BORDER CROSSINGS IN AN AGE OF BORDER PATROLS: CRUZANDO FRONTERAS METAFORICAS
MARGARET E. MONTOYA

This volume is being produced as the issues for the 1996 presidential election are being defined. Issues involving immigration, free trade, illicit drugs, affirmative action for Latinos and the English-only movement have pushed relations with Mexico, Mexicanos, and Chicanos into a prominence in the political discourse that is unusual for recent national elections. No issue is more prominent and more hotly debated by both the Democrats and the Republicans than the legal and illegal migration of low-skilled persons from Mexico into the Southwestern portions of the United States.

Concerns about transborder movement of people, goods, capital, languages, and accompanying legal claims have become global. People throughout the globe are moving from the southern regions with their relative poverty into the northern countries in search of employment and political stability. Within this current political environment borders are embedded with symbolic meaning about national sovereignty, a desired clarity about who "belongs" and who does not, and employment security. Border crossers become media symbols and political scapegoats.

The articles in this volume have been selected using the United States-Mexico border as the point of perspective. Allow me to provide some context for this symposium volume first by describing briefly how the border itself was defined, then by explaining how borders have become a ubiquitous metaphor for cross-disciplinary scholarship as well as for the multiple identities associated with a decentered self, and finally previewing the articles that are included in this volume.

THE BORDER

The U.S./Mexico border was defined, as many international borders have been, by war, political intrigue, and river morphology. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the United States' war with Mexico and established the Rio Grande as the border from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso. Moving west, the Gila River that runs from New Mexico through Arizona at a point above Tucson and into the Colorado River was the negotiated boundary. From the Colorado River, a straight line was drawn to the Pacific Ocean at a point just below San Diego.

By 1853, Mexico, and its President Santa Anna, had land and needed money; the United States had money and wanted land for a transcon-
tinental railroad system.\(^1\) So James Gadsden, the minister to Mexico, bargained to have the United States buy large portions of northern Mexico. Originally hoping for Baja California and parts of Sonora and Chihuahua, he eventually settled for a smaller section of land, approximately 30,000 acres for which the United States paid $10 million.\(^2\) With the so-called Gadsden Purchase, the border was now drawn below Nogales and Douglas, Arizona.

The border measures 1,951.36 miles from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific, with the Rio Grande accounting for 1,253.69 miles, the Colorado for 23.72 miles, and the land border for 697.67 miles.\(^3\) Even after the border had been officially defined, both the meandering of the alluvial channels of the Rio Grande\(^4\) and the cartographic mistakes in the maps which formed the basis for the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo\(^5\) created ongoing disputes between the two governments.

Nonetheless, what has characterized the border for most of its one hundred and fifty year history has been the lack of open hostility among the people who inhabit the territory along the border.\(^6\) According to historians, the process of cultural lending and borrowing began almost immediately\(^7\) with the flows of people, capital, and ideas largely disregarding the political boundary.

During most of the past century, the United States actively encouraged the movement of workers from Mexico. In the late 1800s, miners were recruited from Sonora and Jalisco, and those immigrant laborers were responsible for the feasibility and profitability of open pit copper mines in Arizona and New Mexico.\(^8\) Later as the Imperial and Mesilla Valleys were irrigated, farm labor from Mexico became critical for the planting, weeding and harvesting of crops. Immigration laws were specifically

---

2. Id. at 81-4.
3. Id. at unnumbered preface.
4. Jerry E. Mueller, Restless River: International Law and the Behavior of the Rio Grande 19 (1975). The problem with a meandering river is described by Mueller: [T]he treaty [of Guadalupe Hidalgo] designated the channel of maximum depth as boundary along those reaches where the River had more than one channel. Although used sparingly along the Rio Grande . . ., such practice of marking the deepest channel is commonly referred to in international law as “the Principal of Thalweg.” In alluvial streams such as the Rio Grande, the thalweg channel shifts position in time and place in response to varying flow regimes. Id.
5. Id. at 23. The most significant mistake incorrectly located the river north of Juarez. Specifically, “Disturnell’s map showed El Paso del Norte (Juarez) at 32 deg., 15 min. north latitude, when it is actually at 31 deg., 45 min., or approximately 34 miles farther south. The city’s longitude was given as 104 deg., 39 min. west, when in fact it is 106 deg., 29 min., or approximately 130 miles farther west. The question arose as to whether or not the boundary should leave the River at 8 miles above Juarez, as shown on the map, or 42 miles above Juarez, as indicated by the incorrect grid.” Id. Subsidiary treaties to locate the border have been necessary up through the 1970s.
7. Id.
drafted to protect the Mexican labor supply for agribusiness in California and elsewhere.

Much of the current political debate centers on the "violations" and "transgressions" of the border by undocumented workers who cross to work in the United States or who overstay their visas. This debate is in sharp contrast to the original desire of the two countries to facilitate trans-border interactions. A series of "sister-cities" were established along the border—Mexicali and Calexico; Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora; El Paso, Texas and El Paso del Norte (now called Ciudad Juarez); Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tumaulipas—with the explicit intent, at the time, to create a population along the border with facility in both cultures, a borderlands in which both languages would be spoken and goods, labor, and capital would move fairly freely. These hopes have largely been realized. Current proposals to fortify the border by building impenetrable concrete walls, electrified fences, or a human fence of border guards fail to take into account the considerable advantages of these historic connections, especially those advantages offered by a hybrid population that navigates easily through both societies.

Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-El Cajon, Ca.) has proposed the building of a triple fence along the 14-mile stretch of border from the Pacific Ocean to Otay Mesa, known colloquially as "Smugglers Alley." According to the Los Angeles Times, the idea for the fence is based on a study prepared by the Sandia National Laboratory in New Mexico, which "concluded that if one fence was good, three fences were better." The triple fence idea is opposed by nearly everyone, the Clinton administration, both senators from California, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the labor union for the Border Patrol, and even the conservative San Diego newspaper, the Union-Tribune. Nevertheless, the border continues to serve the political fortunes of jingoistic politicians.

BORDER AS METAPHOR

More recently, the border has been imbedded with metaphoric and tropic meanings. Applicable to disciplinary, cultural, and epistemological spaces, the border is seen as site, intersection, bridge, and membrane. Borders have been transformed from bilateral national boundaries to borders representing cultural and epistemic sites of contestation.

In her classic book, Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa transformed the concept of the "border" from geo-

10. Id. at A22.
11. Id.
graphic and physical spaces to one applicable to psychological, sexual, and spiritual sites, "present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy." What follows is intended to give the reader who is not initiated into this literature an idea of how the border has been transformed into trope and an entry point into this body of scholarship about boundaries and about border crossers.

The border as an epistemic space for the exploration of cultural production has proven particularly salient to ethnographers. In 1989, the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo observed:

> [O]ur everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets and eruptions of all kinds. Social borders frequently become salient around such lines as sexual orientation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, dress, food or taste. Along with "our" supposedly transparent cultural selves, such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation.

Dwight Conquergood extended the notion of contested sites to the self, exploring the reframing of borders for purposes of epistemology and identity formation:

> Borders bleed, as much as they contain. Instead of dividing lines to be patrolled or transgressed, boundaries are now understood as criss-crossing sites inside the post-modern subject. Difference is resituated within, instead of beyond, the self. Inside and outside distinctions, like genres, blur and wobble.

> . . . The major epistemological consequence of displacing the idea of solid centers and unified wholes with borderlands and zones of contest is a rethinking of identity and culture as constructed and relational, instead of ontologically given and essential. This rethinking privileges metonym, "reasoning part-to-part" over . . . synecdoche, "reasoning part-to-whole"; it features syntax over semantics. Meaning is contested and struggled for in the interstices, in between structures. Identity is invented and contingent, not autonomous: "'I' is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers


Sidonie Smith writes:

For Anzaldúa the topography of the borderland is simultaneously the suturing space of multiple oppressions and the potentially liberatory space through which to migrate toward a new subject position. The geographical trope is at once psychological, physical, metaphysical, and spiritual since it functions as a space where cultures conflict, contest, and reconstitute one another.


of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. 'I' is, itself, infinite layers.'

My personal favorite is Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. The centerpiece story about an indigenous Mexican woman is told by Behar in her ethnographic voice, but the multilayered translation of Esperanza's story requires Behar to tell her own story. Here the border is integral to the identities of both the Cuban ethnographer and her Indian informant, but, more importantly, both Behar and Esperanza use their relation to the border to create their identity, to name themselves as illegal, as "literary wetbacks," thereby robbing the popular discourse of its power to define epithets, to construct identities, and to stigmatize experience:

Esperanza has given me her story to smuggle across the border. Just as Mexican laborers export their bodies for labor on American soil, Esperanza has given me her story for export only. Her story, she realizes, is a kind of commodity that will have a value on the other side that it doesn't have at home—why else would I be "using up" my life to write about her life? She has chosen to be a literary wetback, and I am to act as her literary broker, the border crossing who will take her story to the other side and make it be heard in translation. The question will be whether I can act as literary broker without becoming the worst kind of coyote, getting her across, but only by exploiting her lack of power to make it to *el otro lado* any other way.

There is a special burden that authorship carries if you have ever occupied a borderland place in the dominant culture, especially if you were told at some point in your life that you didn't have what it takes to be an authority on, an author of, anything. It means writing as a "literary wetback," as the Chicana poet Alicia Gaspar de Alba puts it, without "the 'right' credentials... to get across."

It is not just Esperanza, then who is a literary wetback. Even though I have borne her story across to this side of the border, I recognize that I, too, in a quite different way, am a literary wetback in the world of academic letters, a wetback despite the papers that tell me I'm okay, I'm in, I'm a legal alien.

**THE ARTICLES**

The first article by Guadalupe Luna, "*Agricultural Underdogs*" and *International Agreements: The Legal Context of Agricultural Workers*

---

18. See BEHAR, supra note 17, at 234.
19. Id. at 340.