

Crossing Borderlands: The Face of Chicana Border Literature

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Abstract

Chicana literature details the trials and tribulations of Chicana life at the borderlands of the United States and Mexico. In particular it focuses on different challenges Chicana women face at the borderlands they must cross. While borderlands are usually represented as physical, many are not. Using Sandra Cisneros' Women Hollering Creek, Denise Chavez's Loving Pedro Infante, Maria Amparo Escandon's Esperanza's Box of Saints, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's, The Mystery of Survival, I will explore several common themes that relate to Chicana identity and the struggles that they must go through to overcome these barriers. I will examine the Chicana experience with racism, generational gaps, religions and culture.

Introduction

Chicana Border literature details the trials and tribulations of Chicana life at the borderlands of the United States and Mexico. In particular it focuses on different challenges Chicana women face at the borderlands they must cross. While borderlands are usually represented as physical, many are not. These non-physical borderlands are issues that many Chicana women must face. Using Sandra Cisneros' Women Hollering Creek, Denise Chavez's Loving Pedro Infante, Maria Amparo Escandon's Esperanza's Box of Saints, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's, The Mystery of Survival. I will examine the Chicana experience with racism, generational gaps, language religious and cultural values in these borderlands.

What are borderlands? Many see borderlands as a physical space like that of the border of the United States and Mexico, but many are not physical there are those that transcend borders and one that creates the identity of many Chicano/as. These borderlands are not found or are overcome by crossing the Rio Grande, but by coming to terms [by those that make a person who they are with one's own identity. As Anzaldúa states in her book Borderlands/La Frontera:

“The U.S. border es *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. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los *atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over and pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal” (Anzaldúa, 25).

Anzaldúa states that the borderlands are a mixture of two cultures that form into one. Whether you come from Mexico or live in the United States, it is a culture that takes the best and worst from both worlds. It is a constant struggle with the old and the new. Many feel that they are *no de aquí* or *de allá*.

Many Chicanas are confronting issues in these borderlands that keep them from being successful and which result in the loss of identity.

A part of crossing an issue of a borderland is racism. Racism is one issue faced by Chicanas crossing the non-physical borderland. At some point in their life, most Chicanas face racism. This experience forces many to question their identity; it makes them feel inferior and makes them lower their own ambitions. School settings usually exhibit some form of institutionalized racism. It is difficult to cross this borderland because of the fact that it makes a person feel inferior, especially a child who does not possess the knowledge to overcome such an issue that can make or break the adult they are to become.

A form of this type of racism is seen in "Eleven," a narrative from Cisneros's: Women Hollering Creek, introduces readers to eleven-year-old Rachel who encounters institutionalized racism at school. No one in Rachel's class wants to claim ownership of an ugly red sweater. To Rachel it is quite possibly the worst piece of clothing she has ever laid her eyes on! It represents more than just bad fashion sense. The ugly red sweater symbolizes the poverty and embarrassment so often associated with Chicanas. Rachel describes her negative feelings about this sweater: "It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it as a jump rope" (7). This description that Rachel uses to describe the sweater gives the readers and idea why she, like her classmates want to claim this sweater. Who at the age of eleven wants to be labeled as the poor, dirty classmate who cannot afford a new sweater certainly not Rachel.

Rachel knows she has not worn that sweater. To the utter horror and despair of Rachel, Mrs. Price insists that the sweater must belong to her, "of course it's yours, I remember you wearing it once" (7). Mrs. Price and the other students simply assume that because of the decrepit condition of the sweater, it must belong to the Mexican girl. Mrs. Price being the authority figure feels that she is able to place the blame on Rachel, especially because she is Mexican and most are stereotyped as poor and dirty.

It is also easy for Mrs. Price to associate the sweater with Rachel because Rachel would likely not defend herself. The traditional Chicano cultural value of respect for elders prevents Rachel from putting up a defense as she says that Mrs. Price, "because she is older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not" (7). Rachel being a child, she feels that she is young and must not question an adult because they are wise.

Rachel feels humiliated and embarrassed, "Only today I wish I didn't have to be eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin box" (7). Rachel wants to be younger so she would not have to face racism. Rachel does not want to worry about feeling like the dirty, smelly, little Chicana she is being made out to be. Her identity is not her own to decide, she has no such luxury. Instead, Rachel's supposedly well-educated teacher has predetermined an identity for her. Cisneros quite ably draws sympathy for the anguish and heartache Rachel went through.

Mrs. Price's mindset accurately reflects the lowered expectations and negative connotations. Her mindset is a sort of institutionalized racism. Cisneros likely intends for readers to understand what so many Chicanas go through in their lives. Being so young, Rachel was not able to comprehend why she was treated that way. How is a child supposed to comprehend that what is being done to them is wrong? A child would likely think that it is their fault that the teacher is cruel to them. They cannot imagine the teacher being wrong, they do not understand how a teacher could not be fair and responsible. This is part of a borderland that must be overcome by being able to stand up and defend oneself and by not letting this tear a person apart to succeed and show people that are not who they think they are.

Generational gaps mark another border-crossing for Chicanas. Both the young and old experience mutual conflict because of such gaps. The fact that United States and Mexico are so close it is easier to be able to connect with the mother culture. Also, because many Chicanas are taking different customs from both worlds this creates a conflict with those that want to maintain their mother culture intact. The older generations try to maintain traditional Mexican culture and values, which they also try to pass on to the youth. This is easier said than done however. When a family moves from their own culture and homeland to one where there is a new dominant culture, the traditional cultural values become hard to maintain. This is when conflicts arise. Many Chicanos, like other immigrant communities, struggle to find an identity between the two cultures that dominate their lives: Mexican and American.

One reason why Chicanas find it so hard to find their own identity is that they are attacked from all sides. The dominant Anglo-culture negatively stereotypes them. In response, many mistake home as a safe-haven, instead they find similar negative attitudes reflected there. This is one reason why it is so hard to find an identity; they are made to feel like they are either too "brown" (Mexican) or too "white" (American).

An example of such gap is found in the short story “Mericans” from Women Hollering Creek illustrates this generational gap well. In “Mericans,” Micaela’s Awful Grandmother goes to church to pray for her loved ones while the grandchildren stay outside and play. Awful Grandmother prays because she thinks that “el otro lado” has corrupted her family. She hopes that the Virgin de Guadalupe will help undo the damage that the United States had inflicted on her family. The Awful Grandmother calls the United States “that barbaric country with its barbaric ways” (19). This phrase effectively represents the way that older generations of Mexicans think that American culture destroys family and cultural values; this is why so many think of American culture as barbaric, because it barbarically destroys their centuries-old traditional culture. Frequently skipping church is one such “destruction.” It is a common intergenerational difference.

The Awful Grandmother feels that she is losing her children and grandchildren; she is upset at the fact that her family is losing their traditions and values. She is also upset that they are not as involved with the church; she would like them to be devout like her. For Micaela and her brothers it is fun and games while they wait for grandmother outside the Basilica, the holy site of the Virgin de Guadalupe.

The Basilica is a way that Mary Pat Brady expands on the different mindset of the children and herself and how each view the building. The beautiful Basilica fails to effect the newer generation, she explains:

Hence, the basilica is simultaneously represented as a religious shrine and tourist site, an object of veneration and of curiosity, although for the children it appears to be neither. Or rather, it is alternately theater and playground, as well as a tourist sight or shrine. The juxtaposition of the presumptuous tourists and the and the disapproving grandmother characterizes the crossing of identities forced on the children and suggests the kind of shuttle diplomacy in which the collection itself engages” (121).

It is all fun and games for the children. They seem not to understand the value or historical context of this Basilica. The children do not identify with their grandmother and do not know why she wanted them to care about the building. While the Awful Grandmother is inside the church praying, her children do not seem to see, or even care, how significant religion is. Her grandchildren are apathetic even when they are by the domains of a holy church. It bothers the Awful Grandmother, because she knows that her grandchildren have no sense of how important this site is. The differing degrees of importance of religion represent a borderland struggle.

Language is another borderland struggle; it is a way identity is questioned. Language is an essential part of the Chicana culture, whether they speak English, Spanish or both. Chicana writers use both languages in their literature. Anzaldúa also discusses the value of language in the Chicana way of life and culture, “A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither español ni ingles or both” (77). Chicano/as need to find an identity and by speaking Chicano Spanish, which most know by Spanglish, they are able to connect with both cultures by using both languages in the same sentences. This give Chicano/as their own culture and able to communicate among each other.

Spanglish is seen in Gaspar de Alba’s novel and also explores some of the nuances surrounding language; one of her stories is written entirely in Spanish. She does this because it allows her to capture the culture and values traditionally associated with Spanish. “No me voy a disculpar. Después de tantos años, hasta nuestras lenguas han cambiado”(47). Using Spanish, Alba shows the bilingual facet of her Chicana identity. As Mary Pat Brady points out:

“the weighted choice of Spanish or English or Spanglish in these stories evokes the tensions of living in two languages and two cultures, languages that conflict not only with each other but also with the presumed cultural underpinnings that, in the border zone, are frequently highly charged.”(41).

Brady alludes to the importance of using both English and Spanish in Gaspar de Alba’s stories. The reason is because there are two languages and two cultures, but that they are connected to each other and also conflict with each other it is a border culture. It is a way that Chicanas can maintain themselves in between borderlands while still able to find their identity.

Many Chicanas do grow up and decide to speak English. Some do not even learn Spanish, making it harder for the younger generation to understand the older generation. Some decide to mix both languages, which Anzaldúa refers to as Chicano Spanish, “Pocho, cultural traitor, you’re speaking the oppressor’s language by speaking English, you’re ruining the Spanish language” (77). Many Chicanas are view as traitors because they have decided to mix both English and Spanish, which most feel mutilates

Spanish. The mixture of both languages by Chicanos and Chicanas is usually viewed as nothing short of betrayal by those whose primary language remains Spanish. These alleged linguistic traitors are called Pochos, just for trying to find their own identity in an uncertain world.

Language is a borderland that also intersects with intergenerational differences. The older generation often feels that the United States corrupts the younger generation. “El Pavo” from Gaspar de Alba’s The Mystery of Survival and Other Stories explores the relationship and generational gaps between Gabriela, her grandpa and dad.

Representing the older generation, Gaby’s grandpa speaks Spanish. Her father is a college-educated man who knows both languages, while Gaby who understands Spanish speaks only English. Gaby’s grandfather resents her lack of Spanish proficiency. Many elders, like Gaby’s grandfather feel that English is not the correct language.

Gaby’s grandfather’s attitude of superiority is reflected in Gaby. Her grandfather attacks her for not speaking Spanish. Her father agrees as he tells her, “Habla Español, hija, tu abuelo te va a pegar” (20). Gaby’s grandfather attacks her identity by making her feel that speaking in English makes her an inferior person. It is not unusual for those raised in the United States to speak to their elders in English; it is a part of who they are. Many first and second-generation Mexican-Americans adapt to the new culture by learning English. Overtime, either by choice or by the fact that they are surrounded by English, Spanish becomes mixed or lost. Choosing one over the other does not make them lesser people.

Choosing one over the other is another issue that comes into play is how Gaby’s grandfather views education. He does not understand why his son pursues a college degree. This is an intergenerational point of conflict between Gaby’s grandfather and her dad. It does not make sense to Gaby’s grandfather that his son went to college to become a gringo. He says, “Y tu te crees muy gringo, ¿Verdad? Desde que te metistes al colegio ese, ya no respetas, ya no te importan las costumbres y ni tu madre te importa” (21). Gaby’s grandfather feels that his son has lost his customs and respect and he thinks that it reflects on Gaby. In his eyes, his son is trying to act like something he is not, and should not be: Anglo.

One more reason for Gaby’s grandfather’s dismissal of his son’s college might be economic in nature. Many families need their children to work instead of furthering their education. A lot of Chicano families live in the present and usually do not think of the future because many are poor and everyone has to help each other out in order to survive. So many children end up quitting school and end up in the same position as their parents because they chose to help out their families instead of receiving a better education. As Chicanos and Chicanas one must cross this borderland if not it is an issue of whether the person will succeed and or stay behind. It must be something that Chicanas must stand up to. Culture and religious practices go hand in hand. They are a borderland that many Chicana women must cross to find their identity. It is a way for machismo and the mal treatment of women to occur and be accepted by some people. Women have specific roles that the culture and church dictate. If they do not follow these roles, some face consequences for going beyond the norms.

The norms are the roles of women designated within the Mexican culture and Catholicism, they are well-defined as Anzaldúa states, “The Culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn’t renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a virgin until she marries, she is a good woman.”(Anzaldúa, 39). A good woman is like Anzaldúa said a woman who must be a good wife, mother and must give herself to a man. If she is not then she has failed her role as the woman her husband and family expect her to be. A woman has three paths in her role, being a mother, nun or a prostitute as Anzaldúa writes in her book. Of course the first two are acceptable and the latter a woman is known as a mala mujer. There is a fourth role, that is of being educated or having a career, this is a path that many Chicanas are taking. But many are still obligated to be a wife and mother as Anzaldúa says. It is also seen that many Chicana women are breaking from their confined roles as a wife and mother and crossing a borderland of being self-sufficient and not depending on men and creating another identity, that being an independent woman.

Being an independent woman means that there are repercussions to women who cross this border. Many who decide to take on the fourth step and waiting longer to get married and have children. As Anzaldúa states “Women are made to be total failures if they don’t marry or have children” (39). These women are not following the path that their parent’s culture and religious values have dictated and those around her including family members question her identity as a woman for choosing a different path.

Many Chicana women must face the guilt they feel for choosing this path. In Loving Pedro Infante by Denise Chavez, we see how the character, Tere Avila is affected by this saint/ sinner dichotomy.

Tere is a single, career oriented women in her thirties who is having an affair with a married man. It is already seen that by being single, in her thirties and working she is already going against her culture and religious values. Not only this, Tere is having an affair which makes her a sinner who is criticized and ostracized for this affair by those around her. She is made to feel guilty even through she feels she is not, "on top of that, I love my guilt. On the Guilt-o-Meter, I guess that I'd have to say that I'm a pretty good Catholic."(114). Tere feels that she is not as guilty as people seem she is, even though those around her think she should feel shame and guilt for having an affair. In a way Tere overcomes her borderland by not letting other people tell her that her guilt is bad or wrong. She feels comfortable with herself and that is her identity.

Religion is also criticized not only for the way women should act, but also by how those who have power in the church act. Maria Amparo Escandon does this her novel Santitos by projecting Padre Salvador as a sexually-driven man who had his first sexual experience when he was just a child. He develops feelings for Esperanza after hearing her confessions. Priests are supposed to serve God, but Padre Salvador seems to be far from committed to his vows. He watches telenovelas and revels in the gossip the small Mexican town offers. For example, Padre Salvador is praying to God and says, "and now, I have to go. It's almost eight o'clock and I don't want to miss my soap opera" (23). It seems that Padre Salvador is more fascinated in the gossip and things that do not have anything to do with Catholicism. This also suggests his desire to be a part of the carnal world. Chávez criticizes the Catholic tradition of abstinence for priests. Many do not live up to this ideal and entertain thoughts of carnal pleasures.

Conclusion

Crossing borderlands allows Chicanas to maintain their sense of identity. Identity is a central component of Chicana life and crossing those borderlands allows them to be what they want to be in life. Chicana writers like those I have discussed are changing the traditional outlook of literature by writing about these issues through women's perspectives. This new generation of writers is trying to break out into a genre that has traditionally been dominated by men. Readers are able to see the points of views of Chicanas and how they perceive different borderlands, such as racism, generational gaps, language, religious and cultural values.

Chicanas have to cross many non-physical borderlands. Chicana authors often write about racism, generational gaps, language, religious and cultural values. Anzaldúa, Castillo and Brady explore these themes by applying theories. Cisneros, Gaspar de Alba, Escandon and Chavez introduce readers to different ways in which Chicanas have confronted or experienced such non-physical borderlands. The protagonists of this Chicana Border literature serve as positive examples of how borderlands can be crossed without the loss of identity.

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