

The Unbearable Lightness of Being Fronterizo: Reflections on Border Crossing

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Abstract

This essay—a blend of critical commentary with personal memoir—is a report on border crossing, on the ghosts that we carry, on the stories that we bear, and the promise that is handed on in telling them. Our material realities are made up of fragments of memories, echoes and traces that give shape and depth to a place. What happens, however, in the case of border crossers who find themselves suspended in-between the memory of what was left behind with the reality of a different cultural context? Through a reading of border crossings works, this paper examines the spectres/ghosts/echoes/ traces—the oftentimes traumatic residue— that remains when crossing borders. The works I discuss offer up a migratory aesthetics through what I have been calling an “unbearable lightness of being fronterizo.” As a response to narratives of control—hegemonic narratives that attempt to define or inscribe a space—a *fronterizo* practice can function to undermine reifying narratives, positing a contestatory strategy for emerging cultures.

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Under a Streetlamp the Border Brujo Sings Songs of Love

Barcelona 9 pm. We are at dinner bien nice in el Eixample. Earlier that evening the Border Brujo and me had been sitting in the audience listening to Dr. Spanglish give a lecture on Spanglish in the United States. He talked about his book on the subject and on his translation of the first chapter of Don Quixote into Spanglish. After a while, the Brujo leaned over to me and said: “It’s cool, loco, but you and me, we were doing this fifteen years ago.” The night before, the Brujo had led us on a rite of exorcism—Mexorcism—in a theatre near the Plaça Catalunya. He invited us to consider the spectacle of a mexicano in the process of *desmexicanización* para *mexicomprenderse* and finding himself still on the journey.¹ He spoke to us of the need to undermine national policy towards the U.S./Mexico border and to find strength in the in-between, the meshed, the ambiguous, and the ironic. Through his meshing of language codes, flowing from English to Spanish to Spanglish to Catalan to Ingleñol, he fused histories and identities and invited us along. That night, we are at dinner, while Dr. Spanglish is being feted, and the six of us in our corner of the long table make plans for later that night.

Barcelona 1 am. We are in a bar in El Raval. Nearby are small bodegas selling goods for the

¹ While the editorial tradition is to italicize foreign words, as a native Spanglish speaker I resist this as I do not speak in italics. Italics will be used for words/phrases that are not part of my linguistic repertoire—for example, Turkish—but for Spanish, they will only be used for emphasis.

Middle Eastern communities that live in the neighborhood. There are also restaurants that offer Lebanese, Afghan and Moroccan food. But at that hour everything is closed, and the streets are largely empty. The bar is full.

Barcelona 3 am. Under the moon the Border Brujo sings songs of love. “Bésame ... bésame ... chuca ...” They are hybrid renditions of classic tunes from the barrio—already hybrid music that often blends Mexican folk songs with Afro-American rhythm and blues—and Latin American boleros. They are part of the urban Chicano experience, but modified further by the Brujo: “con tarjeta y sin tarjeta / digo yo la pura neta / y mi palabra es la ley.” They are songs for those who are uncitizens traveling through the Middle World, migrants, transterrados. The disidentified in a region in-between. The Border Brujo, holding on to a lamppost, sings songs: for those who live here and there, placed in multiple countries and histories at the same time, for those who find themselves *entre caminos*, for those in the land of elsewhere, for those who are here to conflict with the plans of systems of power. They are songs for us, the products of migration who continue to find ourselves in and on borderlines. They are songs of our experience.

What follows—a blend of critical commentary with personal memoir—is a report on border crossing, on the ghosts that we carry, on the stories that we bear and the promise that is handed on in telling them. This is an examination on how border writers represent an alternative discourse of cultural identity as a consequence of living in a contact zone. The works I discuss offer up a migratory aesthetics through what I have been calling an “unbearable lightness of being *fronterizo*.”² I note how border writers and artists navigate the push and pull of borderlands through this aesthetic practice as a way towards negotiating the transition through the Middle World. What does this mean, how to write of a lightness to being in the borderlands, when we are living through times when border crossings are fraught with danger and violence? In the following essay, I want to reflect on border crossing and the specters we carry, on language as a form of migratory aesthetics, and what I have heard called “migritude” as an example of a type of decolonizing *pensamiento fronterizo*.³ As a response to narratives of control—hegemonic narratives that attempt to define or inscribe a space—a *fronterizo* practice can function to undermine reifying narratives, positing a contestatory strategy for emerging cultures. Framing the essay through a mix of the creative with the scholarly, the personal with the public, serves as another form of border crossing, and entangles and engages with the works discussed here.

² This essay is the result of a performative text that I have been presenting at a number of international fora over the last couple of years.

³ José David Saldívar identifies “*pensamiento fronterizo*” as a geopolitically located thinking that “emerges from the critical reflections of (undocumented) immigrants, migrants, *bracero/a* workers, refugees, *campesinos*, women, and children on the major structures of dominance and subordination of our times” (1). More importantly, this type of thinking is allied with Aníbal Quijano’s notion of “coloniality of power” and, as such, is a decolonizing strategy for undermining forms of power.

A Passage through the Middle World

South African poet, Breyten Breytenbach, has spoken of a space that he calls the “Middle World,” a world between the first and the third, a liminal space where “truths no longer fitted snugly and certainties did not overlap” (135). The situation of this world is conditioned by migration and wandering. Breytenbach’s model for the Middle World is helpful for understanding the consequences of mass movements across borders. For him, the Middle World is a world between nations and populated by migrants. Its citizens—“uncitizens” as he calls them—are in constant migration. He further emphasizes that though the Middle World is everywhere, “belonging and not belonging,” it is not “of the Center ... since it is by definition and vocation peripheral, other, ... living in the margins and on the live edges” (136). Crossing a border is always a crossing into the Middle World. At the same time, passage through the Middle World is never that easy, as one often finds that they still carry the burden of their past with them.

One artist who could speak to a Middle World experience is Guillermo Gómez-Peña. In his writings and performances, Gómez-Peña offers up a reflection for a nation of migrants living in between borders. He gestures towards communities in transition, in the process of becoming. In his essay “The Free Trade Art Agreement / El tratado de libre cultura,” Gómez-Peña argues against the old First World/Third World dichotomy and argues for a “Fourth World” made up of indigenous and diasporic communities, “there are no ‘others,’ or better said, the only true ‘others’ are those who resist fusion, mestizaje, and cross-cultural dialogue” (7). He also adds that the “members of the Fourth World live between and across various cultures, communities, and countries” (7). His locating of a Fourth World is not far off from Breytenbach’s notion of the Middle World. Both examples privilege the migrant while also recognizing the spectral qualities that make up this space of transition.⁴ The “uncitizen,” traversing the Middle World or caught in the Fourth World, carry with them the traces and echoes of their pasts as they try to find a place for themselves.

A number of years ago, at a conference in Lima, Peru, the young Peruvian writer Carlos Yushimito offered some observations on being an immigrant writer. A few years earlier, he had left his country to study at Brown University. Reflecting on his experiences living in another tongue, he compared it in some ways to his own nearsightedness. In Lima, he was familiar with his surroundings and he moved about easily. Living abroad was different, everything was filtered through different codes, and there was also the fact that he had to live in a different language. He likened it to moving around without his glasses on as life was slightly out of focus. As Breytenbach notes, “the way you are positioned to and in language may be one of the defining traits of the Middle World uncitizen” (141). Yushimito, finding himself outside his language, positioned him into a new relationship with his self. At the same time, he began to appreciate this

⁴ By spectral, I do not simply mean ghosts. I am not against, however, the figure of the ghost as a conceptual way to understand trauma. As Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Petersen astutely note, the “ghost implies a rupture with notions of the present as an immediately accessible, coherent, and self-contained timeframe when a call for justice for victims from the past becomes manifest in the present” (3). Rather, what I am aiming for is a larger conceptual field made up of ghosts, traces, and echoes as narratives that we all carry.

loss of clarity as it forced him to become more introspective. The shift in perspective, the crossing of borders from one country to another, gave him an insight into his self and his writing process.

In a similar vein, Mieke Bal reflecting on a short film that she worked on about migration, recalls an interview with an Iranian asylum seeker, Daryush, in Berlin. Their conversation first had to deal with the problem of language: he spoke limited English, and she did not speak any of the languages he was fluent in, Farsi and Greek. Seeing that English was their only option, their conversation was halting. However, at one point, she writes:

[W]hen I asked him what he most missed about his home, he fell into a frantic expression of the incapacity to speak. He was most desirous to speak, but most incapacitated by the foreignness of the language we were using. I told him he could speak in Farsi. While I was unable to respond to his answer, I would be able to understand it later, since my partner in the project is also from Iran. After a few seconds of total silence—I was beginning to wonder if he had understood my proposal—words, sounds that I did not understand at all tumbled out of his mouth Some time later I got the words translated. To my surprise as well as delight it turned out he had said that what he most missed was speaking *his own language*. (27)

For Daryush, migration was the loss of being able to express himself freely in his own language: it was a loss of clarity. This is similar to Yushimito's reflections on being a migrant. Both Daryush and Yushimito, in their experiences of migration as a loss of clarity, demonstrate how they are still in transit through the Middle World. This is seen in their own sense of displacement; they are lost in place.

Being lost in place (lost in sight, lost in language) or having a loss of clarity forms an important axis of Bal's conception of a migratory aesthetic, which she defines as "an aesthetic, but takes the [migratory] concept literally, as a *condition of sentient engagement*." (23). The sentient encounter in both Yushimito and Daryush is in their awareness of being in a state of suspension where their own migrant experiences have left them out of place. Their pasts become spectral echoes that they carry with them in their journey through the Middle World. "To be of the Middle World is to have broken away from the parochial, to have left 'home' for good (or for worse) while carrying all of it with you and to have arrived on foreign shores feeling at ease there without ever being 'at home'" (Breytenbach 143).

Everywhere That I'm Not: In the Realm of Jet Lag

In 2007, I took my third yearly trip to Turkey (by 2011, I was traveling there up to three times a year). After arriving in Istanbul, I made my way in my jet-lagged state to the hotel, opened the curtains and laid down on the bed. I listened to the sounds from all around: from the hotel, from outside (the passing tram, the occasional traffic, the afternoon call to prayers coming from the mosques). Though physically I was in a room in a hotel with the evocative name of

Orient Express, psychically/emotionally I was still flying from Amsterdam to Istanbul. I was in the realm of jet lag, which might be one of the passages through the Middle World.⁵ It was a country where I had spent a lot of time. Lying on the bed, I waited to reconnect, though I knew that it would take a few days. Until then, I knew I would be, in a sense, driftless, lost in place, out of focus.

When I first began to travel to Turkey, people would ask: why. I always responded: work. And this was true, after my third visit to Turkey in 2007, I began to receive yearly invitations to give talks on my work. Around 2011, I was traveling frequently between the United States and Turkey. I had friends in Istanbul who offered me room to stay. Since both were professors gone most of the day, I would have the place to write. My frequent visits allowed me to finish many of the stories that formed my first two collections of stories. What I discovered was that living in Istanbul allowed me something that I did not have in other places: the freedom to live within my head. I could not speak the language, but I knew just enough to be able to get around. I suffered from the lack of clarity that I had while traveling in either Spanish or English-speaking countries. Turkey became my fortress of solitude, my refuge in the Middle World. I could write, literally, from the margins. To create from the margins, the limits, the borders, or the Middle World is to be situated in a point where sharp lines are softened, contours lose focus, and we are faced with multiple possibilities for proceeding.

After an hour of lying on the hotel bed, I decided to go out for a walk into the neighborhood. I wandered, slightly dazed, along the streets of Sultanahmet until I ended up on the docks at Eminönü. Gazing across the Golden Horn, I saw the bridge that crossed the Bosphorus strait, connecting the European and Asian sides of the city, and was reminded of the conclusion of the story, “Bajo el puente,” (“Under the Bridge”) by the Mexican writer, Rosario Sanmiguel. In it, a poor, young, woman from Juárez, Mexico, is floating in an inner tube in the middle of the Río Grande, the river that divides Texas from the northern Mexican states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. Her boyfriend, Martín, a coyote who ferries migrants across the river, had just been shot by a border patrol agent that he used to work with, leaving her alone in the inner tube in the middle of the river. As she floats under the August sun, she thinks about her life in Juárez and about the day her father left her family to cross the river and find work in el Norte. Drifting in the space between nations, her memories connect disparate places and times. At once weighted down by the specters of her past, she is also, somehow, free in that in-between moment.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being Fronterizo

⁵ Pico Iyer writes, “I often think that I have traveled into a deeply foreign country under jet lag, somewhere more mysterious in its way than India or Morocco It’s not quite a dream state, but it’s certainly not wakefulness, and though it seems as if we’re visiting another continent, there are no maps or guidebooks to this other world.” (158-59).

Over the past couple of years, I have reflected in talks and readings on this notion of an unbearable lightness of being fronterizo. At first, this reminds us of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where he writes:

The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. (3)

Looked at it this way, life as a struggle between lightness versus weight—weight being that baggage that burdens us, weight being history, and lightness implying freedom from the specters of the past—the unbearable lightness of being fronterizo seems dangerous: How can one feel light when they are caught in a border? How can one move beyond burden? And also, is it wise to remove oneself from history? Especially in this day when our own history is at stake?

Rather, what I am leaning towards with this phrase is that being in a borderland offers a sense of lightness, a freedom from one or another side. Also, this is something that Chicano and Chicana cultural production has been alluding to since the Chicano Movement of the 1960s.⁶ In 1974, Juan Bruce-Novoa argued that Chicano identity could be located in the “space (not the hyphen) between the two, the ‘intercultural nothingness’ of that space” (98). This nothingness is not meant as a lack, but rather as a space of potential: a space that can continually expand and where a pluricultural, intercultural, identity could develop. Around the same time, the poet Ricardo Sánchez advocated for a Chicanismo that is always in a process of becoming. He identified this process as *entelequia*. The term refers to a space of actualized potential, and for critic Miguel López, “entelequia functions as a metaphor for the development of *chicanismo* as a historical process of *liberación*, and as an expression of the human condition that encompasses both tragic joy and suffering” (9). *Liberación*, liberation, is an operative term in Sánchez's poetics, and as he writes in *Hechizospells*:

Liberation begins in the mind/soul and is legitimized by meaningful and direct action. It is nurtured by the love and appreciation we have for ourselves and others. It is the wellspring from which comes purpose in life. There ultimately exist two choices: liberation or enslavement. (28)

The path for Chicano liberation moves then through *entelequia*, which Francisco Lomelí rightfully aligns with Gloria Anzaldúa's conception of intersectional *mestizaje*. He notes that *entelequia* “appears as unbridled freedom of mixing linguistic codes or eclecticism in the purest

⁶ And certainly before. The focus of my work starts with the rise of the Chicano student movement of the mid-1960s—corresponding with the arrival of my parents to the United States—but I am certain that scholars working in the periods before the 1960's through the Recovery Project—the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Project out of the University of Houston—will have noticed strands of this notion in borderlands communities after 1848.

sense. It represents what is commonly termed *mestizaje* today” (x). For Sánchez, the space of *entelequia* embodies an intersectional positioning, between nations, languages, and histories.

In his poem, “Pienso y canto: 1970 Chicanismo” included in *Hechizospells*, Sánchez writes:

y realizo
 i realize
 lo extranjero que he sido
 the stranger that i've been
 aquí en mi propia casa
 here in mine own house...

but no more	pero ya no
shall i wander in darkness,	vagaré en tinieblas,
i've finally arrived	al fin he llegado

i am mesoamerica
 soy mesoamérica
 merged with spanish providence,
 mesclado con la providencia hispana,
 that new man called mestizo
 hombre nuevo llamado mestizo. (9-23)

Out of this merging, the Chicano is formed as a *mestizo*, a hybrid mixture of national, ethnic, and cultural identities. The way that the poet glides between languages is instrumental here: in the shift between English and Spanish, the poem moves through *entelequia* to show how mestizo potential is actualized in language.

This mixed, intersectional formation, an identity that fuses the diversity of ethnicities and nationalities that make up the Chicano, is also alluded to by Gloria Anzaldúa in her poem, “To live in the Borderlands means you.” The poem begins:

To live in the borderlands means you
 are neither hispana negra india Española
 ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata half-breed
 caught in the crossfire between camps
 while carrying all five races on your back
 not knowing which side to turn to, run from (1-5)

And then concludes,

To survive the Borderlands

you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads. (40-42)

Though she speaks directly to the Chicanas, one of the specters that haunts both her work as well as that of Sánchez is the question of belonging. To what nation does one belong when they are tugged at by various histories? For Anzaldúa, the answer lies in being a crossroads, for Sánchez, it lies in the *entelequía*, that in-between moment in which potential is actualized.

In both examples, what is being called for is the recognition of a type of lightness, a freedom from control by one side. But it is a lightness bound in the knowledge of history, and the specters of the past. The gesture of recognition of the past and the resulting engagement with it is key—to be free of its burden, but also recognize it as a necessary component of your own intersectionality. The unbearable lightness of being fronterizo is the freedom of being a crossroads, as Anzaldúa points out. And it is unbearable because burden, the specters of migration and history, will always tug at you. Nations fear those who refuse to choose, those who choose to cross borders without fear, those who choose to construct their identity in the in-between, in the Middle World.

Border writers often find themselves on the fault line between countries, cultures, and languages. Standing on this seam between two national cultures, these writers threaten power structures since they undermine the cultural hegemony of a country through their marginalized status. For border writers another problem arises: how can they construct an identity in which different cultures tug at them? One way is to remain in the border and construct a dual identity without falling into the problematics of either nationalism or assimilation. The border writer must learn to look both forwards and backwards at the same time, to be, in Rubén Martínez' words, "North and South in the North and in the South" (5).

This in-between, liminal space opened up by the Middle World is threatening to national imaginaries. For as people who inhabit border regions and map out a place for themselves in one national space, they are at the same time influenced by another, undermining the homogeneous identity that nations imagine for themselves. Border artists, who choose to remain in the Middle World, undermine one national identity through influences from another, and in the process, they infiltrate, undermine, and subvert hegemonic power structures through a diversity of migratory—hybrid—aesthetics.

I Speak Spanglish porque así me nació la conciencia

A story. A Chicano from California. Assistant professor at a Midwestern university who teaches courses in Latina/o literatures and cultures in a Spanish department. His courses are often over-enrolled, but that he is neither here nor there. Everything seems fine until one summer day he receives a letter from the administration. Among the things mentioned, he is called out for teaching his courses in English (when the majority of the material is in English) and Spanglish. At first, he is outraged at the implication of the teaching in English until he realizes that the issue is not there. This is a straw man argument, with him being the straw man—after all, he has noted

how his colleagues occasionally drop into English to check students' comprehension—rather, the argument is against the use of Spanglish in a Spanish department. This is yet another example of a dissing of Spanglish como una forma de broken Spanish. And there is also a subtle jab at the issue of authenticity: one cannot speak Spanglish and consider themselves an authentic Spanish speaker. My initial reaction upon receiving the letter was to respond a la Gómez-Peña: “Pardon mi Spanglish, mister. Llegué tarde to this state and I haven't been domesticated yet.”

As a term, Spanglish is fairly controversial. Linguists often prefer to use a term like “code-switching.” In this way, a whole host of different types of switches can be identified: calques, loan words, etc. I would argue, however, that Spanglish is not simply code-switching. Rather than switching, Spanglish is more properly meshing. For Sánchez, one of the paths for Chicano liberation was through language, in particular, the fusion of Spanish and English. As he proclaims, “To understand our literature is to realize that it is created out of linguistic fusion, not from a demarcated/fragmentary chaos, but out of synthesis” (x). This synthesis is not bilingual nor bicultural. Rather, it is intercultural, interlingual. As Bruce-Novoa explains, “Bilingualism implies moving from one language code to another; ‘interlingualism’ implies the constant tension of the two at once” (226). This interlingual space that is opened up is inscribed literally in the Middle World between the languages. In his poem, “Notes on Other Chicano and Chicana Inventions,” Juan Felipe Herrera writes:

Phrases like

I said, you better wash those trastes o te torzo el hosiko boy.

Phrases like

You better not hang around with that bola de marijuanos o arranco that branch off el arbol y te curo las centaderas.

Phrases like

Keep on painting your carota de chankla like that & you're gonna get granotes the size of a calabaza, you hear, esquinkla? (65-82)

In this moving between English and Spanish, Herrera highlights an important feature of Chicano language, its fusion. To quote Sánchez again, “Because language is alive and fluid, people change it, just as it too changes peoples' attitudes; Chicanos have taken two tired languages and given them a new spark of life by fusing them” (xii). Language here is used to express the hybridity of the Middle World, and, at the same time that it reflects a culture, a history, and linguistic differences, it also produces them. Spanish and English are deterritorialized, dissolved and reformed into a new language, Spanglish, to reflect the intercultural experience of a community who lives between borders. The type of reader that is implied in this poem is interlingual. This is a voice present in the Spanglish of *Dear Rafe*, by Rolando Hinojosa, and *Canícula* by Norma E. Cantú, flawless and even. In the performances and writing of Guillermo

Gómez-Peña. In the Spanglish of resistance in Gloria Anzaldúa and Ricardo Sánchez.⁷ In my own descarga here in this section of this essay.

We can read how Spanglish, a language dear to my heart, arrives to its extreme possibilities in las *Killer Crónicas* of Susana Chávez-Silverman, where she demonstrates how in the Middle World language can be expressed de múltiples maneras, in multiple registers. As she declares in her titular crónica:

“Saquen ustedes. Killer, por favor” dije, sin inmutarme, a mis estudiantes. Ellos tampoco se inmutaron not even a hair, acostumbrados a que yo invente palabras, cree interlingual giros neológicos y faux traducciones sin pestañear. And they obeyed. They took out obediently *El matadero* de Esteban Echeverría, reconociendo estar en un curso survey de literatura hispanoamericana, primer semestre, college norteamericano that shall remain nameless, pero sabiendo también, que a pesar de la canonicidad de dicha obra, they weren’t in Kansas anymore, and maybe not even in Argentina either, sino somewhere in between, liminal, interstitial. (143)

The type of code meshing that Chávez-Silverman revels in is that of the mobile, the transnational, the cosmopolitan. Her type of Spanglish is connected/enmeshed in a globalized, interconnected hemisphere, and also reflects an affinity for the Middle World. As Debra Castillo astutely notes of bilingual writers, “the punctuation of one language by another serves as a political and poetic device,” and that to translate Spanglish into either Spanish or English would be “to distort them into meaninglessness, to subject them to a kind of linguistic assimilation and erasure” (12). Translation here would be an act of violence to the doubled language necessary for the particular migratory aesthetic of writers like Sánchez, Anzaldúa, Chávez-Silverman, and Gómez-Peña. As Anzaldúa writes, “wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (76).

The use of Spanglish, or code-meshing, can also be viewed as a tool for undermining narratives of control, in this case, narratives that would attempt to marginalize one language over another. This meshing of language expresses a fragmented, quotidian reality, and, at the same time that it reflects a culture, a history, and differences, it also produces them. As a migratory aesthetic that is also an act of identity, Spanglish places focus on the fluidity of the borders between languages. Spanglish is a fluid construction and those of us who speak with forked tongues are not tongue tied: we leap from one language to another sin darnos cuenta. And we do it without asking for permiso. Undocumented and undomesticated. Not stumblingly tongue tied, but rather tongue twisted, tongue adapted, tongue meshed.

Re/Pensar the Border

⁷ In the introduction to *Hechizospells*, Sánchez writes: “To understand our literature is to realize that it is created out of linguistic fusion, not from a demarcated/fragmentary chaos, but out of synthesis. It is not bilingual nor bicultural, just as I am *not* Mexican-American nor American-of-Spanish-Surname (A.S.S.) nor whatever other categorical empirical the social-science-schizo-makers would make me and others of my raza out to be” (x).

What do we think of when we think of a border? In limit; in point of contact; in beginning; in end; in wall; en canvas; en división; en bridge; in volleyball net; in desert; en herida abierta, as stipulated by Anzaldúa; in danger; in river; in an open/closed window; in a puerta negra; in past, present, and future at the same time; in a long, interminable line; in a door that is a wall until it is opened.

Above all, a border is a thing that needs to be crossed.

Ahora, one could ask, but why? Why is it necessary to cross a border? My answer is simple: because parece que we live in a world where we cannot conceive of a connection between people without including a wall, a marker of separation. And we must resist this. To accept a wall, a separation, we close off potential lines of dialogue and communication: we as Other, and in this Othering, we cut off stories. And, if anything in these times, when we dehumanize others in a thrall to a capitalist machine, an overwhelming neoliberal onslaught, we need to stop, we need to listen, we need dialogue and empathy. Because to fail to listen is to invite conflict, and conflict can lead to marginalization, disenfranchisement, and cultural Othering.

As communities of color in the United States, we are often judged by negative narrations, we are considered criminals, rapists, we are told that we do not belong, that we do not have a history, that we are unwelcome. Slavoj Žižek has a quote that I often use, “an enemy is someone whose story you have not heard” (46). When we allow a story to be placed upon us, when we are *Othered* by a system of power, we can then be viewed as an enemy, as unwanted, as a force that must be eliminated. What I try to do, in telling stories, in teaching the works that I do, in giving talks and readings, is to counter those stories said about our community. And I try to counter with our own stories, because this is what we should all be doing, we should all be resisting a power that would try to make us unwelcome. We are here, and we belong. And in these times, when our communities are being told that we are not a part of the United States, it is urgent to speak up.

The need to create connections to another is necessary to interrupt a hegemonic discourse that attempts to impose order from above, ossify a border imaginary with an intention to explain the region in negative terms—the border as danger, the border as violent, etc. Border citizens need to find ways to move beyond these structures imposed by power. Art and literature, in its capacity for imagining a different world, can function as a way to conceive a world beyond conflict, beyond borders. Border artists, in their imagining of different ways of being, often recur to a meshed language to give weight to their interlingual, intercultural experiences. As a migratory aesthetic, the unbearable lightness of being fronterizo is one strategy for negotiating the Middle World juncture that is the Mexico/U.S. borderlands.

A Xicano Walks Home Alone after Midnight

A few hours after turning 50, I left the apartment where some friends of mine lived and started walking back to mine. I had been living in Ankara, Turkey, for one month. I was there on a Fulbright to teach courses on Chicana/o popular culture as well as on the Borderlands. As I strolled back to my place with my headphones on, I pressed Play, to hear what song would begin

the soundtrack for the next year of my life. It was “Latinoamérica” by Calle 13. With the song playing in my head, I walked beneath the trees that line my street and just before turning into my apartment block, I stopped beneath a street lamp and looked out around, at the sleeping buildings, the closed shops, the occasional passing cars and the towers of the city in the distance.

I thought about the routes that had led me there to Turkey. I thought about the soft-focus gaze that Carlos Yushimito felt as an immigrant. The loss of clarity in living in a foreign tongue. Recently, I learned a new word in Turkey, *göçebe*, which means “nomad.” In some ways, my travels across the Americas and Europe made me identify with the word. But there was another word that I was frequently called in Turkey, *yabancı*, which means “foreigner.” A few days earlier, a man on the metro had called me that, and I had responded, “*Evet, ben yabancı*” “Yes, I am a foreigner.” But while it was true that I was a foreigner in Turkey, I realized that my whole life I had been made to feel like a foreigner in Mexico and in the United States. I was a *yabancı* in every country that I passed through. I was a product of migration, and my journey through the Middle World was continuing. Rather than make me despair, I took comfort in the thought. It gave me a sense of lightness, an almost unbearable lightness. I then thought of my connections to home and to my family and my friends, spread out over multiple continents, countries, and time zones. I thought about the stories that bring us together, that connect us, that bind us as a community.

Standing beneath that streetlamp at 1:30 in the morning, on my quiet street on the edge of Ankara, I thought about routes and roots; about the personal soundtracks we make in our steps; in the process of migration that would take one to leave a country, a language, and a sense of clarity; and in the secret pathways of our hearts and the necessity for both communion and community.

Almost three years later, and after a particularly brutal year of violence against migrants—children in cages, families being separated, mass shootings targeting my Latinx community—I still recall that night when I was so far from America, both North and South, listening to Residente rap about the diversity, the history, and the strength of Latin America. Before that night, I never really thought much about the song, about its political strength. But it struck me, especially a few months later, after the U.S. presidential elections and the inauguration two months later. Noticing how the election emboldened White Supremacist and racist attacks against People of Color and the LGBTQ community, I began to introduce myself at readings in this way:

For most of my life as a writer and academic, I’ve played with different identities that I trot out every so often at conferences and talks. All have been reflections of my own fractured identity as a Mexican in the United States, a Mexican American, a Chicano. Some are The Unrepentant Border Crosser, the Peripatetic Pocho, the Transterritorialized Travieso, The Bordered Bato, Doktor Spanglish (AKA Mr. Lost in Lengua), The meXicano. However, since the election, with the rise of Trumpism and the growing hate crimes across the country, I’ve come to realize that a new term has been added to me,

Unwelcomed. I may be able to return to my country, but it will no longer be mine, it will be one where misogyny, racism, hate, and fear has been normalized. So I come to you today as a Deterritorialized Xicano. An exile. Here I stand, a Mexile.

Upon my return, the song “Latinoamérica” continued to resonate. On its surface, it is simply a slow reggaetón song, built on a simple, almost bachata beat, but over the course of its five-minute length, it builds up as the verses hit harder and harder about the history, society, and political conditions of Latin America. Residente, the lead rapper of Calle 13—the other member is the beat producer, Visitante—is aided by a chorus made up of the Peruvian Susana Baca, Colombian Totó la Momposina, and Brazilian María Rita. These three singers, along with the Puerto Rican band, Calle 13, make up a formidable Latin American musical collective in a song about connections across the Global South.⁸ Above all, the song is one about communities that in the face of adversity continue to endure, to resist being silenced, forgotten, or forced into the shadows.

We resist, we persist, we continue. We have to continue. To remind those that would deny us our presence, to repeat to them that we are as much a part of this country as is salsa—both the tasty side dish that outsells catsup and the music—and that some of us did not cross the border, the border crossed us. We have to continue to also remind those (English and Spanish speakers) that our language is legitimate. As Anzaldúa declares:

Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without always having to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (81)

To stop fighting for our stories would be to allow ourselves to accept marginalization, our “excuse me” tongues, and the feeling that we are not good enough. That our Spanish is not authentic. That we just do not belong.

And yet we do. We have seen the ugly side of anti-immigrant sentiment in US culture, from the signs that used to dot the Southwestern United States stating things like “No Mexicans or Dogs Allowed” to racist portrayals of Mexicans in the media. From the sight of current president Donald Trump and his daily attacks on people of color to the sight of children in cages and families being separated at the border in the name of zero tolerance. And to respond to this onslaught, we need to counter with our own voices, our own stories. We need to demonstrate to

⁸ Another example is the fantastic song “Somos Sur” by Chilean rapper Ana Tijoux, accompanied by Palestinian rapper Shadia Mansour. In the song, and accompanying video, both rappers offer a shout out to the Global South, displaying and praising the transnational connections between the communities. I offer a longer reading of this, as well as Chicano/Borderlands music in my recent essay, “Imagining Something Better: *Rolas* from My Border Hi-Fi.”

those on the other side that not only are we a part of these United States, we are also part of Latin America. American, América. Americano. Latino American, living in Nuestra América with all its diversity of language and expression. It is necessary, it is urgent.

Mine is a community bound by story and travel, threaded across distance, held together by history, and bound in a book that travels with me. Though I choose to live in the Middle World, I do not allow it to cut off my connections. Part of my job—probably the smallest part—is to tell a story, the other half is to listen to others tell me theirs. In this way, hopefully, we can bridge those things that would attempt to separate us.

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