

**In the Antropoetas and Muses We Trust:**

**Reading and Teaching the Poetics about the Borderlands and Chihuahuan Desert**

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“What makes the desert beautiful,” the little prince said, “is that it hides a well somewhere . . .”

“Yes,” I said to the little prince, “whether it’s a house or the stars or the desert, what makes them beautiful is invisible!”

Antonie de Saint-Exupéry (68)

Since my moving to the U.S. Southwestern region in 2013, the borderlands and Chihuahuan Desert have undertaken new dialogue in the study, teaching, and interpretation of poetry as I experience the border worlds as inhabitant, educator, and researcher. The poetics of this region and landscape provide new ways of seeing, reading, and rethinking the poetry of the Paso del Norte borderlands and how narratives influence a people’s identity formation and affirmation. Students’ familiarity with borderlands poets continues to unfold in jagged and established junctures. Nonetheless, students seek to gain more literary fervor as they now study through close reading and with rigor the works they seldom encountered in their secondary schooling. A renewed interest in poetry, bilingualism, and biliteracies, especially in those poems that articulate senses of place and home, draw more students into our dialogue for deeper thinking, learning, and questioning as we study a diverse chorus of borderlands poets. Many students in our local schools and universities—and beyond—call on our recovering and rethinking the literary works by U.S.–Mexican and Latino-origin poets writing the voices and

metaphors the borderlands and to incorporate their body of works into our curricula and instruction in both print and digital media formats.

My aim in writing this chapter, then, is to situate the expansive role of identity and influence of the muses in the borderlands with the concept of the *antropoeta*, ethnographer-observer-poet. The emphasis on the expansive Chihuahuan Desert as a source of poetic imagination further advances the question of writing where one claim origin and identity. Specifically, I analyze the poetry that communicates borderlands narratives, identities, and geographies of the desert through language, memory, and form. Frederick Luis Aldama notes, “In today’s Latino poetry, we see a smorgasbord of sorts when it comes to ancestry, geographic location, subject matter, and formal device. Nothing is off limits—that is, if we can even speak of limits in the first place” (*Formal* 6).

The poems selected render voice and hope to the borderlands citizens who possess cultural and linguistic wealth. These forms of wealth enrich American poetics and are unlimited and thus create an expansive view toward more global literatures and perspectives. To support the teaching of Latino and Latina poetics, four challenges conceptualized by literacy scholar Ernest Morrell as “practice[s] of powerful English teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” are incorporated into the chapter to support a pedagogy and dialogue that complements the diverse narratives that constitute American and world literatures (5).

To define Latino can become a challenge and, for this chapter, the definition in relation to literatures and identities is best described by Suzanne Bost and Frances R. Aparicio. They remind us:

The history and politics of US Latino/a literature are distinct. “Latino/a” identity is a product of layers of conquest, colonialism, and cultural mixture—beginning with

Western European territorial battles upon indigenous lands of the “New World,” from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, and, after most Latin American nations achieved independence, continuing through the US imperialist expansions of the nineteenth century to the present. (2)

This definition interconnected to identities and various influences, from colonization to sociopolitical encounters, inform the chapter. Lastly, the following three questions will guide the chapter: (1) How are the muses influential in the shaping of Latina/o poetics, especially for U.S.–Mexican-origin poets in the borderlands? (2) Do poets write to revise or reframe sanctioned narratives or to incorporate a new vision for the identities, languages, and literacies of desert dwellers? and (3) What implication, if any, does defining Latina/o poetics have for the way we teach and read poetry in our secondary-level schools and university classrooms?

### **Meeting and Reading the Muses**

My earliest memories of the desert and wilderness are hearing stories from the scriptures and later, as an adolescent, while reading poetry written and published by Mexican Americans. From the poets Pat Mora and Benjamin Alire Sáenz, I learned about the Chihuahuan Desert in West Texas and northern México and its influences on desert dwellers, ranging from their everyday lives to their struggles for survival, triumphs as storytellers, and commitment to cultural preservation. Like the desert, their poetry was transformative and offered me sustenance and hope while growing up in a large Latino community of Houston. Accordingly, I could dive inward through poetry and also make leaps into worlds so unlike my own, yet interconnected to mine.

While growing up in a large urban area, I oftentimes wanted to explore spaces other than my own to gain experience and understanding—far away from the rules, haunts, and sirens of what seemed a hurried, mundane world I was living in then. Thus, it seemed like my unique

calling to find poetry that gave voice and meaning on the page and in the imagination of Mexican and Latino-origin people living in many parts of Texas, the country, and world. Similar to the prince and pilot in Saint-Exupéry's novella, I was seeking spaces and writings that "hid a well" (68). The well of poets' imagination became visible with understanding to me as a reader of poetry and later as a teacher and researcher guiding students to read, study, and hear poems closely and slowly—like a poet at work.

Hence, the overflowing wells and reservoirs of energy before me were the Mexican and Latino-influenced poetics that complemented the classics I was assigned to read as a high school and university student. I learned what the essential canon works were in my public schooling and university studies. Any other works were remained overlooked, unspoken, and unknown. Either way, a young reader like me could have interpreted this slight as a message that the poetics reflecting my world mattered little in my teachers' development of curricula and planning of instruction. As a result, I memorized and saluted the canonical myths, gods, and goddesses I was required to read and revere in my public schooling and in some of my undergraduate courses. I wanted to possess literary rigor and acumen. Conversely, I became drawn to stories that could relate to the lives absent in the assigned readings, but that I could possibly complement with my own reading goals outside of my public schooling and university studies.

In fact, I became drawn to the lesser-read myths and overlooked arts from ancient Greece and Mesopotamia. I wanted to know which additional narratives and perspectives existed and were not included in school readers and university anthologies. The works and pages not often revered as "literature" or "American" were skipped and, when pursued further, a few teachers and professors shared, in confidence, that they were unfamiliar and thus uncomfortable teaching any literary works new to them. I followed their lessons and syllabi nevertheless, and I

succeeded in my course work. The indifference to recovered and revisionist literature was, at best, ignored, and it resembled then and even now patterns of colonization and marginalization that directly influence what students experience as readers to opportunities to gain literacies for democracy and self-affirmation. Aldama observes,

The different histories of migration and policies toward Latinos (or of borders moving over populations as in the case of those living in the northern Mexican territories known today as the Southwest) have led to different experiences with access to education and literacy. The use of English (and less and less Spanish) by Latino/a authors is largely socioeconomically and historically determined. (*Latino/a* 4)

Still, I wondered how a more pluralistic vision of American and world literatures could be realized and taught. Admittedly, I valued the classical literatures I was told mattered most for surviving the test of time, instruction, and assessment but with some skepticism. In the critical essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American presence American Literature,” Toni Morrison concedes, “Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense” (8). In the reading program I developed as my own diverse empire to become learned, I began to pay more attention to the roles of the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who are recognized as the Muses of knowledge and the arts, and competing voices to the master narrative too often upheld as the only story about our civilization.

In *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer’s Odyssey*, Carol Dougherty believes, “The poet [Homer] respectfully identifies himself as merely mortal in comparison with the Muses—they know all; he knows nothing—and then proceeds to produce poetry that sets the standard against which all future poets will measure themselves” (24). The Muses are summoned in epic poetry and other narratives for inspiration, guidance, and help by

many adventurers and explorers. Reliance upon them can yield to escape and triumph in the face of hardship, tumult, and hopelessness.

Similarly, in Mexican and U.S.–México borderlands literatures, I learned that many poets often call on “*La décima musa de América*” for affirmation and vision, and she offers guidance toward an epiphany or catharsis. The Tenth Muse of the hemispheric Américas is Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century scholar, nun, and poet from San Miguel de Nepantla, México. Sor Juana is revered as an inspiration to many Chicana/o and Latina/o poets who seek her interceding in their life of letters and quest as witnesses. To illustrate, in a recent critical book titled *[Un]Framing the “Bad Woman” Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba acknowledges, “For the past five years, I have been living with Sor Juana in my head, my heart, and my dreams. I have been researching her life, listening to the underside of her words, letting her entrap and guide me through the webs of logic, pun, and metaphor that she so meticulously spun in her writing” (41).

Gaspar de Alba’s reflective meditation and scholarly research reveals many ways that we can rethink and reframe the stories and poetics about women and societies across history, time, and systems. She repositions the rebels that been dismissed in history and gives voice to their points of view with primary and secondary sources. Counternarratives and diverse points of view create the possibilities of finally telling a larger, more complex story that merits our attention and instruction as educators and readers of poetry. This is the case about the poetics from the borderlands and Chihuahuan Desert in the effort to challenge colonialism and indifference that persists about native cultures, peoples, and languages. Instead, poetics can provide a sense of origin and place for a people seeking to understand and experience the meanings through languages and a sense of place in their homelands. Literature can affirm and redeem a people and

country dispossessed from literary history and canons. In the essay “What Is Poetry?,” Dan Rifenburgh explains,

Like other forms of literature, poetry may seek to tell a story, enact a drama, convey ideas, offer vivid, unique description or express our inward spiritual, emotional, or psychological states. Yet, poetry pays particular close attention to words themselves: their sounds, textures, patterns, and meanings. It takes special pleasure in focusing on the verbal music inherent in language.

The literary elements of poetry described by Rifenburgh encapsulate the varied possibilities that a poem can deliver and articulate for both speakers and readers of poems.

Along the same lines of Sor Juana as a revered visionary, we can find reservoirs of inspiration, energy, and hope from many poets for a writing life. Mine have been poets and thinkers who write about the borderlands and desert—at the turn of the century to today. Situated in what has become one of the longest borders of enforcement in the world, the Chihuahuan Desert is the largest desert in North America. It covers more than 200,000 square miles, which are mostly situated south of the Río Grande, although portions lie in Texas, New Mexico, and the southeastern Arizona. This vast desert and space offers many perspectives in poetry that reveal the geographies of domination, imperialism, power, and linguistic oppression, which are not foreign here nor to the greater hemispheric Américas.

The desert can be easily overlooked as barren and dry, yet in its vastness so much is concealed and revealed here to native people and newly transplanted neighbors. In its varied state, the desert can be just as giving and resilient for human, animal, and plant life. Mora observes, “Th[is] desert—its firmness, resilience, and its fierceness, its whispered chants and tempestuous dance, its wisdom and majesty—shape[s] us as geography always shapes its

inhabitants” (*Nepantla* 13). The shaping of both identities and geographies can merge through poetry as we examine selected poetry in this chapter.

### **Antropoetas**

Poetry invites readers to make connections across time, experiences, and cultures and to become present through language and form by making the poem part of this moment, *now*. Jane Hirshfield emphasizes, “Poetry’s work is not simply the recording of inner and outer perception; it makes by words and music new possibilities of perceiving. [...] A work of art is not a piece of fruit lifted from a tree branch: it is a ripening collaboration of artist, receiver, and world” (3-4). Also, poetry can transform and fuel our imagination and soul as we gain understanding and elaborate the poem’s conversation alongside our living experience. In all forms, poetry reminds us to be present and awake: human and humane. As such, a chorus of Chicano/a and Latino/a poetics reveals how their voices tell the story of place and memory through what Renato Rosaldo names as “*antropoesía*,” or ethnographic poetics (106). Much like the role and craft of “poet as *curandera*” that Mora urges us to consider for the Chicana writer, Rosaldo provides a complementary lens that invites a balance of the senses and deep inquiry (*Nepantla* 127). The antropoeta approach is driven by mindfulness and self-reflection to gain deeper meaning and understanding—as jagged or “uneven” as it may be, in the shaping of observation and poems for readers.

Rosaldo and Mora’s vision of a poet’s craft and contribution are both instructive and affirming for me as an educator and writer. Theirs is a meditative, reflective labor that can be fulfilling for the poet and reader through concentrated use of language and our senses. In fact, Rosaldo elaborates the work of the *antropoeta* much further in the effort to make sense and meaning from the world and interconnected relationships:



Like an ethnographer, the antropoeta looks and looks, listens and listens, until she [sic] sees or hears what she did not apprehend at first. This form of inquiry resembles field research in that it involves observation, asking questions, attending with patience and care, knowing that meaning may be there, waiting to be found, even if the observer-poet does not yet know what it is. . . . My task, as a poet, is to render intelligible what is complex and to bring home to the reader the uneven and contradictory shape of that moment. (107)

An example of the poet as *curandera* and *antropoeta* can be found in various narratives of the borderlands. As an illustration, in Mora's poem "Bribe," the speaker invokes and persuades the desert through a ceremonial incantation to gain the gift of voice and imagination for her craft. Although the modern meaning of the word "bribe" is a gift used to influence or persuade someone to do something unethical, Mora uses the term as a positive connotation. In the poem, the word "bribe" means to make an offering or sacrifice accompanied by a call or prayer for Mother Earth's help and interceding. The word "bribe" comes from an early French word meaning "a morsel of bread given to beggars," but today it has a negative connotation.

The speaker in the poem observes Native American women celebrating and honoring the earth and natural world in voice, song, and ceremony. The traditions of American Indians, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans are present in the opening stanza that reads:

I hear Indian women  
    chanting, chanting  
  
I see them long ago bribing  
the desert with turquoise threads,  
in the silent morning coolness,

kneeling, digging, burying

their offering in the Land

chanting, chanting

Guide my hands, Mother,

to weave singing birds

flowers rocking in the wind, to trap

them on my cloth with a web of thin threads. (*My 57*)

Earth is personified as “Mother” and from whom Native American women request guidance. Moreover, there is a comparison to spiders weaving a web, which recalls indigenous people’s myths about Spider Grandmother. Acts of “kneeling, digging, [and] burying” confirm the human journey as sacred and one with the earth as turquoise threads are offered as a “bribe” to the land. The speaker identifies with indigenous women and the Chihuahuan Desert as she summons her muses as a poet. As the poem unfolds, the speaker, who may possibly be Mora herself, then calls on her muse, the Chihuahuan Desert, for inspiration and to fuel her writing life. The speaker seeks to barter with her instruments to meet nature in the second and final stanza:

Secretly I scratch a hole in the desert

by my home. I bury a ballpoint pen

and lined yellow paper. Like the Indians

I ask the Land to smile on me, to croon

softly, to help me catch her music with words. (*My 57*)

In a reversal of roles from observer to actor, the speaker in the poem seeks to develop her craft and to honor not only traditions, but also the beauty found in nature with affirmations through language that is transformed into poetry. Like the indigenous women, the speaker offers a

“bribe” to the “Land” as well, except hers is a ballpoint pen and paper. Together, the women’s offerings suit their craft, which is weaving, while the speaker’s craft is writing. As women weave pictures of the natural world, the speaker wants to write about nature; they complement each other as translators of the beauty of the natural world into designs and words. Overall, the speaker’s diverse identities and connections are significant to begin her poetic narrative that is one with culture and nature and affirms mestizo identities with the meeting of indigenous and Mexican-Spanish civilizations and heritages.

### **To Observe**

“Writers are observers,” explains Amitava Kumar (xiii). In observation like the *antropoeta*, the poet awakens language with the possibilities of testimonies that witness earth and humans coming alive about their senses of identity and origin as well as departures. Through sensual imagery of river water, as noted in Joseph Delgado’s poem titled “dirty,” survival and resilience accompany the speaker to make meaning and a life:

4.

on the river I could smell the waters

thick at my nose,

scurrying across my chest,

war beaten

forest of salt-cedar

forest of dark leaves,

like an ageless dust come

hunting my bones over hills

and deserts

and mountains of stone. (4)

The spacing of the poem communicates the flow of water as well as the jagged sense of being the speaker experiences in the wholesomeness of nature, a revelatory muse.

For Saenz, the desert is fiercely majestic as revealed so meticulously in the poem “Meditation on Living in the Desert, No. 1.” In just three lines, the speaker reveals the ordinary and extraordinary power of the his muse, the desert world, through a form of a ritual, communion, and affirmation:

The rains do not always come.

The winds remain.

The dust will gather on your tongue. (*The Book 5*)

Moreover, the desert can be just as relenting and giving to the speaker in a faithful and spiritual journey as witnessed in the poem “To the Desert” by Saenz. In the poem, the speaker who possesses *antropoeta* acumen with the desert as both muse and giver:

I came to you one rainless August night.

You taught me how to live without the rain.

You are thirst and thirst is all I know.

. . . . .

You wrap your name tight around my ribs

And keep me warm. I was born for you.

Above, below, by you, by you surrounded.

I wake to you at dawn. Never break your

Knot. Reach, rise, blow, *Sálvame, mi dios,*

*Trágame, mi tierra. Salva, traga, Break me,*

I am bread. I will be the water for your thirst. (96)

The physical and spiritual needs are revealed in the poem as the speaker follows a journey that possesses an omnipresence larger than the self. The speaker and desert barter in many ways like in Mora's "Bribe" to become full and whole again.

In "Bones" by Sheryl Luna, the speaker establishes a sense of place for readers as we enter the borderlands with a concept of origin, the realism of what transpires and dies, and what is remembered through vivid memory and once-spoken languages as if for an *antropoeta*. The deliberate actions of humans reveal memories, losses, and gains:

And I remember that it is good to be born of dust,

born amid cardboard shanties of sweet gloom.

I remember that the bare cemetery stones

in El Paso and Juárez hold the music, and each spring

when the winds carry the dust of loss there is a howl,

a surge of something unbelievable, like death,

like the collapse of language, like the frail bones

of Mexican grandmothers singing.

Although titled "Bones," the poem renders a new interpretation of bones as the title and even redefines the word for readers as if it were a Georgia O'Keefe canvas on display through a poem. Moreover, the poem ends with "Mexican grandmothers singing" in affirmation for many lives lived and similar to the speaker in Mora's "Bribe" from whom we hear "chanting" in the continuous present tense.

In a deep observation through the speaker who is a gas station clerk, we gain insights about human labor and violence through various situations in Luna's poem "Lowering Your Standards for Food Stamps," which is included in its entirety here.

Words fall out of my coat pocket,  
soak in bleach water. I touch everyone's  
dirty dollars. Maslow's got everything on me.  
Fourteen hours on my feet. No breaks.  
No smokes or lunch. Blank-eyed movements:  
trash bags, coffee burner, fingers numb.  
I am hourly protestations and false smiles.  
The clock clicks its slow slowing.  
Faces blur in a stream of hurried soccer games,  
sunlight, and church certainty. I have no  
poem to carry, no material illusions.  
Cola spilled on hands, so sticky fingered,  
I'm far from poems. I'd write of politicians,  
refineries, and a border's barbed wire,  
but I am unlearning America's languages  
with a mop. In a summer-hot red  
polyester top, I sell lotto tickets. Cars wait for gas  
billowing black. Killing time has new meaning.  
A jackhammer breaks apart a life. The slow globe  
spirals, and at night black space has me dizzy.

Visionaries off their meds and wacked out  
meth heads sing to me. A panicky fear of robbery  
and humiliation drips with my sweat.  
Words some say are weeping twilight and sunrise.  
I am drawn to dramas, the couple arguing, the man  
headbutting his wife in the parking lot.  
911: no metered aubade, and nobody but  
myself to blame.

The title, both fitting as a paradox and oxymoron, is dissected in a line-by-line approach to reveal the speaker's witnessing of American labor and life. The bigger questions about public assistance are turned upside-down as we learn that the public needs not only assistance to live and co-exist for essentials, but assistance to survive through violence enacted upon fellow humans.

With irony and several literary devices, Luna delivers the shame and scam of public assistance that dehumanizes those who are attempting to live and thrive. The public's interpretation of advancement and progress are placed at the forefront for two audiences: the speaker who faces American life and American dreams and the reader who is both vicarious observer and also trying to make ends meet. The reader learns about the mundane existences and even movements of a modern world. In essence, the world the speaker inhabits and participates in daily can easily become indifferent and inhumane as well as detached as one "unlearn[s] America's languages" as opportunity keeps taking different form and possibility erasure if it ever existed for the majority of Americans. The speaker fulfills the role of an antropoeta, as does Luna, as witness in struggle.

In the poem “The Towers” by Rafael Jesús González, the speaker remembers September 11, 2001, and places the Twin Towers in relation to other towers across time and sacred texts. Within the poem, humanity is challenged against injustice and revenge. Instead, the speaker imagines a world created by humans who pledge for the common good in a world filled with chaos and injury. The speaker favors justices and exhorts the just.

The towers fall as if,  
seen through crossed eyes,  
a Goliath fell brought down by a David.

Behind the myths  
who of us is the guilty?  
Who the innocent?  
What is the distance  
between justice and vengeance?

Death is inevitable, not fair.  
And when the innocent are caught  
in the webs of violence, it is terrible.

May the Earth hold them in rest.  
If we would make a monument  
worthy of their deaths,  
in honor & memory of them,



let us pledge ourselves  
to freedom,  
true justice,  
world peace.

For if death be not just  
let just be our lives.

The speaker's observation, perception, and interpretation favor an imagined world filled with justice and where the meek can prevail. In short, a self-pledge and a worldly pledge for the common good and necessary justice must prevail.

The concept of *antropoeta* appears in many poems about the borderlands, especially when the speaker appears in a first-person point of view. The *antropoeta*-speaker attempts to name and redefine identities and spaces that remained unnamed in literature for centuries, relegated to the margin, in complete absence in public and print life, and erased from dialogue and conversation in histories and literatures distributed for reading and instruction in borderlands public and private education. Overall, borderlands poetry can engage diverse perspectives through identities and narratives that elicit deeper questioning and thinking.

### **Counternarratives versus the Single Story**

Whose stories matter? Whose story becomes poetry and canonical for study? The telling of stories varies from chronicler to historian. This holds true in the diverse voices of poetry from the borderlands. It can be instructive to learn from Ricardo Castro-Salazar and Carl Bagley about the main narrative that appears in history and literature. They explain, "The Master Narrative acts like a powerful filter that tells us that the U.S. has been built by [W]hite European settlers

and that the founding civilization of this country was Anglo-Protestant. Thus, non-English speakers, brown, black and yellow people are seen as strangers, aliens, and ‘others’” (8). The filter they describe reveals the “danger of a single story” as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains in a TEDTalk. As a result, counternarratives, or stories in opposition to the “Master Narrative,” advance multiple viewpoints.

Castro-Salazar and Bagley note that those who are too often absent, erased, or misrepresented “create counter-histories in order to incorporate their own experience into the national narrative. These counter-histories, however, do not claim to be the definite history. Definite stories do not exist; different accounts of events nurture our histories and identities. (Perhaps that is why “history” and “story” are the same word in Spanish [*historia*])” (8). The counternarrative is present via poetic forms in Latino poetry and borderlands poetry in the effort to recover literary history that includes witnesses and testimonies. World languages such as Spanish and indigenous languages provide lenses into narratives often untold, but are now being articulated via poetry and other genres.

The concept of the *antropoeta* and “poet as *curandera*” articulate the role of the poet as a storyteller, listener, and skilled griot who tells the *historias* in need of telling, reading, and performance. The storyteller may be from the colonial era to the present. For instance, in the multi-narrative titled *Counternarratives: Stories and Novellas*, Keene’s narrative places into perspective the role of the Roman Catholic Church with native people as he writes, “The clergy had one method dealing with the Indians, soldier another. The Colonel, no Jesuit, urged his men to pursue the last of the savages until they were incapable of staging even the memory of a surprise. There were therefore no natives who could be pressed into serving as guides” (p. 11).

The methods noted in Keene's storytelling technique are just as applicable and relevant to the counternarrative methods adopted in Latino poetry and borderlands poetry.

To maintain and advance the presence of the *antropoeta*, John Alba Cutler insists, "Chicano/a literary works celebrate Chicano/a culture, which has been devalued and denigrated in the United States, yet these same works know that attempts to represent that culture inevitably transform it. [...] Chicano/a literature, by virtue of its literariness, pinpoints serious blindspots in assimilation sociology" (11). The assimilationist narrative is challenged by borderlands poets through both acculturation and creative narratives that reveal multi-literacies through testimony and witnessing of struggle and triumph. Specifically, in Andrea Beltran's poem "Reading and Writing Lessons," the speaker Beltran reveals the meaning of literacies, for whom literacies are accessible, and how literacies are enacted. Beltran's first stanza reads:

I remember the day I learned  
about my grandmother teaching  
herself to read and write. I was being nosy  
in her living room cabinets and found  
her workbooks, similar to the ones I took to school,  
cassette tapes, too. Back then,  
I thought literacy was free and that everyone  
took advantage. She signed cards only when holidays  
and birthdays demanded and wrote the occasional shopping list.

Beltran's poem incorporates the challenges faced by students who once sought knowledge, schooling, and education. The speaker describes herself as "nosy" as she becomes *antropoeta* in her grandmother's house and comes to understand her self-education to become literate and

participatory. The poem hints at education history and periods in which resources were scarce, and some books and media were shared across grade levels and age groups to become learned and to participate in society. As revealed in the full poem, borderlands citizens' efforts were hindered, since schooling in native, borderlands languages were absent as well as across the greater United States.

Despite generational differences as well as historical, social, and political realities affecting access to a literate life between a grandmother and her granddaughter in the poem, they share the pursuit of knowledge and to make meaning happen as they communicate and bond across time, limitations, resources, and events. The poem functions as a counternarrative by communicating how literacy is enacted for engagement and how the speaker relies on literacy for existence despite the limited access to schooling and education she once experienced. Through literacy, the grandmother and granddaughter communicate, exist, and affirm their origins, identities, and mutual love.

Public monuments and spaces advance narratives that are often in opposition to the local people's sense of place and history. To take a case in point and in response to a tourist-friendly narrative I found on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, while visiting the Wyler Aerial Tramway State Park, I wrote the following poem and titled it "Variation on a Theme by Lucille Clifton."

*on the cable car at Sierra de los Mansos, 2nd May 2015*

nobody says the names  
the given names by first peoples  
to rocks once moved so moved  
by the people calling this home  
now unidentified and indistinct

instead we only hear of purchases  
and treasures galore of land  
the ranger remembers with glories  
claimed yet he does not know  
the names we know of the sacred  
rocks and hands once touching earth  
some bodies sat here and carved  
mountains of lineage with rocks  
fed fish and manna on these rocks  
how waters once flooded the land  
shaping rocks and adobe we behold  
before us as we ascend into the sky  
and rock bed flowers bloom  
we know the rocks must know  
their own deserted names  
and our ancestral names  
even if we misremember  
or forget to ask what pages  
were rewritten without us  
without telling what was  
and is native and holy here  
somebody manifested another  
telling by making one history

after the coming of franklin in 1848

erasing some memories and names

we remember and pronounce

Wyer Aerial Tramway State Park

El Paso del Norte, Tejas

Chihuahuan Desert

The poem serves as a counternarrative and testimony of additional histories that surround a natural space—a mountain—by one of the First Peoples, the Mansos, who honored the sacred and meanings of the mountain to both humans and Mother Earth. Admittedly, the power of naming and the removal of names communicates the telling of one dominant and exclusive narrative through the erasure of native people in public spaces. Regardless, the people's sense of memory maintains alive the relevant narratives and in response to colonization and disregard in the written documentation advanced by the state.

The counternarrative also serves as a response to borderlands chaos, terror, and violence that citizens face in their everyday life. Despite El Paso's designation as one of the safest cities in the United States and reduced crime and violence in the neighboring Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, México, the media narratives are neither neatly delineated nor easily categorized for consumption by citizens in both cities. For example, in the poem "Mexadus" by Jorge A. Gómez, the reader enters the poem *in medias res* as images unfold with hardship, abandonment, and flight. In the first two stanzas, we witness a people seeking to be delivered from violence, terror, and crime to make a promised life in the borderlands.

The structure and design of Gómez's poem "Mexadus" resembles the jagged lives endured by borderlands citizens and functions as a book, or poem, of the continental Mexican people's exodus and possibly their diaspora between native territories. Consider the first two stanzas in which the speaker serves as *antropoeta* and eyewitness of a war zone in actual time as the reader moves from line to line with a feeling of brokenness. Here violence is enacted upon the innocent who are neither protected nor guilty:

call it  
the Mexadus,  
miles  
en fuga,  
pavimentos 'turrados in metal  
shells,  
yellow tabs beneath  
a bulletholed  
Escape.  
  
calcined corpses  
divested faces  
decorate deserts,  
cartels crucify  
cadavers to trees  
of carbon age  
zapotecas revere,

Zetas toss  
Molotovs,  
bottled  
mercurochrome  
combusts in  
farmacias.

Gómez's poem's title mirrors the linguistic innovation of borderlands languaging and poetic sensibility of the *antropoeta* as languagemaker. Moreover, the poem provides various scenes and sequences of history and violence that include México's indigenous people as well as bodies unaccounted in the Chihuahuan Desert, yet noted through the everyday assassinations and violence in the making. The word "Escape" appears in its own line as an imperative, which is an apt arrangement and command in the poem. Overall, Escape becomes synonymous with Mexadus and as a fit description. The borderlands citizens' most promising opportunity is to flee for their lives and livelihood. The Mexadus in progress reveals the incendiary circumstances within a drug and crime warfare state.

The poetry volume *The Verging Cities* by Natalie Scenters-Zapico is a model of the counternarrative in response to the single story consumed by the general public. In the poem "How Borders Are Built," the speaker describes from a bedroom how she loses her own self, body, and agency in the authority and hands of others through an enactment that is cyclical, numbing, and violent:

You lay on blue sheets. I put two fingers in my mouth and they disappear.  
In your hair a crown of border patrol point their guns at me; they watch  
with night vision goggles to see if I'll wade across our river. I lick



the black corners of your ears; one agent shoots my shoulder. I wonder if you  
could take them down while you're on top of me, put them in a box somewhere.

I tell you I am desert: my face cracks; reptiles hide in my shadows[.]

. . . . .

[. . .] We eat our border every hundred years then build it up again.

We ask each other if we've carried any foreign items today, barbed wire

fences stapled to our teeth, avocado pits in our back pocket. We say no. (4)

The speaker communicates how violent acts toward one's body have similarities with those enacted by border law enforcement. Consumption and decomposition of the body appear in nature's presence, even as humans attempt to comply with authority and coexist with nature. At the same time, the building of borders occurs across centuries and to the detriment, and even demise, of borderlands citizens.

In Scenters-Zapico's poem "The Verging Cities Watch Me," two cities are transformed as possessing omniscience and vision through human connections. The speaker takes our hand and walks us through the streets of her hometown to a scenic area that can be considered romantic. However, reality soon dominates the vision of what two cities are as well as crime scenes too familiar to escape from one's own body and aloneness as a witness:

I walk home from a bar alone, stop

on Rim Road to let the lights of El Paso

and Ciudad Juárez switch on

and off, sew themselves over all the ugly

of my body. I hold my breath and hope  
all that light will turn

into black beetles to swarm me quiet.

But when I open my body I am alone,  
alone only the way these two cities can be

alone, only the way I am alone with him.

When we are naked, we are pale as fliers  
for women gone missing. (19)

The cities are personified as feeling aloneness, while the speaker's body and her lover's are no different from the disappeared women of the twin cities now verging in narrative poetry and human plight.

History and poetry are interrelated in the making of the counternarrative to function as a text that is in response to a "Master Narrative" that dominated and was sanctioned as the official text and narrative. Furthermore, the function of the counternarrative in borderlands poetry is best summed up by Ricardo Castro-Salazar and Carl Bagley as they define history which is relevant, and possibly synonymous, with poetry. They add:

History is not what occurred in the past, but merely a story of what people thought and experienced at the time an event occurred. Inevitably, the belief system and context of the narrator (the historian or individual recalling the past) influence any interpretation, modern or otherwise. Thus, historical narratives are continually retold and elucidated, undergoing vast transformation as they are reinterpreted at different points in time. (p. 4)

The poems presented as counternarratives fulfill the promise of revisiting, revising, and rethinking histories we deemed accurate or even as the sole pre-interpreted account that must remain unchallenged and untouched. Instead, borderlands poets reframe the essential questions and sanctioned narratives via *antropoeta* and “poet as *curandera*” to examine interpretations across time and space.

### **Four Challenges for Reading and Teaching**

In the essay “Teaching English POWERFULLY: Four Challenges,” Ernest Morrell insists, “No matter what technological innovations arise, the core classroom transactions are between teachers and students, students and students, and students and the texts they consume and create” (5). Similar to the *antropoeta*, we can teach out students close reading and critical thinking strategies to read poetry like a poet and in society for action and change. Most specifically, the relationships that we build with students to advance the reading of poetry must be led by the four challenges Morrell proposes for our instructional planning and learning connections:

Challenge #1: Develop powerful readers of multicultural texts.

Challenge #2: Develop powerful authors of multimodal texts.

Challenge #3: Connect classroom production to social action.

Challenge #4: Connect the discipline around the student.

The four challenges were used within this text to advance the reading of poetry through the lenses of an *antropoeta* in the presence of muses influencing identities and cultures of the borderlands and Chihuahuan Desert.

In support of these four challenges, one recent achievement and influence connected to the power of world languages and poetry is Juan Felipe Herrera. In June 2015, Herrera was

named the 21<sup>st</sup> Poet Laureate at the Library of Congress for 2015–2016. In his work and laureateship, Herrera seeks to advance the work of poetry across economics, politics, and society. For Herrera, the chaos and challenges of the world are not absent in his poetics.

For example, in the poem titled “Ayotzinapa,” Herrera memorializes a group of teachers who went missing, from the Ayotzinapa Normal School near Iguala, Guerrero, México. His poems is a remembrance of their lives and actions.

From Ayotzinapa we were headed toward Iguala to say to the  
mayor that we wanted funds for our rural school for teachers

. . . . .

no one knew it no one saw it

we are learning this number            43 for you

because there were            43 of us

we are

not disposable

9-26-14            (17)

Poetry, including borderlands poetry, must remain connected to the everyday world and struggle for justice and freedom.

On September 16, 2015, Herrera presented his inaugural reading at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. “When we say poetry, it’s really the vision of all voices,” Herrera explained. “It’s freedom. . . . When you use your own voice, freely, then we’re all united.” Herrera’s new poem titled “Imagine What You Could Do” and the recording from the event capture his earliest memories of speaking Spanish and struggling to learn and speak English

while a student in elementary school. The poem vibrates with energy, resilience, and the vision to become a U.S. poet laureate. The final stanza reads:

If I stood up  
wearing a robe  
in front of my familia and many more  
on the high steps  
of the Library of Congress  
in Washington, D.C., and read  
out loud and signed  
my poetry book  
like this—  
'poet laureate of the United States of  
America'  
Imagine what you could do.

As teachers, we can understand these feelings within our students, within ourselves, and given voice in poetry. We can encourage our students and colleagues to reach their highest potential, too.

Herrera's third-grade teacher, Leyla Sampson, encouraged the young Herrera as an emerging reader, singer, and writer in her classroom in the 1950s. Early on, Herrera exhibited a fondness for words and languages. He recalls singing "Three Blind Mice" as Ms. Sampson listened intently. Her assessment confirmed his resilience: "You have a beautiful voice." (Here, assessment is used in the sense of the Latin word *assidere*, which means "to sit beside.")

On Herrera's inaugural reading night, guess who sat in the audience? Ms. Sampson! Indeed, the attentive listener, sitting patiently before her student again, was Leyla Sampson, who is now ninety-four years old. Herrera, who is sixty-six years old, shared with Ms. Sampson and his audience, "It was your words that made it all happen for me.

All poetry is influenced by world languages, literatures, and cultures. Thus, as educators and readers, the challenges are significant for our teaching and reading lives. Through deliberate planning, we can welcome more readers to poetry waiting to be read and sung by children, adolescents, and adult alike.

### **Trusting Muses and Poems at the Table**

In the United States, from September 15<sup>th</sup> through October 15<sup>th</sup>, we observe National Hispanic Heritage Month. This period marks the celebration of diverse cultures, histories, and contributions of Americans whose ancestors came from various lands with changing frontiers and borderlands across time and space: Spain, México, the Caribbean, and Central and South America.

Our classrooms are filled with opportunities to advance the contributions of Hispanic and Latino Americans from the literary, performance, and visual arts to scientific research. The continental Américas, as a hemispheric whole, is rich with generations of heritages interconnected with Latino life and thought and include indigenous people's influences and contributions. Through language, poets make the natural world and our senses visible and to experience with reflection and memory. Poetry and memory can be joined in communion as we witness, document, and teach poetry as *antropoetas*. The borderlands poetry that exhibits linguistic innovation can be savored by more readers who are guests at a literary banquet when we offer invitation and places at the table for many cultures, identities, muses, and poems. Our

openness to experience and understanding can create a movement about how poetry ignites our lives with meaning and hope. We can open more doors and windows to poetry and world languages at our table.

The poets and thinkers included in this chapter merit reading in their entirety, because their poems beckon us as readers, writers, thinkers, and performers to their craft, muses, and vision. As readers and teachers of poetry, we are committed to the spoken, celebrated word. In fact, the poems we welcome to our conversations and classrooms—including those that our students and colleagues have penned, texted, typed, or just Tweeted—must remind us and our students about the mutual and reciprocal relationships that poetry can feed and fuel in our everyday lives and across literary tables within and beyond the borderlands and Chihuahuan Desert.

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