

# Borderlands / *La Frontera*

by Gloria Anzaldúa

HOTCHKISS SCHOOL  
ALL-SCHOOL READ  
SUMMER 2023



Image: AFP

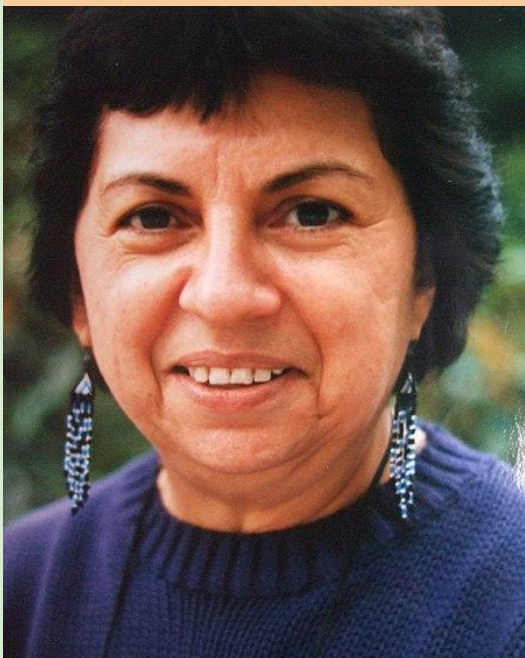


Image: Smith College (1990)

Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) was a queer Chicana feminist, teacher, poet, and scholar. She was born in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas to a family of migrant laborers. Her lineage was mixed, with her indigenous mother identifying as “Indian” and her father tracing his ancestry to the early Spanish *conquistadores*.

Anzaldúa graduated as valedictorian of her Texas public high school in 1962, and subsequently earned a BA from the University of Texas Pan-American (now Rio Grande) and an MA from the University of Texas at Austin. She taught at various public universities in California throughout her life.

In addition to *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Anzaldúa wrote a series of essays like “[La Prieta](#),” penned several [children’s books](#), and co-edited, among other collections, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* with Cherrie Moraga.

# Encountering Anzaldúa's Language



Painting by José Joaquín Magón

## Race / La Raza

The full title of the book is *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which describes a woman of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent. For Anzaldúa, this mixed racial heritage is a source of power and vision:

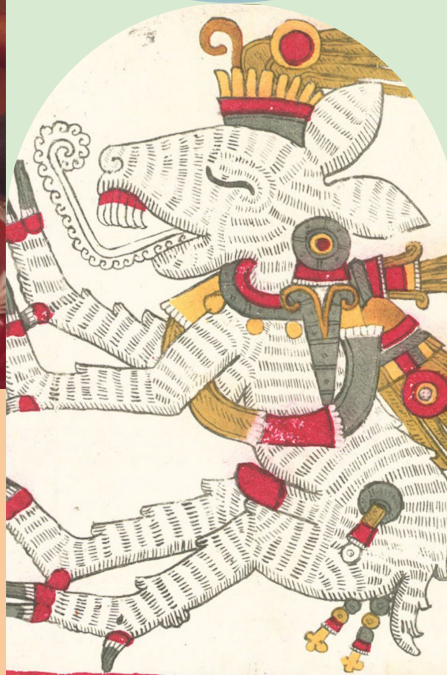
"*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (86).



Coatlicue and Huitzilopochtli, Codex Florentino

## Prose / Poetry

The first half of this book is an essay in prose, while the second half is a collection of poems. What does it feel like to traverse the border between these genres as you read?



Nagual, Codex Borgia

## Transformation

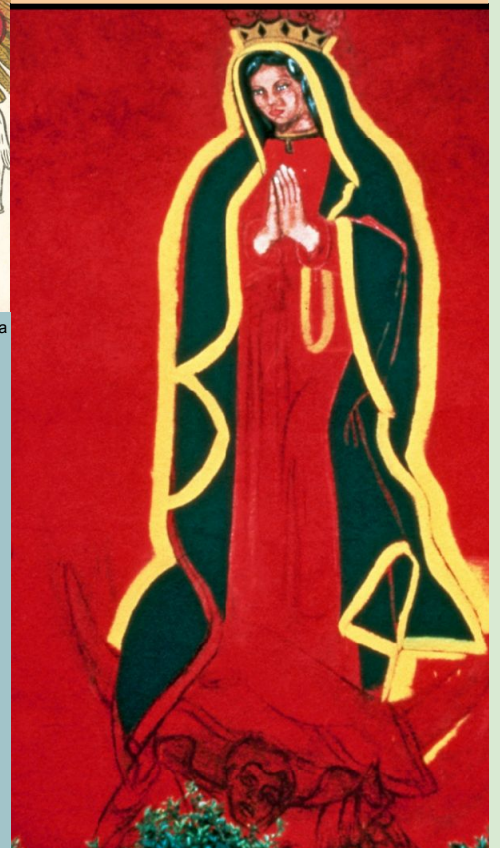
Anzaldúa is fascinated by how empty spaces in the world and within the self can allow for radical change and transformation: "She becomes a *nahual*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She learns to transform the small 'I' into the total Self" (88).

## Language / Idioma

As you begin reading *Borderlands / La Frontera*, you may be struck by how often Anzaldúa switches between English and Spanish, sometimes translating her words, and other times leaving large sections of the book untranslated.

Rather than trying to translate these passages, we encourage you to simply let the language wash over you, considering what sort of barrier or entry point it forms for you as an individual reader.

Mural of The Virgin of Guadalupe, Los Angeles: Steve Delgado





# Reading Between the Lines



Image: Alison Hawthorne Deming



Image: Aztec codex in black and red ink

In her posthumously published work, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*, Anzaldúa uses the indigenous Nahuatl word *nepantla*, or “in-betweenness,” to explore geographical and conceptual borders – not so much as rigid lines, but as fluid, productive, and indeterminate spaces of ambivalence and combination.

In *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Anzaldúa also names many binaries, but instead of accepting them, she suggests “third” spaces, or borderlands, that exist between and move beyond them. She writes that “a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and the collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle” for a more just and peaceful world (86). What do you think she means by this? Here are some of the binaries she considers, as well as the “third spaces” that emerge from them:

Spanish	<i>mestiza</i>	indigenous
U.S.	<i>la frontera</i>	Mexico
male	“half-and-half”	female
heterosexual	“queer”	homosexual

Can you think of other sets of words that Anzaldúa troubles in this way? What are some possible “third” spaces between other binaries you can recall from the text or think of in the world?

In Chapter 6, Anzaldúa also likens her book to a codex in black and red ink. She writes, “In looking at this book that I’m almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. I see a preoccupation with deep structure, the underlying structure, with the gesso underpainting that is red earth, black earth” (74). What patterns can you find across the varied sections of her book?

For Anzaldúa, writing itself is a borderland: “When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart – a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else” (80).

Check out [this short video](#) made by community members for more information on why the All-School Read Committee chose this book and how to navigate some of its challenges!

# Reimagining Women

Anzaldúa confronts the norms of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and femininity she inherited growing up and juxtaposes them with her chosen alternative expressions of matrilineal, queer, and feminist values.

In many cases, *Borderlands / La Frontera* reinterprets traditional female religious figures like *Coatlicue* and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in new and inventive ways.

Of the former, the Aztec “mother of the deities,” Anzaldúa writes, “Coatlicue depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated. Like Medusa, the Gorgon, she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (56). How does this vision of Coatlicue complement Anzaldúa’s work on binaries and borders in this text?



Image: Coatlicue statue, National Anthropology Museum, Mexico City

Anzaldúa imagines her book as female:

“It is a rebellious, willful entity, a precocious girl-child forced to grow up too quickly, rough, unyielding, with pieces of feather sticking out here and there, fur twigs, clay. My child, but not for much longer, This female being is angry, sad, joyful, is *Coatlicue*, dove, horse, serpent, cactus. Though it is a flawed thing – a clumsy, complex, groping blind thing – for me it is alive, infused with spirit. I talk to it; it talks to me” (74). Why do you think she sees it this way?

As you read, you may find instances where Anzaldúa uses strong, even shocking or objectionable language to confront the violence directed at women and queer people. What effect does it have on you as a reader of this book?



Image: Los Angeles Times

In this 1978 triptych entitled *Guadalupe*, painter Yolanda Lopez reimagines her grandmother, her mother, and herself through the iconography of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. Anzaldúa writes that *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, “like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered” (39).



# Lisa Elmaleh

Award-winning photographer Lisa Elmaleh will visit Hotchkiss for a week this fall as a guest speaker and artist in residence. Her work will remain on display in the Tremaine Gallery from October through January.

In her series “Promised Land,” Elmaleh uses an eight-by-ten tripod camera to capture the people and places of the U.S.–Mexico border. Since 2017, Elmaleh has documented the natural and artificial features of the border and has taken portraits of migrants and activists, among them the Ajo and Tucson Samaritan groups, volunteers who leave water and food for migrants in the Sonoran desert.

Elmaleh travels to shooting locations in her truck, which also contains her bed and a portable wet plate darkroom to develop photographs.



Clockwise from top right: *Moonrise over Juarez* (2021); *Dayana y Miguelito* (2021); *Nogales, Arizona* (2021); *Samuel in front of Monument Hill* (2021)



# WALLS AROUND THE WORLD

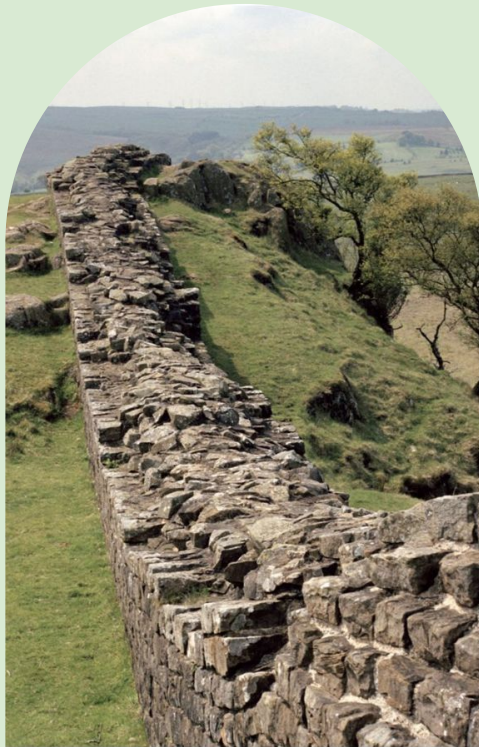


Photo: Peter Marlow

**HADRIAN'S WALL,  
ENGLAND, 122 C.E.**



Photo: AFP

**ISRAEL-PALESTINE, 2002**



Photo: Thomas Hoepker

**BERLIN WALL, 1961**



**KOREAN DMZ, 1953**



Photo: AFP

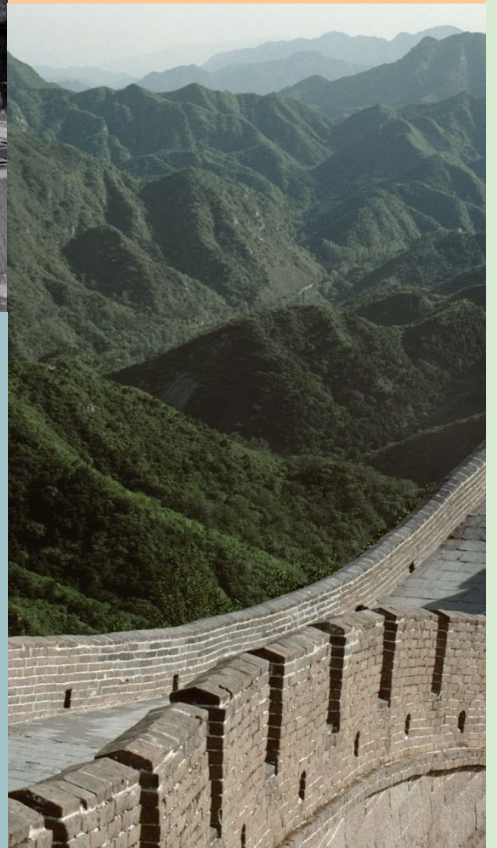
**INDIA-PAKISTAN, 1988**

Over the past few thousand years, humans have erected many physical barriers in an attempt to create artificial boundaries between groups of people.

The dates here indicate the construction of the walls pictured. While some have since been fully or partially dismantled, the wall on the U.S.-Mexico border is just one example of the many barriers that still stand around the world today.

**GREAT WALL OF CHINA,  
770 B.C. – 1878 C.E.**

Photo: Erich Lessing



# Quotations to Consider

## PROSE

Anzaldúa imagines the border as a rift, a wound in the skin of the earth: “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (17). What do you think of this image?

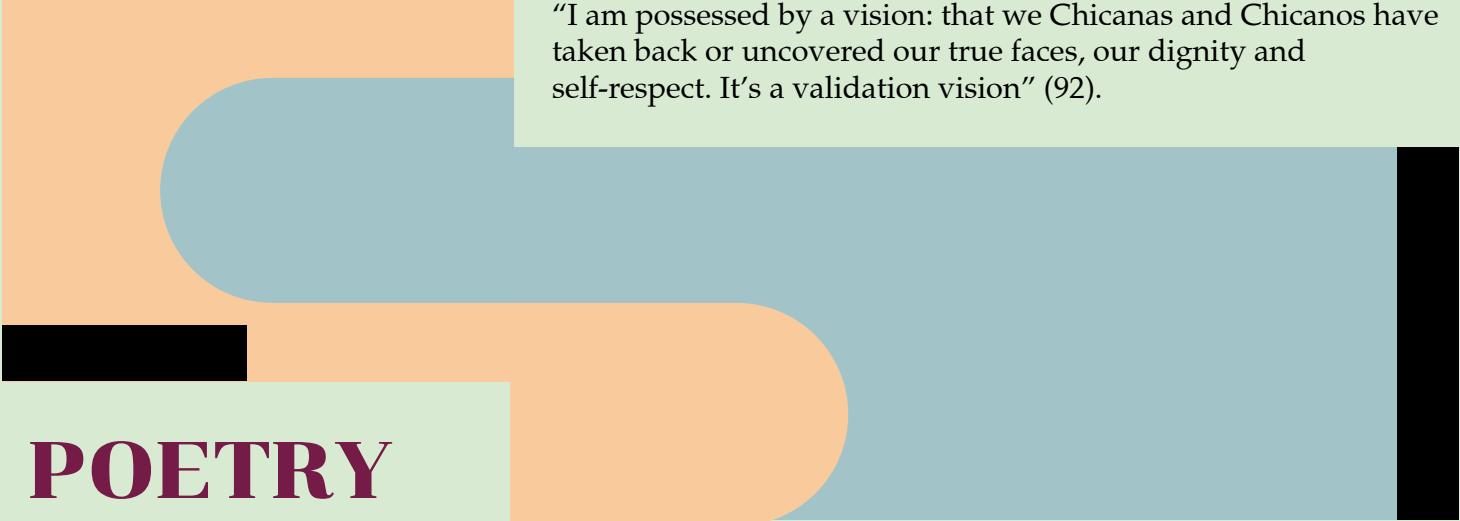
This book was written in 1987. Anzaldúa writes, “Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a a border culture, a third country, a closed country” (24). Does this quote still resonate thirty-six years later?

“*La facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface... without conscious reasoning... Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest – the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign” (47).

Anzaldúa at times deploys shocking language to jar us awake to the issues in her work. She connects this impulse to a rebellion against traditional femininity, since “having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being *mal criada*. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women – I’ve never heard them applied to men” (62). Does this shift your thoughts on her use of certain words in this text?

“Chicano Spanish is considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish. But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally... *Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir*. Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language” (63).

“If you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself... Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate... my tongue will be illegitimate” (66).



“I am possessed by a vision: that we Chicanas and Chicanos have taken back or uncovered our true faces, our dignity and self-respect. It’s a validation vision” (92).

## POETRY

“We are the holy relics, the scattered bones of a saint, the best loved bones of Spain. We seek each other” (154).

“It’s not enough / opening once. / Again you must plunge your fingers / into your navel, with your two hands / rip open, / drop out dead rats and cockroaches / spring rain, young ears of corn. / Turn the maze inside out. / Shake it. / This time you must let go.” (164-5).

“*Una mujer vaga en la noche / anda errante con las almas de los muertos*” (184).  
(An ambling woman in the night wanders with the souls of the dead.)

“Don’t give in *mi prietita* / tighten your belt, endure. / Your lineage is ancient, / your roots... firmly planted... / That sleeping serpent, rebellion... will spring up. / Like old skin will fall away the slave ways of obedience, acceptance, silence. / Like serpent lightning we’ll move, little woman. / You’ll see” (202-3).