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Cracked Spaces and Body Acts

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CRACKED SPACES AND BODY ACTS

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2010

Dedication

To Dan, my love and light

CRACKED SPACES AND BODY ACTS

by

MARIA MIRANDA MALONEY

THESIS

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Cracked Spaces and Body Acts

Month of May, 1974

On our way to see la Virgincita, to offer
ripe yarrow, bouquets of buds cut
from abuela's garden, we stop
for a photo in front of the tight-lipped
cypress. We are a blur in white organza,
our heads swollen in tulle and tansy.
And in the background, our house—
the only one for miles, rises like a birthmark
from fields once stunned with oak
and flashing flowers. In time, the land
will burst with makeshift homes and gravelly
roads, shifting from soil to salt and we
will thirst. But we'll do what we can.
In May, we'll always pray for water.

This poem is about place, reconstructed from memory. It is a poem that speaks of "...the individual past combine[d] with [the] material of the collective past" (Walter 159). This collective past bespeaks of people who share the same cultural experience, and the same place. The place is not a barrio, but a rural place where the land was once "...stunned with oak / and flashing flowers" and "...gravelly / roads...." The intent of this poem, however, is not to romanticize an idyllic and illusory past like so much of the Southwest, post-colonial literature of the first half of the twentieth century does (Padilla 43), but to speak of the hard realities that underlie the transformation of this land from "soil to salt". It is a poem that seeks to juxtapose the imagery of the romanticized Southwest—landscape, sun, silence and adobe—with the harsh realities of living in a marginalized place cut off from the center of progress and society, but it is also a poem that attempts to move from the colonized image of the

Chicano/a to the decolonization of self and community when the poetic persona notes “But we’ll do what we can / In May, we’ll always pray for water.” In other words, the speaker refuses to be a victim to her conditions, but instead seeks an interstitial space, in this case, prayer, in order to deal with the condition of living in a place that lacked running water. Prayer, then, becomes a space of dialogue with self, and not a patriarchal, destructive construct.

I was born in a place such as the one described in the poem, dispossessed and impoverished. It was a small farm town in the county of El Paso, Texas. I am, therefore, intimately familiar with the place. In the early 1970s, families in this community were mostly migrant workers, newly arrived immigrants, or first generation, working class Americans of Mexican descent. We resisted cultural and language assimilation successfully by keeping our language and traditions, from our enactments of Christmas posadas to the construction of our houses. We also built their own homes, relying on compadres and family with building skills to assist with construction. They knew enough of planning regulations to keep code enforcement at bay. The construction of a home was an ongoing process that took years to complete. There was always the risk that code enforcement officers would stop the construction, and when they did, folks like parents, waited it out until the “dust settled”, this sometimes took years. My parents’ house took almost twelve years to finish. My father, with the help of a relative, constructed the main rooms of the house from adobes they made out in our backyard. The second half, finished almost six years later, was made out of cinder block. And while the adobe half of the house kept us warm, the cinder block part of the house, not conducive to heat, highlighted the deficiencies of our house, like the lack of central heating, none of which evoked the romantic ambience that so much of the post-colonial literature alluded to. Growing up I was aware of the disparities between our houses and the houses in affluent neighborhoods. I was aware of socio-economic differences from an early age, aware that it was the dominant culture that was better off economically than we. So, we “thirst”, as the poem above notes, thirsted for a better life, but not just for a better material life, but for a life that would erase

the disparities between “us” and “them.” We wanted to be, in other words, equal, and to have the same socio-political access and power in society without giving up our language and culture. We resisted complete assimilation because we knew one culture would not be enough to fulfill us. Now, as a poet, I have inherited these experiences “like a birthmark.” I am aware that my culture is not enough to quench this “thirst,” but neither is the Euro-American culture.

Furthermore, language, too, was a barrier, but most people learned enough English to get out of farm work and into factories, retail and other blue-collar jobs outside of the community. For those adults who did not speak English, their children became the “cultural-brokers,” mediating between them and white teachers, doctors, social workers, preachers and creditors. But it was in the home, between parents and children, that culture and language negotiation was the fiercest. For instance, my mother, the guardian of my Spanish tongue, insisted on purity and corrected my Spanish as well as my father’s border slang. She also insisted that her six daughters uphold the Mexican traditions and customs, especially those associated with Catholicism. Sex, and any notions of leaving the house before marriage, was taboo. American popular culture was deemed to be a corrupting influence on us, she said, and she promptly guarded us from overexposure to it. Television was all but banned at home.

Thus, my poetic “I” was shaped inside my parents’ house, and negotiated in the classrooms and in the streets of my colonia. But I am still a poet in the making, not fully shaped, but learning to navigate in spaces of the past and the places of the present. I am still learning to negotiate memory with the now, and learning to negotiate between English, Spanish and codeswitching as I try to reach for authenticity in my poetry. I am in the middle of *Nepantla*, the Nahuatl word, coined in Anzaldúa’s work, which means the space of “in-between.” As a *fronteriza*, not only am I living in a physical place between the Mexico-U.S. border, a place of resistance, between person and land, language and culture, but I am also in the constructed space of in-between in language, culture, personal beliefs, and my parent’s and society’s beliefs. I have decided to deepen that space of *Nepantla* through poetry, the place where I can

continue negotiating language and memories so that I will not get locked into one perception of my culture, or the world, particularly those “destructive perceptions of the world that [I have] been taught by various cultures” (Anzaldúa 293), and also, so that I may “change the stories about who we are and about our behavior” (293), because when I write poetry, I am not only concerned with the self but the collective—my community and the environment. The space of nepantla is “[the] natural habitat of artists, most specifically for the mestizo border artists who partake of the traditions of two or more worlds and who may be binational” (Anzaldúa 181). Poetry, then, for me is a place of nepantla, a place where I can deconstruct and construct my mestiza identity, but poetry is also a public domain, and as a poet, I feel it is my responsibility to contribute to the collective consciousness by writing from the perspective of a witness—the poetic persona that sees the land and space of nepantla, synthesizing it through poetry. It is in the poetic place that I find the equilibrium between self, the community at large, and with other poets. It is in there that I resist, converse, resist and attempt to find resolution.

In *Cracked Spaces and Body Acts*, I attempt to unite memory and experience, and write from the space of witness. I cross, not only physical borders, but constructed borders through language and form. But I also write from memories I have inherited from my antepasados. I know, for instance, my great-grandmother was a curandera and a midwife. She used to walk for miles across the vast Durango desert collecting roots and plants for medicine. I was told this. Thus, the Durango desert becomes my ancestral home, just like the fields of California, inherited from my grandfather and father. These memories then transformed into poetry of communal quality. That is, stories passed on from generation to generation, which I access into the poetic place that is the page. But I also write from experience. I transpose images and perceptions formed by my lived experiences in the la frontera, the U.S.-Mexico border, negotiating the fragmented memory of my past with my present. Geography is the inner layer of my poetry, the foundation on which my identity, as Chicana-mestiza and as a poet, is formed. When I refer to myself as Chicana, I do as one who is born in the U.S., of Mexican ancestry, and shares geography, culture and

language with another culture, which in this case is the Euro-American culture. Mestiza, on the other hand, refers to the racial mixture—European, Mexican, indigenous, Asian, African—that represents a fifth race, a term coined by José Vasconcelos elaborated and Gloria Anzaldúa modified.

Moreover *Cracked Spaces and Body Acts* is also a narrative of identity. My identity that was formed and shaped in my community and my parents' home, and like my poetry, that continues to be formed and shaped by the present. Poetry, therefore, acts as a place where I can negotiate self, language and politics. It serves as geography, a third place where I attempt to negotiate a new history of self and community in order to “decolonized the otherness,” because as Chicana historian Emma Pérez points out in her book *The Decolonial Imagery: Writing Chicanas into History*, “one is not simply oppressed or victimized; nor is one only oppressor or victimizer. Rather, one negotiates within the imaginary to a decolonizing otherness where all identities are at work in one way or another” (7). It is in poetry where negotiation takes place but not only through imagery, but through language and form. And because I am not a historian, but a poet, I have the freedom to move in a fragmented, non-linear space, moving from the outside, meaning the physical, to the inside, or the “I/eye,” the participant and witness. My poetry attempts to move through these spaces, of construction and deconstruction, outside to in, and back out again.

From the Lens of Witness and Experience

What compels me to write from the lens of witness has to do more with the place I inhabit—the borderland, the place where two nations, two cultures and languages, evoking entanglement, transition and contact, the space of nepantla. In this place I am both an insider and outsider. I am both a witness and participant. As a witness I am the outsider, often watching the disparities and complexities of this land and my culture. For instance, the drug war across Mexico is an event that is close in proximity, only

six miles from my home, but I am not physically present or a participant of the war. I hear the news and see newspaper images of the violence daily, and on occasion, I have recorded personal accounts of people who have been directly affected by the drug war, but I have not been affected by the atrocities of the drug war personally. Therefore, I stand as a witness, and as such, I write from this lens, motivated to record and make sense of this senseless event through poetry. But I also write as a participant, an insider, as one who has experienced the joys and tribulations, and intricacies of living in the borderland. As such, I inhabit a space of experience, drawing upon fragmented memories of events that have directly impacted me, my family and my community.

The cultural contacts and interlopes in the borderland, specifically the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez borderland, have not always been relegated to the political arena but also the physical layout of the place. The evidence is seen in the geographic layout of the city of El Paso, marked by east and west. Although the population is over eighty-five percent Hispanic, the west is upwardly mobile and white. The east, including southeast, is Chicano or Latino, with some areas economically impoverished. Farther east, the desert is peppered with colonias, or communities that lack running water and sewage. It is difficult, then, as a poet who grew up in a farm town with poor infrastructure and a geographical area that was subdivided by class and race, not to write from the lens of witness, and as an insider and outsider.

I have also been both shaped and moved by events in my community. For instance, between 2004-2006, the El Paso del Norte Foundation, an organization composed of mostly powerful (and white) business leaders in El Paso, created a master plan to redevelop the downtown, historical area. The master plan was done in secrecy, according to media sources, and calls for the eminent domain to transfer land to private developers. The plan to revitalize downtown may be worthy on the surface, but it also affects more than 1,800 residents in the area known as the Segundo Barrio, an economically impoverished community whose residents have lived in the area for generations. Opponents of the plan

state the residents and small-business community in the Segundo were never consulted, arguing that the move to evacuate and uproot this community is largely driven by the historical racism and classism that exists in the community. I am politically aware of the underlying motivation that drives this organization to demolish a historical area of importance to the Chicano population. Under the auspices of revitalization, the Segundo Barrio will lose its historical significance, displacing not only a group of people, but its history. As a poet, I feel it is my duty to write about such matters. This duty is an inheritance from my poetic precursors of the Chicano/a and Euro-American, feminist literary canon.

Furthermore, with the issues of geography, it is impossible to contemplate on the land without the politics of gender, race and class. “Creativity [after all] is not quiet,” writes bell hooks in her book *belonging* (162). Similarly, Anzaldúa states that creativity is political. My poem “Plucked” was written after a young woman from Ciudad Juárez was kidnapped on her way to school, her body later found in an empty lot. The news report was brief, with little detail of the incident, or of the young lady. Both moved and angry, as well as feeling helpless, I reconstructed the event in this poem, juxtaposing the beautiful with the ugliness to evoke the irony and cynicism of violence in the first stanza:

It’s a lovely corner with the steady stream
of city pushing against the curb’s lips. This corner
blooming with discarded wrappers and toothed sketches
of girls posted on a scrawny light pole

The four stanza returns to the image of the corner, this time relying on witnesses to piece the incident together. Ironically, there were no witnesses when the real crime took place, according to the media.

Those who saw her last pointed to this corner—
she wore a cardigan, she had long hair, a pinched waist
she was waiting for the light to turn,
patiently unwrapping crackers.

By constructing the physicality of the corner, the girl's appearance and the day of the incident through poetry, I am a participant, imagining the event into being. An event that is political, because by constructing a specific reality, I am constructing into being, for the reader, another kind of reality, and that is, a reality in which this kind of violence does not exist. Perhaps this is the reason why poets across the borderland continue to write of the violence against women. The topic is inexhaustible. As poets, we want to denounce and reconstruct another reality. I want to name and keep naming this atrocity in my poetry as long as the femicides continue across the border because as poet Brenda Iijima notes in "Metamorphic Morphology Meeting in Language: P as in Poetry, Poetry Rhetorical for Election Season", "[p]oetry can actively engage blind spots—where conditioning, denaturalization and denial for instance, have buttressed the status quo, politically, socially, spiritual" (3), and I venture to say, poetically. I also want to resist silence, or muteness. As I write, I know, for instance, that the Mexican government has squelched the outcries of the families affected by these deaths through bribery and intimidation. Thus, so many of these families have fallen silent.

Of course, not all poets write from my lens nor do they write politically. Poetry is an open field and a personal place. There is no right or wrong poetry because as an art form, it is highly subjective. Nevertheless, for me, poetry offers a place where I can pause to reflect and make sense of the state of war we find ourselves in. In la frontera, the violence against women is the consequence of the drug war, a war that is rooted in issues of class, sexism and race that has plague the country for centuries. The crimes against women remain unresolved. In these circumstances, poetry not only becomes the place of refuge where I can grieve, name and record what I cannot say aloud, but to continue the conversation until the blind spots in their judicial system are filled because, as noted earlier, for me, poetry is not only an art, but a way to participate politically.

But if the place I inhabit has shaped my poetics, so, too, has experience. The German philosopher, Wilhem Dilthey, writes that “every work of great work of art must be rooted in the totality of lived experience, and must contain, as it were, both inward and outward movement of breathing process” (22). Experience is, perhaps, the nexus to place. I cannot claim to be intimate with a place if I have not experienced its sounds, smells and abandon myself to its surroundings. Experiencing an event or place with all its intricacies strengthens the sensorial memories, and long after the experience is over, what remains are fragments of the experience in memory and in the sensory organs. Our experience of life in our mind is a direct experience of life. As a poet, I can access these residues of experience in order to reproduce the image of the experience in poetry. These images, then, may feel more real to the reader than if I had not lived the experience. German psychologist, Gustav Fechner, calls this “memory after-image” (Dilthey 62), or images created from perception. That is, what residues I rescue from experience, creates my perception of the self and community. As experience accumulates, so does memory after-image. The more experiences, the more images, the more perception changes, and as a poet I can write many versions of poems out of one experience. Not only can I choose to portray these after-images as real, but I can choose to write them as shadows of reality because as Dilthey notes, “[art] is not expected to either serve our knowledge of reality or be converted to reality” (58). These shadows of reality in poetry, therefore, can be said to be at a state of “dream while awake,” or may stem from intervention of another representation. For instance, the poem “Plucked” can be considered a shadow of reality in the sense that I appropriated its root information from the media, or “another representation.” As such, the poem has retained a shadow of reality in the sense that I was not a witness or a participant. The images in this poem are constructed in the mind, and perhaps, from other sources, or other corners I have crossed many times before. Another example is my poem “Canto: The City I Love” which is a true form of shadow of reality in this collection. In this poem, the images are derived from many sources: lived, read and dreamed. They are abstract perceptions of the spaces and places I have lived. On the

other hand, my poem “While a Young Bride” is rooted in experience, but freely transformed in my mind so that what remains of experience is only a shadow of reality. By appropriating images of lived experience, and images from shadows of past knowledge, or from memory and dreams, I am able to construct a political discourse in my poetry, one that resonates with my reality.

When memories surface “[a] poet can point the way to intimate depth” (193), writes Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. As a poet, I seek to interpret those inherited memories, to negotiate experience and after-images, and images of witness. The poem, then, is the palpable, breathing offspring of the fusion of these spaces where I write from, it is an “integrated unit of opposites” (Calderón and Saldívar 62). These “integration of opposites” or elements, confront each other in my poetry that make a political theme, the overarching framework found in *Cracked Spaces and Body Acts*. But my poetry is not only based on only my perceptions, and I am not the only poet writing politically. As I noted earlier, there are many poets writing about the drug war and femicide. I join the conversation with them in order that we can make sense of the situation, and in the hope that we can move the country toward justice. But also, part of my political impulse stems from my literary inheritance. There are other Chicanas, most notably the canon of poets like Alma Villanueva, Sandra Cisneros, Lucha Corpi, Ana Castillo and Cervantes, whose poetic themes explore female roles, and debunk myths and stereotypes about the Chicana. They also explore the physical geography of the border, and their identity. They have constructed various and ever shifting Chicana identities by shaping a literary tradition that is both unique and empowering.

For instance, the poems of Cisneros voice female sexuality. At a time when Chicana sexuality was still kept under wraps at home, such as my own sexuality, Cisneros’ cracked the taboo by writing two volumes of poetry that explored issues of sexuality, writing and identity. Her poetry is simple and direct. Cervantes’ poetry, on the other hand, explores the issue of identity of the tough, young Chicana in the Mexican barrios of Los Angeles. Her poetic language is assertive and urgent. Villanueva explores

the self in relationship to the cosmos. Her forms are open, more experimental and her language is lyrical. In so many ways, my poetry parallels these poets' poetry. In my poems exploring relationships and sexuality, I hear the voice of Cisneros. In the poems that speak of community, I hear the urgency and confidence of Cervantes, and in the poems of self and cosmos, as in the poem "Canto: The City I love", I hear the lyrical voice of Villanueva.

These poets also draw from the American and European literary canon, often re-interpreting texts in order to revise their roles in the Chicano communities, and assert their existence in the American literary community. An example of a poet who has revised and reinterpreted Euro-American canon is Villanueva. Her poetry "[a]sserts its own feminine and Chicana authority within the overarching cultural framework of different--even alien and oppressive--beliefs and modes of articulation" in order "to achieve a balanced melding of corporeal life, spiritual flight, and poetic language" (Ordóñez 71). Villanueva's poetry draws from feminist theory to synthesize self and cosmos in her poetry. Cervantes, on the hand, writes as a means of protest against the patriarchal ideologies that keep the Chicana in stagnant roles. But these Chicana writers constitute only a small portion of the body of work I draw poetic inspiration. They are, however, the poets who planted the seed of resistance in my poetry. Their poetics is now part of the Chicano literary canon. Like them, I, too, write from their perspective of witness, experience and inherited memory. In *Cracked Spaces and Body Acts*, I attempt to incorporate these inherited literary ideals in a wider dialogue with other poets through form and language.

On Language

In the poetic place, I negotiate language—English, Spanish, codeswitching— but ultimately, my impulse is to preserve codeswitching, and I find that my poetic voice is stronger and confident than

when I write in only one language, Spanish or English. For instance, as in the poem “Easter Sunday, 1975”:

Decked out, como dicen, in our Easter
vestidos, patent leather shoes, eyelet ruffle
socks that made my sancas itch, we are muñecas
de aparador with satiny breasts, like mom wanted
us to be. She blamed the U.S. for our fracasos. Said
we’d be different if we’d had stayed in Mexico.
Thirty year later, two divorces, several children
out of wedlock, and a couple of mental breakdowns,
we wonder if Mexico would’ve saved us.

Interestingly, codeswitching is also associated with the usage of tough, barrio-slang Spanish. My father spoke caló, a form of barrio-slang, usually reserved for men of the barrio. It is a mixture of Spanish, English and fifteenth century Spanish, intended to be inaccessible to the “Other,” meaning the dominate Euro-American culture, but it also excluded Chicanas. I say “excluded” in the past tense because, according to Chicano Studies professor, Maria Herrera-Sobek, “[the] Chicana is no longer limited in her verbal repertoire to ‘pretty’ or ‘sweet-little girl’ memory” (Galindo 177). In other words, caló was, at one time, the language of the Chicano. However, by appropriating the Chicano language of the barrio, Chicana poets have created a space to develop their own voice. Poets like Evangelina Vigil uses caló “to utilize the full spectrum of poetic discourse previously available only to male [Chicanos]” (177). Thus, caló and codeswitching are now part of the Chicana poetical discourse, an appropriate measure given that for most of us, these languages are intrinsic to our language development and cultural identity, even when we had been asked by our mothers and grandmothers to speak like nice, young ladies.

In the poem noted above, I use the word “sancas” which means trenches, but is also slang for tobillos, or ankles. These words I picked up from my father despite my mother’s disapproval. While my mother’s Spanish connoted fluidity or smoothness, and spirality, my father’s was direct, often sounding brutal to our sensibilities. As a poet, I find that when I write of the socio-economic construction of my

community and the colonia or barrio, I employ my father's tongue. It is when I write of the "outside" that I find my voice confident and forceful; perhaps it is because I had a lifetime of knowing the physical terrain that I transfer this knowing and confidence to the place of poetry, and because my identity is strongly tied to my community. Poet Levi Romero, whose poetry is rooted in the barrio, uses caló to give the reader a closer view of the pachuco of New Mexico:

his *locura*, cocky and loud
estilo California, nothin' like *Nuevo's*
quiet and proud
back then *Taosie* wasn't a lowriding town
chale, low Impalas came from *Espa'*
I remember Rupert blurting out the window
to some *Taoseño* dudes staring us out
(excerpt from "One Last Cruise Taos Plaza")

By employing caló, I appropriate the language, a language that allows me to explore my poetic voice, my otherness, the treatise of female and male found in poetic space, but it also allows me to explore in depth the geography of the borderland.

But caló is not the only language I use in my poetry; I also use Spanish, the language inherited from my mother, a language that is filled with aphorisms, metaphor and wisdom. I use it to explore the interstitial place of female wisdom. In the poem "A Study of Green" I use Spanish and English to explore domestic violence. The poetic persona revisits her childhood neighborhood and comes across a depilated house that immediately evokes memories of couple who used to live in the house. The speaker remembers that the man used to hit the woman, but one night "cops take him away. / We hear the woman cry or sing." I weave in Spanish aphorisms, like "Borrón y cuenta nueva" and "No hay mal que por bien no venga," to signify the motherly voice of wisdom inside the speaker that allows her to understand the circumstances why the man has returned to an empty house where "Windows never washed again." In this poem, the battered wife abandons the house to begin a new life. She finds her strength in the wisdom of dichos, or aphorisms.

Poet Emmy Pérez, another poet with whom I align myself with, also codeswitches to explore the lyrical “I” in the context of language, geography and form:

I want geography – to know it like driftwood knows it. Offer new shapes for the macaw’s tongue in the fashion of precipitation. “Ahh! Ahh!” he says as a school girl pushes “Polly want a cracker” like a veteran paleta vendor. “Ahh! Ahh! Ahh!” he replies until “Whazzz up!” surfaces on the momentum of his pendulum.

(excerpt from “Ars Poetica”)

Codeswitching, however, is not exclusive to Chicanos. It is doused in poetic tradition connected to *jarchas*, a type of Arab-Hispanic lyric poetry (Callahan). Contemporary Filipino poets like Craig Santos Perez, Sasha Pimentel Chacón and Barbara Jane Perez codeswitch to explore questions of identity, culture and colonization. Codeswitching allows them to partake in fragmented and assimilated spaces, but more, codeswitching gives their poetry a quality of strength, and an assertion of political identity that is resistant to monoculture. In their poetry, I, too, share the space of *nepantla*, and my own poetic discourse of language and form.

Significance of Place and Space

Yi-Fu Tuan notes that there is a difference between the notions of “space” and “place.” Place is the space where experience takes place. It is also a function of time, and the intensity and quality of contributes to our sense of place. Place are “centers of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation are satisfied” (4). Place is an object where the body dwells, the space of lived experience. But place is also a poem because it is a poem that both the poet and reader participate as witness, experiencing words and images. Space, in contrast, is abstract perception of the world around us. It evokes a sense of freedom and spaciousness, and it is defined by the human ability

to move, by spatial location of the body in relation to objects. But space is also place where the shadow of reality dwells, my abstract perception of my lived experiences.

This theoretical approach to geographic space and place in my poetry helps me to explore how space and place function to shape reality, and like Iijima “[to] move additionally out of the sometimes clogged and claustrophobic notions that identity and the self can pose” (1). In other words, theory chases after the substantiated self that in turn grounds experience into language, language meaning poetry. Given these definitions of space and place, the home, as one example, becomes important in my poetic landscape, for when we think of home evocatively, it assumes unexpected meanings, and raises many questions we had not thought to ask. For Bachelard, the house conjures images of warmth and pleasure, but for many contemporary writers, like Cisneros, the home also serves as a metaphor of oppression and restriction.

I employ the image of home to convey the dialectic of “inside and outside, that is, *here* and *there*, integration and alienation, comfort and anxiety” (Olivares 161). Like Cisneros in her work, *The House on Mango Street*, I use the poetics of space to denote the anxiety of growing up in a marginalized community, and speak, not from the lens of a male, but a woman confined to certain roles, both in and out of the house. Encoded in the poems is always the sense of wanting to leave, to move to the *there*, and yet, like I state in the poem “A Mutt that Grounds Us,” the poetic persona returns “home with wounded souls, he’ll be there to lick our skins.” The dog becomes a metaphor for home, or place. The attachment to home is evoked in this poem, where the poetic persona cannot escape the “here.” It is as though the home is inescapable. The speaker tries to leave because she does not like the space in that place, but she returns because there is something “there” that compels her to return. She returns, however, not defeated, but ready to re-negotiate the space that she eventually accepts as place or home.

Moreover, in the prose poem “What We Know” I try to investigate the place I grew up in, as place of security and angst. The poem begins by romanticizing the space as a place “...where the city

ends and the barley begins” and that “...marginal place of sleepy fields and thin nublina awakens” but upon closer inspection, the poetic persona realizes that for all its “white summers” this place is also a space of cultural annihilation. By learning English, “words sticky like syrup,” the two sisters begin the process of assimilation that severs them from their culture, separating them from their language.

In the poem “The Persistence of Form or Two Windows, One Door, and Maybe a Back,” the poetic voice compares the building of a house to that of a religious celebration, a communion. On the surface, the building of the house is romanticized, as everyone works in “...in / solemnity, sit down a faithful / foundation”, but the poetic voice also notes that these houses are built by “spare parts”, meaning it is substandard. The substandard house, then, gives the reader a clue of the community that is, perhaps, improvised. But the substandard house is also symbolic of what Tuan notes as “[a] house that is not achieved once to be enjoyed thereafter” (104). This house, unlike Bachelard’s comfortable house that beacons the inhabitant to daydream, is in constant flux of construction and repairs, and the inhabitants of this house are aware of its transitory nature within the environment, which at any time, can annihilate the house as a shelter of safety. That is, at any given moment, a hard wind may sweep its roof away, or a flash flood may knock its walls down. The key, then, is to persist in construction until the house achieves a form that is sturdy and evocative of comfort. But the hope that the house will weather the storms is engraved in the ritual of sacrifice: “We stir blood sausages and tripes / battered in beer...” but this also denotes that the act of building is a religious act (Tuan 104).

The builder of his own house is aware of participating in a momentous occasion. “The built environment, like language, has the power to define and refine sensibility. It can sharpen and enlarge consciousness” (Tuan 107). A poem, too, is an act of building, an act of spirituality, for it forces the poet to commit one’s whole being, mind and body, to capture the ideal. A poem, like a built environment, or a house, has the power “to heighten the awareness and accentuate, as it were, the different emotional temperaments between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’” (Tuan 107). It has the power of intimacy and exposure, of

private life and public space, and it has the power to de-construct and re-construct the past. The poem is physical, it is a place where the eye, the mind rests, takes repose from the day.

But just a poem can be constructed to house the poet's creativity, the poem, like the house, is transitory. Not all poems can withstand the test of time. For instance, the political poem is at the mercy of time, history and other people (Orr 2). Unless it is well-written, where the poetic language takes precedence over ordinary political language, it will suffer annihilation just as a substandard house in the vices of a bad storm. I often wonder if by writing political themes, I run the risk of my poetry becoming a transitory house. It is a real concern to me, and yet, as a poet who is learning the craft, I feel that *Cracked Spaces and Body Acts* places me in dialogue with other poets and perhaps, for now it is enough.

Traditions and Perspective

Just as lived experience, culture, literary inheritance and language is shaping my poetic identity so does geography. I have inherited love for the land and its features, from my parents and abuelas who were all farmers and curanderas, relying heavily on the land to make a living. My father taught me how to look at the night sky with awe. His stories of his youth spent in California picking fruit alongside his brothers and sisters are vivid, filled with images of sound, smell and color, so that I have also inherited the California fields of his memory, and his migrant identity. Because of his oral stories, doused in the senses, my poetry, too, moves heavily with imagery and oral traditions. I want the reader to experience the event, or the land, in the closest possible manner. One can argue that much of the impulse—the tendency to romanticize—also comes from the post-colonial literature of the Southwest in the first half of the twentieth century, when Latino (or Chicana) writers, particularly from New Mexico—Cleofas M. Jaramillo, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca—inscribed in their narrative the aesthetic, European perspective of

myth and romance of the Mexican culture in the Southwest. Writers like Charles F. Lummis, D.H. Lawrence, Paul Horgan, Alice Corbin, and many others, re-invented or reconstructed their version of Mexican culture in their narratives (Calderón and Saldívar 46). I cannot apologize for reading and assuming some of the aesthetics from this era since much of the literature of Southwest at school was authored by white writers. This was the literature I read in my elementary school days. Literature from the Chicana/o perspective was rare at our school library. Also, the literary list I was introduced to during my formative school years also included poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, Langston Hughes (who is precursor of prosody in my poetics), and Edgar Allen Poe, whose poetry served as windows to other worlds that I was not familiar with. While Millay was known for exploring themes of feminism, as a child I remember her best in poems where she evokes the landscape to explore other themes. In the poem “Spring” the poetic persona talks about experience, and how, Spring with all its beauty is not enough, for “you can no longer quiet me with the redness / of little leaves opening stickily / I know what I know.” (Poetry Foundation). The poem is filled with sensorial imagery and her poetic lines are both enjambed and end-stop, long and short lines, in contrast to most traditional forms written during that time. Similarly, I remember Hughes’ poetry best for its prosody, and not so much for its socio-political content. From these poets, I have inherited the aesthetics in my poetry: form and prosody.

I also draw my literary inheritance from the Chicana writers of the 1980s like Cisneros, Villanueva, Castillo, Cervantes and the theoretical feminist works of Anzaldúa. Their narratives are symbolic, political acts in the social, political platform and in the American and Chicano literary canon, and in academic studies of gender and race. My own poetry is strongly rooted within their framework. These poets handled subjects, such as sexuality and gender roles, with such ease and confidence, articulating their protest against the patriarchal conclave that had absorbed their culture, homes and literary circles and texts, for so long. These marginalized Chicanas, who had been excluded from publication both by American and Chicano presses (Bruce-Novoa 86), were writing from their

experiences of living in the barrios of Chicago, California and Texas, and under paternal households and classrooms. Geography and issues of gender, race and class seemed to be inseparable subjects in their poetry. Later Chicano literary canon articulated the Chicana narratives as works with “a fresh vision of self and society; they [Chicanas] have opened an alternative cultural space, a heterogeneous world, within which their protagonists no longer act as unified subjects, yet remain confident of their identities” (Leal 78).

In other words, what surface out of 1980s from Chicana narratives is a proclamation of self within a cultural and political context, and like our Chicano writers who appropriated their narratives of the barrio, the Chicana was now writing her narrative into the canon of Chicano literature, appropriating writing as her own, participating in the American literary canon.

But times have changed and our political and societal issues have also changed. With technology and market globalization, borders have been redefined. A border is no longer a physical wall or barbed wire fence. It is not stagnant but moving, continuously redefining the space we find ourselves in. In la frontera, we find ourselves crossing the border daily, not just physically but mentally whenever we speak to our loved ones who live on the other side, or al otro lado, or when we encounter people who cross over from the other side, or when we find ourselves following the media stories of other wars in other borders. Each time we reflect upon our encounters with other people from other borders, our perceptions shifts, our borders become porous.

As such, the Chicano community discourse has also changed. We are no longer isolated from the rest of the world, although some communities, such as colonias, still remain cut-off from the center of political and economic discourse. The Chicano/a discourse now reaches across our physical, geographical border. We find ourselves entrenched in war in the Middle East, gripped by the narco-wars and femicide across the border in Mexico, and political instability in Mexican states such as Chiapas, and other countries in Latin America. Writers and artist find solidarity with countries, communities and

peoples, who like us, have experienced colonization, classism and racism. As a Chicana who grew up with a strong Mexicana identity, it is difficult for me to ignore the fate of my Mexicana sisters across the border, as it is equally devastating to hear the fates of women under extremist Islam rule. In my poem “State of Affairs” I address the issues plaguing our world, beginning with the continuous illegal border crossings across the Arizona desert that has left many Mexicanos in the U.S. estranged, but also going on to address the war in Iraq and the devastating wars in Sudan, Somalia and Rwanda, and subsequent consequences. The environment, too, is a recurrent subject of my poetry. In the poems “Garbage” and “Tourist After the Oil Spill” I “see” the landscape strangled in trash and oil, and what I posit here is Joy Harjo’s claim that so much of our muteness or detachment from our environment has to do with language colonization. She states that when people are separated from a significant part of their culture or language, a muteness or silencing is transposed onto the environment (Bryson). In the two poems I mentioned, I attempt to evoke this muteness.

As a poet of witness, I want to capture the experience of my borderland consciousness, meaning that I want the poem to name the complexity of my female position in relation to my Chicano community and Chicana identity, and also my position in socio-political arena of the dominate culture and in wider global context. But I also want to conceptualize constructed borders through form. To this I have turned to my contemporary feminist, and experimental and avant-garde poets who use form to create a framework where they can explore their respective themes, be it sexuality, language, imperialism or globalization. By widening my poetic aesthetic, I am aligning my poetics with contemporaries like C.D. Wright, Anne Carson, Juliana Spahr, Reyes, Harryette Mullen, Gabe Gomez, Brenda Coultas, Edwin Torres, Rosa Alcalá, Gloria Alvarez, Emmy Pérez, Pimentel Chacón, and the late Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, thus, bringing my poetry into what Anzaldúa calls “a new tribalism,” a poetics that attempts to be more inclusive, and that is “based on many features, and not solely race” (Keating 283). Poets like Spahr in her poetry collection *This Connection of Everyone with Lung*, shifts

between local and global, the public and private, and the individual and social. Her form is prose and lyrical, and she connects two long poems to question her readers on political responsibilities after the September 11 terrorist attack in New York City. Likewise, Wright uses hybrid forms to open the discussion across borders, particularly in her collection *Rising, Falling, Hovering*, that questions to responsibility to others in a world engulfed in war. She moves readers across physical borders, from Iraq to Mexico. The late Kyung Cha like Anzaldúa, uses experimental forms to reconstruct her countrywomen's and personal history, and explore issues of fragmented memory. Poets use form is used to move across the spaces of memory and history. By crossing borders of form, these poets construct or evoke the crossing of the physical borders. Thus, their poetry becomes a mediation of not only the self, but the state of global affairs. I attempt to move through spaces of memory in my poem "Holiday at the Outskirts" by using form that is evocative of fragmented memory. The poem is comprised of four fragmented segments that move across the page. In my poem "The Business of Violence: 12 Year Olds Record Their Stories" I move from fragment to verse, in an attempt to move from the "I/eye" to the student's personal stories of violence in Ciudad Juárez. In these poems the theme follows form.

Kim Whitehead, author of *The Feminist Poetry Movement*, states that it is the borderland consciousness that allows Anzaldúa "[to] cross poetic form and genre and issue linguistic challenges as well as to reaffirm the need to name a knowing and known self that survives and even thrives in the margins" (113). Furthermore, in Anzaldúa's work, I found the possibilities of innovation of form and language that I needed to express my border consciousness. Anzaldúa explores fragmentation and "destabilization of self and culture in cross-genre pieces" (Whitehead 114). My own poetry explores fragmentation, particularly when the poetic persona dwells in the domestic space of motherhood and relationships, where, perhaps, it is the space in my personal life where I encounter the most fragmentation, and where I relate to other women. My poem "The Tupperware Woman" written in four fragments, explores the conflict of identity within the context of motherhood and marriage. The poetic

persona finds herself “broken beautiful” and the kitchen container, used for storing leftovers, is the metaphor of the self, a self that questions her role as wife as merely functional. In Anzaldúa’s poem, “The Occupant,” the poet challenges the conventional concepts of identity and relationship in the lines, “His head’s too snug in mine / the pressure’s making my skull plate flap / like the cover of a boiling kettle” (Keating 22). “The Occupant” is written in stanzas, juxtaposing enjambment with end-stop lines, long and short poetic lines, and single declarative poetic line dividing the two long stanzas that states: “One of us has to go”. While the poem is perhaps one of Anzaldúa’s more conservative poems in form, it does help to illustrate her ability to cross over poetic form, and return to more traditional forms with ease. Also, the combination of textual strategies employed by Anzaldúa is directly related to what I noted earlier, and that is, that form appears to be directly correlated to precariousness of her position in the socio-political context. To her, then, form is “[a] reckoning with the places she has come from—and lived on the edges of—as well as the raw material for constructing a new home, a new consciousness, as a woman” (Whitehead 114).

Furthermore, Anzaldúa, moves toward a synthesis of identity and “some sense of a surviving self in life and poetry” (114). She also explores voice, autobiography and history, prose and poetry, cultural and the personal. What resonates most for me is “synthesis of identity” within poetry. As I noted earlier, poetry is an extension of the self, and a self which participates in and constructs a world. At times, this self is not in sync with reality, and it is only through poetry that the self fuses with the real, or the world. When the self experiences a rift with reality, or as Harjo points, separates from his or her culture or language, a muteness occurs within the individual. Poetry is the space where synthesis of self and reality happens.

Drawing from Anzaldúa’s poetics, I, too, explore and cross over poetic form, finding often, it is form that determines the content, but this is not always the case. Content also determines form. For instance, in my poems “Looking at Her Father” and “I Dream of California” I move away from

fragmentation. The form is more compact and relies on prosody to carry the poem through. The content, too, addresses the father. The father represents the traditional, the canon, and of course, head of household. The form is in synthesis with the subject, compact. However, in the poems, “What We Know” and “Holidays at the Outskirts”, where the poetic persona experiences economic and language destabilization, I employ prose and fragmentation. By employing forms that are more experimental, it pulls my poetry away from the canonical tradition, and places me in dialogue with feminist and experimental poets who are writing from, perhaps, the same perspective that I am, and that is, of self-definition and witness, to postmodern acknowledgment of fragmentation of the self. When I refer to postmodern, I am only defining it in the narrow context of the experimental works of language poets, such as Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein, and not the postmodern poetics referred to poets writing after World War I, or as Whitehead defines, poets writing “upon the end of the reign of the high modernist Ezra and Pound” (116).

One of the features the postmodern poet employs is irony and parody to subvert its source. It is here that I part ways with Anzaldúa, for according to Whitehead, Anzaldúa employment of history “[is] never parodic or ironic” (116), instead, “[she] call[s] upon precise recollections of histories of domination [...] and in doing so, [relies] on subjective voice and experience to correct the historical record and (re)establish the historical presence of [her] marginalized ancestors” [116-7]. Thus, Anzaldúa’s approach to history intersects with the postmodern approach, but extends beyond postmodern (Whitehead 116). My own approach to history, and other themes, in my poetry has traces of the parodic and ironic, as in the poem “In English Class” and in the poem “Easter Sunday, 1975” where the speaker addresses the idea that Mexico would have been a safer place to raise a family, given the present day circumstances that country finds itself in, the speaker wonders if “Mexico would have saved them.”

Furthermore, the fragmented and nonlinear, multilingual and prose poetry written today is as much about aesthetics as it is about resistance to new formalists. The impulse to move away from canonical traditions is rooted in my geography, cultural identity and language. It is rooted in the past as it is in the present. Yet, like the past that I embrace in my poetry, I, too, embrace the canonical poetic traditions. I cannot be a poet in dialogue in the present without first having to understand the past. I cannot write from a lens of resistance if I do not understand what it is that I am resisting, nor can I claim to bridge poetical borders if I do not embrace canonical tradition with other contemporary schools of poetry, such as experimental, feminists and language poetics. As poet, I “thirst” for knowledge, for language, for imagery, and it is only by fusing and resisting my Chicana identity with my Euro-American education, and by both blending and resisting the poetic traditions with the current poetic discourses that I feel fulfilled as a poet, or at least, feel as if I am moving steadily toward fulfilling my destiny as a poet.

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Moonless. Starless.

Falling snow.

Mountains edging across a barren landscape.

The stars depicted on stones.

She sleeps. The soldiers nearby watch her closely.

A hand slips across a small breast, a thigh. She stirs.

The train strains to a stop. Sighs. The soldiers call out the her name. In a single line, they file out of the train cart, spill into the fisted night. Tonight the unnamed settle back into a hungry sleep. The train

pulls away with a grunt then speeds across the vast landscape. The train in full speed is shorter. Such are the brain's mechanics.

Cupping Spiders

today, pen split, meditative eye, eye unmoving, inward, remembering imprecise memory. splitting in two: white/word, silence/red. from the corner, a twitch. a dot falling. an acrobatic spider, in mid air. stretching its miniscule body. startled. arm extends. memory forgotten. palms cup as if to capture. the spider trapped between two. if the hand wanted. if to crush, dismember it. to remember the. letting go. if to study the fragmentary body. the leap it goes. the jig it pleasures. the want to discover. how it leaps. goes. leaps. forward jumps

Click

You tell stories and I hear your tongue click at the end of a line
as a key clinks and claps inside the mouth of a keyhole, click
as a cricket's thighs rub against each other for want of love.
I listen with half ears: one leaving the room from where we stand,
to the kitchen where my sisters' chatter has lost the clicking
of chimes, and I tune you out. You say I don't love you enough,
never have, not long enough to listen to an old man once young,
tramping on his father's soil to the tractor's groans. Such deep
slicing of earth, into the mouths and entrails of sleeping beetles,
their carcasses gutting out, damp, into a struggling sun. Click
and I see your tongue's tip slip between your teeth the color
of buff, and I think this is not a daughter's love for her father.
In this you are right. This is not the ear that wants to hear
your acerbic tongue click, click, click its way back into
a heart. This is not the beetle you can wield, command
to wake to a new dawn, not with a click, your tongue.

In July

a twist of dry wind on charcoal leaves. epileptic sun, cranberry color, no chance of rain. last summer the last almond tree died, half wit, curled under three digits and rising. it's said in the desert death is a snap twig away. desert people live on the hem of ambiguity. we check the sky like an assembly line: a smudge, a particle, a bruise, the equivalent of maybe. gnaw at the stripped bone of distant thunder. like inchworms hanging from grassblades, we toss our heads. blind and frantic, wearing out our days in panic.

One Day in San Anton

Left El Paso in a rush to meet you
under the cottonwood trees
Eight hours later I'm here,
clothes clinging to my body
in the sweltering heat, in the stench
of rotting food in alleys. Before I say
those gringos forgot to record the true
story in books you kiss me once, twice,
say you have a bit of history to make
on your own and you unbutton
my blouse, dart your tongue to my nape's
groove, pressing your hips to mine.
I remind you I'm Mexican and you are
a gringo, and there's the question
of payback for the lands, but you say
there are more victories to be had
and this time it won't be a damn fort.
But Christ, how I want to make you pay
for the wrongs done to my people,
to the land. For now, I'll turn the other
cheek and watch the Alamo's hybrid walls
rise from your window. I wrap my legs
around your waist, close my eyes, shutting
the voice that whispers malinchista.

Language

you say I speak
in many languages
when I put words on
paper like shriveled
leaves falling and you see
letters on yellow
grass then absorbed
back into the light
like water
like all my life
disengaged
from the self as if
the joints in my body
don't belong to the
ligaments holding me
together

you say I write
with my tongue in case
the syllables get stuck in
the bowels wanting
to speak through
the eyes blinding me
like stone with no sense
but wait for the elements
of weather and when I write
in these languages you want
to live in the white space
in the rock with me

Give her soul, she'll create a time bomb, destroy
form, bastardize the language and paint Lupes on stucco
walls. She'll hang zarapes from doorways, and sing her native songs.

this child old,
this child dignified
this child insolent
this child waiting,
waiting,
waiting
this child rises

Teaching a Non-Native to Roar

First,
warm up your tongue fold
in half flutter and curl relax
scale the tongue's tip bend it to the gums
turn the teeth or
your lips between
folds, press down
hard, until the rah
 and rew or
 ru sit
in the right place (the part that contains the tooth socket)
then vibrate, breathe out
and soon you will ree,
your r's will go
purring Remember
stick to it don't think
your mouth wasn't built
for it There's no genetic reason: color or country
why everyone can't rrrr.

In English Class

Courtney,
(we mispronounced 'Corny')
teaches us not to add
the “e” in front of the word
story but we do when we say
this is [e] stupid [e] story
and we say she’s f-u-c-k-ulty
for wanting to put our mouths
on hers (even if it’s just metaphorically)
to mark the threshold
of the word’s beginning
but we are happy with
omission as if a subject is
always necessary, as if
our boundary is meaning
less when we say we want
to parkquear our cars
that is really what me mean

What the Thunder Said: On Reading The Wasteland

I lost track of images. Heard my voice, loud, following a line, the harshness end, ending in i-n-g, and words repeated, like so many, so many, shadow, shadow, lady, lady. I heard the lament, the roar: I could not, I was neither, I knew nothing of, and the rush and anxiety in the: O O O O, HURRY PLEASE IT'S TIME! HURRY PLEASE IT'S TIME! Then the music (this must be something, a sort of meter I can't articulate) coming, that ta tata, ta tata, ta tata, louder, drilling me to the end, to the Weialala leia, to the convulsions of burning, burning, burning. I was fooled by long lines, thinking of shortcuts, distance, struggling to pronounce the x, z, the y, and all the Ts, so obvious and present with yearning. The many lists of Pause. Phlebas. Phoenician. The need to kneel and pray. The need for winding, burying in water, rain, mountains, drink, rock, air, grass, chapel. *DA*. Stop. *DA*. Stop. A dictation. *DA*. Stop. *DA*. To the final running, my last breath.

Containment

Pick the tart flood

to sieve wound up
my words sweetly
and listen to the skin scab
over the puncture

Hold there fast, where
your words unless it be
your words where

words are gravity and the cave
is fat where the flood
flows upward where
your language and
mine never flow any.

If

if and if I'm bees and where if

I was migration

or the eaten palm thinning

or if I was the falling changes

as changes as beaten to the

or even worse

if I'm me in ways

nothing but me more than thinning

but way ahead, or away or the hands

open to remains

to the *cornea* (a word inserted arbitrarily)

ready even with you to

the many words

and if I'm nectar and

if I'm winged or fall or

I am steady too, to

thoughts. Will I hear

you follow your violet

or hear not the unchanged

but the before me

shrinking the you

“How much longer?” She asks quietly. Her eyes wide open.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s been fourteen days,” she says.

“Soon, they said. One more day.”

She smiles sadly, tugs her gray blankets under her chin.

Shadows from two sticks are always different lengths. This is how we know the earth’s surface is curved. This is how we know the ships come up from the horizon. This is how we know.

While Making Split-Pea Soup

jaundiced-bellied, the caterpillar slips soundly on tile
floor, ignored. a second reveals movement, detectable.
in a pause. eye pinches. mouth slices. hand splitting peas
stops. into focus, the laborious glide. renounces like six
eyelets resolve. hinging on a curtain's seam. as if to hide.
as if never a minute life. pupil retracts and the knife resumes
nipping. the pudgy hand swathed in colors. spilling
with curiosity, picks up the prize. the caterpillar's fate
unnoticed by the larger hand holding the knife.

Message

1

eyes closed stretched limbs stiff
on a bed you died a sweet death
at the wake of sky thick black smoke,
severed breasts & semi-automatics
discharged by fractured children
& santa muerte cocaina strung
devotees in sects that butcher
& sacrifice for the faithful
promise cocaine of clichés:
big house big truck big
stamp of drug lords carved
on bones to scare hell out
of old ladies with a message:
keep your prayers flags
anthems rallies this won't do
the children & women
on the way to dust.

2

abuela, my love, it's a good thing you
died & everything is just like
the last: dark is unpunished
while the sun doesn't touch deeper
than the skyline. I pray the way
you taught me:

*Dear Lord, send a spiral down of whoop ass
upon those who defecate your country.*

amen.

3

tears of mothers, swell
of flesh, piss of dogs,
flags of pride, bullets
of lords, ache
of grandmothers & armies
starved mother country
who guards your streets
of cocaine & decay?

A Lesson in Dying

this morning, a nature walk, before the raptor frights
scorpions into submission. before the invisible sun scurries
the rattle back. three blisters, circle a one dead fly. how
it died? the child asks. it has no business here one fly. one dead
fly. one lousy dead is a black fly. no business except flew here
to die. in the distance, a roadrunner, frozen except for the quickened
eye. watching the blisters round. behind the brush, a child. awed
to see beetles collapse. they all come here to die

The Business of Violence: 12 Year Olds Record Their Stories

*This is what was recorded Two days
we talked These children who came everyday
from across the border to learn English*

[from efrain]

He is down eating lint, the cat's white
hair. The soldier's boots are steel against
his head, the trigger finger is business
and there's the beat heaving heavy on
the chest to slow him, to see feathers,
to taste the salty grout, his neck stiff
lips locked. For now no one rots behind
bars, no one dies.

*Later, other nights, the soldiers returned, took his
father, stole the family's belongings. I did not see him
for five days, I did not see him again.*

[from elizabeth]

In the space we were confined
my tongue is back to the throat the man said if we screamed, they shoot us
It's stiff like
when pronouncing, it hurts

Plucked

It's a lovely corner with the steady stream
of city pushing against the curb's lips. This corner
blooming with discarded wrappers and toothed sketches
of girls posted on a scrawny light pole

In this corner, the red light hangs from coiled
wire in mid street, the leaded sky waits
for the infinite red to turn green

Last week, on her way to school, she waited
here—the sun was a hulk, the dew in the
sidewalk's cracks and in the kindest moment
of morning, she disappeared

Those who saw her last pointed to this corner—
she wore a cardigan, she had long hair, a pinched waist
she was waiting for the signal to turn,
patiently unwrapping crackers

State of Affairs

1

When the snake sleeps,
a woman slips by the metaphor of a river
In the palm of desert, she is a stranger
and the sun with an unnamable face calls
the rolls, claims the hour
as the hawks circle by

2

Between the thumb
of dust and rain, the clatter
of hundreds swirls above
the market place. All humanity is
visible at this hour
A bomb detonates,
a woman screams, a man
deconstructs the art of details

3

A halo rises from grass rooftops
Boys hidden in ashes leave
the village, survive on mud:
urine mixed with sand and in
the line of a border, they
leave fragment of bones
It is not uncommon for boys
to bury their brothers

Tourists After the Oil Spill

We arrive in the break
of light, in the high tide of emerald
waves ballooning, splintering against the shore
Here the sand is refined sugar
The sky a tacit blue
Curling our bare feet in sand despite
the no swimming warning, we pick
sea shells sticky, sea weed flaccid
and blonde, gummy tar balls the size
of palms and sand dollars

Later, this is what we see:

Conservationists and clean-up crews studying
gray skies for fair weather, all day tossing tar
in bags like corn A few tourists, like us
hopeful on the beach, wait. For what?
Clean waters?
Later, when the shore is humming with
bulldozers turning sand, we gather our umbrellas,
wipe oil from our toes
This is the last our children
will see, will record

Inventory: Garbage on one square mile of desert plot off Horizon Blvd.

A couch, lilies fading slipping off the side of a dune. A black crate and hubcap with pea-size dents juxtaposed on a quivering Sotol. Dark glass in geometrical bits scattered to simulate puzzle in progress, and a pink, Barbie sports car, missing front wheel, found two yards away. Growing thin hairs of grass in grooves for pinning to dowel. A 20 ounce Styrofoam cup hooked to yucca's needle, deterrent for spiketail, vantage for thrasher. Concrete slaps, 3x4, 5 inch deep, jagged-edged possibly from forced uproot. Each boasting an artist rendition of happy face, one missing an eye, one missing a smile, another protesting in bubble: Fuck you. A 10-gallon, plastic container black color, kissing what appears to be a mattress as evidence in yellow, foam core spilling onto snakeweed. Its ticking flapping in dry wind, smart in faded rosebuds. No sign of urine or blood stains. Remaining frame is good for kindling or squatters. Other trash: a bottomless chair.

On Route 290

A type of Juniper. Nothing clear and cut. Bikman Organic Farm then Bell Farms. What's ahead? Bogs D'Arc Lane. Corn and more shucks of corn and in between no shaft of light. In the hurricane sky. Everything is bigger in Texas. Ask the trailer man who t-boned my sister at an intersection.

We are in Klaus Lane now across seventy-seven belts of acres. We slaughter down this country lane, zoned for BP, KFC, DQ, HEB. Stop at the Breakfast Basket for biscuits and gravy. She was banged up, a sketch of round cheek and broad nose on the windshield.

Ahead is Dog Trail through Watermelon Fest on Old Potato Road. Here, a trickle of goats. Horns and Longhorns. There's Friendship Cemetery with tongues of stones and water holes. Said she was on her way to pick up a buddy flying in from Tombstone.

Look. A row of windmills. The orange glow of corn. Soon to be subdivided.

In Gilding, close to Whistle Stop next to Magnolia, the trees are fatter. This is God's Country. All trucks enter here. The driver had a history of depression. He was caked with amphetamines. He was on parole.

We stop at Carmine. Rows of antiques line the shafts of roads. At Round Top, the main street, white cows linger on Memory Lane. Before she passed out, she called mother. Said she was afraid or frightened but more than anything scared. Could she fly home?

We take the shortcut to Crossover. Hempstead skirts Heartbreak. Turtle Bayou drowns in Trinity Waters. And the little humped trees in Winnie clamor under the cat calls of cicadas. She said she remembers nothing except her knees stuck in the dashboard. That, and the smell of rain in the desert.

Month of Mary, 1974

On our way to see la Virgincita, to offer
ripe yarrow, bouquets of buds cut
from abuela's garden, we stop
for a photo in front of the tight-lipped
cypress. We are a blur in white organza,
our heads swollen in tulle and tansy.
And in the background, our house—
the only one for miles—rises like a birthmark,
from fields once stunned with oak
and flashing flowers. In time, the land
will burst with makeshift homes and gravelly
roads, shifting from soil to salt and we
will thirst But we'll do what we can.
In May, we'll always pray for water.

Easter Sunday, 1975

Decked out, como dicen, in our Easter vestidos, patent leather shoes, eyelet ruffle socks that made my sancas itch, we are muñecas de aparador with satiny breasts, like mom wanted us to be. She blamed the U.S. for our fracasos. Said we'd be different if we would have stayed in Mexico. Thirty years later, two divorces, several children out of wedlock, and a couple of mental breakdowns, we wonder if Mexico would've saved us.

Jupiter has moons.

How could mathematical equations maintain a perfect earth?

One day she will know. One day she will find out.

One day she will write the perfect poem

I can no longer remember
a minute I was young, fed
or the morning before when artists lined
the streets with patriotic
colors on acrid fuse sidewalks
of pipeline gas raw across
avenidas and bridges where fronterizos on foot
carried weaved handbags or a child or
a bad smell of something going
amuck and poison hearts picked up
stench making its way down gutted alleys
where dogs and gangs mark territory with cross-coded
words and mythologies transform reality into tattooed
arms and peek-a-boo cleavages, imprints of hearts:

amo amor te amo
your name here between a red-dripping
heart two swords a tear drop luna
sol anchor your soul here in grooves
of sun baked skin among Aphrodite and Tlazolteotl

say something bleeding heart!
it is late and the night grows violet and unrecoverable
legions swallow my breath, my words

like dying is

what it is:

clemencia castigo

I open my eyes my lashes heavy with dust
or did I awake in a drunk stupor
like blind and bottomless
if this is fiction or if this is cryptic gravity will it fail me
 then what?
how much deeper will I sink into a body nullified?
or will I emerge in a chinaberry street with silver blue pigeons
flapping around gutted papayas, crazy
over pan and aguas frescas?
will I awake, wake to this star debris like thick
mascara weighing my vision to rolling darkness
like hills and nebula like wet manatees against skin
that never forgets skin

lie to me sweet darkness, tell me I am breath
warm as sun as light as swings as merry-go-rounds as tongues as chords as arteries
and cells as marrow as urine as blood flow warm between my thighs

tell me I am skin and bones as stones to rain to dust to cotton to grass to bird to
swoon me away from this fragrant(less) garden
to touch a body pumping breath craving liquid like seeking sex
to the blue lights where my city drowns its sorrow and fears
in melancholy laments of old men

time is eternity
my voice is flatulent this voice
of timbered cell phone ringtone
lucky to speak two tongues I can
no longer hear myself
with the hissing and sonic
of waves usurping my vocal chords

I dream I think as sweet as you, madre,
dreamed of angels, dark
madonnas buoyant that transgressions
will sweep the filth of the cities below
with streets scintillating
like phony jewels and the stench of pillage rising
 gunning down with putrid(fication) celestial bodies
 as it is done
 in front of
 cathedrals where mothers
 gather to pray for clemencia

as it is done under
marketplace canopies
where people gather
for fruit and prayer, all
shoulders to Mecca

all eyes to god
all voices to heaven
my silence joins
the viscous tragedy
and senseless songs

such is the stench of heaven:

smoke tar shit rot

is it my body?

is it the inertia that bores me

no body against mine

no voice over mine

no obscurity or glory

lightness and this endless

insomnia is unbearable

I pounce upon the mattress
time a grievous
matter to me to find
an element that will return
my sun-damaged skin to plump
and firmness of twenty
the secret to hold me intact

on the mattress my knees give out
I fall the black holes
open their hungry mouths

[isn't this what you wanted,
to be swallowed?]

but I know better, I've driven
the streets of Juárez

I vacillate with turns, twisting
my arms and legs like gears
avoiding the oncoming light
the hell loose inside the brilliance
inside the black hole its center
a deep sea monster bating me
with sin, the dangling
worm that glows, saying
"Come here."

I avert my eyes the way my ancestors did
not out of respect
but so as not to stir up more shit
I've come from cities where there is enough
crap, enough cocaine to rival
star dust up here

open my mouth. ash-star taste. rock debris. snippets of human waste: intimacies and latex shreds. the silence and howl. the dream and nightmare. sweet fury and core. and border. lament and song. and drug-induced America and Aztlan under my feet. I think warm is a strange orange: the brown skin I possessed, jeweled and pungent lime. drop dead gorgeous gold, golden sublime. ripe for this heaven beading. to wear around moons. hallowed this body be in spanglish, bleeding blue. for what? I can never have you again, body: oh, earth! desert! río! oh, salt-brown skin of diosas!

I lived a planetary
life in singularity
in the knot of
complacency in the caucus
of the republic party; at the whim
of cultural traditions how Anzaldúa
would scoff what I've consumed
when all my mind, my skin wanted

I blow a neutrino out of the way [this is what is has come to]
think of Levi writing and riding
on the wingspan
of a '57 Impala [the last poem I read on earth]

think of rolling r's:

las rucas, las rocas
los pachucos, las pachangas
el chuco, and I am suddenly overcome

with love

for the wormhole I called home
el río evoking the pathway to heaven
grandmother's bony feet losing circulation

I breathe in, willing her ashes
to fill my body's cavities
and saunter to the nearest dead star (dear god, like dying this is)
brimming with afterlife I want
to know what the elders
wanted to know how god
needed life, the exotic forms
of bodies, so I prick and prod
the star's undulations, looking for ashes,
looking for clues and my voice erupts, alien:

*fill me with your multiverse, your megaverse with lithium,
beryllium, hydrogen, helium, nitrogen and star light of hundred
years!*

breathless I swim past
the Milky Way, bright, and I see
Altazor falling up, the Virgin trailing
after him, in purple seams
raising cosmic devils

he waves at me
his longing falling through space
my longings following me
like nebulae

for the city I love

heaven has learned to ignore
me: I'm a particle, a light speck
 a sun spot seen by a telescope
 a fraction of a billions galaxies
 a nonsensical idea

I've squeezed in and out of worms
to the sixth dimension to a type III
civilization with super myopic
beings operating super galactic
telescopes tapping on insignificant
conversations

[listen, you laugh, raise your brows]

I've lived among the greats
their dusts razing my form
I've called out to Rilke
to ask him to write
my eulogy across the studded
night to name a planet
for me so I may be
remembered but he is mute
and over translated, his tongue lost

plunge into me, my womb cuddled
in star dust you will not find
you but *you*—

space feast of dust, healed
and the salt earth below, imprint
and the shape, shapelessness

in the vortex of winded songs
in supple bodies
and transient winds in

meteorite dust
quartz, red and orange
sulfuric acid clouds
in the billions strings
and spheres in bloom

you are ululation
a canto of lovers, street corners: sky shores kiss
where your feet once touched grows
and the río you loved
runs in dust in your stardust
drizzling down the city
you loved

Absence of potted flowers.

Pickling jars, neatly arranged. Tall to short. Fat to thin.

Footsteps erasing the dust.

They wanted to plot the paths of planets. Observe the movements in heaven. They wanted to be Greeks. She wants to know something that will explain the absence of brightness. A breeze stirs up. A lantern sways. Skins like ghosts. She thinks she sees spheres, and turtles upon turtles upon turtles.

Faithful Women

To the tinkle of a temple
bell 3,000 voices rise,
women clank dutifully
to the blue-skinned
Hindu god:

*“Hare Radha,
Hare Krishna”*

for his consort:

*“Krishna, Krishna,
Hare, Hare”*

Crammed cross-legged
in an ashram devotees, look
bored out of their minds.

While a Young Bride

4 a.m.

you ask what I'm thinking
All these dawns of dancing

with the Russian girl, smoking
cigars with the Korean Mafia
at the USA Club

You ask in a tone
of a man taking stock, or
filled with Catholic guilt

What can I say?

Even the trees
and split-pea stars
have pity on me

as the Jupiter moon
of my mouth spins
ferociously around you

I feel like a moth
stuck to painted wood
wings wide, eyes swollen

An Anecdote of Mothering

He was three. I was thirty-four. He lost a toy. I was sick.
He cried for an hour. I lay feverish for three. He ran
to my room. Demanded I get up. I said no. He screamed.
I grabbed his arm. What I really wanted was his throat.
I squeezed hard. I could feel the fragile bones. Three notches,
one twist. I could pull his arm from the socket. He looked
at me. His eyes round as marbles. Focusing through tears.
It was me. Whispering to him: Get over your loss.

The Tupperware Woman

1

Her tears like onions shrieking
on a searing skillet like bacon
burning when she hands him
her heart, he devours it

2

Her sunflower dress spills
yellow coos over the child
dangling from her hips
like earrings. At night she wipes
the snot from his nose
like polishing sterling silver

3

She lifts the covers. Curdles the pulse. She's ready
to heat n serve. Rock n serve. Refresh and cool.
She's fridge smart and frumpily elegant, stuffable.
Expanding on demand. Great for those little leftovers.

4

Look at me, she tells him elbows
crumpled to a silk. It's not your fault
you placed your fingers over my
body, making me feel broken beautiful

Scrapbooking: Child and Cricket *for Juana*

a photograph, transfer and memory. a still life
and conversation. a child's record and cricket.
in an album and postcard, in a box of chirp
and peal. it is the fog or scissors, or the legs rubbing
against. mother focused on spatter. of grease.
of crayons. of marks. of unseen, unforeseen, marked
in space. imprints of tips. on stone walls. on toes.
the child and the arm extends. glides in. the cricket
and the summing up to. like, unlike lines. to the point
of meet, mouth, teeth, tongue and pulse and the cricket's
legs curve, contract. between lips. the mother is lost in a fly.

A Study of Green

Grass shivers in the morning dew. Fog in these parts is a notion. Clouds like specimen bottles are arranged across the sky. Split by a train, the air is tart as raspberries.

We hear a woman sing. For want. A song too difficult to hum. Grandmother says, No hay mal que por bien no venga.

The bad slogs in the shape of a snake. We recoil. Trespass into the green house, rectangular-shaped, next to a dry ditch.

A man lived there. Now only a mongrel bird is in the splintered planks. It tears at the trash where snapdragons grow like weeds. We hold our breaths.

What happened to his woman? The woman who made wax candles, peddled fat soap, wore wide-rimmed shades to hide his wine-induced fists.

Por algo Dios no les dio alas a los alacranes. One night cops take him away. We hear the woman cry or sing. Ever hear the song, "I am all out of love"? Gangrene love.

Borrón y cuenta nueva. Windows were never washed again.

Long Distance Caller

Years later I see
the profile
of your nose in
a stranger's shadow

We didn't belonged to each
other except in words
and phone calls like inanimate
objects, suspended
in a time zone, we drifted
my fingers pretended
to be yours, my eyes
undressed the distance, your voice
breaking the line questioned
my fidelity: *What was it
about you?* you asked, knowing
you'd dissolve at the door
for all you could give was your
voice, all I could hand you
was an ear like cones of silk

State Line

We shake New Mexico from our sandals, park the car. Outside, the air is rigged with piñon and shrub, the hills are sewn into the tent of light. The sky unbuttons its shirt, stripping rooftops. Drops like coins clobber the car's hood.

The children, in the backseat, curl like pine needles. When the scattered light shines their sleeping faces, they illuminate the bitter brush. In the drop of sleeping, of scree and caws, we forget ourselves all hands and tongues, fumbling.

“Romance plays no part”, the poet writes. Lust kills like the sun. But listen such cravings are criminal in borders. Ask the trooper's eyes fixed on the windshield, his glare scrawling territory lines.

She stares out the small window into the dark. She is used to the cold, the hunger pangs, the soldier's snores. She is used to the predictable winter sky. The Jasmine, Lotus, Magnolia. The crickets. She watches the lightless lantern dangle from trees, feeling the cold's slap. The shadows move, restless, at dusk. They too will pass through her.

Belonging

pops in
every other day, says hello
and leaves.

When she's swinging
from tree limbs, it's there—
belonging waiting
with tick anticipation.

On her bony knees,
in her sweaty armpits
and sticky skin, it's there
tangled in her tongue
like ruddy tamarind, brushing
against her dress,
belonging here nor there.

The Persistence of Form or Two Windows, One Door, and Maybe a Back

Pulling ourselves by will
we finish the house. It is Saturday and we are
puritans at heart. The act
of construction is religious.

We nail in solemnity, sit down a faithful
foundation. The walls go up rectangular,
clasped in invocation, they won't
come down in a storm.

We don't discriminate
unfaithful parts—all are welcome
in the making of a house with
two windows, one door,

and a back kitchen of primeval colors.
Between nails and planks, this cementing
and tarring calls for communion:
We stir blood sausage and tripe

battered in beer. This is how
we build our homes: by
people and animal parts.

What We Know

For Aida

It's like crossing the cut-off, la punta, where the city ends and barley begins. This is how it feels when our words, sticky like syrup, unravel. When our tongue unfolds. It's like the marginal place of sleepy fields and thin nublina awakes. That is how it feels like mosquitos engorged on blood of barefoot children, or coyotes gliding across the salty streets. But it's more like a llorona's wail en las orillas de canales where we played, or like covering our heads to stop the howls of dogs and shrieks of squealing pigs. Hermana, this is what we know of words like white summers riding bikes, skitting on corners, our knees oozing with gravel and blood. Words that make the skinny snakes slip behind corn stalks, relieved it's not them but us that are severed.

A Mutt that Grounds Us

We will need rain shoes, snake boots. This is not the Fertile Crescent but close enough. The tomatoes' skins are thin, the buffelgrass fills in the cracks and the oleanders, pomegranates lay tugged under the leaf-June trees.

We will smell like laurels, turkeys, dogbane. Itch like black gramma.

He will come. Smelling of dog breath and death. A mutt like a dying campfire. Shriveled to a shock. We will fuss and take him home. And he will offer mice and shoes.

We will be sandpipers. We will need him like water.

He will stay, fill his belly with dinner scraps. He will sniff the dying roots of trees. Many years, when we return home with wounded souls, he'll be there to lick our skins.

Holidays at the Outskirts

In the aftermath of the blaze nothing happened except
we were stunned to stone
and from that day forth
we where framed as children who burned
barley fields on independence day

It happened that on Halloween
no one sported store-bought costumes (you know who you are)
Even a witch could not recognize the sordid
crowd of hobos and saloon girls dodging
sink holes, egged by the idea this was how
death was supposed to be

And while Labor Day meant steaks and beer in other parts
of the country, in other parts of the city
in our own, it meant (recall your father behind machines
your mother tightening sheets at Motel 6
your grandma palming gorditas)
we spent the day playing
hooky in a ditch
crowded with unsupervised children

Each Thanksgiving the baskets came spewing
cans of corn and cranberry: desire rose
from our bellies and we asked why
the turkey's meat was dry

In Christmas,
the gifts came heavy with regret.
They were not for us:
The gun was Mono's, the doll was Chela's

And you my children? Well, maybe next year
maybe
next year.

Looking at Her Father

I watch you raise the spoon
to your mouth on evenings we sit
for dinner when the nickel is washed
off your skin, the work shirt swapped
for a t-shirt. I see the expanse of chest,
your biceps engorged, strained under
the fray material. I want to be picked
above your head, swung around the room
and when I'm older, I'll visit the steel shop,
a rig's crushed bumper twisting in your arms,
groaning on gagging machines. The noise
is agonizing, the silver dust decadent in
the droning room where I see your body cut,
your clenched jaw, the hardened fists on days
you couldn't stand our noise, and years later,
I will look for a softer man.

I Dream of California

With trimmed belly, my father leans on his '59 Chevy, biceps bulging from under rolled sleeves. Behind him the orange grove and farther away the pitched rooftops. What I see is not the eucalyptus shouldering the nightshift smoke breaks. What I see is him. Thirty years later, he'll tell me I would've loved the bay's white chest, the checkered fields. His history clings to him like grapeskins to teeth and I shapeshift in solidarity, from pecan groves to avocado orchards. I want to see what he sees: The gray-washed bungalow cuddled in lemon trees, in sun-drenched shores, my mother skinning paddles. My grandmother smoking corn husks as grandfather rolls out buttons on poker days.

My father's California comes to me every other night in a membrane dream like a long-legged woman in fishnet, or a devil's voice daring me to return. Not with the brittle man my father is but him: the dark-skinned, flat-bellied man in the photograph, his smile seducing me to come.

American Me

Crossed the bridge in '55
for a twenty and five
bought a U.S. visa

ese tirilon, ranchero
watermelon-eating Mexicano
from el Valle de Guadalupe

bien chicloso, spit
shine calcos, slicked
back hair, his comb

ready, always preparado
for las guisas y la chancla
For cinco clemos took

the trolley to La Plaza
de Los Lagartos where
the alligators live

under the Chinese Elms
and the Boy with the Leaking
Boot lo guachaba

while he waited for la ramfla
to take him to San Eli, to pick
pecans, build pig

pens, stir adobes
and live on thank yous
and maybes. Bussed his ass

to Okie town to the fields
of Bakersfield
a la cebolla y el melon.

Never forgot su jefita,
carnales y con cora,
su tierra y orgullo.

A Prayer to Lupe

May your coat cloak
the blood-stained sidewalks,
the glazed-pained eyes

May your steady gaze pierce
the tin and shingle rooftops,
the corrugated boxes

May your brown and violet skin fill
the earth's throat where the bones
lie brittle and white

May your arms be heated stoves
so when we rise from these
broken days, may we rise
soft as bread

Vita

Maria Miranda Maloney's career started as a journalist twenty years ago after graduating from the University of Texas with a degree in journalism. After a short stint in the field, she realized her love expanded to creative writing, but her knack also rested in community organization and public relations. She then moved on to built a career in the field of communication where she put her skills to work as an editor and communication director for the Diocese of El Paso, and for a high-tech company in El Paso. Her duties ranged from marketing to the implementation of research programs for organizations such as the Texas Department of Transportation, Houston University Health Sciences, and the national Center for Disease Control. Her love for program management and writing further developed when she enrolled at University of Phoenix MBA program. After her marriage and birth of her three children, Maria moved to teaching to allow time to take care of her family. She returned to the UT El Paso to pursue her long-dream of creative writing. Today, Maria is the founder of Mouthfeel Press, an indie, publishing house located in El Paso, Texas. She is also a founding member of Rincón Bohemio, a bilingual, literary community project, and a board member of BorderSenses. She is currently a writer for the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum in Washington D.C. Her poetry and personal essays have appeared in the progressive *Catholic National Register*, Smithsonian Latino Museum, *Mipoesias*, *The Mas Tequila Review*, *BorderSenses*, *Mujeres de Maiz*, *Newspaper Tree*, *Mezcla: Art & Writings from the Tumblewords Project*, *Xispas: The Journal of Chicano Art, Culture, and Politics*, and *Compasión Amor y La Muerte*. She has presented at the Gloria Anzaldúa Mundo Zurdo Conference (2010), and read at the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum (2009-10), and at Beyond Baroque, a leading US literary/art center in Venice, California. She is the founder of Border Poets, a community of poets residing in the borderlands.

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