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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10384>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.10384

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Tereza Jiroutová Kynčlová, "Elastic, Yet Unyielding: The U.S.-Mexico Border and Anzaldúa's Oppositional Rearticulations of the Frontier", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 9-3 | 2014, document 3, Online since 23 December 2014, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10384> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.10384>

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Elastic, Yet Unyielding: The U.S.-Mexico Border and Anzaldúa's Oppositional Rearticulations of the Frontier

Tereza Jiroutová Kynčlová

1. Introduction

Demarcation lines, separation lines, dividing lines, boundaries, frontiers, borders, and limits constitute some of the most productive concepts in Western thought. By highlighting difference, they give rise to power-laden categorizations based on binary oppositions and thus help to make reality knowable and imply that the knower has mastered control over the content of what is being known. These concepts, however, are at the same time elusive and problematic due to their capacity for rendering invisible and suppressing ambiguities and liminalities that occur in and/or along—to borrow Bhabha's term—the “in-between” spaces, which defy the clear-cut distinctions supplied by Western dualism (Bhabha 13, 22, 219). Within literary postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and gender studies, it is these “grey zones” that attract attention as they are spaces where meanings and identities are constantly in the process of negotiation, becoming, and struggle for recognition.

The border functions as a sign that represents the region of U.S.-Mexicanⁱ borderlands as a “contact zone” (Pratt 7-8), which symbolizes the ongoing and expediting alteration of American-ness. It is this region which is heavily identified with the browning of Americaⁱⁱ and it is this region where the founding myths of westward expansion and American exceptionalism get explicitly and strategically rewritten by borderland subjects.

The Mexican-U.S. border is also a demarcation line that, as this article shows, in an unprecedented way resists the notion of a national border on a geographical as well as

metaphorical level. It inherently stretches across the vastness of the United States as its existence penetrates and informs all aspects of American culture and institutions. The border can therefore be perceived as elastic in the way that it poses “a barrier and a zone of violence” for borderland subjects whose identities are readily stereotyped and othered and the space they inhabit is discursively driven off to the margins. Materially, however, the border is unyielding, as borderland subjects’ racialized and gendered bodies “continually [face] crossing the border... anywhere [they go] in the United States” (Aldama 46).

Borderland subjectivity is thus characterized by “in-betweenness that goes beyond the reifying effects of national identity” (Ashcroft 20) and in Chicano/a cultural and activist tradition is eloquently framed and performed by *mestizaje*, i.e., the art of living on the border (in every sense of the word), the ability to navigate in/between/among/within different cultures, languages, and epistemological systems, and to embody this hybridity consciously and constructively with respect to one’s own racial/ethnic background, gender identity, class belonging, and reflected lived experience.

Exemplary rearticulations of the unifying narrative of the frontier that pushes the horizon and the limits of the American nation further West are forcefully portrayed in oppositional Chicana writing and their counter-discursive practices. They are a form of resistance “that uses language of empire to contest the dominant ideologies of colonialism” (Madsen, “Counter-Discursive” 65). In this regard, U.S.-Mexican borderlands are also the site where struggles for meaning and voice make their presence felt since, as Fisher aptly observes, “regionalism is always, in America, part of a civil war within representation” (xiv).

Gloria Anzaldúa paradigmatically investigated the border theme in her multigenre book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). The ways in which the region along the Mexican-U.S. border is represented in her writing are, in what follows, positioned in the context of social structures that inform disparities in a symbolic valuation of difference. These disparities arise from cultural, racial, class, and gender(ed) affinities and therefore shape a viable alternative image of westward expansion that competes with established representations of American history and its foundational narratives. As evidenced by her poem “We Call Them Greasers” (*Borderlands* 156-57),ⁱⁱⁱ Anzaldúa invents a new reading of the so-called civilizing mission in the border area. In this regard, her work partakes in struggles for a rightful representation of borderland experience and subjectivity, which have had a long history of silence. This puts her efforts amidst Fisher’s civil war within representation.

Although often included in American literature syllabi, the poem has not—to my knowledge—been frequently analyzed; Sonia Saldívar-Hull’s and Deborah Madsen’s readings are the only exceptions. I therefore draw on the emphasis both authors put on Anzaldúa’s portrayal of colonial violence as a form of subverting canonical images of Western progress and its cultivating enterprise. In addition, however, I offer a gender-sensitive analysis of “We Call Them Greasers” since, as Loomba reminds us, the structures of colonialism and patriarchy are thoroughly intertwined and bear on women as well as men (195). I treat the poem as an example of a rendition of Anzaldúa’s theory of *mestiza* consciousness, for the communication of theory does not, according to Anzaldúa, depend on the genre utilized. Thus, her *mestiza* consciousness, I argue, is an epistemology applicable for reconceptualizing difference which is performed both by the reflexive disruption of borders of social categories and by rupturing borders of

genres and modes of expression traditionally adopted for the (re)articulation of one's self and one's community. "We Call Them Greasers" fittingly illustrates this argument.

2. Border and Genre

The physical presence of the border that separates the prosperity of the United States of America from the poverty of Mexico has fostered a sensitivity to diversity, difference, and otherness in Chicana writers to such an extent that the core of their work, both literary and theoretical, is the exploration of difference—be it the various differences along the axes of race, language, religion, gender, class, and cultural conditions, or the concept of difference itself as an epistemological and philosophical prism. The ways in which borders by their very nature produce difference are elaborated on by Anzaldúa in richly symbolic language and in her rife metaphorization of the border as a wound that functions as a sign for pain and iniquity arising from the modes of othering the dividing line allows for:

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 edge. 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.... Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot.... Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. (*Borderlands* 25-26)

Anzaldúa's tense definition of the U.S.-Mexican border can be read not only as a list of phenomena of abject undesirability, but also as the author's feminist standpoint theory: a means to re-evaluate power interests and thus attach value to identities kept out of the limits of "normality" and "acceptability." Linking the deconstruction of discriminatory binaries to lived experience has opened the door to the emancipation and empowerment of overlooked social groups, such as—in the case of the discussed region—Chicanos and Chicanas.

In light of Anzaldúa's belief that local and localized theories—not methods lifted from white American feminism, which, along with African American and Native American women, Chicanas have found to be insufficient and conditioned by an unequal distribution of power—are best representative of the material and symbolic barriers put in the way of discriminated groups, the Chicana (mainly feminist) community arrived at an activist stance. Self-reflexive, localized theory that is aimed at social change therefore constitutes a quintessential trait of Chicana literary and artistic production. Thus, the situated quality of the Chicana project can be summarized in the following words by Anzaldúa: "*Necesitamos teorías* that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods.... We need to give up the notion that there is a 'correct' way to write theory" (*Making Face* xxv-xxvi). The author's resistance to established modes of theorizing is, for instance, mirrored in the unconventional composition and methodology of *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

The text is divided into two parts, the latter being a poetry collection designed to lend interpretative credence to the arguments introduced in the first section of the work, in which legends, analytic essays, and descriptions of personal experiences

mingle with the genre of *autohistorías*. *Autohistorías* do not engage in a causal, linear, and chronological explication of historical events, but describe events with both a real and a symbolic impact on one's own lived experience and/or the life of one's community. As Anzaldúa coins it, "*Autohistoría* is a term... to describe the genre of writing about one's personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir; an *autohistoría-teoría* is a personal essay that theorizes" ("now let us shift" 578).

At the same time, the genre works to outline the realm of possibilities in the field of internal emancipation and the construction of one's own personal spirituality. This, in Anzaldúa's view, is achieved through a deliberate and diligent analysis of one's own preconceptions, as well as the ways in which we experience our physical being in the world. Moreover, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, *autohistorías* help the author reinterpret the history of the region of the Mexican-U.S. border through the lens of power relations and the categories of gender, race, and class, as seen, for example, in the passage "*El cruzar del mojado/Illegal Crossing*" (*Borderlands* 31-35). Here, the treatment of illegal Mexican immigrants by the U.S. Border Patrol is read against the author's knowledge of the *habitus* within which both, the incomers and officers, operate.

In "We Call Them Greasers," the intersecting categories of race, class, and gender provide a scaffolding upon which Anzaldúa builds a story that looks at the American foundational myth of westward expansion and colonial border proliferation from the perspective of a dominant protagonist. A white male colonizer narrates a single story of how he was able to acquire new land, thereby successfully complying with the imperatives of colonialism. The fact that he shamelessly speaks about the violence inflicted in the process on local farmers by his helpers and himself on the one hand testifies to the power he enjoys owing to his racial, class, and gender identity. On the other hand, it speaks of the power of the institutionalized discourse of civilizing mission that was employed to justify the colonization of Western territories by European Americans to the detriment of Native peoples or people(s) otherwise defined as Other to the American Self.

However, what makes the poem remarkable is the fact that—despite the perspective being the colonizer's—the *effect* of the story is reserved for the Chicano/a historical experience. This experience, then, corresponds with Anzaldúa's appeal to refrain from internalized established practices regarding theory being written (or thought out or done) in a "correct" way. In this respect, this article perceives "We Call Them Greasers" as theory, for Anzaldúa incorporates her awareness of structural inequalities in its narrative at the background of which the border functions as a fault line illuminating ideological, cultural, epistemological, racial, and gender(ed) differences.

While discussing the complex reality of the border region along the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, one must keep in mind the fact that the region has, from the Chicano perspective, historically been a site of double colonization (Acuña, *Occupied* 29). The original colonizing instance was the conquest of the indigenous peoples of Central America by Spanish *conquistadores* in the early 16th century; the later act of colonialism was the annexation of the Northern territories of Mexico by the U.S. in the mid-19th century. As illustrated by the term *mestiza* consciousness pioneered by Anzaldúa (*Borderlands* 99-113), the history and the cultural diversity on the U.S.-Mexican borderlands challenge not only the dualism characteristic of Western thought, but also

the notion of the ethnically and culturally inclusive American Dream of immigration. The expansive Western frontier that historically exemplified the dominant culture of European settlement on the American continent is now—with the rise of what Fisher calls “new regionalism” (xiv)^{iv}—concentrated in contemporary understandings of the Mexican-U.S. border. The latter are informed by Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the borderlands as a space that cultivates *mestiza* consciousness, which is capable of transcending the original binary idea of the border. The following lines sketch out Anzaldúa's attempts at dismantling discriminatory duality:

As a *mestiza* I have no country... yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs... yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. (*Borderlands* 102-103)

Anzaldúa's concept of *mestiza* consciousness thus points to the constant becoming of one's identity while pointing at the borderland subjects' need of negotiating symbolic and discursive violence induced by Western binarisms.

3. Gender(ed) Identities and Colonial Encounters

Apart from reinterpreting national belonging, *mestiza* consciousness questions established notions of dichotomic gender identity as well. For instance, the social order of Mexican-American or Chicano society to a great extent reflects the patriarchal tenets of Mexican *machismo*, i.e., excessive manifestations of male dominance towards women (Baca Zinn 25; Castro 147-148). However, these *macho* traits are permanently undermined by virtue of their being performed by a masculinity that bears within itself the burden of double colonial conquest and is thus placed in a feminine role in relation to the white, heterosexual, American man (Loomba 128-129; Baca Zinn 25). Moreover, as Baca Zinn argues, an overt—at times almost parodic—performance of masculine traits in Chicanos may point to social structures that systematically block access to other sources of masculine identity. In this regard, *machismo* may be viewed as an “adaptive characteristic,” i.e., a means for resisting racial oppression (Baca Zinn 30), which on the symbolical level further subverts the consistency and power position of such a type of manhood. In other words, masculine aggression may mask internal weakness and/or lack of status.

Chicano masculinity as a colonized masculinity inherently personifies the “forbidden” mixing of races, attesting to Spaniards' “theft” of indigenous women from the domain of their colonized counterparts (Frank 29; Paz 65-87). Anzaldúa exposes this historical inheritance of Chicano manhood in her explicit story-of-rape poem “We Call Them Greasers.” When interpreted from a gender-sensitive, rather than a colonialist perspective (as shown above), the poem narrates an incident in which a husband is forced to watch the spectacle of his wife's brutal rape and murder executed by a white Anglo. Because the Chicano husband in the poem is tied to a mesquite tree—in Saldívar-Hull's interpretation the Chicano version of the African-American hanging tree (75)—

he is deprived of any sort of agency and is made to be a passive, powerless onlooker of his wife's doom, and the subject of victimization carried out by a man who not only represents the colonizer's political, economic, and cultural domination, but also embodies hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt).

The performance of hegemonic masculinity, as Connell points out, is not viewed as normal in terms of its statistical occurrence, but in the sense that it conveys a normative ideal to which only a minority of men can be compared and measured. Hegemonic masculinity is thought of as an embodiment of "currently the most honored way of being a man" in any given context; it also requires all men to position themselves in relation to it. Hegemony, in Connell's terms, does not essentially imply violence, but rather a preponderance that is anchored in any given culture and its institutions (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). The Chicano in "We Call Them Greasers" is symbolically emasculated. He lacks power for—as a racialized, colonized man—he has, in the eyes of the Anglo man, never had any.

If Mexican-American or Chicano masculinity^v is already situated as the Other within the model of controlling Anglophone (and implicitly heterosexual and white) masculinity, the marginalization of femininity within the same androcentric societal structure is further exacerbated. Androcentric oppression is present in both the Anglophone tradition of white America and the Chicano/a community. In other words, the subjectivity of the nameless "brown"^{vi} woman in Anzaldúa's poem is virtually erased, for she is purely instrumental. The patriarchal system renders her the Other to both—her husband and the white colonizer. Her objectification, however, finds its ultimate expression in the rape scene. Disturbingly, it is not this violent, dehumanizing act itself that effaces her personal integrity and subjectivity, but the fact that the usurper employs the Chicana's femininity as a tool, as an instrument to humiliate and degrade the Chicano man:

She lay under me whimpering.
I plowed into her hard
kept thrusting and thrusting
felt him watching from the mesquite tree
heard him keening like a wild animal
in that instant I felt such contempt for her
round face and beady black eyes like an Indian's.
Afterwards I sat on her face until
her arms stopped flailing,
didn't want to waste a bullet on her
(*Borderlands*156-157).

As Saldivar-Hull fittingly argues, rape in the poem "is an institutionalized strategy in the war to disempower Chicano men" (75). Moreover, this sort of institutionalization is underscored by the fact that the violated and murdered woman has no name, therefore her lot might be read as a universal one for all women under both patriarchal and colonial rules.

4. Metaphors of/on the Border

After the annexation of the territory of Northern Mexico and the solidification of the border between Mexico and the U.S. along the Rio Grande by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the formerly Mexican inhabitants of the region were suddenly

governed by the American side and became, due to their mestizo/mestiza racial origins, their linguistic competence, and their class belonging, *de facto* second-category American citizens, since the incorporation of Mexican Americans or Chicanos/as into the U.S. nation would complicate the supremacist imperative for maintaining European racial purity (Madsen, "The West" 379). The United States became the second colonizing power after Spain. This moment can retrospectively be read as a defining one with respect to Chicano/a national consciousness. Under the banner of the Chicano Movement, the descendants of the annexed Mexicans would go on to forge the "Bronze Nation" (Alurista 1). To Chicanos and Chicanas, the symbolic mental map of the American Southwest would become a native land colonized by white American culture, while their strategically construed mythical homeland of Aztlán remains more or less beyond the borders of immediate American control: in the ancestral home, i.e., in the region of Mexico.

Under the influence of the border, the economic, but even more so the social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and epistemological diversity reproduced and underscored in the lived reality of borderland subjects as well as in their literary production represents a radical re-evaluation of prevailing notions of American identity. The dominant notion is based on the myth of immigration-as-homogenization, in which European immigrants are those who build a new American nation as an extension of forging a new life for themselves. The traditional immigrant "Dream of Ellis Island" (Tinnemeyer 475) is, however, deeply challenged by borderland subjects: by mestizo/a Chicanos and Chicanas, but also by members of Native communities, the original targets of colonialism. They all represent an immigration that is never conventionally "completed" (e.g. by acquiring legal citizenship, cultural integration, or an assimilated status), for they cannot by definition "land in America"; they never "arrive." Borderland subjects have been present from the beginning. They take a conscious stance against the idea of American-ness as the product of the proverbial melting pot. Chicanos/as have never been (im)migrants, as they never crossed the U.S. border: the border crossed them.^{vii} Thus, their non-(im)migrant belonging makes them invisible and thus uncategorizable within the concept of ideally white American-ness with a history of immigration from Europe.

The employment of metaphor for the conceptualization of borderlands in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* opens new ways for understanding the complex region and Chicana identity. Mestiza consciousness, an epistemology generated by the proximity of the border, represents an emancipatory and self-reflecting program with the opportunity to theoretically grasp the situation in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands and to deconstruct the discriminatory binary oppositions implied by the Western conceptualization of "the border." As already suggested, the Mexican-U.S. border operates not only on the level of its real, physical presence. Harkening back to one of the cornerstones of American cultural identity—the myth of the westward American frontier as proof of the success of the American conquest/settlement project—the border instantly takes on a metaphorical aspect that ties it to the notion of the American "us" and the Mexican "them" (Quintana 16).

On the metaphorical level, the border in question is "infinitely elastic" (Aldama 46), allowing us to extend the expression "the American borderlands" to all regions, including internal ones, that show resistance to Euro-American cultural dominance. Among the symptoms of Euro-American cultural supremacy is an unshakeable belief in

westward expansion, as celebrated by Frederick Jackson Turner and others, which gives rise to the American national narrative with its goal to legitimize the conquest of indigenous cultures: the manifest destiny lifted from Puritan tradition. This myth endows Americans of European origin with rule-power over the continent as determined by divine providence, and designates them bearers of a strict code of individualism that enables them to successfully face the trials of the New World and, thanks to this experience of adversity, become the new American nation with functional democratic institutions (Turner 5-36). This nation is, however, defined solely within the bounds of European ethnicity and cultural tradition—and any nation defined in such a way that it rests on the values of white androcentrism is “located within a powerful discourse of Anglo-Saxon superiority and inevitable racial destiny” (Madsen, “The West” 381).

According to Slotkin, the Western American frontier stands for one of the major myths that generally inform the American identity—which, from the perspective of the (post)colonial center, is the supposedly desirable white, masculine, and heterosexual tradition—including its mythical belief in a vacant, uninhabited, wild continent ripe for the settling Europeans’ mission of civilization and enculturation into something “new.” This myth also serves to legitimize the violent suppression of the allegedly “uncivilized” “natives,”^{viii} who are consequently labeled as a “tame” indigenous population and linked to femininity in opposition to the dominating masculinity of the white settlers. In “We Call Them Greasers,” as discussed above, the concept of the emasculated Chicano becomes evident in the lynching scene of the tied up farmer and husband who witnesses his wife’s rape and demise.

The atrocities of colonialism portrayed by Anzaldúa in the poem can take place precisely because the discourse of racial supremacy and entitlement vested by the divine authority constructs an ideology of imperialism which is meant to legitimize the deeds carried out under its banner. Essentially, this is a tautological logic which is not unlike the workings of the discourse of orientalism detected by Edward Said. The heavenly assignment of manifest destiny is performed by the Anglo colonizer’s implied duress arising from his authority, which makes the Mexican-American or Chicano land owners behave as if they were in the presence of a deity (see Saldívar-Hull 75). Their gestures may be viewed as showing respect and/or fear. The poem reads: “they took off their hats / placed them over their hearts / lowered their eyes in my presence” (156).

Although the colonizer’s assumption of such a god-like position equals blasphemy in Christian terms, the poem makes it clear from the matter-of-fact depiction of the treatment of the Chicanos that the Anglo perpetrator’s confidence in his actions is unshakable and his power unmatchable to such an extent that he feels no need to attenuate his explicit language of scorn, contempt for the “brown” people, and an air of boredom he is experiencing while dealing with them and their mild protests: “cowards, they were, no backbone / ... oh, there were a few troublemakers / ... it was a laughing stock” (*Borderlands* 156). The narrator’s choice of words nearly makes it seem as if the criminal seizure of land from the hands of the farmers is actually a bothering task for the Anglo figure; not because he is not enjoying the exercise of his white privilege, but because the people he must dispossess of land are not even deemed as worth his effort. In his eyes they pose an obstacle to the civilizing mission of westward expansion. The interjection “oh” also emphasizes the steadfast conviction about the justification of the colonial project: on the one hand, it may be read as fleeing reminiscence of an event that is, within the mission, so generic that it cannot be easily recollected, on the other

hand it implies Anzaldúa's attempt at bringing into memory and discourse the representation of events which were overlooked by the dominant versions of history.

The fact that Anzaldúa writes about dispossession, violence, rape, and murder significantly reinterprets and reshapes the history of the Western frontier. She is interested in what I have called above "the grey zone," i.e., the events that occurred between the invention of the frontier destined to be pushed west and its assumed closure. Anzaldúa's poem does exactly what (in Fisher's term) new regionalism aims to uncover and bring into awareness: she confronts us with withheld views of colonization and with previously invisibilized images of both physical and discursive violence. The fact that in "We Call Them Greasers" the Anglo usurper does not differentiate among the Chicano *rancheros*, whose land he strives to confiscate under false pretenses of unpaid taxes, testifies to how, in Anzaldúa's view, colonization deprived the colonized people of their subjectivity and relegated them into the sphere beyond the human.

The Chicanos in the poem lack names and the Anglo narrator systematically uses the third person plural pronoun to speak of the farmers. Thereby he first deletes their individual identity and then he turns their suffering into a universal experience of the colonized people, discursively making such an experience prescriptive for any other clash with any colonial power they may ever face. The farmers who are eventually chased from their land become voiceless because of their linguistic background and because of the fact that within the context of American colonial expansion they lack a discourse in which they could articulate their rights and be heard (Spivak 308-309). If some of them who "had land grants / and appealed to the courts" nevertheless manage to resist the colonizing despotism, they are shut up by the institutional tyranny that does not recognize Spanish as a language, "them not even knowing English" (*Borderlands* 156). Saldívar-Hull sums up the silencing as follows: "For the Anglo-American imperialist, literacy in Spanish or any other nonstatus language is illiteracy" (75).

As Slotkin points out, the westward progression of the American frontier has been part of American national identity since the 17th century and related to the myth that the expected cultural regeneration of the continent could be realized by violence (Slotkin 5; Furniss 22). Therefore, when Anzaldúa portrays the effects of westward expansion as brutal, violent, and dehumanizing, she thwarts the ideal of westward progress as a carrier of a civilizing mission, yet she complies with Slotkin's thesis in regards to the penetrative violence. Despite this congruence, however, her approach in general by no means agrees to the idea of violence having any regenerative potential whatsoever. If regeneration is demanded, in Western dualistic thinking it inevitably reacts to previous degeneration. Such binarism essentially links people of color with impurity and contamination, whereas dominant whiteness is aligned with purity and clearly defined edges and/or borders of identity.

In other words, regeneration through violence poses a discriminatory potential for lethal practices. In this respect, the alarming outcome of Anzaldúa's poem is grounded in a simple, but immensely efficient idea: a woman of color addresses the racial values of American colonialism through a white man's voice but she assigns the story to the Chicanos'/as' experience and their current lives on the border and "in-between." Anzaldúa, through the manner in which the poem is composed and formally executed, positions the American and Chicano/a perspectives next to each other. Thus, as Madsen observes, the work tells two stories at once: "a story of colonial dispossession

and a story of the westward advance of American civilization.... The poem then articulates what Paul de Man called an 'aporia'—an irresolvable contradiction between two logical positions" ("Counter-Discursive" 67). Anzaldúa, however, does not seek a final solution to this encumbrance; such contradiction is the reality of mestiza consciousness.

Further, Slotkin's theoretical outlook on the westward frontier as a myth is important precisely because it identifies the functions of the border on the level of metaphor and mythology. By means of repetitive and constantly replicated cultural myths, collective historical experience is codified into a set of standardized and generally recognizable (national) narratives and metaphors, symbols and relations. As such, cultural myth does not explicitly describe a historical experience but, drawing on a rich palette of established metaphors and symbolic expressions, builds a kind of collectively construed *idea* of a national—or collective—identity (Slotkin 7; Furniss 9; Anderson; Bhabha). The moment the westward American frontier and the border separating Mexico from the United States—portrayed countless times by a concrete wall, metal barriers, barbed wire, electronically operated cameras, and other surveillance equipment—transform from geographical fault lines into a social concept represented by the aforementioned signifiers (among others), the border loses its real, traceable position. It becomes, to recall Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialized and displaced (507-510). The border thus stretches and can be detected everywhere (see Aldama).

As I have already argued, the geographical border has become a metaphorical concept applicable to all categories of social organization, with an emphasis on culturally construed, yet rigidly policed norms. Along with this deterritorialization, more and more locations and subjects appear that resist such strict division into categories or mix cross-categorical boundaries. The metaphorical displacement of the border paradoxically brings into focus the hitherto unnoticed heterogeneity of American society, made yet more prominent by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Previously disregarded ethnic minorities gradually develop political and activist platforms—in the case of Chicanos/as, the most prominent is the nationalist (and also significantly androcentric) Chicano Movement or *El Movimiento* (NietoGomez 98; Quintana 19). The Movement makes it possible for Chicanos/as to enter the discourse of white, middle-class, patriarchal, and heterosexual American-ness and at the same time to subvert the pantheon of traits traditionally considered to be "American." Those traits are thus shown to have only masked a different America: an America that is multilayered and vastly hybridized, yet at the same time rife with cultural, linguistic, and racial discrimination, an America in which more than a little emotional energy has been invested into the coercive maintenance of borders of all kinds.

5. Hybridity and Mestiza Consciousness

It is precisely the double traumatic experience of discursive and cultural disenfranchisement tied to the institutional discrimination of the Chicano/a tradition that drives Chicanos and Chicanas into the ambivalent, discomforting, and hybrid space of the U.S.-Mexican border (Bhabha 7, 112). On the Mexican side of the border, the Chicano/a existence is stigmatized as it is thought to represent an Americanized and therefore alienated Mexican experience (*agringado/a*), while on the American side

Chicanos'/as' (and other Native peoples') agrarian tradition and strong ties to land as well as their racial mestizo/mestiza otherness were exploited by American colonizers as a means of oppression. The colonized subjects were made to "appear as invaders in their own land, as enemies of Western progress" (Madsen, "The West" 377), which are techniques that facilitated both the dispossession of their land and the colonizers' unwillingness to consider people of color as *humans*.

Such a racial aspect can again be illustrated by "We Call Them Greasers." Beside the dehumanization arising from racial otherness in the white usurper's lines relating to the raped woman "I felt such contempt for her / round face and beady black eyes like an Indian's" (157), there is another method of othering. The farmers and their families are likened to animals in the line "heard him keening like a wild animal" or as in "some loaded their chickens children wives and pigs / into rickety wagons," where omitted punctuation renders domestic animals and family members on the level of the same, i.e., worthless value. The utter debasement of the raped woman then lies in the way she is murdered: "I sat on her face until her arms stopped flailing / didn't want to waste a bullet on her" (156), which is a portrayal of death that goes way beyond conventional and acceptable methods of animal slaughter.

The colonial dispossession of land and its securing in the hands of the colonizer also bears sexual and gender connotations. Newly acquired territories were associated with virgin lands to be conquered by male explorers and settlers and became a terrain where masculinity was put to test. This is why images of sexual assault and violence are frequently associated with Western progress and processes of colonization in general. Kolodny calls such representations "psychosexual dramas" (xiii). Not only does the rape scene in Anzaldúa's poem, by the same token and as I have already argued, portray the victory of white, colonizing masculinity over the racialized masculinity of the Chicano farmer or the dehumanization of the land workers whom "[the colonizer] found... when [he] came [there]" (156). Most importantly, it shows a totalizing crusade of white masculine power subduing the feminine, i.e., land, colored skin, and a woman herself. Entities associated with femininity are replaced with androcentric culture and Euro-American, capitalist notions of land ownership as "the white colonizer rejects [the Chicanos'] collective farming techniques, cultural remnants of indigenous tribal traditions of the mestizo" (Saldívar-Hull 75), when he says "they didn't even own the land but shared it" (156).

The border, being the neuralgic point of the Chicano/a identity, is portrayed by Anzaldúa as an infernal generator of pain, caused by the dualism of Western thinking. At the same time, however, as Anzaldúa notes along with Bhabha, the border can also give rise to subversive yet simultaneously productive acts. While the border serves as a rationalization and legitimization of the disenfranchisement described earlier, it can also be transformed by critical reflection into a springboard for a new epistemology, such as Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness. Anzaldúa calls the demarcation line between the two countries—and metaphorically between American and Mexican identity, between masculinity and femininity, and between other binary oppositions—her home. In her figurative language, this home is portrayed through painful imagery such as a "1,950 mile long open wound" and "thin edge of barbed wire," its border along the Rio Grande being "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds"—but it is also a space where there is potential for the birth of some new,

previously unknown quality (*Borderlands* 25). In Anzaldúa's metaphorical words, the life blood of both of the neighboring worlds "form[s] a third country" (25).

As suggested by Bhabha's parallel to this situation, the role of culture in the borderlands is determined by "an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present [and that] creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation" (7). By locating what is new as well as what is past in an in-between space, a reinterpretation of both becomes possible. According to Bhabha, everything begins on the border. Anzaldúa's borderlands and Bhabha's "space in-between" can thus be interpreted as synonyms that contain the hybrid complexity of multiple emotional investments into all—not necessarily just two—cultures and positions relevant to any borderlands subjects and their intersecting, sometimes mutually incompatible, loyalties. On hybridity, Bhabha adds: "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal.... [H]ybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space... a negative transparency" (112). An important aspect of Anzaldúa's concept of mestiza consciousness is the fact that, in the first instance, it is based on the contextualized lived experience of a Chicana lesbian discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity, culture, and gender, a woman who came from an exceedingly poor background and who battled severe health problems throughout her life. More broadly, Anzaldúa identifies the causes of the social exclusion that she and her ethnic group have faced—but even in this area, various androcentric and hierarchical practices that disadvantage women persist, and Anzaldúa criticizes those as well. This puts her in yet another kind of symbolic borderlands: her criticism constitutes friendly fire to Chicanos, making Anzaldúa seem "disloyal" to the community. As her quote below suggests, however, discrimination and exclusion are the byproducts of the system of binaries imposed by Western epistemology, resulting even in the kind of androcentrism criticized by Anzaldúa and others, and so it is necessary to deconstruct the effects of such a system in this area as well:

The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (*Borderlands* 102)

The next phase of Anzaldúa's work transforms mestiza consciousness as embodied by a single person, a figure of emancipated Chicana womanhood who distances herself from the disciplining patriarchal ideal of a pliable and passive femininity, into a collective epistemological project. Mestiza consciousness should symbolically evaluate the hybrid existence of the Chicano nation, which was born of "racial, ideological, cultural and biological crosspollinization" (*Borderlands* 99). On the epistemological level, it should collectively accept that these border-crossing mestizo/a identities "are in a state of permanent transition," as they "juggle cultures" and cannot "hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries" (99-101). Mestiza consciousness integrates contradictions and "operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does [it] sustain contradictions, [it] turns the ambivalence into something else" (101).

This concept enables Anzaldúa to include, besides Chicanos and Chicanas, other groups of people who resist oppression into the emancipatory project and to consider (in a partly utopian fashion) the possibility that even those who hold power can be met halfway: “[we can] meet on a broader communal ground” (*Borderlands*109). This is the moment when the original dimension of an all-encompassing *personal* identity takes on a universal aspect and mestiza consciousness is transformed into a sort of horizontal manifesto of global diversity that respects and reconsiders difference while deliberately working with it.

6. Conclusion

Anzaldúa's aim is not a simplistic “overcoming” of distinctions and a degradation of mestiza consciousness into an instrument that eradicates all difference for the sake of a bland, generalized sameness. This is a frequent misinterpretation of her work (Naples 509-511). Anzaldúa's line of argumentation stands in opposition to the strategies employed by the dominant culture, which (ab)uses difference in order to legitimize and justify the political and social pressures exerted on marginalized minority groups in America (and elsewhere). These strategies result in symbolic stereotyping, in the proliferation of cultural and economic barriers, and in the capitalist exploitation of the subaltern. Mestiza consciousness stands for the *representation* of difference. It is also the image of an ideal world order where thinking in oppositions has lost its hierarchical validity and can no longer exclude, as the author mentions, “[l]os *atravesados*... the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato [sic], the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (*Borderlands*25).

Mestiza consciousness offers a radical deconstruction of the border phenomenon, remolding it into a concept used not to divide but to create. In Western epistemology, the very notion of the border generates an interplay of differences that are in themselves boundless, infinite, and uncontrollable by any kind of power, since they are elusive. Aside from this reinterpretation of the concept of the border and the suggestion of an inclusive epistemology, Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness contains a distinct, though perhaps not so overt, gendered element along with the critique of dualistic thought.

Western rationality, which functioned as the motor of colonial expansion as well as its advocate, is associated with masculinity under the current status quo; the same is true for the process of colonization itself. As Elenes aptly remarks: “highly educated European and Euro-American males produced science, art, and philosophy... while the rest of the world (including the poor and women) produced folklore” (50). By placing an emphasis on the conscious grounding of her intellectual-emancipatory project in a specific space and time and reinterpreting local epistemologies as well as *asteoríastailored* to the given context, Anzaldúa questions the universalizing ambitions of Western thought and its implicitly Anglocentric, patriarchal, and hierarchical gendered imperatives. Mestiza consciousness attempts to emancipate the individual as well as the community from dichotomous thinking divided into mutually incompatible categories, the very thinking that has colonized not only Anzaldúa's home hemmed in by 1,950 miles of barbed wire but also the local people's minds. Theorizing the border is

a tool of a holistic “intellectual decolonization” (Mignolo 45) of both the physical space and of the individual as well as collective psychological dimension.

The concept of *mestiza* consciousness can thus be understood as a local epistemology that, on the level of deliberate practice, corresponds to what Tuhiwai Smith terms an *indigenous project*^{ix}—a set of activities and/or a type of research contributing to the survival of indigenous nations, the preservation of their cultures and languages, and an acceptance of diversity as a value in and of itself (142-161). The approaches and methods employed by the projects are always situated in local conditions, self-reflexive, and up-front about their (political) agenda: their goal is to be emancipatory. In this respect, they correlate with feminist theories and methodologies, for instance in their use of experimental approaches to research that, as has been illustrated, disrupt the presumed dyad of (masculine) rationality and (feminine) knowledge, the latter supposedly gathered in areas that have historically been outside of the purview of traditional Western science. It is the sphere of local epistemologies that enable the “subaltern” to heal from the trauma inflicted by colonialism and power that most frequently mobilizes the analytical potential of Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness, the employment of which, as the thinker implies, is conceivable also beyond the region of U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

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NOTES

i. To avoid binary hierarchizations that would be in stark contradiction with the content of this article, I alternate the order of the two countries in the designation of the border as Mexican-U.S. border and U.S.-Mexican border, respectively. This approach also points to the fact that the Chicano/a homeland is actually located on both sides of the border and thus the adjectives differ based on the geographical position from where one looks at the border. Moreover, this split also speaks of the constructedness of the border, be it a geographical site, a topographical marking, or a cultural and/or epistemological concept.

ii. The concept of the "browning of America" points to the fact that the Hispanic/Latino population is the fastest-growing ethnic minority in the United States. According to the 2010 Census, it presently comprises over 16% of the overall U.S. population (see "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010").

iii. The poem's title pays tribute to a book by historian Arnolde De León called *They Called Them Greasers* (1983), in which the author "investigates lynching as an institutionalized threat against Tejanos" (Saldívar-Hull 74).

iv. Fisher uses this expression for approaches to studying American culture and identity in the light of political, social, and epistemological shifts of the 1960s and 1970s with respect to diversity and subjugated knowledges that "tore apart the various singular and unifying myths of America." These new disciplines "unmask[ed] the myths of previous generations, among other things as... overwhelmingly white male [ones]" (xiv).

v. Yet another multiplier of marginalization is added if a man's (or woman's) identity does not align with strictly heterosexual (heteronormative) imperatives. On Mexican-American/Chicano heterosexual and gay masculinities see Baca Zinn.

vi. The adjective "brown" is used in this article as one that Chicanos/as themselves ascribe to their own racial, mestiza/o identity. Its use is meant to connote Chicanos'/as' pride at their cultural and racial background, thereby subverting racial hierarchies and defying racism aimed at people of color. The appropriation of the adjective "brown" is a semantic shift in language and a parallel to gays' and lesbians' reclaiming of the term "queer." It is also analogous to the adoption of the term "Chicano" (or "Chicana") by the Chicano Movement. The term is etymologically related to Mexicano/Mexicana, but with the pronunciation referencing the Nahuatl language. It emerged as a derogatory label for people of mixed Native, Spanish, and Anglophone heritage. "Chicanos/as" thus refers to the entire community while avoiding the generic name Mexican-Americans, thereby setting Chicano/a cultural, racial, and social specificity apart.

vii. The motto “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us” is among the rallying cries of the Chicano Movement, but has been used by other indigenous minorities in America as well. See also Acuña, *Anything*.

viii. As opposed to the current term Native American, the generically-employed plural noun “natives” in this context would be representative of the objectification and othering of indigenous peoples of America by white settlers.

ix. Tuhiwai Smith identifies the following activities—to be undertaken on the individual or collective level—as examples of such projects: claiming, testimonies, story-telling, celebrating survival, remembering, indigenizing, inventing, revitalizing, connecting, reading, writing, representing, gendering, envisioning, reframing, restoring, returning, democratizing, networking, naming, protecting, creating, negotiating, discovering, and sharing (142-162).

ABSTRACTS

Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of mestiza consciousness is presented in this article as a form of epistemology that makes non-binary and non-discriminatory reinterpretations of the Western concept of the border possible. Anzaldúa’s rearticulation of the U.S.-Mexican border is contrasted with established U.S. national myths of westward expansion. The writer’s project is further illustrated by a gender- and race-sensitive analysis of the poem “We Call Them Greasers,” carried out from a postcolonial perspective and a feminist position.

INDEX

Keywords: gender, mestiza consciousness, U.S.-Mexican borderlands, westward expansion

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