

HOW BORDERS COME TO MATTER? THE PHYSICALITY OF THE BORDER IN GLORIA ANZALDÚA'S BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA

*Melina Pereira Savi**

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Abstract: In this piece I attempt to address the ways in which Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands: La Frontera* (2007), negotiates the idea of the border as having both discursive and material dimensions. In creating a new *mestiza* consciousness from the borderland, which is the space that is affected by the borderline, Anzaldúa develops concepts and ideas that can be linked to Donna Haraway's articulation of the cyborg and to Karen Barad's theory of an agential realist ontology in the sense that Anzaldúa engages creatively with contradicting parts of her identity in a cyborgian fashion, and sees the enactment of borders as both limiting and empowering, as having emotional and material effects. Anzaldúa then addresses these effects and demonstrates how she applies them in the fabrication of a new consciousness, the consciousness of the new *mestiza*. In this work, therefore, I explore how the border makes itself *physically* present in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and how the discursive meets matter; and I do this by finding common threads and possible connections among the works of Anzaldúa, Haraway, and Barad.

Keywords: Borderland Theory. Gloria Anzaldúa Cyborg Theory. Agential realist ontology.

"I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one."
Anzaldúa

Introduction

In the preface to the first edition of *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) describes the borderlands, saying that they 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



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* Doutoranda em Literatura e Estudos Culturais no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês da UFSC. Possui mestrado em Teoria e Crítica Literária e Cultural pela UFSC (2009), Pós-Graduação *Latu-Sensu* em Tradução e Revisão Textual em Português/Inglês pela Faculdade Barddal (2007) e graduação em Língua e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa pela UFSC (2005), com graduação sanduíche em Estudos de Cinema na New York University (2004, bolsa CAPES-FIPSE). Tem experiência acadêmica na área de Literatura, Estudos Culturais e Cinema, e experiência profissional em tradução e jornalismo para revista e internet. E-mail: melsavi@gmail.com

shrinks with intimacy” (preface to the first edition, my emphasis). The word *physically*, one could argue, can lead to a whole exploration on the materiality of the border, which insists on making itself present with the effects it produces on those who are themselves subjected to the laws of border, even though the borders Anzaldúa describes in this fragment are of three orders: geopolitical, geoeconomic, and emotional. The first border she mentions, where cultures edge each other, in her work entails the one that delineates the territories between Mexico and the United States. It is, therefore, the geopolitical border. The second and third borders, which entail both the occupation of the same territory by people of different races and classes, is both geopolitical and geoeconomic. The fourth and last border, the one between individuals, is the emotional border. These categories, however, are not clear cut: they contaminate each other, they overlap. Borders between racialized groups, as those between classes, are also emotional. Borders between individuals are also economic. The categories do not correspond neatly.

All these borders, however, be they geopolitical, economic or emotional, produce emotional *and* material effects in the sense that they limit one’s possibilities within the cultures at play. In this piece I am interested in exploring how the border makes itself *physically* present in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, how the discursive meets matter, and to do so I will resort to Karen Barad’s articulation on matter as active and to Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg to argue that Anzaldúa is herself a cyborg writer, as she devises technologies of engagement with both the Mexican and the American side of her, perhaps because she understands that there is no one pure identity after all: there is no one pure object (be it a subject, an idea, an identity, a representation, even matter) unaffected by its surroundings.

Anzaldúa talks of borders, the transit through them, as a place where one inhabits. “It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions,” she says in the preface. Books, she explains, saved her life because they opened her to other knowledge that taught her how to “survive” and “soar.” Nature, she continues, helped her, “succored” her, “allowed [her] to grow roots.” The choices of words are revealing. They entail actions, doings, but they also involve places and what is material, such as books and roots. The borderland, as the extension of the borderline which is not necessarily visible but can be felt, is the place inhabited by all of those who do not inhabit the center. Donna Haraway, in the *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), also brings forward the issue of boundaries. She invites the reader to give in to the pleasure of confusion of boundaries, as well as for the responsibility in their construction. This, of course, is an invitation and not a fact, as in the borderline that Anzaldúa

experiences in the effect of the borderland. However, Haraway's musings on the border could be helpful in that it can give Anzaldúa's text a cyborgian dimension.

Borders, Haraway puts it, are of many orders: of gender, class, race, machine vs. human, and of genesis. The cyborg, in having no genesis, that is, in not being bound up in a narrative of origin, has no commitment to a determined tradition and, in her words, "skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" (HARAWAY, 1991, p. 151). Anzaldúa behaves as a cyborg writer and articulator because she also refuses both to settle on the idea of an original unity and to find coherence in her own narrative: "*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (ANZALDÚA, 2003, p. 103). In this sense, the cyborg is not a hybrid confirming its dichotomous parts but one that challenges such hybridity, without denying its real effects. A cyborg, in other words, is one who has developed technologies of engagement and is able to connect with everything (as well as question everything) because it knows that nothing is really separated, unless it is markedly so and in an "agential cut," as Karen Barad (2003) puts it. Anzaldúa, in questioning light and dark as well as identifying with light and dark at the same time seems to argue that they are constitutive of each other, which results in an *amasamiento* that refuses to believe in the narrative of unity (that allows for the narrative of the binary.) The cyborg sees connections where Western culture suppresses them, and Anzaldúa seems to be aligned with its technology of engagement in refusing the borderline's request for her separation either with what she identifies with (Mexican) but "is not" or with what marks her as Other and to where she "belongs" (USA's side of the border.)

Cyborg Identity: the new *mestiza*

Haraway puts forward that "women of color" could be understood as having cyborg identities because they hold a "potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities and in the complex political-historical layerings of her 'biomythography,'" (1991, p. 175) and she draws from Audre Lorde, among others, to articulate this idea. Having had to overcome many more obstacles than their privileged white counterparts, women of color gained experience and resilience, so that they are prone to being cyborg writers. For Haraway, "[c]yborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (HARAWAY, 1991, p. 175). Anzaldúa does just that throughout *Bordelands*, pondering on

the function of writing as well as articulating how matter has been marked by Otherness by referring to the borderline as a “1,950 mile-long open wound” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 24) and matter’s resistance to being marked in saying that “the skin of the earth is seamless. / The sea cannot be fenced, / *el mar* does not stop at borders” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 25). But even though matter resists, the effects of the discourse of the border are real (as the border is real). Anzaldúa writes that “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (p. 25). The border marks Mexicans as Others and reminds those who are in the US side of the border of their queerness, their status as aliens, and aliens in the Star Wars teleology Haraway speaks of, that is, for those who construct Mexicans as aliens, the cyborg is not Haraway’s, it is Reaganist, invested in protecting the First World in its illusion of a national identity unity. The First World (a nomenclature that in itself produces exclusions) cyborg is the one that produces a narrative of the same sort that made Tejanos lose their lands and become foreigners overnight, that “locked [the Gringo] into the fiction of white superiority” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 29), but Anzaldúa is a cyborg writer that insists in inhabiting both narratives in resisting the First World cyborg and inventing one of her own: the *mestiza*.

Anzaldúa expands on the formation of the potent subjectivity in articulating the experience of having a homosexual perspective, saying that one has access to both worlds in being both female and male. She defies the norm by saying that:

Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 41).

And she defies the norm in writing, in using the technology of writing to mark her *rebellion* (the chapter where she writes this is called *Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan*) toward the practices that aim at defining her as one when she claims to be *at least* two in what concerns gender, which is an argument that is extended in her work to encompass her experience as Mexican, Chicana, and American. And she is not a purist, she does not embrace her Mexican heritage blindly. Anzaldúa defies the narrative of the good woman, wife and mother by claiming that rebelling against her native culture is possible by means of sexual behavior, embracing what she terms two “moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality,” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 41) and she insists on the matter’s resistance to

indoctrination by Catholicism and the straight mentality. Anzaldúa, like Haraway, sees this multiple consciousness as a “path of knowledge – one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 41), she puts it.

Quantum Theory for a Cyborg Strategy of Engagement

Haraway already brings, in 1991, an idea that Karen Barad (2003) later explores to a deeper extent, the fact that one of the breakdowns in science that allowed the former to articulate the cyborg manifesto was the blurring of the line between physical and non-physical with the development of quantum theory. The miniaturization of science (into microchips and microscopic parts, atomic noise and so on) changed our experience with objects and our perception of matter. Barad expands on the notion of quantum theory, especially based on the work done in the field by Niels Bohr, and also on Butler’s notion of performativity to articulate a theory of “agential realist ontology.” Barad starts her argument by saying that “language has been granted too much power,” (BARAD, 2003, p. 801) so that from the start she questions the importance placed on discourse and its “power” to represent and construct matter, as if matter were a passive object, “waiting” for inscription (but how can passive matter even wait?).

Barad shows the limits of social constructivism and representationalism to then conduct the reader into a more compelling system of representation, one where the “knower” is neither separated from the “object” nor is s/he able to fully represent the latter’s “reality,” only when markedly so and in what she calls a “cut,” where the “knower” agentially separates herself from the object, using what she terms “apparatuses” to describe a given phenomenon that is by no way universal, but a specific intra-action between subject and object in a determined setting and moment. The only possible separation between matter and “knower” is that of “exteriority within phenomena,” a term she uses to explain the myth of exteriority that is marked by the “agential cut.” Phenomena, Barad explains, involves positions and momentums. Positions only have meaning when there are apparatuses, when rigid, fixed apparatuses are used. A measurement (one could call it a description), then, can only be made with the knowledge that *inside* the phenomena (which is the smallest epistemological unit, instead of the observer or the observed) the observer enacts an exteriority that will allow him scientific objectivity. The exteriority, the observer knows, is always already within phenomena. Anzaldúa makes a direct critique to the pretense of exteriority that results in the binary in Western tradition when she says that “[i]n trying to become ‘objective,’ Western

culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them,” and adds an important remark that shows the degree of the hegemonic effectiveness in saying that the dichotomy that is created in doing so is “at the root of all violence” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 58).

When Western tradition, in believing in objectivity, divides the world in knowing subjects and constructed objects (matter, to use Barad’s terms) – and Anzaldúa’s share lies in the “object” part of the binary – it “cheat[s] matter out of the fullness of its capacity” (BARAD, 2003, p. 810). Anzaldúa resists that description, but identifies the powerful mechanism Western tradition has working for itself. The Western reasoning in which Protestant and Catholic religions thrive, Anzaldúa argues, leads us to believe that the body is separated from the spirit and that the soul is an object of fiction, so it rips the right of the cosmology of her culture[s] to deal with these elements in a way that feels legitimate, so she argues that Western culture “encourage[s] [her] to kill parts of [herself]” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 59).

Barad, instead of working with representation and social constructivism, two articulations that work with the idea of “reflection,” as in what is taken to be a reflection in a mirror is the truth, works instead with the notion of “diffraction” where many representations (always partial, always a *cut*) are possible at once, depending on the phenomena and the apparatuses that are made available both for matter and “knower.” In relation to reflection, which is connected to the argument above regarding objectivity and truth, Anzaldúa, in discussing the process of making mirrors in ancient Mexican Indians’ culture, presents a view that differs from the Western common-sense notion of mirrors as offering reflections of truth. Her words resonate Barad’s argument of the agential realist ontology in that she does not really separate seer and seen. She freezes a moment in the process of seeing in a way that is much similar to Barad’s articulation of the “cut,” of the agential cut that enacts a border between subject and matter:

There is another quality to the mirror and that is the act of seeing. Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she. The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it. A glance can freeze us in place, it can ‘possess’ us. It can erect a barrier against the world. (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 64)

And she calls that the *Coatlicue* state, because this seeing that she is referring to is an act of peeping into the soul, what she calls “*enfrentamientos con el alma*” (p. 64, emphasis in the original). Anzaldúa works with the material, the mirror, the object that reflects an image

that gives us the illusion of reflection, to articulate the idea of erecting a barrier against the world, of pretending one does not know that all elements are constitutive instead of separated.

Still working with the notion of the mirror, one can go back to Barad's argument, which is both performative and posthuman. It is posthuman in the sense that she shows that matter is not passive, it has agency, and discourse alone cannot describe or shape it. Discourse produces effects, yes, but these effects alone do not *materialize matter*, as matter meets discourse halfway to *make itself matter*. In fact, in working with quantum theory, the argument is also that in there being no separation between matter and knower, representation can only be achieved *together*, that is, exteriority is always already *exteriority within*. In her words, she presents a:

[R]elational ontology that rejects the metaphysics of relata, of 'words' and 'things.' On an agential realist account, it is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role 'we' play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming. (BARAD, 2003, p. 812)

It is in this sense, in the role both matter and human play in the processes of knowing and becoming that Barad's theory is also performative, so she uses Judith Butler's articulation of performativity to discuss the enactment of borders in the exclusions one makes in the use of given apparatuses to perform meaning. Apparatuses are practices, "open-ended practices," as Barad puts it, as well as phenomena. She makes an analogy with a lab in saying that scientists do not have a space full of apparatuses that are made for specific purposes: apparatuses are tested, made-in-the-moment, they are interchangeable, they are not static, but are "*dynamic (re)configurings of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted*" (BARAD, 2003, p. 816, emphasis in the original). Meanings or representations in the agential realist articulation are boundaries enacted by "cuts," and they are always subjected to changes given the apparatus that is used. Boundaries, Barad shows, "do not sit still." (p. 817)

Anzaldúa, I would like to argue, is *messing* with the apparatus that was used to inscribe her as belonging to the outside of the border. She refuses to inhabit either side, instead she expands it to include all the meanings she *wants* to see in the border and turns it into a richer place, one that allows and produces a more potent subjectivity. It is there that she gains consciousness, the consciousness of the new mestiza. Anzaldúa, in allowing for her material body to perform two genders, also messes with the boundaries enacted by the gender

apparatuses. About those who inhabit the Borderlands, she makes a statement that can be interestingly related to Barad's reading of matter's resistance to passive inscription when she says that:

[w]e do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame, [...] or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 43).

This can be linked to matter's position in relation to language, where language "cheat[s] matter out of the fullness of its capacity," (BARAD, 2003, p. 810) an argument I have used before because it is a potent reminder of matter's agency. When matter is "boundaried" out of the equation, it really cannot engage fully (although it finds ways to remain engaged, it resists). And when one inhabits a borderland that allows for little agency, the same happens, but Anzaldúa's work seems to argue for the agential realist ontology in turning this difficulty of engagement into something empowering. In bringing matter back into the equation, it is no longer inscription, it is what Barad calls intra-action. Actually, matter is always already in the equation, there is no "bringing it back," there is only the illusion that it was once boundaried out.

Barad puts forth that in enacting borders we need to be accountable for what is left out. The objectivity that is made possible in the "exteriority within" frame of theorization means, for Barad, taking responsibility for the marks that will be left on bodies. She explains that agential cuts produce the effect of separating component parts of phenomena, "one of which ('the cause') expresses itself in effecting and marking the other ('the effect')" (BARAD, 2003, p. 824). This is what she calls a "measurement." She further explains that a measurement can be read as "part of the universe making itself intelligible to another part in its ongoing differentiating intelligibility and materialization," (BARAD, 2003, p. 824) but these cuts produce borders, and can, I believe, be related to Anzaldúa's description of the US-Mexico border as an *open wound*. Anzaldúa makes a powerful claim to boundary-in what has been factored out, or to resist inscription because her matter is as strong as the apparatus that produced her in the borderlands:

[...] don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods with my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – *una cultura mestiza* – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 44)

Anzaldúa, in her claim, invokes all kinds of materiality. She uses temperatures, the chisel, her own face, lumber, bricks, which is a building material; mortar, a war apparatus; and finally her feminist architecture, that, as ideational as it may be, gains physicality in its performance of a way of theorizing and behaving that is non-conforming with the boundaries laid out for (against) her. The feminist architecture interests me because it invokes the idea of something material, an apparatus that can be used to organize observer and observed together, in an intra-action that enacts or performs more permeable boundaries that work on the basis of “becoming-with,” a term Haraway (2014) claims to be indispensable for our time of the Anthropocene, a subject that, unfortunately, will not be tackled here but which is extremely relevant for the conversation on the effacement of borders.

In performance we enact correspondence knowing that correspondence is a fiction. Theorists let words do, knowing they cannot fully describe, and agency is the possibility of acting within the limitations of the powers that already exist within performance and description. Barad puts forward that acting within these limitations is paramount because doing so is to “intervene in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (BARAD, 2003, p. 827). Anzaldúa seizes the agency available to her and produces a consciousness, a way of becoming that calls attention to the borders at the same time that it attempts to reshape and resist them. An interesting passage in Anzaldúa is when she explores performativity as legitimizing “Chicaneness” in parties and conferences she attends. She argues that although she and her friends tend to speak English in these events, they wonder whether they will find each other *agringadas* because they are not speaking Chicano Spanish. “We oppress each other in trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the ‘real’ Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos,” and continues with the argument that “[t]here is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience” (p. 80) to show that the idea of a stable identity can only be secured by repeating the signs that make one look like a legitimate Chicana. It could be argued that they are, in these events, reproducing boundaries that have marked their own bodies, and further along her work, Anzaldúa calls attention to the effect of this conflict of the boundary when she says that she has “so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes [she] feel[s] like one cancels the other and [they] are zero, nothing, no one. *A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy*” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 85).

For Haraway (1991), writing is an important tool for re-writing stories and histories, and the way Anzaldúa discusses her process of writing resonates both the ideas of Haraway

and of Barad in that she speaks of encapsulating stories in time, “enacting” stories when she voices or reads them quietly. Anzaldúa claims to like to “think of them as performances and not as inert and ‘dead’ objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works)” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 89). Her reasoning echoes Barad’s – though Anzaldúa’s work precedes Barad’s by more than two decades – in that she already sees the process of storying as changing the story, as enacting different borders from the ones devised in a tradition that wants to exclude matter from the process of meaning-making. She, as an author, intra-acts with the stories she tells as if they are telling themselves too. The work, she claims, “has an identity; it is a ‘who’ or a ‘what,’ and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods and ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be ‘fed,’ *la tengo que bañar e vestir*” (p. 89). Anzaldúa seems to respect the autonomy of the story (or of matter, to make an analogy with Barad’s articulations) and understand that she is intra-acting with the work, that she alone cannot control the outcome of a work because it stretches beyond her control once it materializes. There is no Author, capital A, there is only phenomena where the measurement, the text that materializes from the cut she enacts, is a version of what can be said about matter.

Concluding Remarks

Finally, I hope I have managed to demonstrate how Anzaldúa is both a cyborg writer and an agential realist articulator, for she identifies the crack in Western tradition that allows for subversion to evidenciate the myth of objectivity. The border, a material separation between the US and Mexico, that produces and is produced by discursive practices, is the place that provokes such powerful feelings in Anzaldúa. Instead of denying the material and the discursive, she appropriates them and creates something new, something powerful and subversive. She resists being inscribed as lesser and in doing so gains a potent subjectivity, that of the *new mestiza*, but she also seizes the elements that could oppress her into oblivion and turns them into something else, she creates on top of them: “[I]iving in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create” (ANZALDÚA, 2007, p. 95). It is not a painless process, though, as she explains that after she puts pen to paper there is “no more discomfort, no more ambivalence,” and that writing, for her, is “an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be” (p. 95). Anzaldúa, I argue, participates in the materialization of the border and, in doing so, changes what it means.

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Como se Materializam as Fronteiras? A Corporalidade da Fronteira em *Borderlands/La Frontera*, e Gloria Anzaldúa

Resumo: Neste artigo, analiso as maneiras com as quais Gloria Anzaldúa, em *Borderlands: La Frontera* (2007), negocia a ideia da fronteira como tendo dimensões discursivas e materiais. Ao criar a consciência da nova *mestiza* a partir da zona de fronteira, que é o espaço afetado pela linha fronteira, Anzaldúa desenvolve conceitos e ideias que podem ser relacionados às articulações de Donna Haraway, com sua teoria do ciborgue; e de Karen Barad, com sua teoria de uma ontologia de agenciamento realista, no sentido de que Anzaldúa se engaja criativamente com partes contraditórias de sua identidade, de forma ciborguiana; e enxerga a fronteira como ao mesmo tempo limitante e empoderadora, como produzindo efeitos discursivos e materiais como constitutivos um do outro. Anzaldúa discorre sobre esses efeitos e demonstra como os aplica na fabricação de uma nova consciência, a da nova *mestiza*. Neste trabalho, então, exploro estes conceitos a partir de uma leitura que identifica, no trabalho de Anzaldúa, pontos em comum com e complementares às teorias de Haraway e Barad.

Palavras-chave: Teoria da Fronteira. Gloria Anzaldúa. Teoria Ciborgue. Ontologia realista de agenciamento.

