
Incidentally Western

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Sometimes, serendipity gives us a small, but lovely gift. In this year's wonderful, California-themed conference, we stand on the westernmost edge of the westernmost state, while last year, in Texas, we reveled in a state whose eastern border is arguably as far east as one can go before entering a space that does not call itself Western. Such an understanding of "Western" presupposes a geographic definition of what makes a place, in the words of Tara Penry's Boise conference theme, "feel Western." As many scholars in this organization have long argued, the West is not a geography, or if it is, it is a fluid and mutable one, dependent more on the relative positioning of the claimants rather than the lines on a map. From the point of view of Anglo New England, the West is what Daniel Boone was traversing in the wilds of Kentucky. At different times it has been upstate New York, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the deserts of Nevada, the Texas/Mexico borderlands. But California? Maybe yes, maybe no. Some argue California is the least "western" of the Western states despite its location; others insist it is the

most western because of everything BUT its longitude. California invites us to speculate on what Western might mean.

I was thinking about this last month, as well. Back in September, as Bill Handley, Geoffrey Bateman and I were debating the relative merits of the essays under consideration for the Taylor Award for best paper presented by a graduate student, we hit a bit of a snag with one of the essays. It was certainly a very strong piece of writing, in fact, we agreed, clearly the best. But Bill was a little worried. Although it engaged a life-altering experience in the deserts of the American West, the essay wasn't directly about Western American Literature. After a bit of debate, someone pointed out that the Taylor Award does not specify that the winning essay be focused on a text traditionally labeled Western Literature, just that it be the best grad student paper presented at the conference. Since that was the case, we decided, the essay we all felt was the most outstanding ought not to be penalized for being, in one person's words, only "incidentally Western."

That phrase kept nagging at me. What, I wondered, is the opposite of "incidentally" Western? "Deliberately" Western? "Authentically" Western? "Trying really, really hard to be" Western? We are all a bit wary these days, perhaps especially here at this conference, of throwing up border walls to keep people out, or fence texts in. And rightly so. At the same time, we all recognize that making definitions and drawing boundaries serve a very real purpose, both academically, and in the "so called" real world with which we in academia are so intimately entwined. While it is a cliché that those in the ivory towers are somehow above or beyond the dirt and fuss of the rest of the world, most of us recognize that stance as an illusion.

William Blake once wrote, “The foundation of Empire is Art and Science. Remove or degrade them, and the Empire is no more. Empire follows Art and not vice versa.” Out there in the real world, where Empires struggle with each other and real people live and die on the border fences that divide nations and families, and are violently inscribed by definitions that allow or disallow genders and races and sexualities, we are seeing a furious disruption of traditional boundaries and borders. Some term this a crisis.

But this crisis has set the stage for an abundance of creative and critical voices, Art that demands Empire follow it, whether Empire wants to or not. That, to me, is more than “incidentally” Western. These voices affirm both the potent danger and power of borders, as well as the forbidden pleasures of inhabiting them. Many of these voices are not seeking to make all the boundaries disappear, but rather crossing and re-crossing them deliberately, attempting to harness the velocity and energy of their frontier spaces.

Poet Juan Felipe Herrera calls this kind of Art “A Wetback Alphabet”, undetectable by Border Patrol K-9 units, passing unseen under the very eyes of La Migra, smuggled back and forth across border checkpoints, more dangerous in the end than any gun. His poetry collection *Bordercrosser with a Lamborghini Dream*, contains a Wetback Alphabet poem called “This is the Z”:

Z for elongated suffering

Rodent dweller seeking wisdom in the fold of the blue

Little letters that can be tricked to read all
The freedom in the universe. Except the rodent
Has a hard time getting to the center since it
Cannot distinguish between the margin and the heart
Hunger & enlightenment

Is this poem “Authentically” Western? Or just “incidentally” so? Where is exactly is this elusive center? After all, this poem could as easily be about the West Bank as the border of Mexico and the Western US. It could be about the experiences of a transgender high school student in Atlanta, or a Sikh professor at Columbia University trying to cross his campus. Perhaps this makes it “Incidentally Western.” Maybe being “Incidentally Western” is better than being “Deliberately Western.”

If so, then “Incidentally Western” Art (including literature) embodies mobility and mutability, a willingness to cross over into what may be figured as forbidden or impure, but is still somehow imperative. Alienation and perversion as transformative elements. “Incidentally Western” Art could come from Baghdad or Soweto or Mumbai and still be Western. This art depends on the existence of borders but at the same time, on their penetration. Social constructions have always included borders, as social anthropologist Mary Douglas explains: "The idea of society is a powerful image....This image has form: it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas" (114).

To be “Incidentally Western” then may mean to seek what Donna Haraway calls “affinity without unity” across forbidden boundaries, an acceptance, an affirmation, an acknowledgement of difference that will necessarily struggle against paradigms and logics, binaries and dialectics which seek to “reward conformity and repulse attack.” It is no accident that the rhetoric of warfare so often accompanies those who move across borders and walls. They fight an ephemeral war with constantly shifting frontlines, defined as enemy and Other by those enclosed within the comforting, suffocating, confines of the center. But as Douglas also notes, “The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power. Those vulnerable margins and those attacking forces which threaten to destroy good order represent the powers inhering in the cosmos” (161). “To have been in the margins,” Douglas continues, “is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power” (97).

Those margins also define and often confine us in academia, albeit in different ways than they define other Bordercrossers inhabiting less privileged spaces, but none of those spaces, ivory towers or maquiladoras, gated communities or blue-collar barrios, are every really separated from one another. Or put another way, the boundaries that attempt to keep such spaces separate are far more permeable than we imagine. As critic Ana Maria Jagose writes in her essay “Slash and Suture,” borders both divide and join together. Real human beings cross borders every day, and the wetback alphabet they carry with them as they traverse those borders is also more powerful than we imagine. This means Poets may be our most well-armed revolutionaries, the ultimate Western badmen and women, our real, “Authentically Western” Outlaws. Muskogee poet Joy Harjo writes of being searched at the Albuquerque airport in a poem aptly entitled “I am a Dangerous Woman”:

The sharp ridges of clear blue windows
Motion to me
From the airport's second floor
Edges dance in the foothills of the Sandias
Behind security guards
Who wave me into their guncatcher machine

I am a dangerous woman

When the machine buzzes
They say to take off my belt
And I remove it so easy
That it catches the glance of a man standing nearby
(maybe that is the deadly weapon that has the machine singing)

I am a dangerous woman
But the weapon is not visible
Security will never find it
They can't hear the clicking
Of the gun

Inside my head

Now THOSE are Western words—from a woman who grew up in Eastern Oklahoma and understands perfectly the real relationship between Empire and Art, and who should be following whom.

As this image of armed security guards and gun-wielding poets whose words are weapons suggests, this is at once the blessing and the curse of making Art from the Borders, even incidentally. Perhaps most especially incidentally. While the "powers inhering in the cosmos" may indeed be swirling in the margins, all the discourses of Empire will be directed against those who transgress. To have penetrated or inhabited the Borderlands is to have risked the pollution and impurity which marks those who cross over from the safe and contained into the powerful and alien. Just ask the women who dared to protest in Tahrir Square and were raped by their fellow protesters, or gays and lesbians living in Russia who lack the sponsors and state protection afforded to elite Olympic athletes. For women, for queers, for people of color, for the poor and many others who have no choice but to inhabit the borderlands, the risks are terrifying.

"On the positive side of this equation," theorist Alvina Quintana speculates, "this marginal position between ideologies contributes to new aesthetic opportunities, as it provides the writers with the strategic position to enhance or refute...outside sources and thereby contribute to the emergence of a new culture, a culture which by its very nature is characterized by a multiplicity of voices and experiences" (259). The "new aesthetic opportunities" available to bordercrossing writers and other artists are apparent across the literary spectrum. We who work in "Deliberately" Western literature are just especially lucky to be in a field that already recognizes the potency of bordercrossing. From the poems within essays of Gloria Anzaldua's

Borderlands/La Frontera, to the short-story/novels of Louise Erdrich, and the cyclical, mythopoetic works of Leslie Silko, we get to freely write about authors inhabiting the interstices and Art that openly utilizes the powers of marginal positions to drag Empire, kicking and screaming, into some new form and new place.

Gloria Anzaldua accomplishes this through the identity- and gender-shifting image of la mestiza, which can be seen as a coyote figure, male and female, sexually, racially, linguistically "neither one nor the other". But her mestiza is more than a Chicana version of Coyote the Trickster. This mestiza coyote inhabits multiple meanings, especially in the various Hispanic cultures of the U.S. and Mexico. In Mexican-American slang, coyote can mean someone of mixed races, usually, but not always, Mexican and Anglo; in South Texas, where Anzaldua was born and raised, coyote is also used to describe one who is on the fringes of society, an outlaw with all the connotations of both condemnation and romanticization inherent in that image; and the newest usage of the word refers to professional border-crossers--smugglers who specialize in bringing human beings across the Mexican border into the United States, often robbing and/or raping them but at the same time representing an offer of freedom, however illusory, which is difficult to refuse.

The legislature in Mexico City recently passed legislation legalizing Gay Marriage,
Tansgeneros/GLATINAS

Donna Haraway reminds us that the boundaries and border include the non-human world, as

well. Her cyborg, like Anzaldua's mestiza, derives from the deliberate and pleasurable penetration of borders and a delight in the destruction of binaries. Haraway creates her border-crossing figure in what she terms, "the ironic political myth" of the cyborg (149). The cyborg exists in necessary irony, which she explains as being about "contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true" (149). Or not.

“Illegal immigrants.” “Virgin land.” “Natural social orders.”

Cyborgs, Haraway says, advocate noise and pollution, the subversion of the purity of unpenetrated binaries. Haraway explains:

A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted. One is too few, and two is only one possibility. Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment (180).

She goes on to note that the technology of the personal computer as is special in the Borderlands of the late twentieth century:

Communications technologies....are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools

embody and enforce new social relations for women world-wide....The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies.

As of 2011, according Business Week, there were approximately 156 million public blogs. One of the most amazing has been around for an almost unimaginably long time for the internet—nine years. It's written in English by a young Iraqi woman known only as Riverbend. It's called *Baghdad Burning*. Riverbend went to school in the US, she apparently studied computer science, she has several brothers and at least one sister, she and her family live on the top floor of a small apartment building somewhere in Baghdad, but little else is known about her. Were her identity to be revealed she would potentially be in danger from any number of forces for any number of reasons. Her blog could be her death sentence. But she writes anyway, because it is also her lifeline. She writes a Wetback Alphabet, "Incidentally Western" Art that goes to places Empires are afraid to tread.

Riverbend is native to a place she terms a newly colonized frontier of US imperialism, who writes both in that physical location and in the geographically unfixed borderlands of cyberspace, a space often termed "the new frontier" and likened to the Wild West in its freewheeling disregard of authority. Riverbend lives the Wild West in ways most of us at this conference will never experience. In an entry from January 18, 2006, she writes about the abduction of *Christian Science Monitor* journalist Jill Carroll and the murder of her Iraqi interpreter in a way that emphasizes the intertwined nature of technology, literacy, and machine skill in contemporary Iraqi life: "I read the news as a subtitle on tv (sic). We haven't had an internet connection for

several days so I couldn't really read about the details... I found out very recently that the interpreter killed was a good friend- Alan, of Alan's Melody, and I've spent the last two days crying" (*Baghdad Burning*, 18 January 2006). Riverbend goes on to explain that Alan was a Christian from Basrah who owned a record store (Alan's Melody) in Baghdad that carried both Arabic recordings and a wide selection of world music, much of it from the US and Europe, "everything," she notes, "from Abba to Marilyn Manson." While the content of the music in Alan's store comprises an interesting example of the cultural polyglot that follows both globalization and imperialism, Riverbend describes the physical space of the store itself as a borderland, accessed through the personal, organic presence of Alan and through the technology of CD's and the internet, but always mediated by the violent realities of war, even as the borderland space it represents is envisioned as a (temporary) escape from those realities. "His shop wasn't just a music shop- it was a haven" she writes,

During the sanctions, Iraq was virtually cut off from the outside world. We had maybe four or five local tv (sic) stations and it was only during the later years that the internet became more popular. Alan was one of those links with the outside world. Walking into Alan's shop was like walking into a sort of transitional other world. Whenever you walked into the store, great music would be blaring from his speakers and he and Mohammed, the guy who worked in his shop, would be arguing over who was better, Joe Satriani or Steve Vai.

In writing about Riverbend and her blog in PMLA, Susan Stanford Friedman recognizes the complex combination of machine skill, literacy, and politics that Riverbend embodies, noting that "Riverbend writes openly for a virtual public, an unknown and potentially worldwide

cyberspatial audience. . . . a community of readers that she assumes to be diverse, not sharing race, nationality, religion, gender, class, occupation, or even political views. . . Thus her blog constitutes a *virtual community of the unlike*” (1708) [emphasis mine]. A virtual community of the unlike—this seems to me to be a marvelous definition of the West—incidental, deliberate, and utterly authentic, all at once.

Riverbend’s last post is dated April 9, 2013. By that time, she and her family had fled Iraq for Jordan, returned to Iraq, fled again to Syria, escaped Syria before the fighting became too horrific, landed in a country she describes as “relatively nearby,” then moved again as refugees to “a third Arab country” she cannot name publicly. She writes that this will probably be her last post, although she won’t say why. April 9, 2013 marks the 10 year anniversary of the fall of Baghdad.

She reflects that:

In 2003, we were counting our lives in days and weeks. Would we make it to next month?
Would we make it through the summer? Some of us did and many of us didn't.

Looking back at the last ten years, what have our occupiers and the Iraqi governments given us?
What have we learned?

We learned a lot.

We learned that while life is not fair, death is even less fair- it takes the good people. Even in death you can be unlucky. Lucky ones die a ‘normal’ death... A familiar death of cancer, or a

heart-attack, or stroke. Unlucky ones have to be collected in bits and pieces. Their families trying to bury what can be salvaged and scraped off of streets that have seen so much blood, it is a wonder they are not red.

We learned that you can be floating on a sea of oil, but your people can be destitute. Your city can be an open sewer; your women and children can be eating out of trash dumps and begging for money in foreign lands.

We learned that innocent people are persecuted and executed daily. Some of them in courts, some of them in streets, and some of them in private torture chambers.

We learned that it's not that difficult to make billions of dollars disappear.

We learned that militias aren't particular about who they kill. The easiest thing in the world would be to say that Shia militias kill Sunnis and Sunni militias kill Shia, but that's not the way it works. That's too simple.

We are learning that ignorance is the death of civilized societies and that everyone thinks their particular form of fanaticism is acceptable.

But it wasn't all a bad education...

We learned that you sometimes receive kindness when you least expect it. We learned that people often step outside of the stereotypes we build for them and surprise us. We learned that there is strength in numbers and that Iraqis are not easy to oppress.

For those of you who have been asking about me and wondering how I have been doing, I thank you. "Lo khuliyet, qulibet..." Which means "If the world were empty of good people, it would end." I only need to check my emails to know it won't be ending any time soon.

Gloria Anzaldua once wrote, "Nothing in my culture approved of me" as she recalled her childhood and the hours she spent reading and writing and being scolded for not behaving like a good and obedient girl. For the poets and writers making "Incidentally Western" Art, who wave metaphorical guns in the face of Empire's all-too-real artillery, the act of writing is also a struggle to overcome the guilt of boundary transgression, of disappointing one's parents, of endangering one's family. Vietnamese theorist Trinh Minh-ha says this reality is present to some extent in all women who write, but most especially for the colonized. Although literacy may be a special mark of colonized people, it is also a mark obtained under the metaphorical or sometimes literal threat of death. Possession of literacy by women and colonized people is often crime which at once aids survival even as it invites punishment. According to Trinh, such "writers are both prompt to hide in (their) writing(s) and feel prompted to do so. As language stealers, they must yet learn to steal without being seen, and with no pretense of being a stealer..." (19).

In the Borderlands

you are the battleground

where enemies are kin to each other;....

To survive the Borderlands

you must live sin fronteras

be a crossroads.

As performance artist and poet Guillermo Gomez-Pena asks, “How would you define Los Angeles? It could be Beirut. It could be Utopia. We’ll know next weekend.”