

Güeras and *Prietas* on the Border

The Narrative of Gloria Anzaldúa And Rosario Castellanos

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This article will analyze the narrative of two border writers, Rosario Castellanos and Gloria Anzaldúa, taking into consideration the many ways borders are represented, particularly when they are re-signified from the standpoint of different sexual, social, racial and cultural conditions. What is special about thinking about, writing and producing texts from the standpoint of borders (geographic,

linguistic, symbolic, different disciplines', sexual and cultural borders)?

This question can be answered from at least two dimensions. The first is related to the construction and preservation of an activity that should give academia lasting meaning: criticism. Cortázar writes about that place from which writing is produced as criticism: "I write from an interstice....I write to always be a little more to the left or a little deeper in the place where one should be for everything to come together satisfactorily."¹

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Cortázar understands writing —of course the writing that de-centers, criticism— as an act of “misplacement” that he dubs “lateralness,” a term that means the sensitivity to alien, eccentric, peripheral situations: “misplaced” situations. This sensitivity is called wonderment and leads to petrifications that writing brings together, kneads and softens. From these “lateral” positions, from these two borders and these two misplaced writings I will analyze the political and aesthetic function of Anzaldúa and Castellanos’s narratives.

WHY THESE TWO WRITERS AND WHY NOW?

I have paired them for several reasons. Rosario Castellanos died in August 1974 and Gloria Anzaldúa in April 2004. Both wrote about women and situated their writing on the border. As Cortázar says, “They are not completely there” in a discipline, in a task, in a genre or in an ideology. Rosario wrote from the South, Chiapas, and Gloria, from the North, the border with the United States. They wrote from the borders of the acceptable and from the borders of what could be enunciated. They produced lateral knowledge.

Both wrote from and about the “crevices” and breaks of our nation: the divisions and duels among classes, ethnic groups and the sexes. One of their main themes was what inhabits the periphery, the excluded, the national impossibilities: indigenous, poor women and migrants.

Both have been bridges for racial, ethnic, class and gender differences. Both have been translators and have been accused of betraying their feminine culture, the patriarchal culture, hegemonic values.

The differences are equally illustrative: one is read as a *giüera*, or a fair-haired, fair-skinned woman; the other is read as a dark-skinned brunette, or *prieta*; one is from the intellectual middle class, the other from the lower class, a wetback migrant. One writes about the South, the other from and about the North. One writes in Spanish, the other in “Spanglish,” using code switching. One uses the tongue, the other the back as a bridge between worlds, countries and sexes. One is heterosexual, the other homosexual. One is renowned, the other is barely being looked at.

What unites them or makes them objects of comparison is their writing from the limits of the nation, their

lateralness, their misplacement, their eccentric meaning poured into writing that overflows as it makes national excesses visible in a body and language: migrants, indigenous, women. How to be a woman from those limits? What writing is produced with the back and the tongue wet?

Gloria and Rosario, North and South, *prieta* and *giüera*, back and tongue. For the last decade we have witnessed different events that define the nation on its two borders, north and south: Zapatistas and maquiladoras; Revolutionary Women’s Laws and speeches to Congress; feminicides, indigenous and migrants as objects and sometimes subjects of the administration of justice and resistance from Chiapas to Ciudad Juárez. These two writers help us understand our transitions to democracy, to (dis)integration, to intercultural-ness, by unfolding those very painful and so radically unjust and exclusionary border scenarios.

Rosario dedicated an important part of her work to making visible the southern border, the lives of indigenous people and particularly women, and the way in which women relate to all systems of exclusion: patriarchy, capitalism, modernity, tradition, customs, violence, the family and schools. She unfolded the role and lives of middle class women in contact with these subordinates, these indigenous. She formed a genealogy of women in contact, rubbing against all the systems that exclude them and take away their confidence, joy and will. She wanted women to be subjects of respect, dialogue, the exchange of discourses and words, not only the exchange of their bodies.

The meaning of the word is its recipient: the other who listens, who understands and who responds, turns its interlocutor into he who listens and understands, thus establishing a dialogue that is only possible among those who take each other into consideration and treat each other as equals, and is only fruitful among those who want each other to be free.²

Gloria, the *prieta*, the farm worker, writer and self-proclaimed Indian, sixth generation migrant, born in Texas in 1942, wrote about the life of Mexicans, Chicanos, migrants in the United States, on the borders, the life of the tongue, of the promise of the American dream. On the border as a wall and barbed wire, on the bor-

der with “pistols of ammunition and pepper,” because, as Luis Ernesto Derbez asked one day, what is better, that they kill you or they just give you a few “biting stings”, spattering you with little metal balls steeped in a little pepper?

Anzaldúa writes to make visible all the ways in which migrants, wetbacks, pain themselves, feel sorry for themselves, leave the skin in order to not leave the back anymore, since the idea is to start sticking out your tongue. Gloria undertakes the unfathomable task of exchanging the back for the tongue. Sweat for ink. In the first pages of her best known text, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, she writes:

In the fields, *la migra*. My aunt saying, “*No corran*, don’t run. They’ll think you’re *del otro lao*.” In the confusion, Pedro ran, terrified of being caught. He couldn’t speak English, couldn’t tell them he was fifth generation American. *Sin papeles* —he did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields. *La migra* took him away while we watched. *Se lo llevaron*. He tried to smile when he looked back at us, to raise his fist. But I saw the shame pushing his head down, I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders. They deported him to Guadalajara by plane. The furthest he’d ever been to Mexico was Reynosa, a small border town opposite Hidalgo, Texas, not far from McAllen. Pedro walked all the way to the Valley. *Se lo llevaron sin un centavo el pobre. Se vino andando desde Guadalajara*.³

Borderlands is a hybrid text composed of fragments of essay, the development of conceptual categories, fiction, pieces of history in the mouths of the vanquished and counterposed to the official history, poetry, *corridos*, autobiography, sayings, songs. Classifying it in a single genre is impossible because it navigates between essay, fiction, autobiography and poetic narrative.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa tenses racial, class and sexuality differences to the limit by subjecting them to the category of being a woman, being poor, being a Chicana and being a lesbian, who lives in English but thinks in Spanish. She unfolds being the female protagonist of all betrayals: of her Mexican culture because she writes in English, of the Anglo culture because she turns it into Spanglish, of women’s culture because she renounces maternity, of the patriarchal culture

because she rejects both femininity and heterosexuality. Gloria’s writing, body and language are at the limits of any social and symbolic national/hegemonic system; her entire being falls within the periphery; her entire being is the product of lateralness.

Rosario and Gloria are mediators, translators, contemporary Malinches of their own peoples and of strangers, foreigners. They have been accused of betrayal because they offer scenes of conscience and liberation to women and men willing to misplace themselves, to displace themselves.

The consciousness or awareness their texts generate can be defined as a state acquired on crossing over from one emotion to another, from one territory to another, from one struggle to another. This transcendence of the differences happens by crossing over and recreating the original meaning and making it coincide with the unknown or subordinate.

Travelers of crossings, permanent crossers from the opposite to the different, weavers of what can knit a topographical change, that brings those from below to the height of the gaze and lowers “those from above” to the level of the back. But there are differences among them.

Rosario’s crossings lead to the creation of an awareness of loneliness whose strength lies in the recognition of its labyrinths and the handling and contention of the desires that spur complete surrender to men, to service, to the nation, to the suffering of love and of sexuality. Gloria’s crossings lead us, not shoulder to shoulder but back to back, to recognize a way of being Mexican, Chicana, Gringa and a woman that articulates all the deficits: those of color (*prieta*); those of language (tongue-less); those of origin (Indian); those of sexuality (lesbian). And it builds us new and whole, face to face with the challenges of desire, of power and of politics. Rosario proposes an “us” that is alone, suspended and fragmented on the threshold of surrender and Gloria gathers the fragments, sutures them together and suspends all surrenders that rend us anew.

Both writers have produced a great deal. Of their most widely read texts are *Balún Canán* by Castellanos and *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* by Anzaldúa. One of their greatest thematic similarities has been the representation of the border indigenous woman: the indigenous Nana in Rosario’s narrative and the New Mestiza in Gloria Anzaldúa’s. The Nana and the

New Mestiza are figures that both writers point out as linked to “the consciousness of crossing,” of the transition from difference and subordination to consciousness, as a result of the possession/position of the racial, sexual or national difference as the ability of signification, not only of exclusion. The capabilities they propose in their texts are very different while their interstitial and “misplaced” treatment is similar.

The Nana and the New Mestiza have two things in common. The first is the preservation of a visible, articulating indigenous supplement, a component that traces the body, the territory and the indigenous language on the territorial defeat. This defeat has pushed the indigenous subject out of the story, that is, outside the power to make sense from its place and to do it in such a way that it circulates legitimately. Both return the indigenous representation of body and tongue to the text. The second thing has to do with an interstitial position, on the margins and outside of literary and sexual genres and their degrees of confrontation and union of gender, class, ethnic and generational differences.

Castellanos’ Nana and Anzaldúa’s New Mestiza speak of their 500-year-old solitude. They create a textual/sexual body, a body fundamental to the story with threshold voices, the story’s fundamental body.

In her narrative, particularly in *Balún Canán*, Rosario Castellanos shows all the ways that identification with the margins, with indigenous subordinateness is impossible. Infinite wherefores of our refusal to identify ourselves with that periphery. She shows these reasons without romanticizing the indigenous world and culture. In this case we do not speak of an identification that would make indigenous identical or at least similar, but an identification that conceives of them as subjects of the same rights that we have as citizens.

The novel deals with the life of a family on a hacienda in Comitán and its contact with/dependence on the indigenous world. It is divided into three parts. The first and last, written in the third person, are told from the perspective of a seven-year-old girl. In Castellanos’s words, “This childish world is very similar to the world of the indigenous where the action of the novel is situated.”⁴ A little girl and an Indian woman who love, understand and enjoy each other. A little girl who loves her Indian nana. How can we love the other, who is radically different?

Two of the three parts of the novel are a little girl and her nana’s murmuring, muttering, an indigenous world in contact with a little white girl who loves her nana. It puts forward a return of the indigenous in two versions: the first in the contact and rubbing together of the margins, the closeness and the love between the nana and the little girl, both invisible in the paternal household. The second based on the clash between what is Indian and what is “*caxtlán*”, between the world of identification and exclusion, between the center and the margins, between the Indian, the “white” and the mestizo, the scenario of exploitation, discrimination and betrayal not only between Indians and mestizos. The second part of the novel clarifies the breaks between the Indian world and its own culture in contact with modernity and the vital, capital economy of a hacienda.

The relationship between the nana and the little girl punctuates the novel. They are one and they are different. We never know the name of either; they are anonymous and insignificant. On the margins, their worlds intertwine and their plots weave. The whole first part, the part I am interested in analyzing, shows the ways the nana and the little girl can relate and love each other from the margins of the family and society. The little girl has a brother who monopolizes their mother’s attention as first born and favorite child: Mario. The entire patriarchal world moves to the edges of the plot from where they love and get to know each other, from where the nana fills the little girl’s ears and eyes with images and stories of her Indian world, a world that for the nana is also experienced in Spanish. Both live together on the limits of their worlds: the urban, the traditional, the patriarchal and the indigenous.

I am poking among the dishes...I like the color of lard and to touch the cheeks of the fruit and undress the onions. “Those are witches’ things, girl; they eat everything. The crops, families’ peace, people’s health.” I have found a basket of eggs. The spotted ones are turkey eggs. “Look what they’re doing to me.” And raising the *tzec*, the nana shows me a fresh, pink sore disfiguring her knee. I look at it with my eyes big with surprise. “Don’t say anything, girl. I came from Chajtajal so they wouldn’t follow me, but their curse reaches a long way.” Why do they hurt you? “Because I have been a servant in your house. Because I love your parents, Mario and you.” Is it bad to love

us? "It is bad to love those who run things, those who own things. That is what the Law says."⁵

The beginning of *Balún Canán* is representative and announces the end on page two. The cherished relationship of the nana and the little girl, so carnal, so oral, so loving, is also described thus:

"Finish up your milk." Every afternoon at five the Swiss cow vendor goes by, ringing his tin bell. (I have explained to Mario that "Swiss" means "fat.")...The maids come out of the houses and buy a glassful. And spoiled children like me make faces and spill it on the tablecloth. "God is going to punish you for wasting it," says the nana. "I want to drink coffee. Like you. Like everybody else. "You're going to become an Indian." Her threat makes me shiver with apprehension. From tomorrow on, I won't spill the milk.⁶

The threat of becoming an Indian makes her shiver and be afraid. The nana herself threatens the little girl with being like the person the little girl loves and trusts the most. This should make her excited at the prospect, not shiver with fear. What pedagogical, disciplinary and emotional processes do the nation and all its systems (the family, the school, morality) trigger, to create rejection of what is most intimate, to produce apprehension in place of pride at being like the person we most love?

Castellanos emphasizes the patriarchal subjection of both the indigenous and the European cultures, but it is in the figure of the nana that she establishes the transgressions of both universes, the Indian and the European. The nana is the bridge that translates the indigenous wisdom and the urban wisdom, the central and peripheral wisdoms. The nana is a kind of Malinche, the translator between an indigenous and a national culture, between the traditions of indigenous wisdom and modernity. She speaks Spanish and an indigenous language. She knows the customs of the "caxtlanes" and she does not forget her own. She is literally an interstitial, border, misplaced subject.

An excellent example of this is the explanation that the nana gives the little girl about who the poor are and why her mother visits an impoverished paralyzed woman. The story is a long one and goes through the indige-

nous mythology that explains the creation of men, first out of wood and then out of gold:

And day after day, the hardness of the heart of the man of gold cracked little by little until the word of gratitude that the four lords had placed in him rose to his mouth....That is why our law says that no rich man may enter into heaven if a poor man does not take him by the hand. The nana is silent. She carefully folds the garment she has just mended...and stands up to leave. But before she takes the first step that will separate us, I ask her, who is my poor nana? "You still don't know. But if you watch carefully, when you are older and understand more, you will know."⁷

The fragile possibility of a way forward accompanied by Indian and mestiza othernesses is perceptible at the threshold where reciprocity finally exists.

Gloria works in reverse: she points to the unfathomable breaks, that which separates us from that liminal identification with otherness to put forward the emergence of a new consciousness, the product of the breach, the rent and the recomposition of these racial, ethnic, sexual and national differences. In the first paragraph of the preface to *Borderlands*, we read:

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

A new awareness that is born on the border between the United States and Mexico, that is born from the re-signification of exploitation, violence and mistrust among Mexicans, Chicanos, Mexican-Americans and Anglos.

Borderlands uses the history of the vanquished in their own mouths, as the revealing discourse, but it also uses operations learned from shamans and from what is left of pre-Hispanic wisdom to open up to the subject the possibility of visualizing all the ways in which she herself and her own culture can be the reason for

the disillusionment. It is as if Castellanos's nana were turned into a migrant to the northern border, a wet-back, and were made to speak.

In Anzaldúa's second chapter, "Movimientos de rebeldía y culturas que traicionan" (Rebel Movements and Cultures that Betray), we read in Spanglish:

*Esos movimientos de rebeldía que tenemos en la sangre nosotros los mexicanos surgen como ríos desbocados en mis venas. Y como mi raza que cada en cuando deja caer esa esclavitud de obedecer, de callarse y aceptar, en mí está la rebeldía encimada de mi carne. Debajo de mi humillada mirada está una cara insolente lista para explotar. Me costó muy caro mi rebeldía-acalambrada con desvelos y dudas, sintiéndome inútil, estúpida e impotente...repelé. Hablé pa'tras. Fui hocicona. Era indiferente a muchos valores de mi cultura. No me dejé de los hombres. No fui buena ni obediente. Pero he crecido. Ya no sólo paso toda mi vida botando las costumbres y los valores de mi cultura que me traicionan. También recojo las costumbres que por un tiempo se han provocado y las costumbres de respeto a las mujeres. But despite my growing tolerance, for this Chicana, la guerra de independencia is a constant.*⁸

The impressive thing about this book is that the creation of consciousness does not reside in only laying the emotional, psychological and economic state of migrants at the door of Anglo-Saxon culture, capitalist exploitation or the abuse of power in U.S. culture. It also emphasizes the ways in which the very culture of Mexicans and Chicanos operates to weaken them and undermine their abilities and sensations.

Anzaldúa is capable of proposing a consciousness raising operation since she shares all the cultures, knows the languages and practices and lives in those areas of "Anglo" power and of the weakening regarding her sexuality, her class and her Mexican cultural association.

Because I, a *mestiza*
continually walk out of one culture
And into another,
Because I am in all cultures
at the same time,
Alma entre dos mundos, tres cuatro,
Me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.

*Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan
Simultáneamente.*⁹

With Gloria, the final product is the creation of a consciousness of oppression, not only of women, but of people of color, homosexuals, migrants and the poor. She traces delicate equations that show up correspondences and equivalencies in these identity "deficits".

El choque de un alma atrapada entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica a veces la deja entullida. Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war...Within us and within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture. Subconsciously, we see an attack on ourselves and on our beliefs as a threat we attempt to block with a counterstance.¹⁰

These deficits (poverty, wandering, femininity, being dark-skinned, indigenous or Mexican, the "wrong" sexuality) constitute, together with all the "being on the sidelines" the mortar that founds the New Mestiza, the hybrid, interstitial, border, peripheral subject. They make up the New Mestiza as an effect of so many crossings and a life on the line of all the borders that articulates the impossibilities.

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns ambivalence into something else.¹¹

The transits between different identities that Gloria establishes, the tension that she demands of the cross-over between different subjectivities produces a textuality full of crossings, of negotiations between opposites, with the aim of accepting, understanding, codifying the other.

Gloria was a farm worker, a migrant worker in the United States, a seventh-generation Texan-American; her mother did not speak English. She traveled through different states with her family, renting herself out as agricultural labor. A wetback with a sharp tongue, educated in schools for poor migrants. Self-identified as an indigenous, with indigenous features, but sixth-generation Texan.

In almost opposite ways, the two narratives make the sutures of the nation visible. With her tongue/language, Rosario builds a bridge whose cracks are visible; a broken bridge among othernesses; and Gloria offers her back as a passage toward understanding of differences and their re-elaboration. The nana subject to the conscience of crossing, of the passage, ends up with sores, expelled and unrecognizable; and the New Mestiza, a mixed subject, a subject of the suturing together of the fragments, lives in the most fragile areas of signification: the borders. The nana ends up getting lost because "all Indians have the same face." And how does the New Mestiza end up? It is impossible to say in advance because the New Mestiza has barely been articulated. How does a subject end up who realizes his/her potential precisely based on his/her most fragile characteristics, a peripheral subject sexually, in terms of nationality, of gender, of class? We read in *Borderlands*, "*La oposición no es una manera de vivir. En un momento dado, en nuestro camino hacia la nueva conciencia de la mestiza, hay que abandonar la oposición....Tenemos que aprender a accionar, no a reaccionar.*"¹²

Gloria and Rosario give the border woman, the Nana and the New Mestiza, the place of "synthesis," of being a bridge, of being translators. Gloria bets on a very, very complex, adventurous synthesis, the fruit of all the deficits, of bringing together the peripheral.

If we realize that today more than 20 million Mexicans live in the United States and to the south we have recently had an indigenous rebellion, it becomes even more urgent to explore and more interesting to analyze the Gloria/Rosario, North/South, *prieta/güera*, homosexual/heterosexual, poor/middle class paradigm precisely as bridges from and toward the other, as passages and inter-crossings from the geographical, sexual, ethnic, class and discursive borders. Our greatest wounds and our abysmal problems come from these borders.

Gloria and Rosario, a glory of rosaries or a rosary of glories,¹³ glossaries that speak from and of the borders, from there build a different Mexico: the Mexico of the nana and of the Indian woman that dissolves in the multitude, but whose knowledge and whose marks stay on the body and on the tongue of the little girl, unrecognizable but indelible. And that of the New Mestiza, that of the internal struggles with all their marginal markings. The Indian woman in Mexico, the Mexican woman in the United States, the lesbian in the heterosexual world, the American in the Mexican tradition: from these places, both dismantle the binomials that radicalize and make the other banal, and build bridges. Rosario's Glory is to do it with the language, Gloria's Rosary is the humidity on the back, with the back in her hand. Back and tongue/language are bridges and breaks, sutures and lines, that return migrants and indigenous to the periphery of the heart, to the center of our consciousness and our emotions.

Like the nana, the wizards of the north also punish our migrants, our Nanas, servants, future New Mestizas, with sores. The authorities answer that they are just a few stinging bites, buckshot with pepper, or Minuteman Projects, in order to get people to stop crossing borders, including the one that leads to consciousness. Which are the pedagogies, the economies, the systems that can form New Mestizas and not only Nanas shriveled by time in our country? ■■

NOTES

¹ Julio Cortázar, *La casilla de Morelli* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1973), p. 61.

² Rosario Castellanos, *Balún Canán* in *Obras Completas*, vol. I (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), p. 24.

³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinters/Aunt Lute, 1987), p. 4.

⁴ Rosario Castellanos, "Introducción," *Obras Completas* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), p. 13.

⁵ Rosario Castellanos, *Balún Canán* in *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

⁸ Anzaldúa, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

¹³ In Spanish, the name Gloria means "glory" and the name Rosario means "rosary." [Translator's Note.]