

The Texas-Mexican Borderlands: “Where the Third World Grates Against the First World and Bleeds”

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INTRODUCTION

The line that separates the United States and Mexico runs from the Gulf of Mexico on the Brownsville/Matamoros eastern end of Texas to El Paso/Ciudad Juárez on the Western end of Texas, to Nogales/Nogales to Calexico/Mexicali, to San Diego/Tijuana and beyond. As can be expected, the United States-Mexico borderlands share traits that are common to the more than 400 borders in the world. Yet, unique to these borderlands is the fact that their boundary line separates two very dissimilar countries: one, the supreme industrial and military power of much of the twentieth century; the other, a representative member of the community of nations known as the Third World.

A native of Hidalgo County in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, critic and writer Gloria Anzaldúa has described the Texas-Mexican border as an open wound: “*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (Anzaldúa 3).

In a chapter entitled, “The Homeland, Aztlán/El otro México,” Anzaldúa notes that in recent years, ten million people without documents have returned to the Southwest or Aztlán, the place of origin from whence the Aztecs set out for the Valley of Mexico in the 11th century. Hence, for Anzaldúa and other critics and writers, what North Americans call a silent invasion, for them is a return to the homeland. This time, the traffic is from south to north.

This paper will first present a brief historical and cultural description of the borderlands, followed by selections from the literature of *tejano* writers, or Mexican American writers native to the state of Texas, all of whom are presenting an alternative perspective of the culture of the borderlands. Theirs challenges the viewpoint of the hegemonic culture which traditionally has praised the “Spanish heritage of the borderlands” while downplaying the reality of Tejano culture. All of these writers were highly influenced by the cultural nationalist perspective of the Chicano Movement. As interpreters of their culture, they transmit a counter hegemonic perspective of borderland culture.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE BORDERLANDS

Although the mass media has created an image of Mexican Americans as illegal aliens, the recently arrived are not the only inhabitants of the borderlands. Today, on the American side of the line live several million Mexican Americans who can trace their ancestry back five, six, seven and even more generations. Many Mexican towns—but not all—along the Texas-Mexico border trace their beginnings to the 18th century, for in 1749, José de Escandón, an enterprising colonizer, founded Camargo, the first permanent settlement along the Lower Rio Grande. By 1755, five other settlements existed: Reynosa (1749),

Revilla and Dolores (1750), Mier (1753), and Laredo (1755), the latter being the only original settlement presently lying on the northern side of the border on the Lower Rio Grande.

Unlike traditional Spanish missions, these towns were created as civil settlements. Land grants, or *porciones*, were awarded to “homesteading” families to encourage ranching and farming in the hinterlands of Spain’s empire.

Under Manifest Destiny the northern areas were separated from the central government of Mexico, first through the War for Texas Independence in 1836 and later in the 1848 War with Mexico which resulted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the creation of an artificial 2000 mile border that suddenly impeded the movement of a people who for thousands of years had been used to travelling back and forth across the Rio Bravo.

As a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, new cities sprouted along the southern border. Architectural historian Stephan Fox notes that Nuevo Laredo, on the Mexican side of the border, was one such city.

This is the post-Mexican War city Nuevo Laredo was an 18th-century suburb of what is now Laredo, Texas. After 1848, families from Laredo who rejected US citizenship left their home city rather than be alienated from their homeland, an



Fig. 1. Map of the eastern end of the Texas-Mexican border.

event memorialized by one of the many monuments along Bulevar Reforma. They moved across the Río Bravo to make Nuevo Laredo a city in its own right (Fox 15).

Between 1900 and 1945, a rapid development of the southwest began to take place. By 1985, the border cities on the Mexican side had become large urbanized centers growing at a fast pace. Industrial firms, known as *maquiladoras*, largely of United States origin located in the Mexican cities in great numbers. The Border Industrial Program, started in small fashion in the late 1960s, provided for much of the industrial employment in the area and produced hundreds of millions of dollars in manufactured commodities every year. Tourism became a mainstay for several border cities; commerce benefitted and grew apace with the demographic increase just south of the border. Migration turned truly into a mass migration.

Raul Fernández stresses that the population of Mexico's border counties and cities grew at almost twice the rate of U.S. border counties and cities between 1850 and 1980. The maquiladora sector has grown in twenty years to approximately a million workers, above 10 percent of the industrial work force. Quantitatively speaking, the BIP constitutes the most "dynamic sector" of Mexico's industrial production. In effect, the center of gravity of manufacturing has shifted from the capital city and Monterrey to the Mexican-American border region (Raul Fernandez 93). The economy of the borderlands is closely linked, and the recent devaluation of the Mexican peso has had a dramatic negative effect on both sides of the border. Following the ratification of NAFTA in 1994, the entire border area has undergone rapid changes. Today, Laredo, Texas is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, second only to Las Vegas.

PROMOTION OF HEGEMONIC BORDER IMAGES

The legacies of the area—historical, military, ranching, commercial, agricultural and cultural—are widely promoted in the tourist literature. "Los Caminos del Rio: Legacies of the Borderlands," a promotional brochure issued by the Texas Department of Transportation and the Texas Historical Commission, invites its readers to "Travel these roads [along the lower Rio Grande of Texas and Mexico] and learn about international wars, steamboat navigation, and architecture." "Los Caminos del Rio" also promotes a mythical view of the borderlands:

Escandón towns remain today as vibrant communities with evidence of Spain's legacy in their religion and language, and in their plazas, churches, and architecture. A social bond continues to this day among descendents of families that settled along both riverbanks. ... Religious congregations, with their buildings and festivals, endure from colonial times in such cities as Laredo, Matamoros, Camargo, and Mier. Border social life can be experienced on plazas in cities along the entire length of the Caminos del Rio.

As literary critic Cecil Robinson shows in *No Short Journeys: The Interplay of Cultures in the History and Literature of the Borderlands*, this view of the "descendents of the original Spanish settlers" began to be promoted in the early 19th century as a response to the overt racism of the period, when prominent American magazines felt no compunction about printing stories of "dirty Mexicans" and unredeemed "greasers." A split vision of the inhabitants of the borderlands began to emerge through which certain Mexican families, "the old Spanish families," were presented as socially acceptable while the general run of Mexican Americans were subjected to discriminatory and segregationist practices (Robinson 124).

THE CHICANO MOVEMENT AND ITS CULTURAL COMPONENT

The decade between 1965 and 1975 was a period of intense turmoil in many Mexican-American communities throughout the Southwest and California as a heightened ethnic consciousness led to protests

over the denial of full and equal civil rights. The struggle for civil rights that came to be known as the "Chicano Movement" was characterized by demonstrations, boycotts, strikes and sit-ins. A cultural component quickly emerged out of the confrontation with social institutions. Its emphasis was on the conceptualization of identity as nationality; full political rights and economic and social participation were its primary goals (Roberta Fernández 1994, 23). Self-redefinition, one of the most important elements of the cultural component of the Chicano Movement, stressed the Indian roots of Mexican culture. Self-acceptance as a people whose numbers lay primarily in the working class was a further challenge to the image of the "old Spanish families" of the borderlands. The family and the barrio became popular subjects for the artists and writers associated with the Chicano movement and its legacies. Memories of growing up in the barrio became a popular theme in both art and literature.

San Francisco artist Carmen Lomas Garza, originally from Kingsville, a small town near Corpus Christi, Texas, has published a book for children entitled *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia*. In her introduction she says, "The pictures in this book are all painted from my memories of growing up in Kingsville, Texas, near the border with Mexico. In two prints, "Cakewalk" and in "Making Tamales," Lomas Garza pays homage to cultural rituals, centered on the popular culture of a people devalued by the hegemonic culture of her youth.

What Lomas Garza does visually, tejano writers portray in words.



Fig. 2. Carmen Lomas Garza: "Cakewalk."



Fig. 3. Carmen Lomas Garza: "Making Tamales."

Today, a nucleus of recognized poets and novelists are writing about a sense of place. For the most part, these writers have earned their doctorate degree in either American literature or Latin American literature; thus, they are in a position to impact on the hegemonic culture, and they insist on writing in the language of their people about a culture that is theirs. No where is this more obvious than in Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), a novel recently brought to the screen as a movie entitled "...And the Earth Did not Swallow Him." Rivera's post-modern novel is a portrait of the life of Mexican American migrant workers, as seen through the memories of an adult recalling his boyhood in the 1940s. These vignettes are told in the language of *el pueblo*, the people who are the source of his identity. The boy discovers his identity not through his own particular individual efforts but through the communal experiences of his people. Rivera earned his doctorate in Spanish at the University of Oklahoma and rose within the ranks of academic administration to become in 1980 the chancellor of the University of California at Riverside, the first Mexican American to achieve this rank. Unfortunately, he suffered an early death in 1984 but his novel continues to impact on a new generation of readers.

A friend of Rivera and translator of *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, Rolando Hinojosa Smith is presently the Ellen Clayton Garwood Centennial Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Texas in Austin. He, too, has a doctoral in Spanish, and his numerous novels about the Mexican Americans of the Rio Grande Valley are told in the vernacular of his people. Some are written in popular Spanish; some in popular English. Hinojosa says that a sense of place is essential in his writing. "My stories are not held together by the ... plot, as much as by *what* the people who populate the stories say and *how* they say it. My works, then become studies of perceptions and values and decisions reached by them because those perceptions and values were fashioned and forged by the place and its history" (Hinojosa Smith 98). His second novel, *Klail City y sus alrededores* (1976), received the prestigious Casa de las Américas award from Cuba for its depiction of a people and its language. It is important to note that Rivera and Hinojosa's first novels were closely identified with the goals of the Chicano Movement, primarily with the self-definition of a people. Although the hegemonic culture has tried to bring them into its folds, Chicano writers for the most part have remained true to the goals of the *movimiento*.

By the mid-1980s, women writers began to add their particular nuances to Mexican American literature. Pat Mora holds the distinction of being the Mexican American poet whose poetry is most widely anthologized in the United States. Presently a resident of Cincinnati and a Kellogg Foundation Fellow, Mora is a native of El Paso. In her poetry Mora captures the space occupied by people in border cultures. In a poem called "Sonrisas," her speaker's in-between placement allows her to penetrate two worlds and to juxtapose their affective states of being. Her speaker says, simply, "I live in a doorway / between two rooms."

Owing to her up-bringing in El Paso, Mora finds a sense of self in the desert and draws solitude and strength from it. Like many other Mexican American writers, she has paid tribute to one of the most important denizens of the borderlands, the folk healer. In "Curandera," Mora gives her reader a sense of the simple ritualistic life of an Indian woman who by living so close to nature becomes identified with it.

She wakes early, lights candles before / her sacred statues, brews tea of *hierbabuena*. / She moves down her porch steps, rubs cool morning sand into her hands, into her arms. / Like a large black bird, she feeds on / the desert, gathering herbs for her basket ...

At night she cooks chopped cactus / and brews more tea. She brushes a layer / of sand from her bed, sand which covers / the table, stove, floor. She blows / the statues clean, the candles out. / Before sleeping, she listens to the message / of the owl and the coyote. She closes her eyes / and breathes with the mice and snakes / and wind.

While Pat Mora has chosen to portray her curandera as a loner who gathers her strength from her one-on-one communication with nature, another writer from the border has chosen to present her curandera as a marginalized figure, an immigrant pariah who lives a lifetime in enforced isolation because her race and religion are different from the rest of the community in which she has settled. Lela, the Tarahumara woman from Batopilas, in Estela Portillo's "The Burning," is an alien in the borderlands, and thus, representative of the "new arrivals" who are rejected by the more settled and so-called older families of the community. Faithful to her old customs after a lifetime of living amongst strangers, Lela knows that she will be complete only when she gives of herself. Thus, she gives the gift of her little gods to all her neighbors who will reciprocate her generosity by burning her in an ironic turn of events.

Healers are also important in the work of two border writers from Laredo, Norma Cantú and Roberta Fernández, both of whom have earned a doctorate in literature, Cantú in American literature, Fernández in Latin American literature. Both consider themselves "cultural workers." Each has received a national award for her first book of fiction. Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood on the Border* identifies her work as an ethno-autobiography. In a scene that borders on resistance to western medicine, Cantú describes her reaction when one of her teachers asks her if she has been treated by a doctor after her foot has been burned by searing grease: "...so I know not to tell her how every three hours, day and night for three days, Mami, remembering Bueli's remedies [her grandmother's remedies], has been putting herb poultices on the burn and cleaning it thoroughly. She's punctured the water-filled ampula with a maguey thorn and tells me there won't even be a scar. And there isn't."

Fernández's *Intaglio: A Novel in Six Stories* deals with the transmission of cultural expressions from one generation to the next. In *Intaglio*, a scene takes place in which the various women in the family heal one of the younger women who has been the victim of a rape. With "old folk" remedies, they form a circle around Verónica and empowered her to a state of wellness.

For the next several weeks everyone took care of Verónica. Leonor meandered through her herbal patch, carefully selecting springs of different properties to prepare into teas and ointments. Blending either *yerba de oso* or *maravilla* with baby oil, she'd pass the ointment on to Isela who would rub it for hours into her daughter's skin, inducing her to sleep profoundly for long stretches of time. After Verónica woke up, Cristina would soak her in hot minted baths, mixed with either *romerillo* or *pegapega*. Amanda insisted on stating simply that "Verónica had experienced a great fright. To alleviate her from its effects, she ran palm leaves up and down Verónica's entire body, then burned creosote in clay urns next to her bed (Fernández 1990 124)

In the examples given above, the writers have made a very conscious decision to privilege traditional healings over biological or western psychological medicine. These four border writers seem to be upholding the authority of the elders as a symbolic gesture of resistance to hegemonic Anglo-American culture. At the same time, they are clearly promoting the idea that their culture is not only valid but parallel to that of the hegemonic culture.

The challenge offered by popular language continues in the work of poet Raquel Valle Senties, who grew up in Laredo, then lived many years in Veracruz before returning to the border city where she has created a small literary center in her restored Victorian house in the Depot District. In her poetry she pays tribute to the hybridity of Spanish and English so common in borderlands speech patterns. In *Soy Como Soy y Qué*, the poet has captured the rituals of border culture: weddings, *velorios*/wakes, the tourist trot. In a poem, "Growing Up in Laredo," Valle Senties points with pride to border language: "Y crecí talking like this."

El get-together ya empezó / Los guys ya están llegando. /
 Préstame tu lipstick /... / Que va, you look bien padre. // Los
 guys would go al otro lado, / Whisper de Conchita's Place. / We
 were dying to ask about it. / But nadie se atrevía.

Valle Senties's book has recently been awarded the José Fuentes Mares literary prize from the Universidad Autónoma de Cd. Juárez for its portrayal of border culture, an indication that finally an interaction is beginning to take place between the two sides of the border which unfortunately to now have maintained almost no cultural dialogue. Writer Carlos Flores, a native of El Paso who teaches at Laredo Community College, attributes the tensions between the two sides of the border to the fact that the periphery is affected by decisions made in the centers of power— Washington, D.C. and Mexico City. "One cannot escape the fact that 'the fence' exists," he said in a recent interview. "The effects of the border patrol runs deep in the community. We wind up distrusting each other. The Mexican Americans on the Texas side do not know the reality of the Mexicanos on the other side."

On the Mexican side of the border, the maquiladoras now hire close to a million workers, mostly women. For the most part, images of life on the southern side of the border go unnoticed on the northern side of the border and in the centers of power. Yet, changes are beginning to take place as a group of photo-journalists in Cd. Juárez document the conditions in which people are living in this border city. Gabriel Cardona, among others, has captured the essence of life in the turbulent city that is Cd. Juárez.

A March 1998 exhibit in Houston associated with Fotofest, the largest photography exhibition in the world, has presented Cardona's work and that of twelve other photo-journalists. Aperture Founda-



Fig. 5. Gabriel Cardona. Back-up traffic moving from Cd. Juárez to El Paso on the Puente Internacional Córdova-Américas, aka Puente Libre.



Fig. 4. Gabriel Cardona. A production line in RCA Thomson, one of the first Cd. Juárez maquiladoras, established in the 1960s.

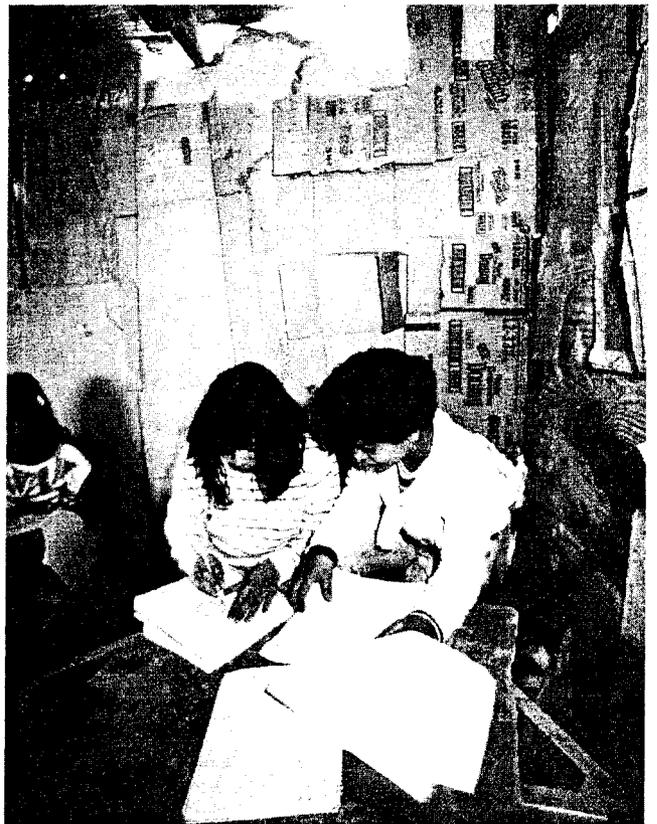


Fig. 6. Gabriel Cardona. Make-shift school made out of cardboard.

tion in New York has recently published the photographs of these journalists in a book entitled *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*, which will help to disseminate information about the reality of life on the southern side of the border. In May, 1998, Texas A&M International University in Laredo hosted a conference on Mexican border writers in an attempt to bridge the two realities of life on the border. Perhaps through these efforts, the hemorrhaging that Gloria Anzaldúa associates with the reality of life on the borderlands will begin to heal. Mexican American writers and artists with a certain amount of cultural capital have documented their sense of place for many years and have helped to bring about a better understanding about life on the borderlands. There is still a need to form bridges across the lines that divide Mexican Americans from their Mexican brothers and sisters. Much work remains to be done but many writers and artists are determined to meet the challenge.

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