Mi Virgin Ranchera  my country virgin
Eres nuestra Reina  you are our queen
Mexico es tu tierra  Mexico is your land
Y tú su bandera.  and you its flag.

—"La Virgen Ranchera"16

In 1660 the Roman Catholic Church named her Mother of
God, considering her synonymous with la Virgen María; she
became la Santa Patrona de los mexicanos. The role of defender
(or patron) has traditionally been assigned to male gods. During
the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata and Miguel Hidalgo
used her image to move el pueblo mexicano toward freedom.
During the 1965 grape strike in Delano, California and in subse-
tuent Chicano farmworkers' marches in Texas and other parts of
the Southwest, her image on banners heralded and united the
farmworkers. Pasbucos (zoot suits) tattoo her image on their
bodies. Today, in Texas and Mexico she is more venerated than
Jesus or God the Father. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley of south
Texas it is la Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos (an aspect of Guadalupe) that is worshipped by thousands every day at her shrine in San Juan. In Texas she is considered the patron saint of Chicanos. Cuando Carito, mi hermanito, was missing in action and, later, wounded in Viet Nam, mi mamá got on her knees y le prometió a Ella que si su hijito volvía vivo she would crawl on her knees and light novenas in her honor.

Today, la Virgen de Guadalupe is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered. She is the symbol of the mestizo true to his or her Indian values. La cultura chicana identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish). Our faith is rooted in indigenous attributes, images, symbols, magic and myth. Because Guadalupe took upon herself the psychological and physical devastation of the conquered and oppressed indio, she is our spiritual, political and psychological symbol. As a symbol of hope and faith, she sustains and insures our survival. The Indian, despite extreme despair, suffering and near genocide, has survived. To Mexicans on both sides of the border, Guadalupe is the symbol of our rebellion against the rich, upper and middleclass; against their subjugation of the poor and the indio.

Guadalupe unites people of different races, religions, languages: Chicano protestants, American Indians and whites. "Nuestra abogada siempre serás/Our mediatrix you will always be." She mediates between the Spanish and the Indian cultures (or three cultures as in the case of mexicanos of African or other ancestry) and between Chicanos and the white world. She mediates between humans and the divine, between this reality and the reality of spirit entities. La Virgen de Guadalupe is the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess.

La gente Chicana tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two.

Ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three “Our Mothers.” Guadalupe has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and mexicanos and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and la Llorona to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy.

Yet we have not all embraced this dichotomy. In the U.S. Southwest, Mexico, Central and South America the indio and the mestizo continue to worship the old spirit entities (including Guadalupe) and their supernatural power, under the guise of Christian saints.17

Las invoco diosas mías, ustedes las indias
sumergidas en mi carne que son mis sombras.
Ustedes que persisten mudas en sus cuevas.
Ustedes Señoras que ahora, como yo,
están en desgracia.

For Waging War Is My Cosmic Duty: The Loss of the Balanced Oppositions and the Change to Male Dominance

Therefore I decided to leave
The country (Aztlan),
Therefore I have come as one charged with a
special duty,
Because I have been given arrows and shields,
For waging war is my duty,
And on my expeditions I
Shall see all the lands,
I shall wait for the people and meet them
In all four quarters and I shall give them
Food to eat and drinks to quench their thirst,
For here I shall unite all the different peoples!
—Huitzilopochtli

speaking to the Azteca-Mexica18

Before the Aztecs became a militaristic, bureaucratic state where male predatory warfare and conquest were based on patrilineal nobility, the principle of balanced opposition between the sexes existed.19 The people worshipped the Lord and Lady of
Duality, *Ometecuhtli* and *Omecihuatl*. Before the change to male dominance, *Coatllicue*, Lady of the Serpent Skirt, contained and balanced the dualities of male and female, light and dark, life and death.

The changes that led to the loss of the balanced oppositions began when the Azteca, one of the twenty Toltec tribes, made the last pilgrimage from a place called Aztlan. The migration south began about the year A.D. 820. Three hundred years later the advance guard arrived near Tula, the capital of the declining Toltec empire. By the 11th century, they had joined with the Chichimec tribe of Mexitín (afterwards called Mexica) into one religious and administrative organization within Aztlan, the Aztec territory. The Mexitín, with their tribal god *Tetzahuhtli Huitzilopochtli* (Magnificent Humming Bird on the Left), gained control of the religious system. In some stories *Huitzilopochtli* killed his sister, the moon goddess *Malinalxoch*, who used her supernatural power over animals to control the tribe rather than wage war.

*Huitzilopochtli* assigned the Azteca-Mexica the task of keeping the human race (the present cosmic age called the Fifth Sun, *El Quinto Sol*) alive. They were to guarantee the harmonious preservation of the human race by unifying all the people on earth into one social, religious and administrative organ. The Aztec people considered themselves in charge of regulating all earthly matters. Their instrument: controlled or regulated war to gain and exercise power.

After 100 years in the central plateau, the Azteca-Mexica went to Chapultepec, where they settled in 1248 (the present site of the park on the outskirts of Mexico City). There, in 1345, the Azteca-Mexica chose the site of their capital, Tenochtitlan. By 1428, they dominated the Central Mexican lake area.

The Aztec ruler, *Itzcoatl*, destroyed all the painted documents (books called codices) and rewrote a mythology that validated the wars of conquest and thus continued the shift from a tribe based on clans to one based on classes. From 1429-1440, the Aztecs emerged as a militaristic state that preyed on neighboring tribes for tribute and captives. The “wars of flowers” were encounters between local armies with a fixed number of warriors, operating within the Aztec World, and, according to set rules, fighting ritual battles at fixed times and on predetermined battlefields. The religious purpose of these wars was to procure prisoners of war who could be sacrificed to the deities of the capturing party. For if one “fed” the gods, the human race would be saved from total extinction. The social purpose was to enable males of noble families and warriors of low descent to win honor, fame and administrative offices, and to prevent social and cultural decadence of the elite. The Aztec people were free to have their own religious faith, provided it did not conflict too much with the three fundamental principles of state ideology: to fulfill the special duty set forth by *Huitzilopochtli* of unifying all peoples, to participate in the wars of flowers, and to bring ritual offerings and do penance for the purpose of preventing decadence.

Matrilineal descent characterized the Toltecs and perhaps early Aztec society. Women possessed property, and were curers as well as priestesses. According to the codices, women in former times had the supreme power in Tula, and in the beginning of the Aztec dynasty, the royal blood ran through the female line. A council of elders of the Calpul headed by a supreme leader, or *tlacol*, called the father and mother of the people, governed the tribe. The supreme leader's vice-emperor occupied the position of “Snake Woman” or *Cihuacoati*, a goddess. Although the high posts were occupied by men, the terms referred to females, evidence of the exalted role of women before the Aztec nation became centralized. The final break with the democratic Calpul came when the four Aztec lords of royal lineage picked the king's successor from his siblings or male descendants.

*La Llorona*’s wailing in the night for her lost children has an echoing note in the wailing or mourning rites performed by women as they bade their sons, brothers and husbands good-bye before they left to go to the “flowery wars.” Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman’s feeble protest when she has no other recourse. These collective wailing rites may have been a sign of resistance in a society which glorified the warrior and war and for whom the women of the conquered tribes were booty.

In defiance of the Aztec rulers, the *mazebualtes* (the common people) continued to worship fertility, nourishment and agricultural female deities, those of crops and rain. They venerated *Chalchihuitlicue* (goddess of sweet or inland water), *Chicomecoatl* (goddess of food) and *Huitzotlhuatl* (goddess of salt).

Nevertheless, it took less than three centuries for Aztec society to change from the balanced duality of their earlier times
and from the egalitarian traditions of a wandering tribe to those of a predatory state. The nobility kept the tribute, the commoner got nothing, resulting in a class split. The conquered tribes hated the Aztecs because of the rape of their women and the heavy taxes levied on them. The Tlaxcalans were the Aztecs’ bitter enemies and it was they who helped the Spanish defeat the Aztec rulers, who were by this time so unpopular with their own common people that they could not even mobilize the populace to defend the city. Thus the Aztec nation fell not because Malinal (la Chingada) interpreted for and slept with Cortés, but because the ruling elite had subverted the solidarity between men and women and between noble and commoner.28

Sueño con serpientes

Coatl. In pre-Columbian America the most notable symbol was the serpent. The Olmecs associated womanhood with the Serpent’s mouth which was guarded by rows of dangerous teeth, a sort of vagina dentata. They considered it the most sacred place on earth, a place of refuge, the creative womb from which all things were born and to which all things returned. Snake people had holes, entrances to the body of the Earth Serpent; they followed the Serpent’s way, identified with the Serpent deity, with the mouth, both the eater and the eaten. The destiny of humankind is to be devoured by the Serpent.29

Dead,
the doctor by the operating table said.
I passed between the two fangs,
the flickering tongue.
Having come through the mouth of the serpent,
swallowed,
I found myself suddenly in the dark,
sliding down a smooth wet surface
down down into an even darker darkness.
Having crossed the portal, the raised hinged mouth,
having entered the serpent’s belly,
now there was no looking back, no going back.

Why do I cast no shadow?
Are there lights from all sides shining on me?
Ahead, ahead.

curled up inside the serpent’s coils,
the damp breath of death on my face.
I knew at that instant: something must change
or I’d die.
Algo tenía que cambiar.

After each of my four bouts with death I’d catch glimpses of an otherworld Serpent. Once, in my bedroom, I saw a cobra the size of the room, her hood expanding over me. When I blinked she was gone. I realized she was, in my psyche, the mental picture and symbol of the instinctual in its collective impersonal, pre-human. She, the symbol of the dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life.

The Presences

She appeared in white, garbed in white,
standing white, pure white.
—Bernardino de Sahagún30

On the gulf where I was raised, en el Valle del Río Grande in South Texas—that triangular piece of land wedged between the river y el golfo which serves as the Texas-U.S./Mexican border—is a Mexican pueblo called Hargill (at one time in the history of this one-grocery-store, two-service-stations town there were thirteen churches and thirteen cantinas). Down the road, a little ways from our house, was a deserted church. It was known among the Mexicanos that if you walked down the road late at night you would see a woman dressed in white floating about, peering out the church window. She would follow those who had done something bad or who were afraid. Los Mexicanos called her la Llorona. She was, I think, Cibuacoatl, Serpent Woman, ancient Aztec goddess of the earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives, and antecedent of la Llorona. Covered with chalk, Cibuacoatl wears a white dress with a decoration half red and half black. Her hair forms two little horns (which the Aztecs depicted as knives) crossed on her forehead. The lower part of her face is a bare jawbone, signifying death. On her back she carries a cradle, the knife of sacrifice swaddled as if it were her papoose, her child.31 Like la Llorona, Cibuacoatl howls and weeps in the night, screams as if demented.
She brings mental depression and sorrow. Long before it takes place, she is the first to predict something is to happen.

Back then, I, an unbeliever, scoffed at these Mexican superstitions as I was taught in Anglo school. Now, I wonder if this story and similar ones were the culture’s attempts to “protect” members of the family, especially girls, from “wandering.” Stories of the devil luring young girls away and having his way with them discouraged us from going out. There’s an ancient Indian tradition of burning the umbilical cord of an infant girl under the house so she will never stray from it and her domestic role.

A mis ancas caen los cuerus de culebra,  
cuatro veces por año los arrastro,  
me tropiezo y me caigo  
y cada vez que miro una culebra le pregunto  
¿Qué traes conmigo?

Four years ago a red snake crossed my path as I walked through the woods. The direction of its movement, its pace, its colors, the “mood” of the trees and the wind and the snake—they all “spoke” to me, told me things. I look for omens everywhere, everywhere catch glimpses of the patterns and cycles of my life. Stones “speak” to Luisah Teish, a Santera; trees whisper their secrets to Chrystos, a Native American. I remember listening to the voices of the wind as a child and understanding its messages. Los espíritus that ride the back of the south wind. I remember their exhalation blowing in through the slits in the door during those hot Texas afternoons. A gust of wind raising the linoleum under my feet, buffeting the house. Everything trembling.

We’re not supposed to remember such otherworldly events. We’re supposed to ignore, forget, kill those fleeting images of the soul’s presence and of the spirit’s presence. We’ve been taught that the spirit is outside our bodies or above our heads somewhere up in the sky with God. We’re supposed to forget that every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it.

Like many Indians and Mexicans, I did not deem my psychic experiences real. I denied their occurrences and let my inner senses atrophy. I allowed white rationality to tell me that the existence of the “other world” was mere pagan superstition. I accepted their reality, the “official” reality of the rational, reason-

ing mode which is connected with external reality, the upper world, and is considered the most developed consciousness—the consciousness of duality.

The other mode of consciousness facilitates images from the soul and the unconscious through dreams and the imagination. Its world is labeled “fiction,” make-believe, wish-fulfillment. White anthropologists claim that Indians have “primitive” and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness—rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the “magical” mind, the “savage” mind, the participation mystique of the mind that says the world of the imagination—the world of the soul—and of the spirit is just as real as physical reality. In trying to become “objective,” Western culture made “objects” of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing “touch” with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence.

Not only was the brain split into two functions but so was reality. Thus people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes. Such is the case with the indígena and the mestiza.

Institutionalized religion fears trafficking with the spirit world and stigmatizes it as witchcraft. It has strict taboos against this kind of inner knowledge. It fears what Jung calls the Shadow, the unsavory aspects of ourselves. But even more it fears the supra-human, the god in ourselves.

“The purpose of any established religion . . . is to glorify, sanctify and bless with a superpersonal meaning all personal and interpersonal activities. This occurs through the “sacraments,” and indeed through most religious rites.” But it sanctions only its own sacraments and rites. Voodoo, Santería, Shamanism and other native religions are called cults and their beliefs are called mythologies. In my own life, the Catholic Church fails to give meaning to my daily acts, to my continuing encounters with the “other world.” It and other institutionalized religions impoverish all life, beauty, pleasure.

The Catholic and Protestant religions encourage fear and distrust of life and of the body; they encourage a split between the body and the spirit and totally ignore the soul; they encourage us to kill off parts of ourselves. We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal; intelligence dwells only in the head. But the
body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to "real" events.

So I grew up in the interface trying not to give countenance to *el mal aigre,* evil non-human, non-corporeal entities riding the wind, that could come in through the window, through my nose with my breath. I was not supposed to believe in *susto,* a sudden shock or fall that frightens the soul out of the body. And growing up between such opposing spiritualities how could I reconcile the two, the pagan and the Christian?

No matter to what use my people put the supernatural world, it is evident to me now that the spirit world, whose existence the whites are so adamant in denying, does in fact exist. This very minute I sense the presence of the spirits of my ancestors in my room. And I think *la hija is Cihuacoatl,* Snake Woman; she is *la Llorona,* Daughter of Night, traveling the dark terrains of the unknown searching for the lost parts of herself. I remember *la hija* following me once, remember her eerie lament. I’d like to think that she was crying for her lost children, *los Chicanos/mexicanos.*

*La facultad*

*La facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an 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 communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.

Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized (when not brutalized into insensitivity). Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign.

When we’re up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away. We’ll sense the rapist when he’s five blocks down the street. Pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone that radar. It’s a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate. It is latent in all of us.

I walk into a house and I know whether it is empty or occupied. I feel the lingering charge in the air of a recent fight or love-making or depression. I sense the emotions someone near is emitting—whether friendly or threatening. Hate and fear—the more intense the emotion, the greater my reception of it. I feel a tingling on my skin when someone is staring at me or thinking about me. I can tell how others feel by the way they smell, where others are by the air pressure on my skin. I can spot the love or greed or generosity lodged in the tissues of another. Often I sense the direction of and my distance from people or objects—in the dark, or with my eyes closed, without looking. It must be a vestige of a proximity sense, a sixth sense that’s lain dormant from long-ago times.

Fear develops the proximity sense aspect of *la facultad.* But 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; the senses become so acute and piercing that we can see through things, view events in depth, a piercing that reaches the underworld (the realm of the soul). As we plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness—an experiencing of soul (Self).

We lose something in this mode of initiation, something is taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance. There is a prejudice and a fear of the dark, chthonic (underworld), material such as depression, illness, death and the violations that can bring on this break. Confronting anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us into a less literal and more psychic sense of reality increases awareness and *la facultad.*
How to Tame a Wild Tongue

"We're going to have to control your tongue," the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth. Silver bits plop and tinkle into the basin. My mouth is a motherlode.

The dentist is cleaning out my roots. I get a whiff of the stench when I gasp. "I can't cap that tooth yet, you're still draining," he says.

"We're going to have to do something about your tongue," I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. "I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn," he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?

"Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?"

—Ray Gwyn Smith

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for "talking back" to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. "If you want to be American, speak 'American.' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong."

"I want you to speak English. Pa'ballar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si
todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent,’” my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents.

 Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua. Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out.

**Overcoming the Tradition of Silence**

*Abogadas, escúpimos el oscuro.*

*Peleando con nuestra propia sombra el silencio nos sepulta.*

*En boca cerrada no entran moscas.* “Flies don’t enter a closed mouth” is a saying I kept hearing when I was a child. *Ser habladora* was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much. *Muchachitas bien criadas,* well-bred girls don’t answer back. *Es una falta de respeto* to talk back to one’s mother or father. I remember one of the sins I’d recite to the priest in the confession box the few times I went to confession: talking back to my mother; *hablar pa’ trás,* repelar. *Hocicona,* repelona, *chismosa,* having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being *mal criada.* In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I’ve never heard them applied to men.

The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word *nosotras,* I was shocked. I had not known the word existed. Chicanas use *nosotras* whether we’re male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse.

> And our tongues have become dry the wilderness has dried out our tongues and we have forgotten speech.
> —Irena Klepfisz

Even our own people, other Spanish speakers *nos quieren poner candados en la boca.* They would hold us back with their bag of reglas de academia.

Oyé como ladra: el lenguaje de la frontera

*Quien tiene boca se equivoca.*

—Mexican saying

“*Pocho,* cultural traitor, you’re speaking the oppressor’s language by speaking English, you’re ruining the Spanish language,” I have been accused by various Latinos and Latinas. Chicano Spanish is considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish.

But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, *evolución,* *enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción* have created variants of Chicano Spanish, *un nuevo lenguaje.* *Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir.* Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language.

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither español ni inglés, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages.

Chicano Spanish sprang out of the Chicanos’ need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. We needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language. For some of us, language is a homeland closer than the Southwest—for many Chicanos today live in the Midwest and the East. And because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages. Some of the languages we speak are:

1. Standard English
2. Working class and slang English
3. Standard Spanish
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California have regional variations)
7. Tex-Mex
8. *Pachuco* (called *caló*)
Chicano Spanish

Chicanos, after 250 years of Spanish/Anglo colonization have developed significant differences in the Spanish we speak. We collapse two adjacent vowels into a single syllable and sometimes shift the stress in certain words such as maíz/matz, cobete/ cuete. We leave out certain consonants when they appear between vowels: lado/lao, mojado/mojaio. Chicanos from South Texas pronounced f as f as jue (jue). Chicanos use “archaisms,” words that are no longer in the Spanish language, words that have been evolved out. We say semos, trufe, batga, ansina, and naiden. We retain the “archaic” j, as in jalar; that derives from an earlier b, (the French balar or the Germanic balon which was lost to standard Spanish in the 16th century), but which is still found in several regional dialects such as the one spoken in South Texas. (Due to geography, Chicanos from the Valley of South Texas were cut off linguistically from other Spanish speakers. We tend to use words that the Spaniards brought over from Medieval Spain. The majority of the Spanish colonizers in Mexico and the Southwest came from Extremadura—Hernán Cortés was one of them—and Andalucía. Andalucians pronounce ll like a y, and their d’s tend to be absorbed by adjacent vowels: tirado becomes tiro. They brought el lenguaje popular, dialectos y regionalismos.4)

Chicanos and other Spanish speakers also shift ll to j and z to s.5 We leave out initial syllables, saying tar for estar, toy for estoy, bora for abora (cubanos and puertorriqueños also leave out initial letters of some words.) We also leave out the final syllable such as pa for para. The intervocalic y, the ll as in tortilla, ella, botella, gets replaced by tortia or tortiya, ea, botea. We add an additional syllable at the beginning of certain words: atocar for tocar, agastar for gastar. Sometimes we’ll say lavaste las vacijas, other times lavates (substituting the ates verb endings for the aste).

We use anglicisms, words borrowed from English: bola from ball, carpeta from carpet, máquina de lavar (instead of lavadora) from washing machine. Tex-Mex argot, created by adding a Spanish sound at the beginning or end of an English word such as cooktia for cook, watchar for watch, parktia for park, and raptar for rape, is the result of the pressures on Spanish speakers to adapt to English.

We don’t use the word vosotros/as or its accompanying verb form. We don’t say claro (to mean yes), imagíname, or me
monolingual Chicana whose first language is English or Spanish is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several variants of Spanish. A Chicana from Michigan or Chicago or Detroit is just as much a Chicana as one from the Southwest. Chicano Spanish is as diverse linguistically as it is regionally.

By the end of this century, Spanish speakers will comprise the biggest minority group in the U.S., a country where students in high schools and colleges are encouraged to take French classes because French is considered more “cultured.” But for a language to remain alive it must be used. By the end of this century English, and not Spanish, will be the mother tongue of most Chicanos and Latinos.

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

My fingers
move sly against your palm
Like women everywhere, we speak in code . . .
—Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz

“Vistas,” corridos, y comida: My Native Tongue

In the 1960s, I read my first Chicano novel. It was City of Night by John Rechy, a gay Texan, son of a Scottish father and a Mexican mother. For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and could get published. When I read I Am Joaquin I was surprised to see a bilingual book by
a Chicano in print. When I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we really existed as a people. In 1971, when I started teaching High School English to Chicano students, I tried to supplement the required texts with works by Chicanos, only to be reprimanded and forbidden to do so by the principal. He claimed that I was supposed to teach “American” and English literature. At the risk of being fired, I swore my students to secrecy and slipped in Chicano short stories, poems, a play. In graduate school, while working toward a Ph.D., I had to “argue” with one advisor after the other, semester after semester, before I was allowed to make Chicano literature an area of focus.

Even before I read books by Chicanos or Mexicans, it was the Mexican movies I saw at the drive-in—the Thursday night special of $1.00 a carload—that gave me a sense of belonging. “Vámonos a las vistas,” my mother would call out and we’d all—grandmother, brothers, sister and cousins—squeeze into the car. We’d wolf down cheese and bologna white bread sandwiches while watching Pedro Infante in melodramatic tear-jerkers like Nosotros los pobres, the first “real” Mexican movie (that was not an imitation of European movies). I remember seeing Cuando los bijos se van and surmising that all Mexican movies played up the love a mother has for her children and what ungrateful sons and daughters suffer when they are not devoted to their mothers. I remember the singing-type “westerns” of Jorge Negrete and Miguel Aceves Mejia. When watching Mexican movies, I felt a sense of homecoming as well as alienation. People who were to amount to something didn’t go to Mexican movies, or bailes or tune their radios to boleiro, rancherita, and corrido music.

The whole time I was growing up, there was norteño music sometimes called North Mexican border music, or Tex-Mex music, or Chicano music, or cantina (bar) music. I grew up listening to conjuntos, three- or four-piece bands made up of folk musicians playing guitar, bajo sexto, drums and button accordion, which Chicanos had borrowed from the German immigrants who had come to Central Texas and Mexico to farm and build breweries. In the Rio Grande Valley, Steve Jordan and Little Joe Hernández were popular, and Flaco Jiménez was the accordion king. The rhythms of Tex-Mex music are those of the polka, also adapted from the Germans, who in turn had borrowed the polka from the Czechs and Bohemians.

I remember the hot, sultry evenings when corridos—songs of love and death on the Texas-Mexican borderlands—reverberated out of cheap amplifiers from the local cantinas and wafted in through my bedroom window.

Corridos first became widely used along the South Texas/Mexican border during the early conflict between Chicanos and Anglos. The corridos are usually about Mexican heroes who do valiant deeds against the Anglo oppressors. Pancho Villa’s song, “La cucharacha,” is the most famous one. Corridos of John F. Kennedy and his death are still very popular in the Valley. Older Chicanos remember Lydia Mendoza, one of the great border corrido singers who was called la Gloria de Tejas. Her “El tango negro,” sung during the Great Depression, made her a singer of the people. The everpresent corridos narrated one hundred years of border history, bringing news of events as well as entertaining. These folk musicians and folk songs are our chief cultural mythmakers, and they made our hard lives seem bearable.

I grew up feeling ambivalent about our music. Country-western and rock-and-roll had more status. In the 50s and 60s, for the slightly educated and agringado Chicanos, there existed a sense of shame at being caught listening to our music. Yet I couldn’t stop my feet from thumping to the music, could not stop humming the words, nor hide from myself the exhilaration I felt when I heard it.

There are more subtle ways that we internalize identification, especially in the forms of images and emotions. For me food and certain smells are tied to my identity, to my homeland. Woodsmoke curling up to an immense blue sky; woodsmoke perfuming my grandmother’s clothes, her skin. The stench of cow manure and the yellow patches on the ground; the crack of a .22 rifle and the reek of cordite. Homemade white cheese sizzling in a pan, melting inside a folded tortilla. My sister Hilda’s hot, spicy menudo, cíbulo colorado making it deep red, pieces of panza and hominy floating on top. My brother Carito barbecuing fajitas in the backyard. Even now and 3,000 miles away, I can see my mother spicing the ground beef, pork and venison with cíbulo. My mouth salivates at the thought of the hot steaming tamales I would be eating if I were home.
Si le preguntas a mi mamá, "¿Qué eres?"

"Identity is the essential core of who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside."

—Kaufman

Nosotros los Chicanos straddle the borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos’ incessant clamoring so that we forget our language. Among ourselves we don’t say nosotros los americanos, o nosotros los españoles, o nosotros los hispanos. We say nosotros los mexicanos (by mexicanos we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between mexicanos del otro lado and mexicanos de este lado. Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders.

Dime con quien andas y te diré quien eres.
(Tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are.)

—Mexican saying

Si le preguntas a mi mamá, "¿Qué eres?" te dirá, “Soy mexicana.” My brothers and sister say the same. I sometimes will answer “soy mexicana” and at others will say “soy Chicana” o “soy tejana.” But I identified as “Raza” before I even identified as “mexicana” or “Chicana.”

As a culture, we call ourselves Spanish when referring to ourselves as a linguistic group and when coping out. It is then that we forget our predominant Indian genes. We are 70 to 80% Indian.10 We call ourselves Hispanic11 or Spanish-American or Latin American or Latin when linking ourselves to other Spanish-speaking peoples of the Western hemisphere and when coping out. We call ourselves Mexican-American12 to signify we are neither Mexican nor American, but more the noun “American” than the adjective “Mexican” (and when coping out).

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero basta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.

When not coping out, when we know we are more than nothing, we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; mestizo when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever own our Black ancestry); Chicano when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the U.S.; Raza when referring to Chicanos; tefano when we are Chicanos from Texas.

Chicanos did not know we were a people until 1965 when Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers united and I Am Joaquín was published and la Raza Unida party was formed in Texas. With that recognition, we became a distinct people. Something momentous happened to the Chicano soul—we became aware of our reality and acquired a name and a language (Chicano Spanish) that reflected that reality. Now that we had a name, some of the fragmented pieces began to fall together—who we were, what we were, how we had evolved. We began to get glimpses of what we might eventually become.

Yet the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality still. One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration take place. In the meantime, tenemos que bacerla lucha. ¿Quién está protegiendo los ranchos de mi gente? ¿Quién está tratando de cerrar la fisura entre la India y el blanco en nuestra sangre? El Chicano, si, el Chicano que anda como un ladrón en su propia casa.

Los Chicanos, how patient we seem, how very patient. There is the quiet of the Indian about us.13 We know how to survive. When other races have given up their tongue, we’ve kept ours. We know what it is to live under the hammer blow of the dominant norteamericano culture. But more than we count the blows, we count the days the weeks the years the centuries the
cons until the white laws and commerce and customs will rot in the deserts they’ve created, lie bleached. *Humildes* yet proud, *quietos* yet wild, *nosotros los mexicanos*—Chicanos will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain.
The underlying idea... of which the vehicle or figure means (97).

**In the Philosophy of Hegel**. A. Yetbacks distinguishes the two parts of a metaphor by the terms: Venue and Vehicle. The Venue is conceptual metaphors defined and identified by Lackoff and Turner in more Than Cool Reason:

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Symbolic doubles -- synonymous with vehicle

**Vehicles**

Cultural Interference -- Cultural roots of origins of the metaphors

Surface Metaphors -- Representations of the Serpent:

Good is male; bad is female

**GOOD IS WHITE, BAD IS DARK**

Conceputal Metaphors:

Anzaldua's Employment of Metaphors