



Borderlands Identity in American Mestizos and “The Bridge Poem”

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Abstract

This study examines how American mestizos are borderlands in their existence and identity and how “The Bridge Poem” depicts their situation as borderlands. 'Borderlands' and 'Mestizo' are intricately tied to the issues of existence and identity. 'Borderlands' encompasses both literal and metaphorical dimensions. It signifies physical and cultural boundary that concurrently unites and divides. Geographically, it denotes regions near country borders, which give rise to unique cultural traits. 'American mestizo,' stems from a blend of European and American Indigenous heritage, and refers to individuals of mixed descent in the U.S. It embodies a borderland culture with a blended identity shaped by Mexican and American influences. It is articulated through bilingualism and multicultural adaptation. 'Borderland culture' in American mestizos represents a distinctive identity that emerges from interactions among diverse ethnic groups. "The Bridge Poem" portrays an image repressed identity, and identity crisis which metaphorically explores the challenges of being a bridge in the borderlands, and emphasizes personal boundaries and the transformative power of self-discovery. This study employs borderland theory as the tool of analysis and interpretation, and connects American mestizos and their identity as borderlands in their cultural practices and literary expressions. Of further illustration, this paper provides an extensive observation of “The Bridge Poem” as the expression of the response to borderland identity.

Keywords: *Border, borderlands, bridge, identity, mestizo*

Introduction

The United States is a country of immigrants and intermingling of different racial groups. Throughout centuries, European, African, Indigenous, Asian, and others have mixed and interacted among themselves, which has resulted in a rich tapestry

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of cultural and genetic diversity as well as cultural mingling. Similarly, Mestizos are people of mixed European and indigenous American ancestry. Molnar outlines that their cultural identity results from a combination of the indigenous, whose actual number and identity is always uncertain, “all mestizos, whether they were Chinese mestizos, Spanish mestizos, or American mestizos, were grouped together, so no actual statistics on the population can be ascertained. As a result, the overall data that we have on the American mestizos is fragmented and incomplete, especially in the first decade of the twentieth century” (34). As part of their identity, mestizo culture reflects a complex interplay of traditions, languages, and customs in the mode of their mental construct, “Mestizaje is therefore not the simple and difficult problem it is for racial purists, but an opportunity to consider Indianness, Europeanness, and mestizone-ness as perspective bound, politically weighted mental constructs” (Arteaga 17). The ‘identity’ or ‘the ness’ is a major concern of Mestizos, and is always a dominant part of borderland culture.

Borderland culture is dynamic and in a constant change. Being dynamic, as a frontier cultural combination, "mestizaje could have positive outcomes" (Wede, Beltran and Restrepo 13). Various interactions and exchanges between various cultures enhance to a complex tapestry of traditions and practices. Furthermore, a socio-political context establishes a discussion on the issues of immigration and border security which determine the dynamics of borderland culture in ways that are very significant.

American Mestizo, a broad idea, involves varying groups of people identified by the nature of biological, cultural and geographical hybridity and Chicano-Mestizo represents one among them. The ‘borderland culture’ for Chicanos generally suggests to the cultural, social, and historical experiences of persons and communities of those who inhabit at the border areas between the United States and Mexico. The Chicanos have Americans of Mexican origin. Their borderland culture expresses the peculiar identity and problems they face. This paper proposes to explore what experiences of identity crisis do the Chicano mestizo borderlands face and struggle with; how have they faced the adversity of cultural in-betweenness and how their identity problems are portrayed in their literary works. In light of exploring the symbolic aspects of border, borderlands, and Mestizos, studying the issues of borderlands identity in American Mestizo, this study employs borderland theory as a tool and tries to address some salient questions: What is symbolic about ‘border’ and ‘borderlands? Who are exactly American Mestizos and how they become mestizos? How does the concept of

borderland relate to identity in American/Chicano Mestizos? How does “The Bridge Poem” epitomize the concept of borderland identity of the Chicano Mestizos?

Borders and Borderlands: From Physical to Metaphorical

'Border' defines a physical or imaginary line separating landmasses. As a physical division, the line represents a deviation in life. Beyond the physical meaning, borders are extended to the metaphorical. They signify divided ideals, culture, and sense of life. In both physical and metaphorical context, a border is a line that divides. This division is a point of departure leading to understanding of both physical and psychological relationships, “Borders are an intrinsic part of human life and are part of the relations between individual and society” (Adesina 202). Causing the form of transformation at physical and psychological levels, borders signify the creation of new forms of cultural confluence known variously in different borderlands, “Borders create political, social, and cultural differences, yet at the same time they imply the existence of (new) networks and systems of interaction across them” (Baud and Schendel 216). They create the condition of borderlands with two implications, “Borders both unite and divide” (Stea, Jamie and Gray 107), in which borders unify cultures into cultural novelty and they divide geography into separation. In both respects, a borderland endures an identity problem.

Associated with many meanings, Borderlands vary significantly in their characteristics (Adesina 210). In the geographical context, it makes reference to the regions located near or on the boundaries between two countries or territories. These areas often exhibit unique cultural, economic, and social characteristics influenced by the proximity of different nations. In its spatial meaning, borderland includes the totality of the inhabitants of certain bordering territories but Zartman further clarifies that "Borderlands need to be understood, not as places or even events, but as social processes" (2). The physical border sets a new dimension of social process of an individual's psychology and understanding the position—the position of space and identity. This psychological and cultural borderland appears even more powerful than the physical or geographical borderland as lined up by national and international political divisions, "the line can be merely a political imposition" (Zartman 6) at the surface level. However, borderlands are understood at the depth with the degree of differences and the impacts the differences create thereupon, "Borders, borderlands, and border regions are enigmatic places where people, ideas, and identities cross and

recross or, alternatively, are forbidden from crossing, leading to a dynamic whereby certain amounts of transience and transmigration, as well as stasis, exist" (Stea, Jamie and Gray 109). The concept of borderlands, not as literal but as metaphorical, therefore shares essence with existence and identity.

Borderland concept, as an identity issue, has become an important thought in literature and culture. Comprehended from literary and cultural perspective, it describes spaces that exist at the margins or edges of distinct cultures, "culture groups have been further separated by border-hardening" (Stea, Jamie and Gray 107), and involves the influence of hybridity and the blending of cultural influences. Although the psychological aspect is somehow related to the literary and cultural understanding but slightly differently, it "involve such dimensions of life as identity, socioeconomic relations, power exercise and relations, security, and culture" (Zartman 5). It reflects the mental or emotional states that exist between two distinct conditions.

Is Mestizos and Borderland Culture a Problem?

American mestizo reproduces mixed racial and ethnic heritage in the United States, "The emergence of the mestizo as a distinct category began with the Spanish colonial regime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Molnar 12). This reproduction reveals biological and cultural process of a long history as "the products of centuries of cultural and sexual intermingling" (14-15) that locates the multi-racial individuals, that of the "mestizo". The history of human being is the history of travelling and movement. This nature of movement gives rise to different contexts of mixing, "Humans, as a young species in evolutionary terms, did not evolve into clearly distinct types in different geographical and demographic niches; in addition, they constantly moved and interacted, with increasing frequency over time" (Wedde, Beltran and Restrepo 4-5). With the history of travelling and social transformation, Mestizos are therefore the people of mixed identity as European and American indigenous combination, "mestizaje marks a cultural mixing that emerges from the infusion of races and cultures characterizing the social dynamics" (Perez-Torres 26), while in other contexts, it may be associated with historical and social issues related to race and identity. Now, racial and ethnic mixing like of mestizo, has been part of the country's complex demographic history.

With different practices about the meaning and contexts of mestizos, the fundamental truth behind the mestizo is cultural integration and the generation of new

culture which comes out of the reality of the border and is identified as borderland culture. Molnar explores American Mestizo identity as:

Boundaries of racial identity for the American mestizos were constantly in flux, and no one imposed or self-ascribed American mestizo identity coalesced. By their very nature, American mestizo racial definitions and constructs are temporally specific and regionally distinctive, complicating any conventional scholarly assumptions about issues dealing with race and ethnicity and demanding a historically contextualized approach to such an understanding. (4)

Mestizos have a particular cultural identity which develops along borders where different ethnic and cultural groups come in contact with one another, particularly the areas along the United States-Mexico border, where different populations coexist and combine elements of their respective cultures. In context to the American/Chicano mestizo, Anzaldúa writes, “A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (3). One dominant aspect of the borderland effect in American Mestizos is the question of cultural identity-whether the borderland has destroyed the cultural identity of both cultures or has generated a new mode of cultural identity.

Mestizo is not always a problem. It accepts the variety of cultures and races that merge into the creation of new identities, “Mestizaje is an affirmative recognition of the mixed racial, social, linguistic, national, cultural, and ethnic legacies inherent to ... cultures and identities. It emphasizes the fact that cultural mixture constitutes a dynamic, propelling element” (Perez-Torres 25) of the amalgamated group resulting in the form of identity. Thus, it consists of the integration of races that transcend clear-cut racial demarcations into more expansive form of linguistic, national, and ethnic integration. It speaks of assimilation of the manifold types of social and cultural influences, forming different identities concurrently.

Borderland Culture in Chicano Mestizo

Individuals from two or more races and ethnicities, each with distinct cultural backgrounds, interweave both culturally and biologically, forming mestizo lifestyles. Human beings, in all community, are intricately tied to culture. They grow up and subsist

within culturally shaped environment that structure their lives and social connections. They place significant importance on their cultural identity, and when their culture blends with others, it gives rise to a state of multiculturalism. Mestizo culture, in this sense, is multicultural. The commitment and belonging of its members reciprocate in acceptance or the sense of welcome, "Cultures grow out of conscious and unconscious interaction with each other" (Parekh 337). Sometimes, they may feel as the outsiders and then the problem of identity arises because as Anzaldua opines, "Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture" (16). One culture "assimilates in its own autonomous way" (Parekh 337) with another and becomes a cultural combination which intends to establish unity but inherently diverse with the sense of "reconciling the legitimate demands of unity and diversity" (343). Like the communities formatted as the culture of multiculturalism, "multicultural societies represent an interplay of different cultures" (339). In the same line, Chicano mestizos inherit multiculturalism into "the imaginary nature of the community that was constructed around mestizo identity" (Terica 194), imaginary in the sense of not existing before.

The Chicanos are mestizos by language because they are polyglot, the blending of the English as well as Spanish, "their language is hybrid (Arteaga 17) and their "dialogue is possible only if each culture accepts others as equal conversational partners" (Parekh 337). Therefore, the spoken and written languages of the Chicano mestizos may vary remarkably. While the linguistic preferences of the Chicano mestizos vary, individuals have expressed their cultural identity in different ways, including through language because "Language itself is significant in the delineation of a homeland and its people" (Arteaga 17). Some are predominantly English-speaking, while others may speak more Spanish or actively use the two languages in different spheres of life. In any case, this choice largely depends on workplace criteria, family background, community, and personal experiences.

As cultural hybridity is central to borderland identity, Mestizo identity is identity of hybridity, and so does it happen in Chicano Mestizos. Individuals with this identity embrace their mixed heritage and see it as a source of strength and resilience, and often navigate between the traditions, values, and practices of both cultures, creating a unique blend that is neither purely Mexican nor purely American. Their art, literature, and music often serve as outlets for expressing the hybrid nature of Chicano mestizo

identity. Bowskill writes about the nature of borderland literature which matches with Chicano mestizos:

Their literature, sometimes referred to as border literature, *literatura de la frontera*, and *literatura fronteriza*, are the novels, poetry, theater, and other literary forms that have to do with the U.S.–Mexico borderlands since the modern-day border was established by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) and the Gadsden Purchase (1853). Material produced in the region prior to the existence of the border must not be regarded as borderland literature. (Bowskill 138)

Chicano Mestizo writers and artists draw inspiration from both Mexican and American cultural symbols, “Aztlán places relatively greater emphasis on the homeland, the borderlands emphasizes more the state of relations” (Arteaga 15). Likewise, religion is a significant part of Mestizo's cultural identity. Religion is the basis of culture, art, as well as literature. The religious landscape of the Chicano mestizos is combined with the presence of Catholicism, Protestantism, and some elements of indigenous spirituality. It is the state of religious hybridity. Religious practices may unite all three traditions. Their cultural events and festivals seem to be a combination of all three. The cultural events include a combination of Mexican celebrations, American holidays, and indigenous ceremonies.

“The Bridge Poem”: Articulating Borderland Dilemma

Kate Rushin's “The Bridge Poem” was published in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. In the poem, ‘bridge’ symbolizes ‘the borderlands’ in a number of ways. It is a metaphor both in the poem and the book. This bridge marks “a cultural moment when women of color assert their literary, political, and academic perspectives as their own movement” (Trujillo 56). Rushin, as a member of African-American origin, shares her experience as a link to make a connection with two identities separated by the borders of caste, race and gender. Her sense of the border/borderlands is what the sense of being here and there—seeing, touching, or experiencing both sides—of which Rushin writes:

I've had enough
Sick of seeing and touching
Both sides of things

Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody. (Rushin lxii)

Her feeling reflects the sentiment of “infusion of races and cultures characterizing the social dynamics” (Perez-Torres 26). She feels sickness for being the bridge, the bridge as connection which is the result of her position as borderlands of race, ethnicity, gender (her gender-bridge as a lesbian), and geography, “a connecting force, often between two previously unconnected territories” (Trujillo 57). She feels herself really a connecting force, a bridge for everybody.

With her position as an African-American woman, a racial borderland, she feels as if she has the interconnectedness of experiences that women of color share (Trujillo 56). She is a real catalyst when she says:

Nobody
Can talk to anybody
Without me
Right? (Rushin lxii)

She realizes a mode of differences within the sameness of identity as borderlands. She has to play the role of a crucial mediator for communication. She injects an important role or vitalness into their role for connecting people, but she asks a rhetorical question on her role, ‘right’?

I explain my mother to my father, my father to my little sister.
from my little sister to my brother to the white feminists
The white feminists to the Black church folks, the Black church folks
To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the Black separatists
to the artists the artists to my friends' parents.
Then I've got to explain myself. (Rushin lxii)

People have faced the trouble of communication, understanding and socialization. The poet becomes that chain of communication or translation whereby she acts as a moderator between different individuals or groups with perspectives and backgrounds that differ. She explains and translates one group to another. She links a web of understanding across diverse social, cultural, and ideological contexts. In each step, she involves in spanning and understanding between groups with different worldviews or experiences. The poet herself serves as a bridge, a catalyst for building a coalition (Trujillo 57), but the reality is that she has got to explain herself. The speaker acts as a communicator, and at the same time, she also realizes that their identity itself is complex and difficult to be understood by others.

This could be a reflection of the complex nature of personal identity in a diverse and interrelated social context of being the borderlands. Being a bridge is not always a question of interest and she feels sick of it too, "I'm sick of filling in your gaps/ Sick of being your insurance against the isolation of your self-imposed limitations" (Rushin lxii). Like a shelter, she has been serving as a way to prevent them experiencing the isolation or the negative consequences of their limitations. She feels tiredness with a relationship. It is a dilemma of becoming a bridge in condition of the borderlands.

Find another link with the rest of the world
Find something else to make you legitimate
Find some other way to be political and hip.
I will not be the bridge to your womanhood
Your manhood
Your humanness (Rushin lxiii)

The poet refuses to play the role of a bridge for the other person's confirmation. She is not willing to be that link through which the other person develops connections with the larger world. She wants others to explore and build connections themselves. She wants them to find their own route themselves. It is her refusal to be the channel for the other person's self-discovery in terms of gender or humanity. To some extent, it is her declaration of independence. Her refusal is her revolt. Strong at personal boundaries, the speaker makes an insistence for the other person to find their way to association.

The bridge I must be
The bridge to my own power, which I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses
I must be the bridge to nowhere.
But my true self
And then
I will be useful (Rushin lxiii)

With this, she states a strong and reflective attitude towards empowerment. She realizes the role they have to play as a bridge. The destination is not some connecting point outside; rather, it's an inward journey to their own power and true self. She is on the obligation and purpose-"The bridge I must be". They realize the need to be connected with their inner strength and capabilities. But she fears and implies the need

for self-reflection and understanding- ‘Mediate my own weaknesses’. She reiterates the concept of reflection over oneself and self-improvement, and finds herself playing the role of a mediator.

She highlights the authenticity-‘I must be the bridge to nowhere but my true self’. She rejects being that bridge towards other external destinations and narrows it down to the internal journey to their true, genuine self. The usefulness and effect come from understanding and accepting one's real self. Thus, the poem conveys a message of accountability, self-analysis, and, above all, the power of change that comes with getting in touch with one's real identity.

Conclusion

Borderland notion holds literal and metaphorical meanings. It signifies physical boundaries between terrestrial areas in literal sense, and symbolizes discrepancy in existence. The metaphoric border incorporates cultural, ethical, and emotional divisions. A border has a dual nature of both linking and dividing. Thus, it forms a new cultural mixture in borderlands. Borderlands notion suggests different meanings, each having different characteristics. Geographically, it reflects a denotation for a region near or on the boundaries of at least two countries. They may have some unique but different cultural traits and that influence the lifestyle and behavior of people. Borderlands represent both physical place and social processes affected by emotional and cultural differences. From a literary and cultural perspective, borderlands are spaces from the margins of two distinct cultural values that result in hybridity in life and manner. Psychologically, borderland dimension incorporates identity, socioeconomic relations, power dynamics, security, and culture. In short, it is the mental and emotional state between two discreet states.

Thus, a borderland could be defined as a multidimensional concept that engages physical and metaphysical implications related to existence and identity. Borderland culture, in the context of American mestizos, signifies an autonomous culture that emerges along borders from the interaction of ethnic and cultural groups. Anzaldúa, being a member of the Chicano mestizo culture, outlines borderlands as in-between spaces which generates the issue of individual and cultural identity among the people. So, it is both physical and psychological. To some extent, this situation brings out a state of dilemma whether the confluence is destroyed or gives rise to a new mode

of identity. With intermingling nature, their cultural identity is complex. They have bilingual expressive mode which results in the multicultural character of their lives. This situation gets reflected in various modes of art, literature, and music. "The Bridge Poem" by Kate Rushin depicts the condition of cultural and communication dilemma of the Mestizo context, especially of the Chicano mestizos. This poem figuratively explores the idea that being a bridge in the borderlands provides an opportunity of interrelation of diverse identities, but a mode of problem. She speaks how exhausting it is to mediate or go-between for cross-cultural exchange. The understanding between cultures makes her feel incoherent from one another. The poet refuses to become a bridge to others' identities, and focuses on personal boundaries. This is a journey of realization and empowerment. She clearly says no to the idea of becoming a bridge. It's about personal responsibility and transformation through connecting with one's identity.

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