Placing the Academy

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Fronteriza Consciousness
The Site and Language of the Academy and of Life

Norma Elia Cantú

In the Borderlands you are the battleground where enemies are kin to each other.

Gloria Anzaldúa

Geography is destiny. And my destiny has been the geography of the U.S./Mexico borderlands where I was born and raised, where I continue to live. In 1980, I returned to the border to teach at a small public university in Laredo, Texas; in 2000, I moved 150 miles north to San Antonio to teach at a much larger institution where I could work in the budding and innovative doctoral degree in English with a focus on U.S. Latino/a literature. The lessons of life on the border have served me well in the “geography” of academia, for I have always been an outsider and yet I have managed to integrate my academic and social activist roles while also writing scholarly and creative works. As Gloria Anzaldúa with her articulation of the mestiza consciousness philosophy and Emma Pérez with her ideas of sitio y lengua have taught us, the border is the place where one lives a life in nepantla, in the in-between, but also a place where one lives a life of power and of strength, if one survives at all, that is. It is a hard place, a place as hard as the dry caliche of the monte and as rough as the prickly thorny bushes and plants, from the mesquite to the huisache and the cacti, whose colorful blossoms
belie the hardy survival capacity of the succulents. To survive life in this terrain, one must develop a *concha*, a thick shell. Driving in the back roads and even on the interstate in South Texas, one often encounters dark brown turtles crossing the road. I sometimes feel that I, too, have to wear a shell like these creatures to survive in the academy, for it is a place that demands that a woman of color live in two worlds, both of which can be as hard as the asphalt of the parking lots and as *aspero* (rough) and hostile as the *monte*—a place that demands that one become as hard and as resilient as the hardy flora and fauna of the region. But the toughness and survival of the turtle must be tempered with the soft underbelly that provides balance. The myriad roles that I must play as a professor, a community activist, a writer and public intellectual all have one common foundation: I am a Chicana from the border. That is what informs my being.

I was born and lived the first twenty-six years of my life on the U.S./Mexico border. After a hiatus of seven years, while I was away in graduate school, I returned, leaving and returning for short stints over the next thirty years. But that formative time, those first twenty-six years, shaped who I am and informs my academic work as well as my writing and indeed all my work as a human being on earth. *Este pedacito de tiempo y este pedacito de tierra*, this small piece of time and small piece of land, where I am destined to live. My mother, a *tejana*, and my dad, a *mejicano*, shared allegiances to the land, the land that the journalist Barbara Renaud González once told me is our last and our first inheritance—who we are. Just as that old platitude goes, it doesn’t matter how old you are but how you are old, I think it doesn’t matter where you are but how you are where you are. And I have been a *tejana* while in Europe, Madrid, Vietnam, Nebraska, and California. *No importa*, it doesn’t really matter, the border is with me; my *tejana*-ness is who I am. That semitropical land of south Texas shaped me as much as the DNA I inherited from my parents, their parents, and the many generations back, *mis antepasados*.

But the cultural education I gained didn’t include certain skills and knowledge that the academic world valued and expected. As I navigated the academic waters, first as a student and then as a professor, I found that my borderlands skills and knowledge—the epistemological formation that made my brain think a certain way, made my body react a certain way—often conflicted with what the academic world expected. I understood that to survive I had to
confront this conflict; I had to superarlo, to overcome it. Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness answers my doubts as to how it is that we trust who we are and how we behave in the world. It is this multifaceted and all-encompassing view of the world that allows the conflicts between the academic world’s culture and my own to be resolved. What are some of these conflicts? Most are not apparent and surface in unexpected ways, creating dissonance. The manifestations of this dissonance are also many. The way I am always cold in air-conditioned buildings or anywhere where the weather is colder than sixty degrees. The way I feel the ocean is on the wrong side in California. The way my body relishes warmth and I feel that all is right with the world when I see the Gulf of Mexico to the East or hear the urracas, those ever-present black grackles, cawing at dusk. All this is shaped by where I first learned to be in the world, on the border. The wide open flatlands between Laredo and east to Corpus Christi and the Gulf Coast; north to San Antonio and the hill country; and south to Monterrey and the cerros del Mamulique. That is home. The geography that shaped me is also what sustains me, what offers me a sense of belonging.

My work. My creative work feels most at home in this terrain where the world conforms to my expectations. It is where my social self is at home, too. My parents taught me to be “bien educada,” polite, and to greet everyone. So, I say good morning or good evening to the cleaning staff as well as to the administrators, for not to saludar, greet, even strangers, is rude and a sign of disrespect. One is expected to at least smile and nod; the lesson sticks, we must never be so into ourselves as to erase the others around us. So even when I am in large urban cities where passersby walk without even seeing those they bump into, I say excuse me and smile a good morning. Civility begins with something as simple as a greeting. When I lived in Washington, D.C., I worked in a government office that had precious few Latinos, and I recall how comforting it was to have a Puerto Rican coworker notice that I was wearing black and ask if someone had died. Indeed an uncle had died, and I was keeping “luto,” although not rigorously, by wearing mostly black for a couple of weeks. No one else noticed or commented on it. My cultural mourning practices were not evident to those who didn’t understand the “code,” but a Latino who knew it recognized it immediately.

Navigating different sociogeographical terrain is as challenging as survival is for those who dare venture into the physical
geography of the borderland. The seasons are different, too, in my land of little rain, a land with few trees in the landscape, yet private gardens resplendent with color—the mimosa, the red hardy hibiscus—gardens exuding aromatic scents of mint, rosemary, and rue, my favorite herbs. But the few trees, mesquite, huisache, retama, and, of course, in certain areas the nogal, the pecan tree, also mark the land where I was born and where I grew up. The animals that roamed wild have all but disappeared, as Arturo Longoria notes in his aptly titled, *Adios to the Brushland*.

My academic work by luck and by choice has been in this land. Teaching in Laredo from 1980 until 2000 and since then in San Antonio has been an extraordinary gift that life has given me. I am lucky to live and work in the place where I feel at home, where people speak my Spanglish and the smells of carne asada cooking in backyards—even in winter—permeates Saturday and Sunday afternoons. I see the bright orange-violet-hued sunsets in Port Aransas or in Laredo or in San Antonio and then scan the night sky for the dippers and Orion and the Pleiades, and I know the sky. I am centered. It is the same sky I have seen for over fifty years. I recognize it. Own it. It is the same sky my ancestors looked to for guidance, for direction. When my father would intone a prayer to the sliver of a new moon in the dimming light of dusk, I knew it in my heart.

The land has taught me to be aware and to be careful: rattlesnakes, fierce ants, and tarantulas among other creatures, the pests that have taught me caution and patience and to be fearless. Additionally, I rejoice in the sounds of the land: the songs of the cenzontle almost year round and on rainy nights in September the croaking frogs, the canta ranas that gave our barrio its name. As a child I reveled in the sounds of the wind caressing the cubreviento trees in our backyard and the palm trees, the fronds swaying in the wind making a sound unlike any other. The gifts of this fertile land—nopales, mequite, quelite that fed the indigenous, the melons and the lush citrus fruit trees (grapefruit, orange, lime, and lemon trees) that sustain the Valley—nurture our economy, even as those who labor in the hot south Texas sun to harvest such fruits become one with the land. My father kept a home garden, a hankering to his own childhood no doubt, when Mamagrande, his mother, my grandmother, grew corn, squash, tomatoes, a variety of chiles, and many other foodstuffs that she would then make into meals for her large family, including delicious dulces de calabaza, the
sugared pumpkin delicacy of late summer and early fall. That garden needed tending and along with the fruit trees—the grapefruit, orange, lemon, and peach trees in our yard—supplied us with fresh and nutritious meals. Even the nopales—the prickly pear with its difficult-to-harvest fruit, the tunas—and the pencas and tiernitas, tender and the color of the inside of the kiwi, once “cleaned” of all thorns, provided delicious food.

When I go home to Laredo, I am transported back to those summers of my childhood when we ran around barefoot in the hot sun chasing lagartijos y camaleones, whose color would turn from a gray-ecru to a deep green according to where they were, and the fiery red santa closes, the “toritos” or sand lions that burrowed into the sandy arid dirt under our house. How we loved to play under the frame house, in the cool shade protected from the hot August sun. I must have been about ten when I realized that I could no longer sit comfortably under the house that was built two feet off the ground and that grew as the family grew and my father added first an indoor bathroom, later a kitchen large enough for all of us to sit at a table, and much later two more bedrooms and a “cuarto de atrás,” a back room where we stashed stuff—his carpentry materials, Mom’s sewing machine—a sort of den and garage all in one. Later it became my youngest brother’s room, but we still call it “el cuarto de atrás.”

When I am in that childhood home, I hear the church bell ring every morning and evening calling people to mass, an ancient call to prayer, to awareness of being on earth, so far from the school bell or buzzer signaling the end of class. At least that practice has disappeared and classes begin and end without bells or buzzers. And yet, the academy can be a daunting and fearful place. A place of trauma and dissent. I recall my first forays into the business of presenting papers at conferences and feeling out of place as it appeared everyone knew everyone else and “belonged.” One particular experience taught me that unlike what I had been taught in education classes, one didn’t “present” a paper; one was expected to literally “read” a paper. I had been trained in education to use talking points and to adhere to a more conversational tone. But my academic field of English required reading from a prepared text. It began my lifelong apprehension of presenting at conferences. The traumatic experience of many young scholars as they prepare tenure files is another occasion for stress and trauma. The demands of academic work can be daunting. Aside from teaching and all its
multiple demands and aside from presenting and publishing one's research, one is expected to participate actively in university governance and be involved in numerous committees at all levels—department, college, and university—in addition to participating in extracurricular service activities.

But even as the academy can be a fearful and daunting place, it can also be a place of refuge and of sustenance. I choose to make it the latter even when there are circumstances that make it the former. I will not allow a disgruntled student who is perhaps too lazy to do the work for a course to spoil the memory of hundreds of other students who are happy and glad to be in my classes, who can say at the end of the semester, it was tough, but I am glad I did it. I will not allow a capricious colleague who disagrees with me to ruin my trust and good faith in my fellow human beings who work alongside of me and who are doing their best and are products of their own environments. Some of them need to learn from me about fairness, about justice, about civility. What will I gain if I alienate and fight them and establish an adversarial relationship with them? What will my students gain? Of course, this does not mean that I will deny to myself or to others that there are injustices and that there are wrong policies, that there is racism and raging backlash against my feminist positions. No, it means that I will continue to struggle with passion and with whatever means are at my disposal. The locations within the academy are hierarchical and work in such a way as to deflate any positive action. But I will continue to struggle. I work from within. Carrying on the guerrilla work in the academy often means that others think you are a sellout: after all, you are teaching in the very institution that perpetuates the system. But there are ways of changing the system with the masters’ tools, to paraphrase Audre Lorde (110). I believe we can use the language, the rules, the very institution to change the oppressive conditions, the injustices. I have seen it happen, not just in the academy where a heretofore-racist college or department is transformed by the presence of one individual with vision and with the courage to proceed and do what needs doing. Even a single faculty member can be a catalyst for change. But at what cost? I have seen too many of my colleagues succumb to illness, their goodwill and good intentions bashed by committees where they are the minority—literally the only woman, the only Chicano or Chicana, the only Black, the only person of color—and have to speak up and then be castigated for doing so. How reassuring when our allies speak up. They sometimes come to
the forefront and make it obvious that it is not just because I am in the room that they must think about diversity and about equal treatment and not even because it is the law, after all, but because it is the right thing to do, to treat all human beings with respect. When there is trauma, there is a need for healing. For me, healing always means going home. I am wounded, but I will heal. And the scar will remain as a reminder, as a testament of what has happened, what has injured me. Us.

What shape does the trauma take? It can be as simple as denial of one’s presence or ideas. A slight comment made at a committee meeting, such as when one brings up a new idea only to have a curriculum committee question how solid the course would be, or to have one’s text selections questioned or one’s approach—is it serious enough? Is it theoretical enough? Isn’t it just fluff, touchy-feely, to have students work in groups? It isn’t high theory if it is grounded in experience. One’s scholarship becomes contested terrain as colleagues question the legitimacy of doing cross-cultural work or interdisciplinary studies, that which is at the core of many area studies programs such as Chicano and Chicana Studies or Women’s Studies. Or the clash can loom larger as the stakes are higher, such as when these smaller battles affect the larger ones of our tenure and promotion decisions. Our work is invalidated by administrators and colleagues who don’t understand or choose not to understand the value of our work out in the world, who do not value the groundbreaking nature of working in these fields, who question our commitment to our classes because we volunteer to do work with community groups. Service-learning courses or innovative pedagogical strategies that are rewarded, albeit not always, when it is a white professor are often suspect when it is a professor of color who proposes or engages in such practices. That is when I become a warrior, when I practice what I preach and I don’t give up, don’t regret a thing, and proceed with what my heart tells me is what needs to be done. I follow Anzaldúa’s charge to do work that matters (“Healing”102).

My biggest challenges in the academy have come when I have had to deal with budgets and administrative tasks that required skills that I had not picked up in any of my educational settings but which I had learned to perform, albeit in a rudimentary fashion, as an office worker. When I worked as an administrator, first as department chair, then as acting dean, I had to prepare budgets and submit requests for funding projects and the daily operations of the department and the college. Although I was successful, I
always felt that I couldn’t possibly be doing all that I could. My own working-class background didn’t present me with models of how to ask for funding, especially when I was new to the academy and my colleagues were the same men who had been my professors and still treated me as if I were a student. Even later and at another institution, as the person in charge of the doctoral program, I have had to be fierce in advocating for increased budgets for student programs and for sustaining budgetary commitments at a time of crises, crises that seem to come in cycles. What I learned early on was to be prepared and, as had been the case when I was a student, to be overprepared whenever I went in to see a higher-up with any kind of request or report. The dismally funded university that I worked at along the border gained tremendous clout as the state of Texas faced a lawsuit filed by the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) in the mid-1980s. The suit was not “won” by MALDEF, but the benefits to the school where I was teaching and to others in south Texas taught me that, indeed, it matters little if you win the battle; what matters is that you win the war. The creation of a new campus for Laredo, however fraught with political undertones, provided an essential growth spurt that has not stopped. The lessons continue as I have moved into another system and have continued to militate within the academy on behalf of students. At the start of this century a crisis looms as fewer graduate students of color enroll, per capita, in graduate school. In my field of English, the decline is frightening. Just when the demographics are changing and the Latino population in the country is growing, the number of Latino graduate students in English is declining.

Along with the battles against a system that, due to its Western orientation and cultural history, is antagonistic to those of us who come with a different system, there are the battles that we must wage against our own: those who, blinded by the hatred and anger, cannot see beyond the immediate and are often self-destructive. Our ultimate goal is not to erase or abolish the tenets of Western civilization, whose unwilling children we are, but to reshape them to be more truly representative of reality, a reality that includes African and indigenous knowledges on an equal footing with the privileged Western civilization model. That is another lesson my beloved borderlands world has taught me: there is never one way of doing things, of thinking about things, or more importantly, of being. As Anzaldúa points out in Borderlands/La Frontera, those who hold that—because we speak in various languages—border residents
are somehow limited do not recognize how limiting it is to have only one linguistic code to think with (76–81). My cross-cultural experience is not limited because I reside along an international border. Rather, I have been afforded opportunities beyond the limited ones those in the interior experience. For instance, as a child I learned to translate two monetary systems, two measuring systems—the U.S. and metric—and several worlds that often collided: the tejano, the mejicano, and the anglo. This uniquely borderlands phenomenon, at one time generally limited to the geographical space where I grew up, has now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century spread to wherever greater Mexico, to use Américo Paredes’s term, happens to be, in Idaho, Utah, Chicago, New York, indeed in every state including Alaska and Hawaii (xiv).

And there are other places where I feel I belong that are not as intimately bound to geography. Libraries and bookstores are such sites of empowerment for me. I feel at home with books. It has been in books that I have found solace and where I have felt most at home when I have been away from home. In Nebraska, I immerssed myself in books during my graduate studies; doing research in the archives in Spain, I would lose myself for hours. One time during a long trip to Colorado, I walked into the university library in Boulder and felt an excitement and an anticipation that was akin to feelings one gets when driving into a familiar and beloved space. It is the feeling I get driving south as I near Laredo or as I deplane at the airport. The feeling of being home. But it isn’t just the presence of books that is comforting: books themselves, especially novels, offer me a place to feel at home. And I revisit some books that I love, rereading them over and over and feeling at home in the world the author has created.

While some creative writers bemoan that they must teach and write scholarly papers as part of their academic appointments, I don’t see teaching and scholarly writing as mutually exclusive and relish the interrelatedness of these three aspects of my work: creative writing, scholarship, and teaching. Even this quirky site-specific pleasure I can trace back to that girlhood in Laredo where the small public library offered a myriad of experiences. My favorite book in third grade was Eloise, the story of a little girl who lives in a hotel in downtown New York. I suppose it was her independence that I yearned for as well as a world that was so different from mine. But I also yearned to inhabit the worlds found in other books, books that I read in Spanish and that offered alternative dreams. Yes, books and the spaces that hold them have been sites of empowerment for me.
I love to read and to talk about what I read; I often tell students that that is why I am a professor and not a lawyer. Writing and reading are my home, and the academic life is a life of writing and reading and talking about what one writes and reads. The cultural geography of this terrain is both comforting and threatening, as is that of my geographical homeland. The terrain of the academy, including the professional organizations, can be difficult to inhabit. Because of my myriad interests and areas of work, I belong to a number of these organizations and, aside from the tremendous expense such affiliations require, they demand and expect a level of participation that can be a drain on precious energy. The Modern Language Association, the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies, the American Folklore Society, the American Studies Association, the Latin American Studies Association, the National Women’s Studies Association, Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social, and others, all provide their members opportunities for sharing and being with others of like mind, both in the literature they publish and in the membership gatherings. Yet I have found that even in these enclaves of professional unity, there can be dissent and discord. However, they provide a “safe space” where we can speak a common language and engage in discussions with like-minded colleagues. It is my reaction to these enclaves that provides a place where I can be who I am, where I can survive as an academic and as a scholar. It is what allows me to feel at home. My “homeland” is in my heart; I am destined to be in the borderlands, to be in worlds whose multivalenced ethos nurtures and inspires me.

Bibliography


