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Conflicting Frameworks: Race and Experimentation in Contemporary Poetry from the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Abstract (English)*: Performance experimentation at the U.S./Mexico border is related to modes of surveillance and consumption, as well as to the difficulty of defining local cultures against dominant ideas of the historical development of national identity in both countries. Renewed academic interest picks up Gloria Anzaldúa's canonical text Borderlands/La Frontera as a text which provides a framework for experimenting with the relationship between human and "nonhuman," and to queer essentializing ecofeminist narratives. Norma Cantú's 2015 Spanish language translation of the text drew interest, in turn, especially from scholars of feminism and gender studies in Mexico. Yet Anzaldúa's deployment of the figure of the "new mestiza" has faced criticism for what activists and writers have referred to as this figure's "anti-blackness" and Anzaldúa's under-theorization of the relationship between this figure and the intellectual history of mestizaje, especially as it developed in Mexico. This paper will compare recent receptions and applications of Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera by Latin American thinkers alongside work by artists Minerva Cuevas and Wendy Trevino. It considers how the text, as border texts and artworks are more generally, is subject to a double pressure to fit into conflicting frameworks for understanding race, gender, and identity, and to exceed these frameworks at every turn.*

Keywords: *U.S.-Mexico border, poetry, space, identity, Comparative Literature*

Abstract (Spanish): *Experimentaciones performáticas en la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México están relacionadas con modos de vigilancia y consumo, así como con la difícil definición de culturas locales frente a ideas dominantes del desarrollo histórico de la identidad nacional en ambos países. Recientemente, un mayor interés académico por el texto canónico de Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La frontera lo considera como un texto que proporciona un marco para experimentar con la relación entre lo humano y lo "no humano," y para someter narrativas ecofeministas esencialistas a una mirada cuir. A su vez, la traducción al español del texto de Norma Cantú ha suscitado un interés especialmente entre los estudios del feminismo y de género en México. Por otro lado, la figura de la "nueva mestiza" en la obra de Anzaldúa ha enfrentado críticas por lo que activistas y escritores se han referido como la "anti-negritud" de esta figura y su relación insuficientemente asumida con la historia intelectual del mestizaje, especialmente en México. Este artículo comparará las recepciones y aplicaciones recientes de*

Borderlands/La frontera de Anzaldúa por parte de pensadores latinoamericanos junto con el trabajo de las artistas Minerva Cuevas y Wendy Treviño. Considera cómo este texto, como todo texto y obra de arte fronterizo, está sujeto a una doble presión de encajar en marcos conflictivos para comprender raza, género e identidad, y superar estos marcos en todo momento.

Palabras clave: *Frontera Estados Unidos-México, poesía, espacio, identidad, Literatura Comparada*

The U.S.-Mexico border often seems like a fixed site in relation to which it is possible to register, read, and interpret movement—of migration, of trade, and of traffic. This border has also been understood, historically, as a kind of performance site, producing embodied and interpersonal experiences of being read and having one's documents and identity assessed. The interactions between would-be crossers and Customs and Border Protection agents bifurcates reality into the true—that which is performed as identity, and the performed—that which is a cover for the truth of criminality or deception which justifies the questions faced by those who cross the border. Examining the work of theater and performance artists from Lebanon and Palestine, curator and writer Sandra Noeth explains how borders become sites in which body and identity are uniquely imagined to overlap. This expected intersection between identity and embodied performance is facilitated and mediated by stereotypes and media representations. The crosser's performance is supposed to coincide with an anticipated role to such an extent that, according to anthropologist Shahram Khosravi, "the body can betray you" just as a well-embodied story can generate access to a different nation and participation in its economy (Khosravi cited in Noeth 221). As Etienne Balibar explains in *Politics and the Other Scene,* borders place States in the "contradictory position of having both to relativize and to reinforce the notion of identity and national belonging" (Balibar 82). This contradictory position is produced in the way that the number of possible categories across which relativization can occur is limited. In order to limit difference as it appears at the border, a finite set of categories are naturalized as characteristics or predicates of "natural" or human being, such as the capacity to have a place, family, and/or language of origin, as well as a gender in a particular sense. Some of these characteristics are also expected to resolve into the racial categorization which requires certain boxes to be checked as a prerequisite for naturalization. Noeth also argues that embodiment itself has been unevenly distributed across such a set of categories. This uneven distribution, she suggests, leads arguments about embodied experience to fall into essentialisms "depicting some bodies as more

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authentic, autonomous, healthy, functional, or natural than others" (183). Rather than consider this question from the perspective of the distribution of naturalness, I would like to consider it from the perspective of the production of the idea of the natural itself when it comes to the forms of behavior, movement, and physical characteristics which appear at the border.

Both the repetition of the wall, fence, and checkpoints along the length of the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as the often serial and iterative nature of the performance of crossing it, produce experiences of differentiation which demonstrate the constructedness of reality, a constructedness to which certain ideas of "natural" embodiment and crossing of or relating to landscapes seem opposed. Artists have continually pushed back against this separation of the border from the landscape. In describing her 2010 "Crossing of the Río Bravo," artist Minerva Cuevas articulates a form of border sublimity when, preparing for the 2010 work, she goes to the river for the first time and notices the absence of "anything connected to that mediatic violence" which saturates representations of the border. "Witnessing" this absence is something she describes as the "first liberation," leading her to "realize that what is intimidating is the desert itself" (Cuevas). This is the sense in which Cuevas' site-specific work of whitewashing a broken line across stepping-stones to trace a path across the river seeks to replace the border with a "kind of natural bridge" (2017). Here Cuevas attends to the expulsion of the natural landscape from the border as it is considered politically, through media, and experienced in crossing at checkpoints. It is this constructedness of reality of which Gloria Anzaldúa's "conciencia de la mestiza" (*mestiza* consciousness) is meant to become aware and resist by returning a different kind of relationship between embodied experience and the landscape (Anzaldúa 77). Her text *Borderlands/La Frontera* is foundational for considerations of a particular idea of borderlands consciousness that served as a basis for the fields of Chicana/o/x Studies. The form of consciousness that she theorized there suggests that being situated in relation to the landscape and to the border shifts or changes one's relationship to knowledge. Not least, this shifts that relationship to knowledge which academic intellectualism has consolidated in the form of what Anzaldúa calls a "subject-object duality" (80). But this foundational status of her writing for new methods of criticism and theory has also made her a target for critique. Her work has been read, more recently, as limiting and limited by its failure to provide terms or space for considering the ways that anti-Blackness operates transnationally, or across and also despite the border.

Anzaldúa's border work describes a territory, a "place of contradictions," from whence her writing was generated. In what follows, I will trace a couple of ways in which these contradictions (of the borderlands) themselves structure a double pressure that critics have placed on her thought. On the one hand, Anzaldúa and her work have been asked to represent a certain approach to the geographic, cultural specificity, and (Chicana, lesbian) identity which might

revise or expand the purchase of existing research methodologies. This reading is sometimes essentializing, and her work is often read *as* essentializing. On the other hand, her work has also been considered to offer tools for thinking against essentializing categorizations of identity by unsettling assumptions about the nature of human being and knowledge itself. Ironically, these contradictory pressures mimic the contradictory demand that structures the activity of border-crossing: that the crosser both perform a role as the embodied and naturally occurring referent of a disembodied category *and* provide the terms for exceeding these categories. Recent theoretical work on the relationship between white supremacy and performance, and knowledge, re-formulates the relationship between ideas of the "human," ideas of the natural or non-human environment, and the epistemological frameworks which they anchor (Jackson 1). Both this work and Anzaldúa's engages in complicated and ambivalent ways with European and, in some cases, Mexican and Latin American philosophy. Yet, as Alexander Stehn and Mariana Alessandri have pointed out, Anzaldúa is "dismissed by most philosophers" (Stehn 298). In what follows, I consider how instances of policing and performance at the border, as well as recent reevaluations of Anzaldúa's work from within the field of philosophy, provide new ways of considering the relationship between anti-Blackness, the constructedness of reality, and performance at the border so central to Anzaldúa's thought.

Double pressure and the desire for "geographic tethering"

In 2020, a virtual "homenaje" (homage) was held to Anzaldúa's life and work, including a virtual ofrenda made both possible and necessary in a new way by the Covid-19 pandemic. This event hoped to generate engagement from Mexican universities including UNAM, the Tecnológico de Monterrey and the Benemérita Universidad Autonóma de Puebla. According to the organizers and editors of the collection of essays and reflections published afterwards, these institutions and other non-academic spaces and groups dedicated to her work are ones "donde el pensamiento de Gloria Anzaldúa ha crecido desde hace mucho tiempo y hay voces muy potentes que han sostenido su estudio haciéndola un centro de conocimiento vivo y acción encarnada" (Magallanes 72).[1] In a 2019 review of more recent scholarship on Anzaldúa, one of the organizers of this 2020 virtual event, Javier Alejandro Camargo Castillo summarizes the transformative potential of Anzaldúa's work for thinking about the world: He describes her work as stemming, "no desde la homogeneidad, no desde los discursos vacíos del respeto a la diferencia, sino desde la experiencia de haber sido marginado, de no tener un lugar en el mundo, de ser excluido y de ser sensible a la alienación

[1] Trans: where Gloria Anzaldúa's thought has flourished for a long time and there are very powerful voices which have sustained her study making her a center of living knowledge and embodied action (Baginski).

que han sentido otros" (Camargo 125).[2] This kind of "living knowledge and embodied action" requires foregrounding one's position both socially and spatially and taking account of the way that power shapes and is shaped by embodied processes and performances (Magallanes 72). Many of the participants in the 2020 event, including writers, thinkers and artists from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Uruguay and the U.S., whose contributions were edited and published afterwards, emphasize this aspect of Anzaldúa's influence on their thinking. They celebrate the pedagogical role of her texts, which incite women and queer people to write about their experiences of marginalization and encourage exploration of experiences of migration and cultural and geographic in-betweenness. The contributions to the dossier also chronicle personal reflections on what her work has made possible in different ways in participants' own lives, interpersonal interactions, thought, and forms of self-expression.

Many of the writings included in this dossier invoke the specific locations from which the authors are writing. Eugenia Bové, for example, includes in the title of her "Carta a Gloria" that she is writing from "un rinconcito del Río Uruguay" (87). Bové describes her introduction to Anzaldúa's text while a student at UNAM. In the now-canonical work she describes finding not only "un pueblo (el de las chicanas) y un territorio (el de la frontera), sino también a un grupo de mujeres con las que poder pensarse y pensar" (87n5).[3] This description points to one of the reasons why Anzaldúa's thought is turned to as a place from which to consider the problem of the concept of race: her thinking opens the question of a connection between a group of people and a geographic location, not one that goes under the heading of a nation's name, but which is nevertheless discrete and seems bounded. Although in *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Anzaldúa's at times seems to conflate "race" with "culture," and "class," in the preface to the book, she defines race through experiences of proximity: "the Borderlands are physically present… where people of different races occupy the same territory" (i). Bové also highlights the relevance of Anzaldúa's approach to place and proximity for her own work in leading a creative writing workshop in the women's prison of Montevideo. She describes how one of the women responded to a writing prompt. The woman understood that the relevance of Anzaldúa's text for her did not derive from any parallel with the specificity of her own experience. Rather, this participant identified a formal aspect of Anzaldúa's thinking about the aporia of emplacement and embodiment. Bové recounts her understanding in a card addressed to "Gloria":

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[2] Trans: not from homogeneity, nor from the empty discourses with respect to difference, but from the experience of having been marginalized, of not having a place in the world, of being excluded and of being sensitive to the alienation which others have felt (Baginski).

[3] Trans: "a people (that of the Chicanas) and a territory (that of the border), but also a group of women with whom to think and think herself (Baginski).

> Úrsula, una mujer presa por vender misoprostol en un país con aborto legal, madre de cuatro, rodeada de sus pulseras y dioses umbandas, entendiendo que no le hablabas solo a ella sino a todo aquel grupo de mujeres juntado por la casualidad menos azarosa. (Bové 88).[4] [5]

Úrsula, as represented by Bové, seems to find Anzaldúa's work helpful for thinking about the combination of contingency and determination shaping her own spatial and social location as well as that of the other participants. This relationship between contingency and determination is managed by the State, and its form of policing shapes the boundaries of the space of incarceration in which this workshop takes place. As with the case of border-crossing, the presence of bodies in prison seems to provide evidence of the natural quality of culturally constructed understandings of criminality. After all, the prison suggests, here we have criminals. This expectation and its relationship to practices of containment produces one and only one way to experience togetherness, to which Bové's workshop offered an alternative. This awareness is enclosed in Bové's reflection on the rare and appreciated opportunity to be surrounded only by women, and to be in conversation and in thought together. The participant Úrsula's aporetic, open expression of the "least fortuitous chance" suggests how Anzaldúa's text and legacy provides an opportunity to develop an alternative explanation for what it means to be in conversation together, as women, in a way that might help to account for or re-shape the meaning of their proximity through something other than misfortune or criminality. The idea of a shared conceptual territory, the flexibility and metaphoricity of the term "frontera," allows for the text to become a ground for articulations of collective experience which engage ambivalently and critically with the embodiment of identity categories, rather than embracing them. As Bové elaborates regarding the workshop participants, invoking Anzaldúa in the second person, "[a]quellas mujeres se encontraban en una frontera, como la tuya. En media de algo, sin saber hacia dónde seguían" (88).[6] Anzaldúa's thinking helps the women to mobilize the ground of their spatial proximity without accepting the categories which produce it.

This possibility of ambivalent orientation is sometimes overlooked by critics and writers who see in Anzaldúa's writing an essentialism coupled with a rosy-

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[4] Trans: Úrsula, a woman imprisoned for selling misoprostol in a country with legal abortion, a mother of four, surrounded by her bracelets and Umbanda gods, understanding that you [Anzaldúa] were not speaking to her but to every such group of women gathered by the least fortuitous chance (Baginski).

[5] Umbanda is a syncretic and transnational religion with Afrobrazilian origins and African influences whose practitioners, according to Andres Serralta Massonnier, have fought for social visibility and legitimacy, as well as a "revindication" of "la herencia afro" in Uruguay since its repression before the 1980s (Serralta Massonnier 45).

[6] Trans: Those women found themselves on a border/frontier, like yours. In the middle of something, not knowing where they were headed (Baginski).

tinged gesture towards futurity. Historian Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, for example, articulates a "transnational feminist" methodological framework for her own work in *Unspeakable Violence* which engages the complicated "overlapping" of colonial histories present in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. This methodological approach is meant to respond to a lack of what she sees as rigorous transnational work in "Chicana feminist critical projects" (Guidotti-Hernández 17). She echoes Rafael Pérez Torres' criticism of the reductive sense in which the term *mestizaje* has been taken up in different contexts, among which she includes Anzaldúa and some of her readers, to signal the "harmonizing of disparate identities" (ibid). Guidotti-Hernández is one among many who have been suspicious of the ways in which the "Indian heritage of Mexicans and Chicanos" has been deployed as the foundation of a unifying political identity or as providing a kind of mythology that would ground "neonationalisms" (Guidotti-Hernández 20). Both gestures, she argues, center around the idea of what she calls "resistive agency" and miss the opportunity to account for complicities within Chicana/o/x and Mexican American communities in settler colonial, anti-Black, and other forms of racist violence (18). The problem of Anzaldúa's relationship to context is double edged. Guidotti-Hernández suggests that the theory of *mestiza* consciousness within "the context of the geopolitics of the U.S.-Mexico border" has been taken *out* of its specific context in an illegitimate way (17). She also criticizes that Anzaldúa herself "reappropriates (misreads?)" Mexican nationalist José Vasconcelos' understanding of *mestizaje*, reading him selectively and out of context in ways which best respond to her "aggrieved sense of being wronged" (17, 18). Taking something out of context seems aligned with a sense of instrumentality and political efficacy dependent upon the assumption of a "kernel of resistance to Anglo hegemony" which Guidotti-Hernández locates "at the core of the field of Chicano/a studies" (135).

Guidotti-Hernández wants to avoid narratives and methods that would ground "resistive agency" in an essentialism by insisting on a historiography that foregrounds complexity, conflict, and silences (18). She argues that a better historical methodology would avoid "co-opting historical subjects […] in the name of nationalism and allows their history to be considered in their own contexts" (32). This reworking of historiographic tools resists exceptionalizing or excluding a community, for example Mexican American communities in the borderlands, from histories of racist violence, insisting instead on a more complex positioning admits complicity in violence and dispossession. But this ambivalence does not seem to apply to the ostensibly corrective gesture Guidotti-Hernández and others make, of situating thinkers, writers, and historical subjects, within "their own contexts." Instead, the gesture of returning theorists and their concepts to their geographic and cultural contexts of emergence by way of the archive and the historian's tools seems underwritten by a kind of common sense that will resolve controversy or ambiguities of interpretation.

Anzaldúa's own use of literary genre and myth itself, however, seems to push back on the kind of common-sense correspondence between consciousness and context that historicism seems to promote. The poem which begins the first chapter of *Borderlands/La frontera* opposes the border as an "open wound," on the one hand, which the poetic voice experiences physically, exclaiming, *"me raja me raja"* ("it cuts (across) me") with geographical continuity, on the other (Anzaldúa 2). She affirms: "But the skin of the earth is seamless" (3). This aporetic construction opposes geographic continuity to the spatial and social signifier which "cuts" the narrator's body. The allegory uniting a natural wholeness of the human narrator's body and the "seamlessness" of the earth hinges on the use of the word "skin" (3). This cutting, wounding, and division, which takes hold not only at the level of geography, or of the division of "a *pueblo*, a culture," but also of the body, problematizes the ability to separate each of these registers. I argue that the problem of the concept of race, as it has been inherited in the Americas, also complicates the ability to separate each of these ways of understanding situatedness and difference. Neither the work of addressing the complicity of communities of color in histories of racist violence nor the desire to read Anzaldúa's theorizations as *simply* about culture or identity engages fully with the way in which the problem of the concept of race appears in her work. Is it possible to problematize the assumption that subjects can be returned to their own spatial, geographic, and historical contexts, *while* also insisting on the importance of thinking from one's own situated location? The concept of race carries with it fantasies of territorial and geographic differentiability shaped by, and endemic to, European philosophical thought. Latin American philosophy has a complicated and often resistant relation to this European infrastructure.[7] To the extent that she draws on this history of intellectual resistance, Anzaldúa's work might be read as problematizing the idea of a natural relationship between landscapes and bodies, making it instead a question of "consciousness."

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[7] My understanding of the "concept of race" as I'm indexing it here is informed by Nahum Dimitri Chandler's exploration of its functioning in *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (15). Chandler tracks the development and deployment of this concept in European philosophy and the development of anthropology and follows W.E.B. Du Bois' orientation to it as, however paradoxically, a "resource" (156). Zakiyyah Iman Jackson sums up some of this intellectual history of the concept, especially the way that it was embedded into natural scientific understandings of the human as "species" in the Introduction to her 2020 book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*. Jackson ties this development of the concept of race to a history of "antiblack experimentation," including the practice of racial slavery in the Americas which generated qualities of naturalness associated with an idea of the "human". This connection helps her to reframe anti-Blackness not as a problem of "denied humanity" but rather of the world-constituting limit between the "human" and nonhuman, continually instituted by natural scientific methodology.

Mestiza consciousness and its relationship to *mestizaje*

Much of the frustration with Anzaldúa's understanding of race in more recent critical work has centered around her creative engagement with the term *mestizaje*, particularly as derived from philosophical debates in Mexico in the early twentieth century. American Studies scholars who have taken issue with this appropriative use of the term often have a methodological preference for writing that provides a sense of "geographic tethering" (Pérez Torres 372). The desire to return historical and cultural subjects to "their own contexts," geographic or literary historical, underwrites another critique frequently made of Anzaldúa's re-appropriation and circulation of a charged term like *mestizaje*. Poet Wendy Trevino is one of those who has been critical of Vasconcelos's legacy. In her collection of poetry titled *Brazilian is not a Race*, Trevino explains, in his essay "La Raza Cósmica," that Vasconcelos "sounds like a Nazi," and that the goal of his thinking about the concept "[w]as to erase Black Mexicans" (Trevino 13). Before turning to other considerations of Anzaldúa's use of the term *mestizaje,* I argue that the epistemological problem which Trevino's poems makes of race, problematizes Anzaldúa's work in a way that needs accounting for.

Trevino's chapbook emphasizes the lack of an empirical basis for grounding the concept of race, and wrestles with the resulting difficulty of grounding judgements about racializing experiences. Trevino writes: "When I said race is relational what/ I meant is people are racialized in/ Relation to other people who have/ Power" (2). Here the word race describes but doesn't explain the uneven distribution of "Power," coming after it. In Trevino's collection, accounting for the presence of Blackness and Afro-Latino roots in the community becomes a problem. At times the poet refers to the community as "us" and other times refers to the town of Harlingen, where Trevino grew up. Thus, in the fifth poem of the collection, a "childhood friend" of the narrator affirms that "since Hurricane Katrina Harlingen's Black population had grown" (5). The first-person narrator responds, "I told him that only/ Recently had I realized that some of/ Us were Afro-Latino" (5). This sequencing of the friend's observation and the narrator's reflection opens the possibility that one reason why the "Black population had grown" could have to do with the change in the narrator's realization after Hurricane Katrina. If the presence of Blackness is something that can go unnoticed and be determined after the fact, then the Black population of Trevino's "us" is expanding in retrospect. This temporal dislocation makes the presence of Blackness a question not of perception, but of realization. But then, where did the presence of Blackness come from? The narrator and her interlocutor debate this in the rest of the poem. The narrator says "I had realized some of us were/ Afro-Mexican & mentioned our friend/ Marco as an example. He said,/ 'That's Right. He was Puerto Rican.' Actually/ He said he was Cuban. We were both wrong" (5). In this back-and-forth, Blackness is attributed retrospectively, mystifying geographic and/or national origins (Afro-Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban).

Realized after the fact, Blackness disrupts the border fantasy of consolidating an identity associated with a national origin within an individual's body.

The next poem examines Blackness as a question less of perception and more of realization in terms of self-identification. Another childhood friend of the poet/narrator, "Becky" is discussed by the two friends in dialogue in this poem (6). The poet asks the first friend if Becky, who "never/ Felt welcome," "thought of herself/ As Black, if he had asked her about it" (6). The friend responds that "he had & that she had thought to/ Herself for a second before saying 'Yeah'" (6). The realization of Blackness happens on two levels: First the interlocutor affirms that Becky's experience of exclusion was "Because Becky was Black." But this affirmation of a statement based on a perception of difference or of a different relation to inclusion is then called into question by Trevino's narrator, who asks whether Becky understood herself as Black. This question of race as a problem of self-identification that interprets and explains experiences of exclusion is then quickly analogized to the problem central to the chapbook: The poet affirms "Mexican is not a race either./ Even when Rob Wilson would get angry/ & call my childhood friend Messcan/ Even when he told me he liked me but/ Couldn't date Mexicans, Mexican was/ Not a race—not even in the 80s" (6). What is it that connects "Becky's" reported self-identification in retrospect with the affirmation that "Mexican is not a race"? (6). The narrator of this poem is conflicted, first pushing back on a seemingly matter-of-fact assessment of a schoolmate's Blackness by suggesting it should be a question of self-identification. The second half of the poem then undercuts the narrator's ability to perform the same kind of reflective self-identification and broach the question of race. Across these two poems the presence of Blackness becomes a question of reflection and realization, a debate among those who count as "us" and a question of self-identification, rather than an empirical or perceptible fact. The phrase "Mexican is not a race either" indirectly and associatively sums up the unwritten assessment that "Black(ness) is not a race." It also becomes analogous to the narrator's struggle to sufficiently ground a racial category in experiences of being othered from whiteness. The reasons why "Mexican is not a race" and why Black(ness) is not, or not just, a racial category are different, as Trevino avows later in indexing the "familiar conflation of/ Nationality & race"—but any incongruity between Mexicanness and Blackness is elided in the progression of these two poems. This figure of coalitional solidarity in a negative, rather than a positive sense, is formed through a resistance to the concept of race, especially the idea that it could have explanatory power for the shaping of the world and of social relations.

Later in the chapbook, Trevino does suggest how the relationship between geography, the idea of a border and the concept of race may be complicated. Trevino writes:

> A border, like race, is a cruel fiction

> Maintained by constant policing, violence
> Always threatening a new map (16).

Having dismissed the "conflation of/ Nationality & race," here the poet suggests that there is a relationship between the two that is more complicated than conflation (18). The question that this poem raises is one that problematizes Anzaldúa's work in a way that needs accounting for: the relationship between geography and the border seems clear but is often mystified in readings of the border that understand it as a place of surveillance, militarization, and enforcement, where politically formed categories of identity and belonging are imposed. In an interview with Chris Chen, Trevino is clear about the way that she understands racial identity as "an imposition" of colonization (Staff). This imposition is similar, as this poem suggests, to the practices of mapping that would have also imposed a very particular form on a set of places during colonization. Trevino goes on to explain that such impositions, for her, generate discomfort when seeking positive political or relational potential within a category of racial identification. She consequently criticizes "Vasconcelos and Anzaldua's embrace of a 'we' based on a shared multiracial identity as emancipatory for those of Mexican heritage—as if racialization, enculturation and (to be real in the case of Anzaldúa) acculturation are all the same thing" (Staff). Trevino's disambiguation is important and the embrace of multiracial identity as "emancipatory" has to accept racial categories in order to imagine their breakdown in this particular way. But race does not function simply as what China Medel, for example, calls "a visual strategy demarcating bodies as inside or outside, legal or illegal, defin[ing] the sedimented history of the US-Mexico border" (Medel 425). Considering race merely as a "visual strategy" of targeting and identification whose empirical baselessness can be demystified and affirmed leaves aside the ways that the concept of race has shaped what appears as empirical, natural, and historical, as well as technologies of observation, surveillance, and incarceration. While it is helpful to continue articulating the ways in which Anzaldúa may have conflated race and culture, leaving the former aside in favor of the latter as an unproblematic tool for describing and distinguishing collective experience makes it difficult to put Anzaldúa in conversation with the complicated way that ideas of race *have* operated in Mexico, for example, with regard to the concept and politics of *mestizaje*.

Anzaldúa's articulation of *mestiza* consciousness was influenced by the work of José Vasconcelos who himself was influenced by the history of European philosophy which Zakiyyah Jackson unpacks (2020). Andrea Pitts is a contemporary philosopher who re-reads Latin American philosophers in light of Anzaldúa's writing while also unpacking their influence on her thought. Pitts explains that Vasconcelos was a border figure himself, whose understanding of himself *as* Mexican was shaped by his childhood experience of U.S. classrooms. They neither dismiss nor downplay Vasconcelos' self-described "aesthetic

eugenics" (Pitts 89). But Pitts does explain that Vasconcelos' philosophy did not embrace a Hegelian dialectical understanding of world history, which might consign non-Europeans, namely Indigenous groups and Afro-descendants, to being the negation of that properly world-historical subject that thinkers in revolutionary-era Mexico saw the country poised to become. Instead, Pitts suggests that his anti-positivist tendencies caused him to work in his philosophical project against the distinctions that were being drawn at the time between the "natural and the social sciences and their opposition to religious and philosophical thought" (Pitts 89). Pitts' reading of *mestiza* consciousness positions it against Vasconcelos' "philosophical anthropology" but underscores how Anzaldúa's concept inherits some of Vasconcelos' non-dialectical model (82, 89). In this sense, they argue that Anzaldúa's articulation of *mestiza* consciousness "retains and invokes the Shadow self, i.e., those unresolved and multiplicitous elements of ourselves that continually challenge and thwart us" (90). If *mestizaje* for Vasconcelos was productive, this is also Anzaldúa's way of accounting for the gendered violence that made this productivity possible, including "sexual violence" committed against African and Indigenous women (Pitts 89).

Pitts reframes Anzaldúa's articulation of *mestiza* consciousness in a way that retains complexity, seeing it both as resisting Vasconcelos' racism and taking up some of his own resistance to certain strands of European philosophical thought. This, according to Pitts, allows Anzaldúa to "underscore both the creative potential of mestizaje and its 'Shadow side'" (94). It also positions Anzaldúa within a history of Latin American philosophical thought about "barriers to self-knowledge" for "mixed race persons," in which this mixing has not always been positioned as emancipatory, but as an inheritance of violence (92). This ambivalence of Anzaldúa's thought provides one way to interpret her analysis of *gringo* culture. "Where there is persecution of minorities," she writes, "there is shadow projection. Where there is violence and war, there is repression of shadow" (Anzaldúa 86). Anzaldúa stages this dynamic of projection and repression as "white society's denial and negation of a psychic intimacy" (ibid). She invokes a *gringo* figure, imploring them to "accept the doppelganger in your psyche. By taking back your collective shadow, the intracultural split will heal. And, finally, tell us what you need from us" (ibid). In this sense, she explains that the externalization of a "collective shadow" is something that must be resisted, but not in an overly positive figure of hybridity has sometimes, like that associated with the work of anthropologist Nestor García Canclini (ibid). Instead, she sees in the border itself a kind of psychic resistance to the sense that the U.S. is "irrevocably tied to" Mexico in a way that necessitates "Chicanos" to "voice our needs" as individuals, but also "as a racial entity" (ibid). In Anzaldúa's ambivalent framing, the racial and gendered violence that *mestizaje* represents is carried along in the form of psychic wounds, rather than cast off in the march of history or State-mediated processes of incorporation. Her understanding of the "shadow" is

similar to psychoanalysis' unconscious, problematizing any idea of transcendence without residues.[8]

There is a moment in *Borderlands/La Frontera* where *mestiza* consciousness is articulated neither simply through resistance to Anglo or *gringo* culture, nor through an emancipatory or romanticized view of what the shock of two conflicting cultural frameworks might produce. In light of this complexity, the story "Cervicide" might be considered as a story about the encounter between Anzaldúa's thought and the strictures required for European-derived understandings of racial purity to have persisted. One of the dossiers published following the 2020 virtual "homenaje" to Anzaldúa is titled "Esto es Nepantla. Descolonizar el lenguaje, vivir la paz entre la tensión de las culturas, bilocaciones corporales, lenguas vivas, ir más allá de los bordes, algo más radical que la reconciliación."[9] Ana Lorena Carrillo's contribution published there speaks to this "something" more radical than reconciliation. In that article, Carrillo reads the story "Cervicide," as a registration of the demands placed upon the Chicana subject in order to become legible as a citizen-subject of U.S. society. The story's main character is named Prieta, a loosely autobiographical version of Anzaldúa herself, who is forced to kill her family's pet deer, nicknamed "venadita" (little deer) which the family had found and raised as a pet since the deer's mother had been shot by hunters. In the story, a game warden comes to investigate the presence of a deer on the family's property, the possession of which would incur the family a fine or jailtime for Prieta's father if they are unable to pay. With her father away at work, Prieta and her mother think fast as the warden's truck approaches about what to do. According to Carrillo, the story represents the history of "un acto fundacional de incomprensión,[10]" necessitated by the U.S./Mexico border's existence as a site of radical conflict between "dos sistemas socioculturales vecinos, pero igualmente tirantes, en que, además, es clara la condición subordinada de uno respecto del otro" (113).[11] The story describes how, in horrible and shameful silence, Prieta murders the fawn with a hammer and rapidly buries it while her mother distracts the guard outside with English that "had suddenly worsened" (Anzaldúa 104).

As the narrator explains, "she was trying to stall la guardia" (105). As he approaches the site of the illicit burial of the illegal animal, the narrator describes "his hounds sniffing, sniffing, sniffing the ground in the shed" and "pawing, pawing the ground," searching for evidence of the life which was quickly and quietly

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[8] Thank you to the editors for their help with this formulation.

[9] Trans: This is Nepantla. Decolonizing language, living the peace between the tension of cultures, bodily bilocations, living languages, going beyond the edges, something more radical than reconciliation (Baginski).

[10] Trans: a foundational act of incomprehension (Baginski).

[11] Trans: two sociocultural systems neighboring, but equally tense in which, moreover, the subordinated condition of one with regard to the other is clear (Baginski).

eliminated in order to comply with the law (105). The repetitive gestures suggest that the guardian over natural resources—effectively a game warden in the story and in Texas—is searching for the ground of a social distinction. If the scene is a performance, his role is to raise the stakes of a dramatic irony. As readers, we know that there is something to be found which is also not there, because it has been killed. Carrillo describes Prieta's killing of the fawn as analogous to the silent sacrifice required by Chicana/o/x communities in exchange for political and cultural legitimacy in the United States: "El sacrificio de Venadita es el del pueblo moreno, pobre e hispanohablante del sur de Texas frente a la lengua, valores y normas del blanco" (Carrillo 113-14).[12] This reading suggests that Prieta kills off, in fact, the most vulnerable and wild part of herself in order to avoid the criminalization of her family and her father and become legible in white language, values and norms. Carrillo's reading captures the sense of the North American racial schema, within which, she argues no bridges are possible:

> Quiero enfatizar que en mi lectura de este relato no hay puentes posibles. Es el grado cero a partir del cual, o se asume la contradicción sin solución como constitutiva del sujeto, o surge 'la nueva mestiza,' esa radical y enojada identidad que se rebela, pero pese a todo, busca armonizar, suturar, reconciliar. La pregunta es si la 'herida abierta' puede ser en efecto suturada, si es necesaria y deseable una sutura que *resuelva* y desproblematice una condición, un estado. En mi lectura, el enojo de *la nueva mestiza* es mejor que su deseo reconciliador. Más radical, más real, más acorde con el turbulento silencio e imposibilidad comunicativa manifiesta en 'Cervicidio.' (114)[13]

Carrillo uses the "el turbulento silencio e imposibilidad comunicativa" to re-read the figure of the "new *mestiza*" (114).[14] Instead of a figure which might be seen as "reconciling" the open wound of cultural and colonial difference confronted by Prieta and the community she metonymically represents, Carrillo reads the "new *mestiza*" as an angry figure. This anger responds to the self-sacrifice

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[12] Trans: The sacrifice of Venadita is that of the poor, brown and Spanish-speaking population of the south of Texas in the face of the language, values, and norms of the white [population] (Baginski).

[13] Trans: I want to emphasize that in my reading of this story there are no possible bridges. It is the zero degree in which, either the unresolvable contradiction is accepted as constitutive of the subject, or 'the new mestiza' emerges, that radical and angry identity that rebels, but above all, seeks to harmonize, suture, reconcile. The question is whether the 'open wound' can in fact be sutured, if it is necessary and desirable for a suture which would resolve and de-problematize a condition, a state. In my reading, the anger of *the new mestiza* is better than her reconciling desire. More radical, more true, more in keeping with the turbulent silence and communicative impossibility manifested in 'Cervicide' (Baginski).

[14] Trans: the turbulent silence and impossibility (Baginski).

demanded of her, the self-mutilation required by the border subject who is required to carry out the displacing and racializing work of the border on herself, killing off the part of herself which is unintelligible in the linguistic, cultural, or legal and political framework of subjectivity shaped by "the dominant North American culture" (114) Carrillo reads the "Cervicide" story for the costs conditional to inclusion: inclusion, that is, on the condition of self-inflicted violence and the performance of a particular role in a dramatic scene. This also resonates with Anzaldúa's early articulations of the coloniality of gender in describing how her characters (many of whom are named Prieta) have to sacrifice the more unruly aspects of their being, including the significance of their gender identity and role whose terms are set by both dominant U.S. *and* Mexican cultures. In their introduction to a 2015 special issue of *GLQ* entitled "Has the Queer Ever Been Human," Mel Chen and Dana Luciano point out the "posthuman" valences of Anzaldúa's work. Luciano and Chen write that "Anzaldúa viewed dehumanization as an opportunity to reconstruct what it means to be human" (Chen and Luciano 186) For them, Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness offers an "intimate and physical connection" to the "land" and the "nonhuman, in the form of the exteriorized land and the interiorized 'Shadow-Beast'" (186). This reading relies heavily on a positive orientation towards queer subjects' ability to generate new forms of intimacy, including with themselves, in the face of the policing of anything outside of what counts as the "heterosexual tribe's" construction of natural human behavior. In the footnotes provided for Anzaldúa's story, "Cervicide" is both defined as the "killing of a deer" and the deer itself is explicitly connected to a symbolic association with "women" (105). Carrillo's reading suggests how Anzaldúa's work might be reframed from the Latin American thought which focuses on the conflicts between European and Indigenous epistemologies. This approach could help to further distance Anzaldúa from Vasconcelos' vitalism while leaving room for the queer negativity of her work.

Part of Anzaldúa's complaint in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is related to what she describes as the resistance of *gringo* psyche to ceding the spatial and historical internality afforded to the national subject of legal belonging to non-white subjects. This resistance takes a geographical form to the extent that the border itself draws on the reality of landscape features and follows the logic of regional differentiation whose model was provided by the antebellum U.S. South. There is no logic of historically or State-mediated progress which would provide a framework for incorporating the Chicana necessarily into a narrative of national subjectivity in the story, nor can such logic be expected in a text which centers around experiences of "rajadura" (Anzaldúa 42). What the Texas ranger cannot locate in the presence of the grave, no matter how fresh it is, is the original violence which inheres within *mestiza* consciousness. This suggests another way to read both the Cervicide story and the shift Pitts emphasizes in Anzaldúa's revision of Vasconcelos' quotation, namely the shift from "Por mi raza hablará el

espíritu" to "Por la mujer de mi raza/hablará el espíritu" (Anzaldúa *77*).[15] The horizon at stake in "Cervicide" is not only one of political viability, where cultural viability, the possibility of original and intelligible speech, lies in the future and follows from a foundation of legal, national, and familial categories of belonging. The character of Prieta also relates to the way that Anzaldúa's text, read as celebratory or essentializing, involves a covering over of the productivity of racial violence, about which the text is much more ambivalent. This ambivalence might provide a way to read her work as refusing to fall into either of two frameworks. As Amarílis Pérez Vera argues in her revision of Anzaldúa's deployment of the term *mestizaje*, "on the one hand, it does not respond to the Mexican State's ideal of integration, and, on the other, it challenges the United States' rejection of 'blood' and mixing of cultures" (Pérez Vera *334*).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Anzaldúa's deployment of the terms race, class, culture, and minority are complicated and sometimes conflicting. It is not always clear whether *mestiza* consciousness is that of an individual within a given context, a racial identity, or a cultural descriptor. Reading for Anzaldúa's own ambivalence about these categories it is possible to see that the difficulty of successfully disambiguating these has to do with the ways in which the naturalness of categories of being is condensed in the figure of the geographic border and how embodied subjects appear there.

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[15] Trans: From "Through my race, spirit will speak" to "Through the woman of my race/ spirit will speak" (Baginski).

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