

# Living on the Border: A Wound That Will Not Heal

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Norma E. Cantú

Living in the geographical area where the U.S. and Mexico meet, the truth is always present. It gnaws at one's consciousness like a fear of rabid dogs and coyotes. Beneath every action lies the context of border life. And one must see that undergirding for what it is — the pain and sorrow of daily reminders that here disease runs rampant, here drug crimes take a daily toll, here infant mortality rates run as high or higher than those in Third World countries, here one cannot drink the water, and here, this land that is our land — and has been our land for generations — is not really ours. But one must also see border life in the context of its joys, its continuous healing, and its celebration of a life and culture that survives against all odds. For to do otherwise condemns us to falling into the vortex of pessimism and anomie where so many already dwell.

*La frontera*: the frontier, the edges, the limits, the boundaries, the borders, the cultures, the languages, the foods; but more than that, the unity and disunity: *es lo mismo y no lo es* (it's the same and it isn't). Chicana novelist Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of this same terrain, this same geography, but her words are hers; they are not mine, not ours, not those of everyone living along the border. However similar experiences may be they are not the same, for the frontera is as varied as the geography from Matamoros/Brownsville to Tijuana/San Ysidro, and the people that inhabit this wrinkle in space are as varied as the indigenous peoples that first crossed it centuries ago and the peoples who continue to traverse it today. The Aztec pantheon didn't real-

ly rule these northern lands; and the *norteño* personality, customs, rites, and language are testament to that other native culture, now all but gone, which survives in vestiges sometimes as vague as an image in the sand, on the wall of a cave, or in the lexicon and intonation of a border native's speech.

These lands have always harbored transients, people moving sometimes north sometimes south. Like birds making their annual trek, migrant workers board up their homes and pack things in trucks and off they go with the local priest's blessing. In Laredo, in Eagle Pass, and elsewhere, the matachines celebrate on May 3rd, December 12th, or another significant date, and as they congregate to dance in honor of the holy cross, the Virgen de Guadalupe, or other local devotion, they remember other lands and other times. Spanish and English languages both change along the border — *mariachis* are flour tortilla tacos in Laredo and Nuevo Laredo and within a 50-mile radius of the area; the *caló* (slang) of the *batos locos*, lowriders, *cholos*, or *pachucos* maintains its literary quality in its excessive use of metaphor all along the stretch, yet changes from community to community, just as the names for food and even the foods themselves change. Differences have been there since the settlement of the borderlands in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the changes wrought upon the border culture have occurred over the span of more than 300 years; yet there are other changes, as well, ongoing changes that will alter the very fabric of borderlands culture.

The collusion of a myriad of cultures, not just Mexican and U.S., makes the borderlands unique. It is a culture forever in transition, changing visibly from year to year. The population increases in number and in variety, as Koreans, Indians, and other peoples of non-European, non-Indigenous, and non-Mestizo origin flow into the region. Because of such an influx, it

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At the feasts of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Holy Cross, the Matachines de la Santa Cruz affirm their spiritual bonds to the Virgin and the Cross, to each other, and to their community by dancing before their altar in the Ladrillera Barrio of Laredo. Most of the members of this religious brotherhood came to Laredo in the late 1930s from the mining towns of Chancel Palafos and Dolores in northern Mexico.

Photo by Norma Cantú

also changes environmentally, economically, and even in style.

The names for the river may be different — Río Bravo/Rio Grande — but it's the same river whose life-giving waters flow down from Colorado, and whose life-taking waters spill out into the Gulf of Mexico. The same river is a political boundary between two nation-states, but people on both sides of the river retain the customs of the settlers from Spain and from central Mexico along with those of the original inhabitants, which they have inherited and adapted to their particular needs.

Newcomers integrate their ways into the existing culture, but the old ones remain. Intriguing syncretisms occur. Weddings, for example, integrate traditional "Mexican" customs such as the Arabic *arras* (marriage coins) and the Native *lazo* (bonding cord) along with the German-style polka or *conjunto* music and *brindis* (toast). An infant's baptism becomes an occasion for godparents to exchange prayers, an indigenous form encapsulated in a European logic. Conversely, a *quinceañera* (young woman's 15th birthday) becomes the modern-day puberty rite of a community. In local dance halls dancers engage in weekly rites as culturally choreographed as those of the Catholic pilgrimages to santuarios from California to Texas; both customs embody forms and values that endure from

times before European contact.

Gloria Anzaldúa says that "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* (is an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa 1987). And she continues the metaphor by adding that before the wound heals it "hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture." First shaped by the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that cut the area in two, the wound has continuously bled, as politics, economics, and most recently environmental pollution exacerbate the laceration. If some healing occurs and a scab barely forms, a new blow strikes — such was the economic blow struck by the 1982 Mexican devaluation.

Ours is a history of conflict and resolution, of growth and devastation, of battles won and lost in conflicts not always of our making. Often these contradictory outcomes issue from the same set of historical events, like the development of the *maquiladora* industry, which provides jobs even as it renders the river's waters "a veritable cesspool" (*The Laredo Morning Times* 1993). The inhabitants of the borderlands live in the consequences of this history, in the bleeding that never stops. Those of us who inhabit this land must live with daily human rights violations, contrasting world views, two forms of currency, and different "ways of doing things" that in some





A migrant worker harvests celery and jokes with the photographer. In an interview conducted as part of the Borderlife Project of the University of Texas-Pan American, Donna Garcia describes part of her life as a Mexican migrant worker. "For years we had been traveling to west Texas to work the cotton crop. I would hear people always talking about 'Those migrant workers — look how they left this place; they're so dirty. You can't leave anything out while they are around.' I had heard these remarks so often that I thought they were talking of people in trouble with the law. One day my husband was talking of some mishap and I said, 'Oh, it was probably those migrant workers.' He looked at me and asked what I thought migrant workers were, so I told him. When I had finished he told me, 'Mama, we are migrant workers.'" *Photo by Lillian M. Salcido*

cases make life easier but in others, nearly intolerable.

Immigration and emigration have shaped the borderlands. The exodus of Texas border natives to the metropolitan areas of Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio or to California or the Midwest during the 1950s was due in large measure to the depressed local economy. But, as emigration to the north occurred, immigration from Mexico into the area continued. The unemployment rates often hovered around the teens and did not noticeably decrease, in spite of large numbers of families relocating elsewhere, settling out of the migrant labor stream, in industrialized areas such as Chicago, or going to work in other areas of Texas.

In the 1980s and 1990s, some of these same

people, now retiring from steel mills in Illinois or factories in Detroit, are returning as retirees and settling in the south Texas border communities they moved from 40 years ago. For many, like my mother's cousins who moved away and worked for Bethlehem Steel, Christmas and summer vacation were times to visit relatives on the border; these days, it is their children who make the trip down south to visit them.

But in many cases the move was permanent. With little to come back to, families settled permanently in places like California, Wisconsin, and Nebraska. This was the experience of my father's cousin who lives in Omaha and who retired from the upholstering business she worked in for over 30 years. She speaks of her life away and her reasons for leaving with great





The shrine in the yard of Isidro Ramírez, a Vietnam War veteran who lives in Laredo, commemorates his participation in the war and expresses gratitude for his safe return. Mr. Ramírez includes in his religious work traditional objects like candles, flower vases, and images of saints, and also personal offerings that express his patriotism and war experience like the flag of Texas and his military helmet.  
*Photo by Norma Cantú*

pain: there were no jobs to be had; political machines controlled the few jobs there were; the pay was below the national minimum wage; the schools were not good for their kids; and the streets weren't paved. At least up north, in spite of discrimination, language barriers, alien foods, and cold weather, there were jobs; one could dream of a better life. The border population is in transition once again as it has been for centuries. The healing occurs for but a short time when the newly formed scab is torn by a new element, and the process begins anew.

The border is not homogenous in geography or in culture; there are many borders, resplendent in their heterogeneity. We who live in these realities celebrate our day-to-day life with family *carne asada* gatherings; with civic events such as George Washington's Birthday Celebration with its numerous border icons like the *abrazo* (embracing) ceremony and the International Parade; with high school graduations (currently attained by around 55% of students), and other markers of academic achievement; and with religious events, such as the matachines dance or the annual visit to the city by the image of the Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos in Mexico, venerated on both sides of the border.

The pain and joy of the borderlands — perhaps no greater or lesser than the emotions stirred by living anywhere contradictions abound, cultures clash and meld, and life is lived on an edge — come from a wound that will not heal and yet is forever healing. These lands have always been here; the river of people has flowed for centuries. It is only the designation “border” that is relatively new, and along with the term comes the life one lives in this “in-between world” that makes us the “other,” the marginalized. But, from our perspective, the “other” is outside, away from, and alien to, the border. This is our reality, and we, especially we Chicanos and Chicanas, negotiate it in our daily lives, as we contend with being treated as aliens ourselves. This in essence is the greatest wound — the constant reminder of our otherness.

#### *Citations and Further Readings*

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute Press.
- “Rio Grande labeled ‘virtual cesspool’.” *The Laredo Morning Times*, 21 April 1993.