

## Doing Work that Matters: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa

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*Do work that matters. Vale la pena, it is worth the pain.*

Gloria Anzaldúa

Preparing this Special Issue of *Camino Real* has been challenging but rewarding—challenging because of the expected obstacles of coordinating a publication from across an ocean and rewarding because I can continue to do the work around Anzaldúa’s legacy. Using an Anzaldúan style to write this introduction, I intersperse my personal *testimonio* and reflection as well as a conceptual framing for the pieces included. When we put out the call for papers for this issue, we were not sure what submissions we would get. I had confidence that the work submitted would reflect the myriad intellectual interrogations that Anzaldúa’s work elicits. Since 2007, I have headed the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa, and I have seen the diversity of approaches to and uses of her work as reflected in *El Mundo Zurdo*, the international conference held every 18 months to honor her legacy. The conference seeks to carry on the work of that space she

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Cantú N. E. “Doing Work that Matters: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa”. *Camino Real*, 10:13. Alcalá de Henares: Instituto Franklin-UAH, 2018. Print.

Recibido: 7 de febrero de 2018; 2ª versión: 11 de abril de 2018.

called, *El Mundo Zurdo*. As scholars, activists, and artists come together to share our work, I am invariably surprised at the serendipitous transformative work that happens there. It is my hope that readers of this issue will also find a similar opportunity for transformative engagement with Anzaldúa's work through the selections published here. Moreover, I would hope that those who have not read her work will get an idea of its significance for Chicanx and Latinx Studies.

It seemed propitious that *Camino Real* dedicate a whole issue to Anzaldúa, for in some ways the Instituto Franklin at the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares has been a home, a kind of safe space for Chicanx literatures in Europe for the past 20 years. Translations of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) exist in Italian (Zaccaria 2000) and Spanish (Cantú 2015a; Valle 2015b) and translations to French and German are in the works. Given the contemporary focus on migration and immigrants and the ever present "crisis" around the status of border denizens, those who traverse geopolitical borders as well as those who live in these spaces, a special issue gathering the work of Anzaldúan scholars theorizing around such border issues seemed imperative.

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*Twice I have had personal loss taint the beautiful experience that it is to engage with European counterparts in the Congreso Internacional sobre Literatura Chicana sponsored by the Instituto Franklin of the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares. In 2004, I was in Spain attending the IV Congreso in Sevilla when my friend and kindred spirit Gloria Anzaldúa died of complications of diabetes in Santa Cruz, California. In 2010, I was in León attending the VII Congreso when my beloved tía María de la Luz Cantú Luna died in Monterrey, Nuevo León. In both instances, I received the sad news via email and mourned thousands of miles away. I was sitting next to Ana Castillo at an internet café in Sevilla; we were checking email after having been at the Congreso all morning. The news of Gloria's death reached us simultaneously via email. I remember the mourning extending throughout my entire trip that summer as I set up altars for her in Granada, Toledo, and in various other places for the following 9 nights, sticking to a practice I learned at home in Laredo and that is rooted in an Indigenous belief that the departed soul must travel through 9 levels of the inframundo.*

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To honor the activist work that Anzaldúa's writings continue to perform, I chose to title this introduction using a quote from her last publication. The epigraph

underscores the activist bent of the “work”—whether academic, creative, or community-based— we engage in as Chicaxs<sup>1</sup>. Anzaldúa’s most important place in Chicax intellectual history lies alongside others who toiled in the academic enterprise of studying borders, seeking to bridge and to understand the genealogy of oppressions and of cultural survival. One of the earliest to study the connections between Spain and the Latinx population in the United States was the early twentieth century Stanford professor Aurelio M. Espinosa whose folklore and philological studies bridged the two continents beautifully. Others followed suit, and Arthur L. Campa, and Américo Paredes walked along the same academic path linking our cultural and literary production to that of Mexico and Spain, a transfronterizo approach. Since the mid twentieth century when Paredes published *With a Pistol in His Hand*, about a border corrido/ballad, few scholars had turned to the border literary and cultural production with a discerning eye. Of course, there were collections of folklore, most notably by non-Latinx scholars such as J. Frank Dobie and Charles Loomis, and various novelists who were writing about the border, including some that remained unpublished like Jovita González whose co-authored novel *Caballero* written in the 1930s and 40s was not published until 1996. So our literary studies were ready for an intellectual and ideological shift when Anzaldúa published *Borderlands/La Frontera* in 1987.

The story goes that over 30 years ago, Joan Pinkvoss publisher of the queer feminist press, Aunt Lute Books, heard Anzaldúa read some of her poetry at a feminist gathering in the Midwest and asked for a manuscript. Anzaldúa agreed to prepare one and spent a couple of years writing an introduction to the poetry; the introduction grew and became the first 7 chapters of *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

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*In 2007, after seeing the way Anzaldúa’s work had taken off, how it was being received internationally, and how in 2005 and 2006 panels on her work at the annual meetings of the American Studies Association (ASA) and Modern Languages Association (MLA) had standing room only audiences, we established the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa (SSGA). After an initial Symposium in 2007 that drew speakers from Mexico and all over the United States, the SSGA began hosting the El Mundo Zurdo Conference every 18 months, and it continues to gather the top scholars and students of her work. Evidence of the sustained attention her work has garnered is also found in the academic professional groups such as the National Women’s Studies Association and ASA, two of several groups that have established prizes or awards in Anzaldúa’s name, recognizing outstanding research and scholarship.*

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Before *Borderlands/La Frontera*, though, Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga coedited a most influential anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) recently reissued by the State University of New York Press (2015). This special issue of *Camino Real* begins with an essay that traces the reception and impact of *Bridge*. While the anthology tilled the soil for future work such as Juanita Ramos's *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians: An Anthology* (1989), it was Anzaldúa's hybrid text, with its unique mixture of genres (poetry, history, testimonio, etc.) and languages (English, Spanish, and Náhuatl) that fed a hunger for a testimonio-like autohistoria by a queer thinker and philosopher poet that was seeking to understand and dismantle the sexist constructions of nationalist and masculinist culture. As an addition to Latinx literary production, it came at an appropriate moment in time, in the last years of the 20th century that saw a flourishing of Chicana literature that included publication of fiction by women such as Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Lucha Corpi and Alicia Gaspar de Alba. However, save for Gaspar de Alba, none of these writers focused specifically on the geopolitical space of the borderlands. In the beginning decades of the twenty-first century, literary production continues to bring us a rich border-centric canon that offers explorations of themes that Anzaldúa first broached in *Borderlands* and developed in subsequent publications, such as gay bashing, identity, sexuality, gender, linguistic terrorism, spiritual activism among many other concepts like nepantla and conocimiento.

In the thirty years since *Borderlands/La Frontera* was published, the border has changed dramatically; it has morphed into a different place, hardly recognizable to those of us who grew up in that space in-between, what Anzaldúa called "una herida abierta" (1987). In the 1980s, when Anzaldúa was writing *Borderlands*, immigration was an issue. It still is, but still to come would be the drug violence and the building of a border wall that began in 2006 and that continues to be at the center of current political debates. It is not to say that violence didn't exist before; the very nature of it being a contact zone between two states that was created in the aftermath of war means it began in violence. The militarization and policing is not new. However, the degree of terror and the state of siege that is the current reality with its assault on civilians and innocent bystanders is unprecedented. So is the consistent assault by various criminal justice agencies on the local population be it in the form of stricter vigilance at border crossings or the routine surveillance that is ever present for those of us who live along the border.

The current administration in Washington has not done much to alleviate the situation and has in fact emboldened and stirred up the blatant violation of human rights

as various security forces take license to institute their own racist practices. A glaring example is the Administration's pardon of Joe Arpaio who as Sheriff in Maricopa County in Arizona was found guilty of contempt of court and faced numerous legal issues. The political climate has changed drastically since *Borderlands/La Frontera* was published, and yet Anzaldúa's work that has consistently been relevant has gained even more currency as we face oppressive conditions reminiscent of the Jim Crow laws of the 1950s that Anzaldúa knew so well. The political situation, nowadays, though, is not just based on local realities, but reaches out and touches the political realities of deterritorialized populations on a global scale.

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*Sifting through memories of Anzaldúa, who was a personal friend, I arrive at the one that has us walking in Santa Fe shopping for silver jewelry from the Indigenous vendors at the plaza and discussing the condition of Chicana feminist writing. Despite what might appear to be an incongruous and unlikely occurrence, neither one of us thinks it odd that a couple of "paisanas" from South Texas are in such a location and discussing such things. Similarly, I do not find it odd that these essays by a diverse group of scholars from various disciplines and various countries will be published by Camino Real to be read by scholars and students in Spain, Mexico, and the United States and beyond. I imagine the pláticas, the strong voices of these scholars and writers across space and time engaging with Anzaldúa's voice, with her texts. A cacophony that becomes a symphony a synchronous melody that warms my heart and inspires my poetic instincts.*

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The essays gathered here, address a number of themes and approach the study of Anzaldúa from various vantage points. I now turn to introducing each of the essays with a brief discussion of the arguments made by the authors who hail from different parts of the globe. Some authors are directly engaging with Anzaldúan theories of the border, such as Romana Radlwimmer, others are veering off into heretofore uncharted territory such as Marisa Belasteguigoitia whose essay is both a pedagogical intervention and a critique of Octavio Paz.

As mentioned earlier, the essay by Tereza Jiroutová "A Contextual Interpretation of *This Bridge Called My Back*: Nationalism, Androcentrism and the Means of Cultural Representation" proposes to contextualize Gloria Anzaldúa's and Cherríe Moraga's revolutionary approach in *Bridge*. The essay seeks to "expose its theoretical and activist

depth” and show how *Bridge* “has impacted both Chicana writing and –more broadly– contemporary feminist thought.” Further, she claims that Anzaldúa’s and Moraga’s important contribution to women of color feminism, the anthology *Bridge* and Anzaldúa’s masterpiece *Borderlands/La Frontera* represented a significant milestone for the evolution of contemporary Chicana literature. In the first part of the essay, Jiroutová offers an insightful examination of the androcentricism concealed by the nationalism of *El Movimiento*. In the second part, she examines theory-making and the risks and consequences of indulging in a mainstream theorizing; she proposes that *Bridge* “touched upon the aspects of making theory corresponding with the concerns of women of color.” She further stresses “the coalitional and feminism-expanding aims of the editorial project” of *Bridge* and notes that “the coalitional goal also was to bridge the gaps between various women’s groups, academic theories, and non-academic modes of knowledge and epistemologies.” In the final part of the essay, “This Bridge’s Legacy,” she traces the emergence of a Chicana literary discourse that “in general depart[s] from imposed modes of literary and linguistic representations and permit and promote the articulation of theory derived from lived experience.” All in all, the essay contributes to the literary history and to the terrain that a path breaking book such as *Bridge* lays out.

If we consider *This Bridge* as one of the first attempts to lay out the literary discourse for Chicana (and women of color) feminist discourse, then *Borderlands* impels the discourse further. A professor of American Literature in Spain, Carolina Núñez-Puente begins her article, “*Queeremos a Gloria Anzaldúa from Borderlands to Light in the Dark: Identity, Difference, New Tribalism, and Affective Eco-Dialogues*,” by offering a conceptualization of Anzaldúa’s approaches to poetry, queerness, identity, and difference as gleaned from reading Anzaldúa’s literary production since *Bridge*. Not surprising, the essay focuses on *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The second half of the essay, however, examines Anzaldúa’s thinking around the notion of a new tribalism, taken from the interviews collected in *Interviews/Entrevistas* (2000), and from her writings in the anthology co-edited with AnaLouise Keating *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002), *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (2009), and *Light in the Dark* (2015). Núñez-Puente posits an analysis of the poetry and prose sections of *Borderlands* and ends with engaging Anzaldúa with contemporary feminists in what she calls “an affective eco-dialogue.” The “queeremos” of her title points to the bilingual word-play from the Spanish “queremos” to love, and the English “to queer.” While Núñez-Puente focuses on the relationship between the poetry and prose sections and concludes that Anzaldúa is a post humanist, and in the next essay Radlwimmer turns an Anzaldúan lens on the literary and artistic production of Latinx writers and artists.

Romana Radlwimmer, a professor of Latinx and Latin American literatures and cultures in Germany, lays out a context for Anzaldúa's work in her essay, "Pensamiento crítico y transfronterizo," providing a foundation to how Anzaldúa's and Cherríe Moraga's *Bridge* was received. Radlwimmer highlights the theoretical view of "border" and how Anzaldúa's thinking about borders changed from her early publications in the 1980s to her last texts written through the fin de siècle and in the new millennium. Furthermore, she shows how artistic practices that interpret Anzaldúa's theory result in transborder thinking expressed in different media and formats. In her analysis, Radlwimmer highlights two Chicana artists who treat the border in a concrete and metaphorical way, filmmaker Lourdes Portillo and yours truly, Norma Cantú. She then turns her critical eye to the work of two Latinx artists who conceive the border materially and symbolically, the Puerto Rican singer Lourdes Pérez and the Chilean American painter Liliana Wilson. Radlwimmer cites her own engagement with the text and her observation of its impact in various discursive venues as evidence of the fierce impact and lasting impact of the text, a text that she says touches, disturbs, awakens and moves readers.

Anzaldúan scholar, Socorro Gutiérrez Magallanes, currently affiliated with the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla in Mexico, explores decoloniality in her essay, "Gloria Anzaldúa y el giro descolonial desde la frontera para el mundo." She finds that theoretically, Anzaldúa takes an epistemic turn towards a decolonial practice in terms of language and towards decolonial thinking. Gutiérrez Magallanes cites the decolonizing and decolonial agency in what she terms "Chicano political autobiography" as a technology for dismantling the epistemic constraints imposed on border subjects. Her analysis of the decolonial enterprise within the Anzaldúan oeuvre sustains her claim that "a decolonial/decolonizing turn is not only a disruption for the senses, it is also an epistemological shift, a change of consciousness in the authors and in the readers" and she posits that the linguistic locations impel a reassessment of what is dominant language and what is the colonized language. The nation's history as narrated in only the colonizing language implies an epistemological rupture that can be countered at some point by the colonized language and thought. She names the shift a "decolonial/decolonizing turn" for, from her analysis, the way of seeing the world from a borderlands perspective sets forth a concept that considers it a larger border set against the world and emanating from the border towards the world at large.

While Gutiérrez Magallanes goes out from the borderlands to the global, in her article "Anzaldúa: Authentic Leadership and Indigenous Feminism in XXIst Century", Isabel Dulfano turns inward to the Indigenous and parallels the leadership

offered by Anzaldúa to that of Indigenous women activists. She briefly traces the status of new Border Studies strategies and methods to articulate, validate and disseminate Indigenous feminist epistemologies that she likens to and finds rooted in Anzaldúan thought. She holds that “Indigenous feminist theorization ... seeks the democratization and autonomy of the authority to theorize and resist; they reclaim rights to their own jurisdiction to produce knowledge, develop capacity based on that knowledge and courage to take action.” Deploying ideas about “authentic leadership,” Dulfano concludes that “twenty-first century indigenous activists...continue along the Borderlands territory as they embrace a key non-Western ingredient of their epistemology, Kawsay (good life), pertaining to a wide spectrum of linguistic, environmental, physical, social, political, and cultural trespasses toward collective good.”

Marisa Belausteguigoitia Rius’ essay also considers the revolutionary action but situates it not within the indigenous epistemology but in the classroom at the Universidad Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM) where she teaches. Belausteguigoitia Rius provides an example of one pedagogical intervention at the UNAM to substantiate her position that Anzaldúa’s work is revolutionary and can transform and interrupt traditional theory. The essay places the activist nature of Anzaldúa’s work front and center in what Belausteguigoitia Rius calls “Theory as interruption,” and that she conceives as a way to join social emergencies and to make the praxis of theoretical thought viable. The classroom becomes a space of movement as well as inter(re)ference. In the deployment of her ideas of theory making and theory practice, Belausteguigoitia Rius highlights the kind of pedagogical actions that posits an interruption or clash between what a *letrado*, or an intellectual, and a *deslenguada*, a wild tongue. She shows how Anzaldúa “stands in the way ... of Octavio Paz,” and his ideas of identity and knowledge related to the formation of the Mexican nation. Thus, she claims the disruption or interruption elicits a pedagogical moment. Furthermore, she inserts the contrast between Paz and Anzaldúa by deconstructing how each--Paz and Anzaldúa--approaches the enigmatic figure of the *pachuco* from different perspectives. She ends the essay with an example of a pedagogically grounded intervention and action.

A conversation between two Chicanas from the Rio Grande Valley, University of California, Santa Barbara Chicana Studies doctoral student Magda García and visual artist Celeste de Luna provides insight into how relevant and important Anzaldúa’s work remains. The interview is an invaluable contribution to this issue as García and de Luna, both natives of the Rio Grande Valley where Anzaldúa was born. It clearly situates the impact of Anzaldúa’s writing on the artistic development of a border artist



and printmaker. Coming from the same geographical area although of a different generation, it is not surprising to find that de Luna claims an affinity with Anzaldúa's life experiences. García deftly draws de Luna into discussions of the border, class issues, intersectionality, and the ever-present tug between making art and being an activist, and not surprisingly, the impact of Anzaldúa on her work.

In addition to the essays the issue includes creative writing: a poem "Redefining Victim," and two short prose pieces, "Love and Hip Hop" and a "Response to a Letter to Gloria Anzaldúa." The prose pieces are testimonio-like narratives about finding the *herida abierta* of Anzaldúa's borderlands in the heart of the country, in Chicago. Eliana Buenrostro a writer who lives in Chicago links hip hop and the "border" that exists in greater Mexico. In the second prose piece, a response to a university assignment draws Eliana Buenrostro into a meditation of how institutions of higher learning inflict violence against women of color students and faculty members, including writers like Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa. The poem "Redefining Victim" makes no direct allusion to Anzaldúa, yet its enigmatic whirlwind of images, reminiscent of Anzaldúa's poetry, draws us in and lures us into the poem.

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*Glorious dreams interrupt my slumber. In one, I see Gloria and other friends at a sort of party. A celebratory mood embraces me as I enter into the fold. My ear is tuned to the familiar Tejano Spanish she is speaking. The voice. Strong yet humble all at once. To the soft laugh that escapes when she is amused. What are you working on? She asks. What are you dreaming? I shrivel at the questions. I can never do enough, I say. And I wake up. What is the question really asking? Am I doing work that matters? Am I dreaming, envisioning a future for all of us?*

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The pieces included in this special issue of *Camino Real* reflect current trends in Anzaldúan scholarship. Each provides a strand for a braid that gathers and lends order to the disparate contributions flung far and wide across the academic universe. Weaving these essays into the special issue has afforded me the opportunity to contemplate how the work continues. More will surely come. For instance, in addition to the two translation projects mentioned earlier, there are currently two projects centered on pedagogy and the use of Anzaldúa in the teaching of various disciplines. As guest editor of this special issue, I sought to bring together voices, diverse and distinct voices, from various locations –Mexico, Germany, Spain, and the United States, the

Rio Grande Valley- all centered on and drawing from the vast well of knowledge that is Gloria Anzaldúa, her writings, her life, and her spirit.

I conclude with a plea and a challenge for those of you who read these essays: carry the torch forward and “do work that matters” out in your own communities, I challenge you to work to dismantle borders and to bridge them wherever they exist. The work of decolonization is never ending. Whether in radical readings of texts and films, or in the classroom inserting disruptive voices into the cacophony of diverse voices, Anzaldúa impels us to act and to do so with conciencia. She whose life’s work was about coalition and building bridges reminds us that we do not need more walls in this global community, we need more bridges. So let’s get to work, “do work that matters. Vale la pena, it is worth the pain” (Anzaldúa 2005: 102).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While the commonly used terms, such as “Latin@” and “Latina/o,” attempt to deal with the inherent sexist grammar of Spanish, a term like “Latinx” or “Chicanx,” includes nonbinary gender constructions and Indigenous populations; it is my personal preference and signals my political positionality and my discursive preferences.