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The Extremities of the Borderlands: Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros and Chicana Identity Politics

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Writing from the border of Mexico and America, Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros are two Mexican female authors that have embraced poetry, prose and word art to articulate the 'Chicana' experience of life. Both writers engage with the concept of the 'border' within their work, both physical and theoretical. Through literary analysis of the work of these writers, more can be understood about the pressures and expectations that are placed upon the Chicana subject. The Chicana subject lives a life within a liminal space, within two or more cultures. A struggle to assimilate both Anglo and Mexican ideologies and mythologies is articulated by both of these writers. Cisneros and Anzaldúa overcome the dichotomies of North and South, male and female, Spanish and English by engaging in the act of 'revisionist' writing, adopting various forms and languages in their style to articulate the experience of the 'borderland' subject.

One may approach the concept of the 'border' in a variety of a ways. The extreme differences between disparate cultures can be highlighted by looking at factors which affect the individual within a writer's work. One can begin by looking at the physical divide between lands and cultures: the differences between geographical boundaries and man-made boundaries. The 'border' can exist as a physical inscription upon the body: a psychological border within the self. There is also the theoretical borderland: a space where literary forms or

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voices may collide and collude. Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros are two Mexican-American female writers that embrace a plurality of 'borders' within their texts. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a text rich in a variety of forms, candidly discussing her experiences as a woman living a variety of 'borderlands' through poetry, criticism and prose. Sandra Cisneros has written both poetry and prose that describes the experience of being a Mexican female living on the border of Anglicized culture and Mexican traditions. This article will assess Cisneros' short story collection *The House on Mango Street,* and poetry collection *Loose Women*. Although the focus of this article is directed at literature linked explicitly to the U. S. and Mexican border, it is prudent to bear in mind Anzaldúa's words when thinking of all literature; 'the psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest.'[1] The border is present within every individual, creating a rift in one's own identity politics.

In his 2004 work *Identity*, Zygmunt Bauman speaks of 'liquid modernity'. The subjects that live in the 'liquid modern era' inhabit a new kind of identity that is capable of assimilating and comprehending various cultures. Bauman articulates the difficulties inherent in being a 'liquid' subject. He writes:

> To be wholly or in part 'out of place' everywhere…may be an upsetting, sometimes annoying experience. There is always something to explain, to apologize for, to hide or on the contrary to boldly display…[2]

Bauman's 'liquid' subject bears the marks and traces of the borderland subject who struggles to assimilate different cultures. This 'liquid' subject can find it difficult to articulate one's individual identity as a result of living within 'liminal' identity politics, always between the extremes of two or more cultures.

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[1] Gloria Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders' in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd Edn. (San Francisco, 2007), 19

[2] Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge, 2010), 13

Written in 2004, Bauman's text illustrates that a liberated identity politics which embraces heterogeneous existence is still an unlivable prospect for most. Anzaldúa and Cisneros' works voice this struggle from within a confluent mix of repressive ideologies. Both writers express lived experience as a Mexican woman, and they do so by embracing a 'liquid' plurality of forms and literary styles.

At the start of *Borderlands,* Gloria Anzaldúa talks of how the border interacts with the body:

> 1,950 mile-long open wound
> dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
> running down the length of my body,
> staking fence rods in my flesh,
> splits me splits me.[3]

The border is inscribed on the female body as a 'wound'. A large part of Anzaldúa's text is concerned with a fear of healing the wound as this may bring on an unfavorable cultural assimilation or a culture of dichotomy like the Mexican-American and male-female dichotomies present in the text:

> no thought I want not to think
> that stirs up the pain
> opens the wound
> starts the healing [4]

There is fear that neither the extremities of the Mexican nor American culture can be incorporated into a third culture: the Borderland culture. The separation of 'the self' for the purposes of introspection encourage the change needed, as Anzaldúa says, 'wounding is a deeper healing'.[5] The body interacts

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[3] Anzaldúa, '*El otro México*' in *Borderlands,* 24
[4] Anzaldúa, 'Creature of Darkness', *Ibid.*, 208
[5] Anzaldúa, 'Poets have strange eating habits', *Ibid.*, 162

with all of these borderlands as a marker of one's intense individuality. The body is also a border between Chicana subjects as, 'to be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We're afraid of what we'll see there. *Pena*. Shame.'[6] The mirror image of the female form puts a barrier between Chicana females as they identify shared feelings of shame, and recognize in one another a patriarchal culture of female domination.

In Cisneros' texts and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* there is a feeling that the Chicana's body is not her own as it is controlled by a patriarchal Mexican society that puts pressure on the female:

> For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother… Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children.[7]

The female Chicana body is regulated by patriarchal religion and the institution of marriage, which leaves the woman with no choice of vocation for herself. Anzaldúa identifies that the Chicana's religion is patriarchal because:

> The male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self [sic] and the female deities.[8]

This masculinized religion enforced a border between the confluent feelings and elements of the female deities, and split the deities into those of 'light' of 'dark' elements, enforcing individual extremity upon gendered idols. Deborah Madsen recognizes why it would be hard for the Chicana to eschew such religious idols:

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[6] Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders', *Ibid.*, 80
[7] *Ibid.*, 39
[8] Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders', *Ibid.*, 49

> The virgin and the whore-these categories of "good" versus "bad" women are complicated by the perception, shared by many Chicana feminists, that they risk betrayal of the people if they pursue an alternative construction of femininity that is perceived to be Anglo.[9]

The Chicana individual must practice a religion that upholds a range of gendered and cultural borders in order to embrace her own Mexican culture.

Anzaldúa posits the Chicana idols as *Guadalupe* (the virgin mother), *la Malinche* (the raped mother) and *la Llorona* (the weeping mother who has lost her children).[10] There are elements of all three of these deities in both Cisneros's and Anzaldúa's texts and these elements possess the Chicana characters. Sonia Salvídar-Hull recognises that *la Llorona* is re-configured within different writers' work to unite the Chicana community:

> The centrality of *la Llorona* in Chicana oral and written traditions emerges in literature written by other contemporary Chicana feminists [such as Helena Maria Viramontes and Sandra Cisneros], a Chicana feminist transformation of the powerless waiting woman resonates with Anzaldúa's revisionary project.[11]

The idols must be transformed to empower the Chicana subject. Anzaldúa articulates a struggle with *la Llorona* during which the spiritual enters the physical, transgresses a border of the flesh, in 'My Black *Angelos*':

> *Aiiii aiiiii aiiiiii*
> She is crying for the dead child […]
> Taloned hand on my shoulder

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[9] Deborah L. Madsen, *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature*, (Columbia, 2000), 123

[10] Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders' in *Borderlands*, 52

[11] Sonia Salvídar-Hull, 'Introduction to the Second Edition' in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd Edn. (San Francisco, 2007), 6-7

behind me putting words, worlds in my head […]
She crawls into my spine [12]

La Llorona possesses the narrator of the poem, and as readers we identify with the bodily intrusion as we hear the wailing of the mother: '*aiiii*'. Fear is induced as a result of the descriptive wording, that 'taloned hand' and the spirit that 'crawls' into the body. This possession is a bodily fear of intrusion that evokes the symbolic destruction of fertility.

In Cisneros' *Loose Woman* and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* the body is the border between the individual and her spiritual self, as it is fertile, like the land, and thus capable of being used by men to secure progeny. In Cisneros's poem 'Well, If You Insist' a Cartesian separation between self and body is expressed:

My body, this
body, that has
nothing to do
with who
I am. But
it's my body, [13]

The line breaks between 'this' and 'body' exhibit a feeling of inability to articulate or to identify with one's own body. The irregular line length and peculiar enjambment mirror the contours of a body itself. The narrator expresses a fear of bodily invasion, a fear of the physical and spiritual border being transgressed, when she says:

Little terrorist, you terrify me.
Come in then. Climb on. Get in.
Well, if you insist. If you
insist…[14]

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[12] Anzaldúa, 'My Black *Angelos*' in *Borderlands*, 206
[13] Sandra Cisneros, 'Well, If You Insist' in *Loose Woman*, (New York, 1995), 36

One could argue that the 'little terrorist' represents a fetus and the pressure that the Chicana feels to become a mother. Although 'come on in then' articulates consent, an unwillingness to be entered is expressed in the title 'Well, If You Insist'. This suggests a sense of an external force influencing the Chicana's decisions and culturally pressurizing her.

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* shows the extreme bordered conflict between masculine and feminine in Chicana literature. This is asserted by the ways in which women are repressed by their male counterparts. The women build their hopes around a man coming to take them away, such as Sally, a friend of the protagonist Esperanza. This notion of the male redeemer is an Anglo mythology that cannot be attained. The particular myth used in both *The House on Mango Street* and *Borderlands* is that of Rapunzel. The border means that Anglo myths influence the Mexican culture by oppressing the female with dreams of a redemptive patriarchal liberation. Anzaldúa articulates the reality for the Chicana female:

> Nobody's going to save you.
> No one's going to cut you down,
> cut the thorns thick around you.
> No one's going to storm
> the castle walls nor
> kiss awake your birth,
> climb down your hair,
> nor mount you
> on the white steed.[15]

The white steed could represent America's white Anglo culture, a desirable culture to the female inhabitants of Mango Street, which the female would be sexually 'mounted' upon.

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[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Anzaldúa, 'Letting Go' in *Borderlands*, 187

Living in America does not liberate the individuals living on Mango Street as the women of the neighborhood are all kept behind locked doors. They can only experience the world through windows:

> Such women experience the world in a series of vignettes which permit no unifying structure. They live lives without narrative, without context, but representing a logic of oppression and cruelty too ugly to confront.[16]

The windows of the community are physical borders which separate the Chicana female from the external world. The Rapunzel myth is re-enforced by Cisneros when she compares one of these locked up women of the neighborhood to Rapunzel, 'Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel's.'[17] The male is the border between the female Chicana and her choice to live a liberated identity politics. Esperanza is disappointed by the cultural normative upheld by the women in her neighborhood, which concerns the romantic Anglo mythology of the male saviour. This myth results in Esperanza being raped. 'They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong…'[18] Esperanza feels betrayed by both her culture and her gender, as both of these elements are influenced by the extremities of Anglo mythology which cannot be assimilated into Chicana life.

Both Cisneros' and Anzaldúa's writings break down linguistic borders, offering a new voice to the individual living between the extremities of disparate cultures. María González argues, 'an author's relationship to standard English is a political one.'[19] According to González there are three categories for the

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[16] Madsen, *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature*, 113

[17] Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York, 1991), 79

[18] *Ibid*., p. 100.

[19] María C. González, *Contemporary Mexican-American Women Novelists: Toward a Feminist Identity,* (New York, 1996), 15

language of Chicana writers: standard English (assimilationist), some bilingualism (accommodationist) and those who use nonstandard forms of both English and Spanish (revisionist). Language is the border the Chicana sets up between writer and reader, between Mexican and American culture, between her past and her future. González argues that Cisneros, in *Mango Street*, uses assimilationist language to narrate Esperanza's experience and that, 'the world Cisneros creates does not mirror that language of the community'.[20] She says that the text lacks verisimilitude; if one were to inhabit Esperanza's neighborhood one would hear Spanish. This then leads González to deduce that Esperanza is 'probably translating everything into English, yet the act of translating itself is muted, never fully represented.' One could argue that Cisneros's message is that there is a border between readership and self-articulation in the text; that the text is inaccessible to some members of the Chicano community because it is written in Standard English.

Anzaldúa's choice of language is very different. González states that the language in *Borderlands* is revisionist. Anzaldúa lists the many different languages she uses in her texts and states her reasons for doing so:

> The switching of "codes" in this book...reflects my language, a new language – the language of the Borderlands. There, at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born.[21]

It is important for Anzaldúa to politicize the language in which she writes because it enhances her message. González says that by switching from non-standard Spanish to English and otherwise 'the experience narrated in the novel includes the experience of reading the novel.'[22] The act of reading *Borderlands* is one of transgressing language borders, of encountering polyvocal discourse

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[20] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[21] Anzaldúa, 'Preface to the First Edition' in *Borderlands*, 20

[22] González, *Contemporary Mexican-American Women Novelists: Toward a Feminist Identity*, 66

that expresses the Chicana's inner conflict of selves. *Borderlands* is split into two parts: The first, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders' is a mix of poetry and prose, and the latter half is '*Un Agitado Viento* / *Ehécatl*, The Wind', a collection of poetry. All Spanish in distinguished from English by italicisation. Barbara Harlow argues that this use of many languages is negative for the Chicana writer as, 'that already complex identity is fragmented further in the bilingual, even trilingual, multigeneric textual composition which disarticulates Anzaldúa's expression – at once intimate and scholarly.'[23] Another way of approaching the text is to view Anzaldúa's expression as an embrace of a wealth of voices because this is her experience of being an inhabitant of the 'Borderlands'. She is the 'revisionist' that uses a third language composed of many other languages. By using many different languages and voices Anzaldúa defeats the silencing of so many generations before her as she says:

> Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language...I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.[24]

Chicana writers transgress the borders of language to find universal expression for their experiences.

Anzaldúa's text is visually identifiable as a hybrid, a text that embraces liminality and overcomes extremities in its many different forms of expression, from poetry and prose to word art. *The House on Mango Street* may seem to have fewer forms as it is presented as a short story cycle with a linear narrative. However, Renato Rosaldo sees within this text that there are different forms and of different ways to express Chicana experience:

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[23] Barbara Harlow, 'Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison, and Exile' in *Criticism in the Borderlands*, ed. By Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar (Durham, 1991), 159

[24] Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders' in *Borderlands,* 81

> The stories in *The House on Mango Street* are near poems. Their play on themes of sexuality and danger occurs within the patter or precise and "childlike" diction which often imitates nursery rhymes.[25]

Both Ronato Rosaldo and María González argue that the form of Chicana literature expresses cultural identity because it embraces different ways of writing. For Anzaldúa, 'writing produces anxiety... Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana... coming up against all sorts of walls.'[26] Writing has extremities and borders of its own that the Chicana writer must overcome.

Cisneros and Anzaldúa share some poetic metaphors in their writing: the use of serpent and eagle imagery, the use of water to transcend border, the metaphor of roots etc. but they also share some poetic techniques. Both women use internal rhyme within their poems. Anzaldúa writes:

> I am fully formed carved
> by the hands of the ancients, drenched with
> the stench of today's headlines. But my own
> hands whittle the final work
> me.[27]

'Drench' and 'stench' are internal rhymes, and because this rhyme separates them out from other words in the poem they are closer related to the isolated pronoun of the individual: 'me'. In Cisneros' work there is a similar example in the poem 'Loose Woman':

> They say I'm a beast.
> And feast on it. When all along
> I thought that's what a woman was.[28]

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[25] Renato Rosaldo, 'Fables of the Fallen Guy' in *Criticism in the Borderlands*, ed. By Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar (Durham, 1991), p. 92.
[26] Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders' in *Borderlands*, p. 64.
[27] Anzaldúa, 'Cihuatlyotl, Woman Alone' in *Borderlands*, p. 195.

'Beast' and 'feast' rhyme internally and thus are separated out from the poem to be taken in conjunction with the conception of what a woman is; an animal creature that is devoured by those around her. Both internal lines focus on identification with shame, dirt and animal characteristics. Cisneros and Anzaldúa use similar poetic techniques, breaking down a border between Chicana writers, as Anzaldúa says, 'when I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex...I felt like we really existed as a people.'[29] Poetry aids the articulation of the individual living within the Borderland culture.

Within Mexican Chicana literature there is a response to its extreme counterpart: writing from within the canon of British and American writers. When María González discusses Chicana culture in literature she defines the accommodationist as someone who:

> […] attempts to combine the two values and not reject one for the other […] an accommodationist conception does not try to resolve the split caused by dualities – that split is accepted.[30]

Cisneros and Anzaldúa embrace the poetry of other cultures in different ways. For Anzaldúa female poetry is a discourse with other women. In her poem 'Holy Relics' the narrator says:

> We are the holy relics,
> the scattered bones of a saint,
> the best loved bones of Spain.
> We seek each other.[31]

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[28] Cisneros, 'Loose Woman' in *Loose Woman*, 112
[29] Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders' in *Borderlands,* 82
[30] González, *Contemporary Mexican-American Women Novelists: Toward a Feminist Identity*, 35/36
[31] Anzaldúa, 'Holy Relics' in *Borderlands*, 181

The book is dedicated to American poet Judy Grahn and English writer Vita Sackville-West and thus is a link to Anglo female writers. It is also about the writer's body being dismembered, idolized and given away to the reader just like the body of Teresa de Cepeda Dávila y Ahumada in the poem, who is buried 'in her threadworn veil.'[32] The writing itself is torn apart as, 'fingers that had once loved her-pinched off pieces of her flesh' and it echoes the way that Azteca-Mexican patrimony tore apart the female deities of Anzaldúa's ancestors.

In 'Down There' by Sandra Cisneros there is a response to writing of another culture but the response is not a dedication to another female poet. Madsen presents a reading of Ciseneros' poem:

> In the poem "Down There" Cisneros creates a vocabulary with which to write poetry about the reality of women's bodies….The poem is characterized initially by a sequence of "bad" macho habits: farting, peeing in the pool…Then the tone shifts slightly and the poem is likened to objects rather than behaviors: a used condom, a testicle skin… In these stanzas the poem is deliberately offensive…But then comes Cisneros's ironic twist: as she turns to the central (the real) subject of her poem, the language assumes a more serious, decorous, "poetic" tone, yet the subject itself is an outrageous violation of patriarchal poetic decorum – "men-struation".[33]

Cisneros creates the female body with a vocabulary that mirrors the act of writing in itself; 'Suddenly | I'm an artist each month.'[34] With blood the Chicana creates life and with blood she creates poetry, just as Anzaldúa does when she says, 'I write in red. Ink.' [35] Cisneros writes about shame and the Chicana body in the poems preceding this, but in 'Down There' she translates

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[32] *Ibid.*, p. 176.
[33] Madsen, *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature*, 120/121
[34] Cisneros, 'Down There' in *Loose Woman*, 83
[35] Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders' in *Borderlands,* 93

the real experience of womanhood without shame. Contrary to Madsen's view, the tone shifts in the poem could be seen as a challenge to the language of male Anglo writers, such as John Updike's poem 'Cunts', which was published in *Playboy* magazine in 1984;

> "Adore
> this hole that bleeds with the moon so you can be born!"
> Stretched like a howl between the feet pushing the stirrups […]
> I glazed my sallow fill in motel light until
> your cunt became my own, and I a girl. I lost
> my hard-on quite; my consciousness stayed raised.[36]

Updike crosses a border by use of extreme offensive language in order to reach out to the female and to share in her experience: to acknowledge the difficulties a woman experiences in childbirth and to acknowledge gender conflict. He disengages from 'patriarchal poetic decorum' to transcend the border of gender. The imagery of genitals that resemble a 'howl' is also mentioned recurrently through Cisneros's poems and so Cisneros engages in the act of responding to Anglicized writing to transgress cultural restrictions upon Chicana writing. Cisneros re-configures the female parts as engaged in the act of writing, and forms bonds with other females:

> I'd like to dab my fingers
> in my inkwell […]
> If blood is thicker than water, then
> menstruation is thicker than brother-
> hood.[37]

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[36] John Updike, 'Cunts' (January 1984) *Playboy*, 31.1 <http://english1022.tripod.com/id15.html> (9/12/10)
[37] Cisneros, 'Down There' in *Loose Woman*, 84

The power of the female writer eclipses masculine bonds. Her intention is to express the experience of being female and being empowered and liberated by her sex, as opposed to confined and repressed within it.

Chicana literature responds to many different kinds of borders, from the physical Texas-Mexico border to the psychological borderlands. In both Cisneros's and Anzaldúa's work an attempt to transcended borders is made, but there is also an acknowledgement of the pre-existing ideological borders that are rooted in patriarchal codes that are difficult to eschew. Anzaldúa asserts that the purpose of her text is to effect a change in the psychological that will hopefully in time change the physical Borderlands. She writes, 'awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society.'[38] Both writers experiment with forms and languages to translate the Chicana experience. For Anzaldúa, the act of complete translation to any one culture defeats the aim of her text. The individual Chicana writer forges a new ground for writing that chooses not to align one's self to extremities. She need not apologize for her strong, heterogeneous voice:

> But we Chicanos no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first overture—to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Lations, apology blurting out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you—from the new *mestizas.*[39]

[38] Anzaldúa, '*Atravesando Fronteras* / Crossing Borders' in *Borderlands,* 109
[39] Anzaldúa, 'Preface to the First Edition', *Ibid.*, 20

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