

An Aesthetic of Cognitive Mapping: The Boundaries of the Unseminar

In memoriam
Ernst Behler
(1928-1997)

Anthony L. Geist
Department of Romance Languages
Jeff Hitchin
Independent scholar
Lynn Purl
Department of Comparative Literature
Yvonne Unnold
Department of Comparative Literature
Michael Weingrad
Department of English

University of Washington

Anthony L. Geist: This project grew out of a seminar that began as an idea in the Spring of 1993, at which time I had to submit the list of courses I intended to teach the following year. Would I give as my graduate offering another seminar on Lorca's poetry or on the Spanish detective novel? Postmodernism and poetry since the death of Franco? I decided instead to offer a "contentless" seminar, or rather, one whose content would be determined by the students. I quote from the flyer I circulated at the time to graduate students in Romance Languages, Comparative Literature and English:

The "postmodern condition" is generated by a crisis of knowledge and by the failure of master narratives. One such master narrative may well be the graduate seminar. At the same time, this crisis opens a space for the circulation of new structures and concepts. In the waning of the 20th century, perhaps we can redefine the seminar.

At first I had in mind a seminar leading, perhaps, to the organization of a conference or to something related to performance art. After several planning sessions, it turned into something quite different, a meditation on borders. We have come to understand borders both in a strict geopolitical sense, as well as more figuratively as that equivocal boundary between literatures, cultures, ethnic groups, genres and genders, a boundary which by its very nature demands an interdisciplinary analysis.

The "Unseminar," as it came to be known, raised more questions for me than it answered. As the professor, I intended it to empower the students, to redraw the lines of authority and authorship. Yet I constantly had to ask myself: if *I* was empowering *them*, was I not merely reinscribing my own authority?

Michael Weingrad: The experience of the unseminar was one of education as process and accretion, an effort constantly to retrace the traditional boundaries. The five of us entered the course for different reasons, with different interests, areas of specialization, and levels and types of theoretical knowledge. Therefore, an important part of the process of the course was the development of a common language we could use to articulate our concerns, a language constructed of shared texts, ideas, and discussions. Each participant was responsible for organizing and running the unseminar for two weeks, and we came up with a remarkably heterogeneous constellation of texts: Jameson and García Canclini, Christopher Columbus and Isabel Allende, Robert Bly, Orson Welles and William Burroughs, Elizabeth Bishop and Ross Perot, among others. The course grew more rewarding as it lengthened, both because we were continually adding more contents to the pot, and because we were learning how to talk about it. We never managed to reconcile these different discourses, but then we never really intended to. We have tried instead to inhabit the borderland that their colliding boundaries trace.

We didn't want to terminate our course with the traditional seminar paper, written and received in isolation, a silent contract between "professor" and "student." A course conceived as open-ended process is only reluctantly transformed into product. We decided to collaborate on a presentation, something that would give a sense of the unseminar's variety, and something that might generate further discussion rather than ending it. We chose the exhibit "La Frontera/The Border," on display at the Tacoma Art Museum at the end of 1993, as the site where our different critical and personal discourses might intersect. Therefore, the success of the unseminar is to be determined now, in this presentation, and in its unforeseen results, to which we hope you as readers will contribute with your responses and questions.

ALG: We visited the exhibit together and each wrote an individual response to it, circulated those texts amongst ourselves, and discussed them at length. We often disagreed—some members of the unseminar found the responses too theory-driven, others not enough. Finally we decided not to resolve the contradictions but to highlight them. We felt that an "unarticle" was a fitting end to the unseminar. Thus we cut and reassembled our texts, juxtaposing and occasionally reformulating contradictory statements in the hope that the reconfiguration would generate new ideas. Had we possessed the technical knowledge and capability at the time, we would have liked to compose our piece in Hypertext, allowing the reader to cut from one text to another, as well as to visuals. As it turned out, we produced a more traditional hard copy, which we presented at "Chimaera: The First Annual University of Washington Graduate and Professional Student Research Forum" in the Spring of 1994. We then agreed to try to publish it as co-authors (unauthors?), a practice as uncommon in the humanities as it is common in the sciences.¹

Students in the original unseminar came not from my department (Spanish and Portuguese), but from English and Comp Lit. Graduate students in Spanish feel constrained by a rigorous exam schedule and reading list. As a faculty member in a small department I offer a seminar once every other year. Thus I am torn between meeting the pragmatic needs of the students, and what Jane Tomkins, following Paolo Freire, calls "education [as] a practice of freedom" (Tomkins 24). Certainly there are other ways, as Tomkins points out, to shift peda-

gogy from a performance model to a more open, collaborative process, and I increasingly try to achieve this in my classes. The unseminar was received variously by my colleagues with enthusiasm, with a bemused smile, and with the occasional "This is what happens when you let sophomores into graduate seminars!"

Now, nearly four years later, the fruits of the unseminar go to print, crowning the experiment as a success, a judgment with which the students concur. For some of the reasons listed above, I have not repeated it. Yet the unseminar will surely ride again, if not in my teaching, then in that of my students, as we map and grope our way into the next century.

ALG: Let us situate ourselves at the border, not just at the intersection of various different margins, but in the interstices of their complex crossing(s). Postmodern theory pushes against the limits of Modernism, describing the death of master narratives and myths, the poststructuralist indifferenciation of meaning, a culture of simulacra (where images reproduce images, ever farther removed from any material referent). Some come to praise Pomo (Lyotard), and others to bury it (Jameson). Yet the shimmering structures of Paris, New York or LA that drive the intellectual constructs of the one and the other, beacons of the industrialized (or post-industrial) "first world," shine differently in Tijuana, Tegucigalpa or the shantytowns encircling Lima. What happens where third world meets first, where premodern abuts postmodern?

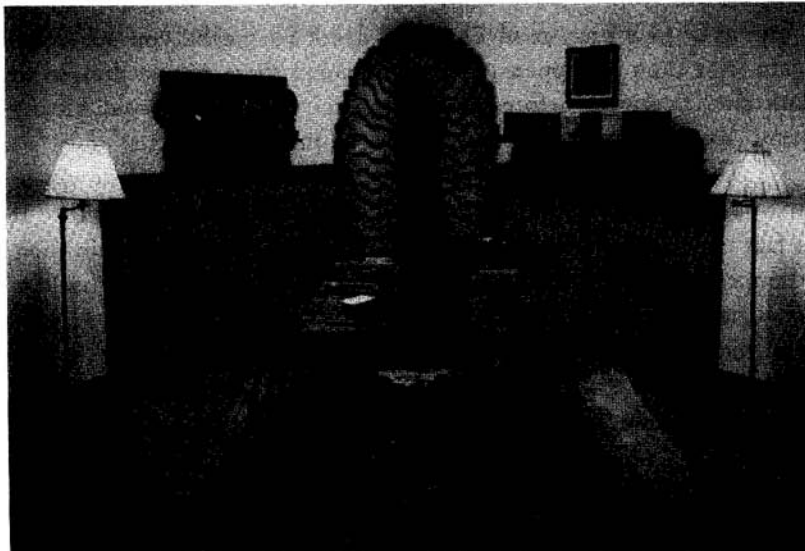
Whether we consider postmodernism a "crisis of knowledge," a "cultural dominant," "the cultural logic of late capitalism," or simply a "question of style," it bespeaks a profound realignment of power, a shifting of boundaries, an awareness of the margins. And it does so with particular intensity in the waning days of the twentieth century. Seeking footing on the shifting sands of postindustrial capitalism, Fredric Jameson calls for a new "cognitive mapping" (54) of postmodernity. Where do we draw the borders of that new mapping, how do we trace the jockeying for position of center and margin, the restructuring of power relations between and within nations, classes, "races" and genders? How, in a word, are we to inhabit the contradiction?

The Mexico-US border is one of the world's longest, stretching 1,952 miles from the Pacific to the Gulf Coast. It dramatically enacts

the realignment in the margins that has been our object of study. (We could also look at the radical redrawing of borders in the former Soviet block since the fall of the Berlin Wall—such dizzying changes in less than a decade!). A border is the touching of two peripheries, located at the farthest flung remove from the centers of political, administrative and cultural power. In one sense the border doesn't "exist," or exists only in two dimensions, an infinitely narrow line traced in the sand or sky that one crosses but cannot inhabit. It separates two nations.

Yet at the same time, the boundary unites. The US-Mexico border has had for many years, and increasingly so since the Second World War, a third dimension. It is a place in and of itself. Goethe recalls the particular joy he felt facing structures designed by Palladio as that *third* thing between the columns and the wall, a space which the great architect simultaneously created and occupied.

The border is that third space, between the walls, or within the wall. A space of crossing and hybridization, an "open wound." In many senses the border is moving north and south, colonizing both Mexico and the US. The traveling exhibit, *La Frontera/The Border* (jointly organized by the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art and the Centro Cultural de la Raza and sponsored by public and private funding), stands gingerly astride the border, one foot squarely in San Diego, a few toes of the other in Tijuana. As such, it provides an ideal object/pretext for a meditation on a number of the concerns outlined above.



Las Comadres,
"The Reading Room from 'La Vecindad/Border Boda' Exhibition"

Jeff Hitchin: While viewing “La Frontera/The Border,” I was reminded of San Diego, where I was raised, and everything I was ever told about the relationship between Mexicans and Americans. I remember when certain signs started popping up alongside Interstate 5. The signs pictured a man, woman, and child running with the word “Caution” written at the top of the sign and “Peligroso” at the bottom. The signs were supposed to warn motorists that illegal aliens might run across the freeway in an attempt to get away from INS as well as warning the illegal aliens that it was dangerous to cross the highway. Unfortunately, many of the illegal aliens couldn’t read Spanish or English and would misinterpret the sign as a crossing area and would run onto the highway.

One of the first pieces I saw in the exhibit used these “Caution” signs. In “The Reading Room from ‘La Vecindad/Border Boda,’” four signs are used. However, two of the signs replace the figures of the man, woman and child with skeletons in the same positions. The effect was quite chilling for me, and while I was staring at it, other memories of San Diego came back to me.

Yvonne Unnold: Imagine it’s night, you are heading toward Tijuana, at a steady 55 miles per hour, when you suddenly find yourself catching a short glimpse of this rather unusual sign. Pedestrians on the highway! Perhaps you slow down for a while, but after all, there aren’t any pedestrians in sight and really, when have you ever witnessed people jumping onto a busy road like wild deer? So maybe you speed up again. But then it happens. Out of nowhere three people dressed in dark clothes appear before your eyes. Are you able to avoid hitting them? You can try. Maybe you will all be lucky.

The signs tell you that you should drive carefully and slowly, in fact, you should be as prepared to stop as in a wild life crossing area. If in fact these illegal trespassers should not be killed or harmed in their attempt to cross the highway, why do local authorities not build a pedestrian overpass? This may appear to be a rather ridiculous suggestion, yet, what message does this sign give you, the driver? Does it not tell you, “Be careful, people are running across the street here, don’t run them over”...? Now place yourself in the position of one of the people trying to enter the States illegally. Surely, if you knew of any safer crossing, you would not use this one. But then, you have made it over the fence, now you only need to cross the busy lanes and you’ll

have made it. There is a sign, you understand a little English and get the message: "Caution, people running." Well, the street is busy, and you'd better not make yourself visible before you can really make it across. You are well prepared, it's night and you are wearing all black clothes.... Should you cross where cars are slowing down, for example right after that sign, or should you rather walk away from it just in case an INS officer is lying in the opposite ditch, waiting just for you...? Eventually you'll cross, and you'll get run over or you won't.

Lynn Purl: I want to talk about my experiences seeing "La Frontera/ The Border," but this raises questions. On the one hand I don't want to "appropriate" Mexican and Chicano art or be a part of what Guillermo Gómez-Peña calls "a dominant culture that continues to ransack ideas, images, spiritual strength and exotic lifestyles from without and its own Third World within" (9). By what right do I, a gringa, a middle-class white chick, talk about the border? On the other hand, if we didn't look at other cultures for fear of appropriating them, what would be left to us but a sort of endless cultural and critical navel gazing? And who "owns" border culture, or any other culture, for that matter? I don't presume to be able to answer that one, but by looking at other cultures through their art, literature, and so on, perhaps I can find ways of recognizing and transcending my own complicity in the perpetuation of U.S. cultural and economic domination of other countries. Border art would seem to offer an ideal physical and ideological space in which to begin a search for a model of subjectivity which would seek to avoid perpetuating this domination.

In her essay "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor," Emma Pérez recounts her anger at a "white Lesbian feminist" friend of hers who is offended by Pérez calling her a gringa:

I rage at her arrogance. I rage at her white-skin prerogative, her middle-class dilemma. I rage at her doctrine of reverse racism. [She tells me my] anger about the pain and abuse of racial violence is inappropriate when used against her... You're a gringa, I thunder. You're white. You will never know how it feels to have brown skin and a Mexican name. You will never know what it is like to watch your mother struggle with white words. You cannot tell me how to define who you think you are to me. You cannot tell me what to think of you. How many times have I lived this scene, have I repeated these words to Anglos who invade my space, who silence my words. (175)

While Pérez' anger may be understandable, name-calling and bitterness don't necessarily constitute an empowering ideology; indeed they seem likely to beget yet more name-calling and bitterness, perpetuating the hierarchy of oppressor and oppressed.²

YU: The exhibit distinguishes itself from more traditional representations by its attempt to address and at the same time present a duality or multiplicity of ethnically and experientially different situations and readings within the Mexican/United States border reality. As it is the exhibit's organizers' goal "to stimulate the discussion of the meaning of the border, for people regionally, nationally, and internationally" (Chávez 8), I would like to relate to you my reading of the road signs and, in turn, hope that by way of this analysis we can initiate a discussion on the multifaceted border experience.

As Jeff has described, the controversial North American road sign stands in contrast to a fictitious and yet realistic Mexican version of the same sign. What is enunciated here is no joke but a sober, down to earth juxtaposition of the meaning and implication this sign carries for the Spanish-speaking community on the one side and the general North American traveler on the other. With dead irony, the artists seem to spell out: People, as you stand in front of this sign staring at a strange word and recognizing the image of people running, what your eyes should really tell you instead is "Cuidado, este rótulo significa la muerte, no sigas a esta gente, o te morirás." "Caution, this sign means death, don't follow these people, or you die."

Many illegal immigrants, attempting to enter the United States by running across the busy Interstate 5 highway near the Tijuana checkpoint, get hit, injured or killed by oncoming traffic. Without question this stretch of the highway is an especially high risk, high accident area, and this fact would seem to support the installation of permanent signs warning U.S. travelers of illegal trespassers crossing the highway. It is my understanding that their presence on the highway and the message which they seem intended to portray may in fact hide their real significance.

I believe the artists succeed in demonstrating the border experience as multifaceted, one of ignorance and horror, of disillusion and death. I believe that in reality, it should not matter which side we are on, in order to realize that borders are imposed artificially,³ and that as long as we uphold these borders, be they between East and West

Germany or between the United States and Mexico, people will risk and lose their lives in the attempt to gain access to that which is reserved for the other side.



Yolanda M. López, "Things I Never Told My Son About Being a Mexican"

JH: Several other pieces in the exhibit showed how Mexican culture and ideology are often appropriated and then degraded by U.S. mass culture. Yolanda M. López' piece, "Things I Never Told My Son About Being a Mexican," brings together many examples of this exploitation. Various types of media are used in this particular piece, including comic strips, toys, advertisements and food products. Some of the examples are almost racial slurs. One comic strip in particular shows the stereotypical Mexican figure in white shirt and pants, sombrero, and sarape sitting against a wall with his head down, apparently sleeping. The figure then raises his head, pops a sleeping pill, lowers his head and goes back to sleep. This idea of laziness is a common theme in the work. Many other pictures and drawings include Mexican men dressed in a similar fashion sleeping. Advertisements used included the "Run for the Border" campaign by Taco Bell, and a picture of the "successful Mexican-American woman," dressed in a pants suit carrying a feather duster, intimating that the only successful Hispanic women were cleaning ladies. I would have liked to think that this kind of exploitation was a thing of the past, but almost all of the examples used in the piece were taken from the last four years.

It seems as though the examples are more unconscious stereotyping by American culture than direct slurs, but it's this unconscious stereotyping that is the hardest to change. Only this year, at my workplace, I was asked to call to verify addresses of a list of customers, not a normal part of the job I was doing at the time. The reason I was given this particular task was that all the names of the customers were "Hispanic-sounding" and the person who normally performs this job figured it would be quicker if I took these customers since I spoke Spanish, and she didn't. I thought it was extremely bizarre that a person could assume that someone didn't speak English just because his last name was Sánchez.

MW: Cultures may be understood as being similar to the La Frontera exhibition. That is, cultures are complex assemblages which are both fluid and analyzable, which travel, and which are encountered in specific situations (e.g., Tacoma). Such an approach to cultural politics may be called pragmatic. This pragmatism is aesthetic in the sense that, like the serious artist, it is interested less in essences, abstractions, and reductions than in details, construction, and practical consequences. And it is political for the same reasons: the "overriding theme" is less important than the "active relationship to multiple forces" (the expression is David Avalos' [67]) constituting political reality. Practical effects, "lived, daily realities" (24), matter most.

To this pragmatics we can contrast the currently popular Politics of the Voice. Emma Pérez' essay "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes From a Chicana Survivor," discussed earlier by Lynn, serves as an excellent example of voice politics. Such an aesthetico-political stance seeks to "return to an imaginary wholeness and past." It is opposed to "transgression, reassemblage, breaking and restructuring," since these words typify the kinds of violent phallogocentric discourse that Pérez takes Foucault (among others) to task for (although the use of the word "survivor" in the very title of Pérez' essay constitutes a glaring ethnic appropriation).

The voice is an expression of the mythic essence of a particular victimized group. The mythic always seeks to disguise the contingent, assembled, and specific nature of a culture. It seeks through blood and soil to make borders natural, not historical. One cannot argue with myth.

Voice is a contemporary counterpart to myth. It hides differences and particularities. It assumes there is an essence to a person or

a community that lurks beneath situation and history. One cannot argue with voice, as Pérez demonstrates in the passage cited earlier, when she responds to a white lesbian friend's objection to Pérez calling her a gringa. The chasm of mutual incomprehensibility that Pérez posits between herself and her friend is sadly farcical. More disturbing is Pérez' uncritical appeal to racial categories to support her unquestionable hierarchy of victimization and outrage. Race-memory, however, doesn't exist. You can't remember something that never happened to you. This is not to say that, as a poetic trope, racial memory cannot be a highly effective political tool for oppressed groups. Still, such a tool is always a potential danger, and race-memory has been less fashionable since 1945. Today we would rather speak of voice. This is still an appeal to essence, but without as much of the distasteful language of blood and soil and *volksgeist*. But there is no "voice" in the La Frontera exhibition. Instead, there are various articulations: necessarily political, provocative, conflicting.

LP: I would like to borrow from a recent trend in feminist theory to try to come up with a new way of looking at national and ethnic identity. Feminist theorists like Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Butler have cast into doubt the idea of gender as the binary opposition male/female, masculine/feminine, or even man/woman, and have shown the ideologies at work in the production and reification of such categories. In *The Technology of Gender* de Lauretis discusses the problems presented by thinking of gender or sexual difference in binary terms:

A second limitation of the notion of sexual difference(s) is that it tends to recontain or recuperate the radical epistemological potential of feminist thought inside the walls of the master's house, to borrow Audre Lorde's metaphor rather than Nietzsche's "prison-house of language," for reasons that will presently become apparent. By radical epistemological potential I mean the possibility, already emergent in feminist writings of the 1980s, to conceive of the social subject and of the relations of subjectivity to sociality in another way: a subject constituted in gender, to be sure, though not by sexual difference alone, but rather across languages and cultural representations; a subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as sexual, relations; a subject, therefore, not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted. (2)

By thinking of ethnic identity in binary terms do we also “recontain or recuperate the radical epistemological potential” of thought on ethnicity “inside the walls of the master’s house”? In other words, by thinking about identity as gringa oppressor versus oppressed Chicana or Mexican, do we leave in place the very structure that allowed oppression to occur in the first place? Perhaps de Lauretis’ concept of the multiple, contradicted subject can offer a model for us to try to think our way out of the confines of this structure.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler also talks about the problems of binary or essentialist thinking on gender. She discusses the trouble caused when the female object of masculine desire suddenly returns his gaze and questions the authority of his place in the power dynamic:

The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female “Other” suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory. That particular dialectical reversal of power, however, couldn’t quite hold my attention—although others surely did. Power seemed to be more than an exchange between subjects or a relation of constant inversion between a subject and an Other; indeed, power appeared to operate in the production of that very binary frame for thinking about gender. (vii- viii)

I believe a similar kind of power is in operation in the production of the binary frame of thinking about the relationships between oppressor and oppressed. If women are no longer defined in opposition to men, if there is no essential “femaleness” that all women have in common, then perhaps there is no essential “whiteness” that all Anglos have in common, or for that matter no essential “Mexicanness” or “Chicanoness.” Thus we can move away from the us-versus-them, white oppressor-versus-brown victim toward a model that is more fluid, multiple, and mobile. All of which is not to deny the historical and contemporary realities of American cultural, economic, and military imperialism toward Mexico and toward ethnic minorities within the U.S. Far from it. To question the validity of the binary model of white-versus-brown is to undermine the very ideological concepts which allow U.S. imperialism to continue. If imperialism has no stable subject or object, how can it possibly continue to wield the power that it has until now? So back to my original question: by what right does a middle-class, educated white woman who lives far from the U.S. Mexico

border talk about the border? I do it in part because to do otherwise would be to remain complicit with the current ideological state of affairs.

Emma Pérez again:

Gringos/as built boundaries, fences, for themselves while they invaded our space, our boundaries. The boundaries that I draw to sustain my sanity. We cannot be friends as long as you think you [...] can invade my space and silence my language, my thoughts, my words, my rage. *Mi sitio y mi lengua*. Invasion, a deceitful intimacy. The Perpetrator wields power over the victim. The colonizer over the colonized. Sexual-racial violence mirrored in language, in words. A speculum of conquest to “penetrate” further. (175)

Pérez says she needs to retreat to her *sitio* and her *lengua* in order to revitalize herself and return to build coalitions for political action. But by accepting and reinscribing the boundaries drawn by the dominant cultures, is she not perhaps needlessly perpetuating them? Are there other models of resistance better able to avoid reconstructing the hierarchy in the act of supposedly deconstructing it?

JH: When I was young, I was always told that the San Diego economy was being undermined by the influx of illegal aliens and that the Mexicans were trying to exploit their situation to the highest degree that they could. Until I started high school, I believed that. Even after visiting Mexico several times and getting to know the Mexican culture, the things I had been told were still lingering in my memory. It was as though illegal aliens were a separate race, totally unlike the Mexicans I had come to know. I was still viewing the border situation from the U.S. side with an Us-versus-Them mentality. They were the enemy that were after our jobs. But while I was viewing the exhibit, it seemed as though the artists were trying to say, “What do you mean we were doing it to you? YOU were doing it to US!” I finally was seeing the border from the Mexican point of view. Maybe my neighbors weren’t being taking advantage of by Mexican workers, but exploiting them instead.

YU: Physical borders are created to serve as a separator between cultures, peoples, and lands. Their purpose is to enclose and exclude, to

serve as a shield, a means of protection, and thus also to serve as an obstacle preventing the crossing over into the other sphere. Yet, the past as well as the present demonstrate that these purposes are not achieved. Instead of preventing and clearly discouraging border violations, borders rather seem to instigate them. Day after day, people, who are supposedly prevented from moving freely from one land to another because of enforced border politics, attempt to trespass the border without hesitating to take risks in exchange for the meager chance of succeeding in their endeavor.

The United States is clearly aware of constant border violations, of people risking and losing their lives in the attempt to reach what they may not and to counteract this border reality stronger controls and tougher immigration regulations are imposed. And yet, who are the victims, and who are the perpetrators? And who is responsible? US border politics seem to indicate that illegal immigrants are considered perpetrators and US actions against them could be seen as a measure to prevent US victimization through them. On the other hand, it is the illegal immigrants who are injured and killed, a fact which suggests that they are the victims. Responsibility? You may agree that this is a difficult subject. Seldom do we lack volunteers who claim responsibility for actions that are considered positive. However, responsibility is frequently denied and hard to accept when it is linked to actions which perhaps only retrospectively are perceived as negative. You will recall that upon the abolition of the border between East and West Germany, soldiers who once killed East Germans as they attempted to flee to the West were being sued for criminal wrongdoing and held responsible for their actions.

JH: When I was in San Diego last summer, I completely re-landscaped my parents' back yard. My father told all his friends about his "great Spanish-speaking gardener." He thought it was hilarious. I was offended at first, thinking my father was making some kind of value judgment about the quality of my work, but then I realized what the implications of that statement were. I couldn't believe that my own father could make that kind of intimation—that gardeners in San Diego didn't speak English because they couldn't. I knew that his friends immediately figured my father had hired an illegal alien to do the work and would be surprised when they found out my father meant me. Then I remembered my first reaction to my father's state-

ment. I thought my father was putting down the quality of my work because he was comparing me to an illegal alien and I realized that I was making a judgment based on stereotype when I thought I was enlightened enough to not do that.

As I was leaving the exhibit, I thought about San Diego and the unconscious stereotyping that still goes on. The exhibit made me realize that I was still doing it in my own way. I don't use racial slurs, but my mind still equates an illegal worker with below-average quality work. I spent a while after that trying to think of some way that this situation could be changed. The only conclusion I could reach was that it couldn't be changed. I've heard people say that Mexican workers wouldn't be exploited if they didn't let themselves be exploited. However, after seeing the exhibit, I realized that Americans are just as much at fault. After all, nobody forces employers to use illegal workers, and as long as the work is there, the workers will continue to cross the border looking for it. All I can do now is keep my eyes on the road to make sure I don't hit anybody trying to cross the freeway.⁴

MW: The most haunting piece in "La Frontera/The Border" is César Augusto Martínez' "Canonization in South Texas by an Imaginary Pope" (1990). But what does this eery palimpsest actually say? The painting has been constructed very carefully—transforming, yet not hiding, the corrugated metal used for cars into the outer wings of a modern triptych. Look how the thousands of votive candles have been rendered—their glow is noticeable but will not outshine the gloomy rust of the sky, with which they coexist uneasily. What do the candles signify? Lives? Hopes?



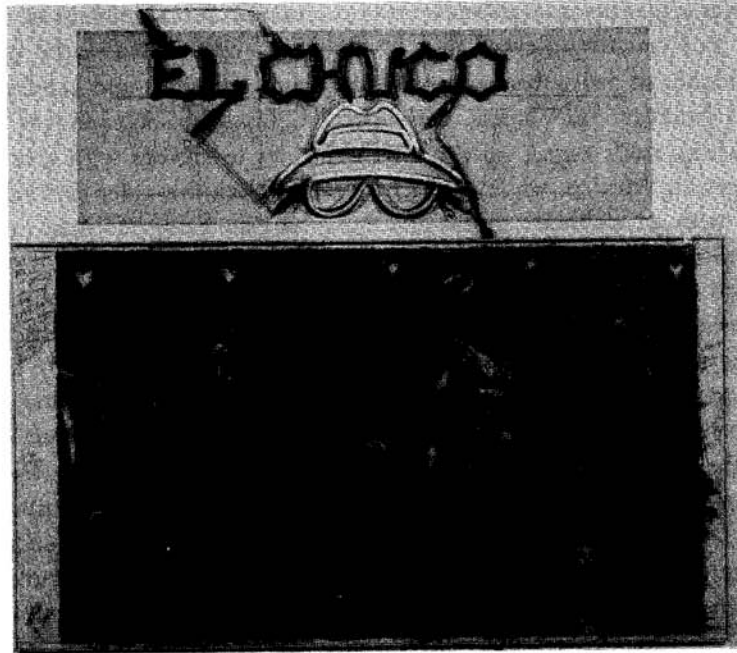
César Augusto Martínez,
"Canonization in South Texas by an Imaginary Pope"

Looking at this landscape—scale obliterated—of somber lights, one thinks of mass graves, hell, oil fields, refineries along the highway, the extermination of innocents. The shadowy pope presiding (a “legendary South Texas faith healer” [La Frontera 37]) appears as a brooding prophet, an old photo of Melville or Marx. Of the paintings of the preceding century, this most resembles Turner’s sulfuric landscapes. “Canonization in South Texas by an Imaginary Pope”: suggestive, disturbing, not easily assignable to some single, reductive or predictable interpretation. And yet how carefully has Martínez worked!

ALG: And like Turner’s infernal landscapes, rendered a hundred years ago in the heart of the Industrial Revolution, at the troubled interface of city and country, Martínez’ “Canonization” also represents the meeting of technology and nature. Yet Martínez’ landscape comes at the end of this century and from the margins: the south Texas desert painted on a junk yard car hood—the margin appropriating the center. Or is it perhaps the other way around: industrial detritus colonizes and inhabits the farthest-flung remnants of the pre-industrial world?⁵

Gloria Anzaldúa suggests that the border is the site of a powerful implosion and explosion of cultures, and builds its own *lugar*/place from the fragments. This is a powerful and suggestive image of the border’s selfconstruction as space: “Implosion and explosion,” “fragments,” “reasseblage” (107). Anzaldúa’s words suggest the violence at the heart of the border experience, as indeed the exhibit’s title does: La Frontera/The Border. The slash between languages opens the wound between the two sides. Out of the rubble of the explosion, the slash, border peoples construct their culture. Gathering and reassembling the fragments is a metonymic process, each shard evoking the whole from which it is splintered. Yet by definition it can never wholly reconstruct that former totality; it can merely suggest it by its absence, a ghost evoked by the splinter. Border culture alludes metonymically to the old matrix cultures, carries them within, yet ultimately creates new machines out of parts of the old, in a process that we could say generates metaphors (Anzaldúa herself says that metaphors *are* gods [109]).

Luis Jiménez, "El 'Chuco"



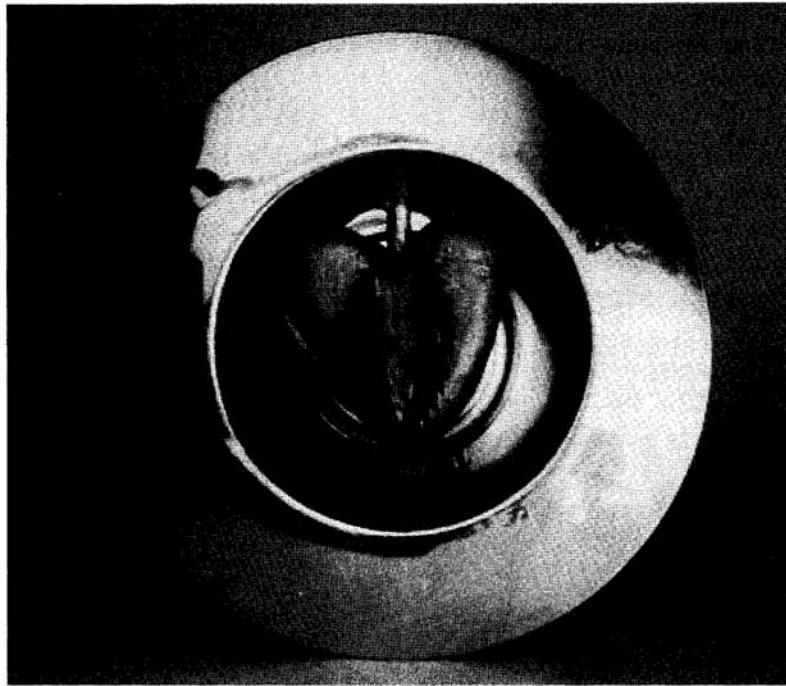
Luis Jiménez' "El Chuco" (1984), to my eye one of the most striking pieces in the exhibit, represents the figure of the pachuco, a foundational myth of the Chicano *Movimiento* in the '60s. The 'chuco is as distant from Mexican culture as he is from mainstream American culture, as Octavio Paz makes abundantly clear in his polemical 1947 essay included in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. The border is multiple for the pachuco of the 1940s, as it is for his descendent, the *vato loco* of the '80s and '90s: not only between Mexico and the US, but within the urban structures of the Southwest, in the barrios of Los Angeles, San Diego, Denver, El Paso. Jiménez' piece, itself a hybrid, mixing neon and colored pencil on paper, represents the pachuco's experience as urban and mobile. At its very heart, (ironically) inscribed at the visual center of the composition, is the Aztec prince holding in his arms a voluptuous (sacrificial?) maiden, the kitsch icon of Mexican calendar art. From that central figure sexuality radiates out to the pachucos and pachucas in or near their cars. The hearts that border the top of the drawing evoke both Mexican *ex-votos* and pachuco tattoos, and suggest the borderlands' appropriation and subversion of cultural icons of both matrix cultures.

LP: I recognize the irony in turning to the pachuco as an example of de Lauretis' multiple, contradicted subject. While he is a symbol of Chicano identity and resistance, the pachuco is also a emblem of sexism and violence. Nevertheless he embodies, quite literally, the transcendence of proscribed categories of culture, ethnicity, and gender, as Luis Jiménez' "El Chuco" demonstrates. In the background of the painting, trails zigzag up the mountainsides to shrines with crosses, suggesting Mexico, while in the foreground sleek low-rider cars and a van with an elaborate mural of a nude woman being ravished make the setting less definite: this could also be the U.S. In the figure of el chuco and his companions the biggest challenge to rigid concepts of identity is that of gender. El chuco and the pachuca on the left bear more than a passing resemblance to each other. They essentially have the same face: same high cheekbones, same aquiline nose, same full mouth. El chuco's exposed midriff and well-defined pecs are echoed by the bosom and bare midriff of his female companion. All of the figures are at once stereotypically exaggerated images of masculinity and femininity and beings who are not so much bisexual as "bigender." They are masculine and feminine at the same time. The recurrent motifs of hearts and crosses magnify this, adding an almost jarring note of little-girl femininity and innocence to the hip, urban, erotically charged scene. The effect of the whole is one of both degradation and empowerment, repulsion and allure, bitter irony and playful humor.

In their essay "The Pachuco's Flayed Hide: Mobility, Identity, and *Buenas Garras*," Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino and John Tagg discuss some of the ways in which the pachuco escapes essentialist categories of identity:

For those who wore the Zoot Suit, it was not a question of discovering beneath the structures of domination an innate individual and collective identity that could be safeguarded and cultivated until the political moment destined for its emergence. Pachuco culture was a survival strategy not of purity, of saying less, but rather of saying more, of saying too much, with the wrong accent and intonation, of mixing the metaphors, making illegal crossings, and continually transforming language so that its effects might never be wholly assimilable to an essential ethnicity, to a "social ecology" of delinquency, or to the spectacle of multiculturalism and commodified diversity. (561)

David Avalos, "Hubcap Milagro #4"



David Avalos' 1987 "Hubcap Milagro #4" subverts essentialist categories of ethnic and gender identity in ways that are quite similar to those of "El Chuco". The hubcap itself is much like the trappings of the pachuco: a North American cultural icon that has been appropriated by Chicano culture and turned into a symbol of status and defiance. The *milagro*, appropriated from Mexican religious culture, becomes a shrine not to any saint but to Chicano identity. The heart of the *milagro*—like the heart of Chicano identity, perhaps—is, like El Chuco, both masculine and feminine. The lipstick, feminine by association, becomes phallic as it rises out of the heart, while the heart itself opens like a vagina. The fact that this is a vagina dentata, a toothed vagina, can be seen as both threatening and empowering. Like Jiménez' work, Avalos' piece is playful and ironic, though for the most part it lacks the dark side of El Chuco.

By resisting or subverting essentialist notions of ethnicity and gender Jiménez and Avalos seem to have found a more productive approach than Pérez' gender politics discussed earlier. It is not so much the product of their endeavors, the identities they create, as the pro-

cess that we might wish to emulate. In going beyond the binary of American oppressor versus Mexican oppressed, perhaps we might find space along the border to forge a new sense of ethnic and cultural identity.

MW: *Love and Rockets* is the most critically acclaimed alternative comic of the past decade. It is written and drawn by two brothers, Jaime and Gilberto Hernández, who work separately on the two storylines which appear in each bimonthly issue. I'll concentrate here



Figure 1

on Jaime Hernández' continuing story, *Vida Loca*. Artistically, Jaime cites influences ranging from Peanuts to the Sex Pistols, and he plays on the conventions of romance comics in a manner similar to Roy Lichtenstein [fig. 1]. Furthermore, *Vida Loca* draws heavily on both Jaime's own Mexican-American upbringing in Southern California, and his experiences in the California punk scene. Jaime's central character, Maggie (Margarita Chascarillo), is the focus of my comments, and is a far cry from the superheroes we might usually associate with comic books. Maggie is bisexual, Mexican-American, speaks Spanish and English, and is possibly the most endearing and sympathetic character ever put in comic book form. Jaime, who treats his characters' sexualities explicitly [fig. 2], along with the many other aspects of their lives, has a strong following among gay and bisexual comics readers. (He was interviewed very positively in *Out/Look*, in an issue devoted to debates on bisexuality.) And, though statistics would be hard to come by, Maggie may be the most popular fictional bisexual today. Maggie represents a positive model for a postmodern self which does not flee ethnicity, but works pragmatically with it.

on Jaime Hernández' continuing story, *Vida Loca*. Artistically, Jaime cites influences ranging from Peanuts to the Sex Pistols, and he plays on the conventions of romance comics in a manner similar to Roy Lichtenstein [fig. 1]. Furthermore, *Vida Loca* draws heavily on both Jaime's own Mexican-American upbringing in Southern California, and his experiences in the California punk scene. Jaime's central character, Maggie (Margarita Chascarillo), is the focus of my comments,



Figure 2



Figure 3a



Figure 3b

Throughout *Vida Loca*, we are shown various examples of Maggie's physical, linguistic, and cultural mobility. In the sequence attached [figs. 3a-d], we first see Maggie with her friend/lover Esperanza (Hopey) Glass, who plays in a punk band. On one page Maggie negotiates—in

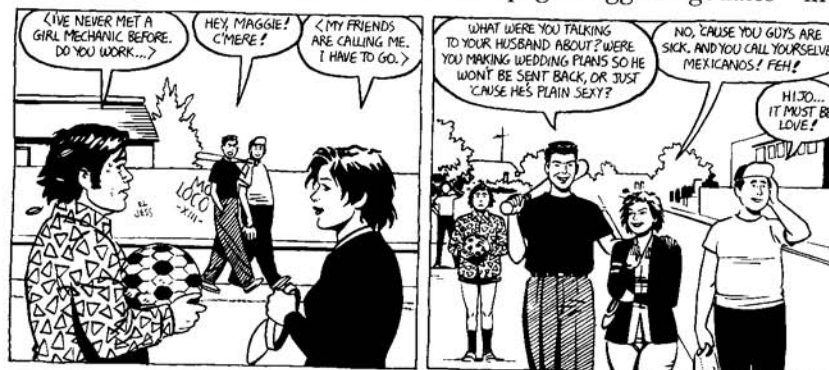


Figure 3c

Spanish and English—between Chucho, an elderly, traditionally homophobic Mexican-American, and Hopey. On the next page, Maggie feigns incomprehension of English to elude a bigoted Anglo. In one panel, she speaks Spanish with Correo, a Mexican immigrant; in the next she crosses the street to speak English with her Chicano friend Speedy. Maggie moves between English and Spanish, as she moves between Mexican-American tradition and the L.A. punk scene. All of this cultural



Figure 3d

versatility is summed up and emblemized in her sexuality. The events of these early stories are punctuated with scenes of Maggie and Hopey in bed, commenting on the day's events. Even more pointed are the story's final two rows of panels. In the first, Hopey's ex-girlfriend Terry admits to Hopey that she is consumed with jealousy now that Hopey is seeing Maggie. Below this, Correo's Mexican friends chide him in Spanish for his interest in Maggie; they teasingly warn him about the trap of marriage. Maggie exists in the space between these panels, between the worlds (somewhat similar here) of heterosexual tradition and her punk friends' exclusive lesbianism. Her sexuality is an extension of her cultural mobility.

Figure 4a



Figure 4b



Figure 4c



Maggie's sexuality becomes linked to even more pressing issues in Jaime's later stories. In these stories there is a repeated linking of heterosexuality and violence; meanwhile, Maggie's bisexuality appears to hold out the possibility of an alternative to violence. In *The Death of Speedy*, the territorial violence of gang warfare is in each instance directly connected to heterosexual jealousy [figs. 4a-e]. Territorial violence is seen as the extension of heterosexual machismo, the desire to possess neighborhood and the desire to possess women is revealed as the same cause of bloody conflict. (We can also think about the territorial rhetoric involved in Pérez' identity politics. "My father taught me to fight," [177] she says. "I have rights to my space. I have boundaries. I will tell you when you cross them" [178].) In a Girardian sense, Maggie is the element resistant to escalating violence [fig. 5].



Figure 4d

Figure 5



Yet I would not wish to gloss over the utopian element in the figure of Maggie. Jaime does not pretend to be drawing “reality”; his work is too aware of its mixing of realistic and fantastic elements [fig. 6], and this applies to the social reality as well as the art. *Love and Rockets* is drawn by a male writer, for an audience composed primarily of white college students.⁶ At present, Maggie’s postmodern virtues may represent, therefore, a possibility—the better instincts of its audience.

Figure 6



ALG: We understand, then, border as possibility, as crossing, as a “strategy,” in Néstor García Canclini’s words, “for entering and leaving modernity.” This strategy, indeed its very possibility, is in and of itself postmodern. The works in the exhibit *La Frontera/The Border* suggest the liberating energies of a postmodernism grown up in the interstices of the crossings of power, in the unweeded margins of the first and third worlds. The borderlands become not just the object but the subject of history, generating an oppositional discourse. bell hooks sees the border as “a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (341). While recognizing that we are writing from a position of relative centrality (American academia), we have attempted to inscribe our own discourse in and from the margins as well, situating ourselves in that “site of radical possibility,” that “space of resistance” (hooks 341) that is the border.

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Border Art: Nepantla, El Lugar de la Frontera." Chávez and Grynsztein, 107-114.
- Avalos, David. "A Wag Dogging a Tale." Chávez and Grynsztein, 59-75.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Chávez, Patricio and Madeleine Grynsztein, curators. *La Frontera/The Border: Art About the Mexico/United States Border Experience*. San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza/Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993. (Exhibit catalogue)
- Chávez, Patricio. "Multi-Correct Politically Cultural." Chávez and Grynsztein, 3-11.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.
- García Canclini, Néstor. *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*. Mexico, DF: Grijalbo, 1989.
- Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. "Death on the Border: A Eulogy to Border Art." *High Performance* (Spring 1991). Qtd. in Chávez and Grynsztein, 39.
- Grynsztein, Madeleine. "La Frontera/The Border: Art About the Mexico/United States Border Experience." Chávez and Grynsztein, 23-39.
- Hernández, Jaime and Gilberto Hernández. *House of Raging Women*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1992.
- Hernández, Jaime. *The Death of Speedy*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1993.
- . "Love and Rockets." Interview by Robin Stevens. *Out/Look* 16 (Spring 1992). 32-35.
- hooks, bell. "marginality as a site of resistance." *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trin T. Minh-ha, Cornel West. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism. or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- Liotard, François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Paz, Octavio. "El Pachuco y otros extremos." *El laberinto de la soledad*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973. 9-25.
- Pérez, Emma. "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor." *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned us About*. Ed. Carla Trujillo. Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1991.
- Reynolds, Eric. Telephone interview with Anthony L. Geist, 12 September 1997.
- Sánchez-Tranquilino, Marcos and John Tagg. "The Pachuco's Flayed Hide: Mobility, Identity, and *Buenas Garras*." *Cultural Studies*. Ed. Lawrence Grossberg, et al. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Tomkins, Jane. "Teaching Like it Matters: A Modest Proposal for Revolutionizing the Classroom." *Lingua Franca*. 1.6 (1991): 24-27.

Notes

¹As I make final revisions requested by the readers and editors, my co-authors are dispersed: Hitchens has disappeared, Purl is working on her dissertation in Montana, Unnold on hers in Seattle, Weingrad on his in Israel. Hence I will address certain issues and contradictions in footnotes, for which I assume sole responsibility (ALG).

²One of the more interesting aspects of this project, which surfaces a number of times, is the often unconscious response of the unseminar members (all varying shades of white) to the rage expressed in Pérez' essay and elsewhere. This, again, is in a certain sense a reenactment of the drawing of lines; as we approach Pérez, or the La Frontera/The Border exhibit for that matter, we become aware of our own cultural and personal boundaries and those of others. We have tried to turn our discomfort to productive ends. Weingrad will pick up Purl's analysis of Pérez (see below).

³While borders may be construed as "artificial" (as opposed to "natural") to a very large extent they have become naturalized. They are political dividers that have history, economic function and emotional content. We do not so much propose the elimination of borders (a Quixotic gesture at best) as strive to recognize their contradictory and conflictive dynamics.

⁴This last sentence in many senses stands as a metaphor for the anxiety experienced by several unseminarians at the retracing of the border, the discomfort at "invasion" — "illegal aliens" scurrying across busy highways. Part of the remapping involved in the unseminar entailed examining our own fears and anger, which remained most often unresolved. We have intentionally maintained this ambivalence in our text.

⁵While the reference to a white male painter working within the European tradition may at first seem an act of appropriation, we feel the comparison with Turner is valid for several reasons. Not only is there a visual analog with Martínez' piece, but the two painters stand at opposite poles of modern industrial capitalism: Turner registers the expansion of industry into the countryside, Martínez its ebb, painting (and painting on) the flotsam left in its wake.

⁶According to Eric Reynolds, editor of Fantagraphics Books (the publishers of *Love and Rockets*), it is true that the Hernández brothers' readership is largely white and college-age. He attributes that in large part to "the infrastructure of comics distribution," which for the most part does not reach the Hispanic barrios. Nonetheless, we can understand Jaime Hernández' projection of a utopian future as coming from the margins: lesbian sexuality within the Chicano community as a corrective to violence, patriarchy and repression.

Illustrations

1. Las Comadres, "The Reading Room from 'La Vecindad/Border Boda' Exhibition."
2. Yolanda M. López, "Things I Never Told My Son About Being a Mexican."
3. César Augusto Martínez, "Canonization in South Texas by an Imaginary Pope."
4. Luis Jiménez, "El 'Chuco.'"
5. David Avalos, "Hubcap Milagro #4."

The *Love and Rockets* illustrations are taken from the following sources: (1) *Death of Speedy*, 56; (2) *Death*, 19; (3a) *House of Raging Women*, 61; (3b) *House*, 62; (3c) *House*, 78; (3d) *House*, 81; (4a) *Death*, 35; (4b) *Death*, 24; (4c) *Death*, 36; (4d) *Death*, 21; (4e) *Death*, 37; (5) *Death*, 38; (6) *House*, 122.

We thank the San Diego Centro Cultural de la Raza, the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art and Fantagraphics Books for permission to reprint these images.