

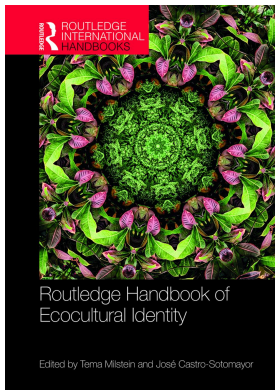
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Borderland ecocultural identities

Carlos A. Tarin, Sarah D. Upton and Stacey K. Sowards

The El Paso, Texas–Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua region at the United States–Mexico border is the largest bi-national metropolitan area in the Western hemisphere. Sitting on the banks of the Río Grande (in Mexico, known as Río Bravo del Norte), the border region is a unique bioregional amalgamation of distinct ecocultural forces wherein languages and populations intermingle in complex ways. Residents of this region must frequently straddle two or more distinct languages, nation-states, and cultures in order to make sense of their identities. Moreover, the bustling cityscape of the Paso del Norte region is also located in the heart of the Chihuahuan Desert. The ecocultural significance of a desert landscape and river, combined with a large number of border dwellers, walls, canals, plants, and non-human animals, highlights the centrality of metaphorical and literal boundaries that constrain and enable movements and beings. In this essay, we use Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of the *nepantlera*, first articulated in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), to theorize the complexities of ecocultural identity in a landscape fraught with numerous, conflicting dualistic tensions – U.S./Mexico, English/Spanish, city/desert, culture/nature, human/more-than-human, straight/queer, and citizen/non-citizen. To be certain, the boundaries of these ecocultural identities are patrolled and policed (both literally and symbolically¹), yet the border provides a unique lens for understanding how seemingly oppositional tensions can conflict and converge in order to (re)create a transformational praxis that we argue is uniquely grounded in ecocultural identities produced in bordered contexts.

We take up Anzaldúa’s concept of the *nepantlera* to begin theorizing ecocultural identity in the borderland. According to Anzaldúa (2015), *nepantla* is ‘a psychological liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future. *Nepantla* is the space in-between, the locus and sign of transition’ (p. 17). *Nepantleras*, then, are figures who live between and across the borders of multiple worlds and work to negotiate meaning in order to provide ‘perspective[s] from the cracks’ (p. 245). Ecocultural identities for border residents, crossers, inhabitants – human and more-than-human – are constituted and complicated by a variety of tensions that must be negotiated. Our analytic goal is thus to articulate environmental *nepantlisma* as a ‘geography of self’ that simultaneously constrains and enables possible modes of thought and practice. As Anzaldúa (2015) argues:

The geography of our identity is vast, has many nations. Where you end and the world begins is not easy to distinguish. Like a river flooding its bank, cutting a new channel that winds in a new direction, we escape our skin, our present identity and forge a new one.

(p. 244)

Anzaldúa's (2000) conceptualization of geography of the self is a way to understand identity through the layering, stacking, and clustering of selves and the communities (human and more-than-human) to which we belong. Geography of the self has traditionally been used to describe oppositional tensions brought forth by the co-existence 'of different cities or countries who stand at the threshold of numerous mundos [worlds]' (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 255), and we extend this idea to humanature contexts (Milstein, 2011). In doing so, we complicate the culture–nature dualism by articulating how identities are imbricated simultaneously by nature and culture, albeit in ways that are sometimes conflicted and tensional.

In probing the potential of Anzaldúa's concept of the *nepantlera* to make sense of ecocultural identity, we focus primarily on the Río Grande, which stretches from southern Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico. As both a natural and symbolic resource, the Río Grande is an apt metaphor for understanding ecocultural identity within the context of the border. The river is a distinctive regional feature with a large presence that defines both biological livelihood and ecocultural identity along its banks. The Río Grande watershed affects natural vegetation, agriculture, and human and more-than-human migratory patterns. More importantly, however, the river itself is a site of ecocultural contestation whose flows have been constrained to demarcate clear boundaries between the United States and Mexico.

The Río Grande is not only an important marker – it is central to contextualizing and historicizing how ecocultural identity unfolds in the borderland. In focusing on the Río Grande, our argument is that the river highlights the numerous tensions and paradoxes that are central to *nepantlisma*. Our own subject positions and ecocultural identities – as border dwellers, as bilingual, as Latinx, as *mestizx*,² as colonized – color this analysis by connecting our lived experiences with Anzaldúa's oeuvre. Charting ecocultural identity in the borderlands, thus, is an *ecotestimonio* wherein 'geography is the witness, and the voices collected upon its surface are varied' (Driver, 2012, pp. 181–182). This *ecotestimonio* links our material reality and identifications with the politically fraught discourses that enable and constrain life in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands.

We take a cartographic approach that traces the flow of the river from north to south to show how stable meanings and conceptions of ecocultural identity are troubled by a confluence of factors at various stopping points along the river: *alluvial diffusions* and land disputes, border signage as *resistance*, and *resilience* despite militarization. Following a brief explication of Anzaldúa's notion of *nepantlisma*, we focus on configurations of meaning along the Río Grande that highlight the potential of borderland theory for disrupting essentializing notions of identity that have traditionally reinforced the dominant Western nature/culture dualism. Ultimately, we argue that *nepantlisma* is an ecocultural identity characterized in part by *alluvial diffusions*, by which we mean both the physical and metaphorical flows of water and sediment that occur following floods and changing river patterns. We use this term throughout our analysis both literally and metaphorically to denote ways in which *nepantleras* position themselves as resilient and resistant within and against shifting environmental, political, and ecocultural contexts. *Nepantlisma* is also an ecocultural identity marked by *resistance* (as evidenced through border graffiti, for example) and *resilience* in how we respond to forces of border militarization. We unpack these concepts of diffusion, resistance, and resilience in the rest of this chapter after first discussing borderland theory and its connection to ecocultural identity.

Borderland theory and ecocultural identity

Borders are dividing lines, the resulting vague and undetermined spaces that develop around those lines, and the consciousness that emerges in those spaces (Anzaldúa, 1987). Our essay is situated on the Mexico/U.S. border and, while this space contains a militarized ever-building wall of division, the border is much more than a physical barrier. The United States' El Paso, Texas, and Mexico's Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, make up a borderland community, influenced by simultaneous desires for unity and calls for division by forces inside and outside the region. In addition to the spaces created by physical borders, Anzaldúa (1987) explains that borderlands

are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

(p. 19)

El Paso and Ciudad Juárez are also situated within the psychological and sociocultural borders Anzaldúa describes, as the people who move through this space daily navigate the border, multiple languages and cultures, and dialectical tensions between human and more-than-human worlds (Dickinson, 2014; Holmes, 2016; Milstein, 2009; Milstein & Dickinson, 2012; Milstein et al., 2019). For example, the militarization of the border has created a dialectical tension between human interdependence with the Río Grande and the human desire for dominance and control over the river as a bordering structure, which we go into further below.

People who exist in borderlands find themselves in a state of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word for 'in-between space' that Anzaldúa (2015) offers for making sense of 'el lugar entre medio' (p. 28) or 'the place in the middle' (Mora, 1993, p. 5). As *nepantleras* move within and across binary categorizations in their lived experiences, they are presented with, and expected to choose from, multiple, competing, and contradictory labels of otherness (Anzaldúa, 2015). Because of the complexity involved in creating a sense of identity while living in an in-between space, *nepantla* identities are stacked and multilayered. Moreover, *nepantla* identities span time and space, and 'geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering, and overlapping "countries"' (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 69).

As *nepantleras*, we draw from *el cenote*, a Spanish term for sinkhole, which Anzaldúa (2015) suggests forms a well of ancestral knowledge created by the waters of many rivers. As the streams of these rivers flow upward, 'they co-mingle to create meaning, customs, and practices that spread and are "borrowed" from and by other cultures through diffusion' (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 88). For *nepantleras*, then, the construction of culture involves the creation of 'a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and the planet' (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 103). The environments that we interact with and depend on, therefore, become parts of our geographies of selves, as they are woven into our identities (Anzaldúa, 2015). In turn, our identities change as our environments do (Steele, 2008). As Anzaldúa (2015) explains, 'the places where I've lived have had an impact on my psyche, left a mark on every cell in my body' (p. 68). *Nepantlisma* as an ecocultural identity draws from the embodied knowledge of the borderlands – physical, place-based, psychological – engendered by human and more-than-human connections to natural and built environments.

This geography of the self as articulated through *nepantla* is also a political stance. Blackwell (2010) explains this through what she calls 'nepantla strategies,' which are

based on understanding how power operates in extremely restricted spaces and on adapting tactics that move in and between those confinements. To open new possibilities,

nepantla strategies include differential modes of consciousness, hybrid political discourses, and the ability to move and shift between sites of struggle and to traffic meanings and knowledge from one context to another to create new cultural narratives of gender and empowerment.

(p. 15)

To illustrate, Blackwell interviewed members of the community organizing group, Líderes Campesinas, and found these female community leaders engaged in nepantla strategies through the creation of ‘transnational subjectivities,’ which in turn led to new forms of self-empowerment as they worked to address working conditions, pesticide exposure, health, education, and globalized agricultural industries. Their community work also moved within and beyond the workplace and family life, revealing creative resistive movements and an understanding of complex racialized and gendered hegemonies. These women, based in California, illustrate how the border transcends its physical location and inhabits border-scattered people’s identities, minds, actions, and activisms.

Living in the in-between space means existing within multiple, often contradictory, cultures, languages, and worldviews, and, while it is not always comfortable to live in this space of contradictions, it comes with ‘certain joys’ as ‘dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened’ (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 19). Nepantleras taking up this work of developing Mestiza consciousness, therefore, have much to teach us, and we can learn by examining the ecocultural identities and strategies employed by writers, artists, and activists living in border regions (Holmes, 2016). Nepantleras not only develop a tolerance for the ambiguity and contradiction that surrounds them, they are able to creatively turn ambivalence into a transformative state of consciousness, making nepantla a consciousness with resistant and activist potential, such as in the case of the Líderes Campesinas. This means that, while nepantleras still must navigate the dominant Western human/nature dialectical tension that often leads ‘humans to construct nature as *other*’ (Milstein & Dickinson, 2012, p. 512), they possess the potential for a resistant ecocultural identity grounded in environmental nepantlisma. Mora (1993) explains, for example, how the nepantlera comes to understand the desert:

how normal the starkness is when we live in it and know no other landscape... We can learn from the desert, from the butterflies and snakes around us, how vulnerable a creature is in transition. We can offer one another strength and solace, protection from the harsh elements, from the painful cold of sexism, racism, ageism, elitism; faith [and] the space for exploration.

(p. 53)

While Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of nepantla draws heavily on her own co-constructed relationship with the more-than-human world, other scholarly uses of this concept tend not to examine ecocultural identities, but instead center solely on the human or social sphere. By focusing specifically on ecocultural nepantlisma, then, we explore how borders not only have impacted the identities of nepantleras in terms of language and nationality, etc., but how border structures are environmentally disruptive in such a way that human and more-than-human actors have co-constructed identities characterized by alluvial diffusions and strategies of resilience and resistance to these imposed human-made boundaries.

In what follows, we trace the geography of the Río Grande from Colorado to the El Paso, Texas-Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua region to examine the porousness and flexibility of ecocultural identity in the borderlands. Animating the Río Grande as a metaphor for ecocultural

identity highlights the salience of nepantlisma as a way of deconstructing the rigidity of the nature/culture dualism, as well as that of other dualisms. We mark three stopping points along the Río Grande to reflect upon ways ecocultural identity shapes and is shaped by the complex constellation of discourses and ecosystems along the U.S.–Mexico border. These stopping points are defined in the following sections through nepantlera orientations in alluvial diffusion of border crossing, resistance to constraining aspects of the border, and resilience through survival strategies.

Chamizal: The Río Grande as alluvial diffusion

After the U.S.–Mexico war ended in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo defined the U.S.–Mexico border as the deepest part or natural channel of the Río Grande/Río Bravo. However, through much of the nineteenth century, Rocky Mountain snowmelt caused spring floods that often changed the course of the river for extended periods of time. Two interesting cases in the El Paso, Texas–Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua region illustrate how the river’s deepest waters literally moved people back and forth across the international border. For example, the Chamizal Tract, a 385-acre parcel of land, was originally on the south bank of the Río Grande in Ciudad Juárez (at the time, known as El Paso del Norte, renamed in 1888 in honor of the Mexican president Benito Juárez). Spring floods in 1864 contributed to the moving river boundary, which eventually was ‘relocated’ by the river’s fluctuating flow entirely to the U.S. side of the river (National Park Service, 2018b). Flooding from the river’s changing course affected Córdova Island, another tract of land that was a peninsula on the Mexican side of the river, which eventually was ‘relocated’ to the U.S. side when an artificial river cut was built by the U.S. government even though the land was still owned by Mexico. Córdova Island was a site for immigration and illegal trade in the first half of the twentieth century, causing further disputes between the Mexican and U.S. governments as well as their citizens in the region. These two land tracts were not minor, irrelevant issues; the Chamizal Tract, for example, had 5,600 U.S. citizens by 1960, which increased the importance of addressing the location of the border and ownership of the land (National Park Service, 2018c). The Córdova Island area now is known as the Chamizal National Memorial as established after the Chamizal Convention of 1963, in which the U.S. and Mexican governments finally resolved the century–old dispute about the border’s location. The Chamizal Tract was returned to Mexico, and the 5,600 U.S. residents had to move and many had to find new jobs, schools, churches, and friends, although the U.S. government did provide minimal financial assistance to the displaced.

To prevent further disputes, the river was cemented into place along the heavily populated border area in El Paso–Ciudad Juárez. The cementing also had the effect of disciplining the unruliness of the river itself, and the people living in the region, by limiting movement of humans and non-human animals, the ways in which plants grow, and even how seeds are dispersed. At the same time, the Convention also helped improve diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States at a particularly crucial time during the Cold War. The Chamizal National Memorial was established on both sides of the border; today, the cemented river and the border freeways on both sides separate the two parks, but both areas commemorate the final resolution of long disputed territory (National Park Service, 2018a).

The ecological and cultural impact of a cemented river, however, preceded by the damming of the river farther north in New Mexico have created long lasting effects on ecocultural identities through the consequences of taming the river. Upstream northwest, New Mexico’s Elephant Butte Dam, completed in 1916, controls the flow of the river to prevent the flooding of years prior and to promote agricultural output through regulation of water resources. The

Río Grande's water volume changes substantially through the seasons when water is released from the dam as needed. Holmes (2016) also notes that 'Irrigation and a shift from ranching to industrial farming is drying up the Río Grande and the Colorado River and threatens acequia water-management systems³ that have long sustained communities in the Southwest' (p. 36). Shifting agricultural practices have changed the river and people's relationship to the river. The presence and absence of water at any given time also changes the ecology of the river, which sometimes is a dry riverbed and at other times a full flowing river with greenery on both banks. The river eventually enters the official designated location of the U.S.–Mexico border and the cemented portion through the cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. It continues to flow as the physical center of the U.S.–Mexico border for hundreds of miles to the Gulf Coast on the other side of Texas/Mexico.

The controlled stoppage and flow of water manifests in the ecocultural psyche of border dwellers. The ways in which the nineteenth-century spring floods reshaped the river's flow and subsequently the border's location as well as twentieth-century efforts to concretize the river's path are exemplified through the remnants of alluvial diffusion, or the way in which the river's water and sedimentation disperses and recedes over land during and after a flood. The area of the river in New Mexico, just before the river begins to define the U.S.–Mexico border throughout the state of Texas, contains numerous trails for biking, walking, and hiking. At different times of the year, this area is experienced in different ways depending on alluvial diffusions and the amount of water flow. For example, when the river is dry, off-road vehicles, horses, and hikers use the riverbed as a trail. When the river is flowing more heavily, humans play along the banks, while non-human animals such as birds, coyotes, and desert cottontail rabbits, change their migratory patterns because they cannot physically move back and forth due to the river's fullness in the spring and constant alluvial diffusions that change the landscape.

Farther into the cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, the cemented and canaled river is heavily fenced and walled, preventing access and use for both humans and non-human animals. The literal and metaphorical concretized border in this region affects the flow of water, the topography of the land, non-human animal migrations, and the psyche of the people who live there. A nepantla ecocultural identity constantly moves back and forth among worlds, developing strategies that enable the nepantlera to sustain the mental contradictions and competing forces that make survival in the borderland difficult. Mora (1993) writes about how nepantla shapes experiences and perceptions of comfort and identity, which requires what Chela Sandoval (2000) describes as *differential consciousness*, in which one maintains strength, grace, and flexibility to navigate intersectional selves. Sandoval (2000) writes that differential consciousness 'can thus be thought of as a constant reapportionment of space, of boundaries, of horizontal and vertical realignments of oppositional powers' (p. 181). Using differential consciousness within a nepantla identity enables negotiation of ecocultural identities in the borderlands, in which 'taming' of 'unruliness' is ongoing and systemic, as evidenced in the cementing of the river itself.

The history of the U.S.–Mexico border and the Río Grande in the Paso del Norte region illustrates how border dwellers become nepantleras, and thus this history becomes a layer within their geographies of self. The artificial and controlled flow of the river, as well as the border walls constructed by the United States government over many years, shape and define how we literally see both sides of the border. The constraining aspects of and on the river as border in some ways physically prevents full immersion in multiple cultural, linguistic, and ecological identities because those on one side cannot go to the other side easily. With an ecocultural identity-rooted nepantla and differential consciousness, border dwellers sometimes are able to find places of immersion similar to ways humans and non-humans find ways to move

back and forth across the river/border. In essence, these differential consciousness strategies are part of our resistances, as illustrated in the markings along the canals and elsewhere along the Río Grande.

River bank graffiti as resistance

As we discussed in the previous section, a concrete canal now constricts the Río Grande/Río Bravo. In turn, the canalled river creates an environment that simultaneously constructs and rejects the border. While the concretized Río Grande positions people as border subjects, these same people construct the channel as a palimpsest, or a text capable of 'giving testimony to what came before' (Driver, 2012, p. 181). The concrete walls of the canal are covered in graffiti by Mexican artists whose messages have faded with time and been painted over. This artwork offers narratives that challenge stereotypes of Mexico, U.S. foreign policy, Trump, and the border itself.

The Paso del Norte Bridge only allows vehicles to move in one direction, crossing from Ciudad Juárez into El Paso. Pedestrians, however, can cross by foot from El Paso into Juárez and while doing so, can look down through a chain link fence and see the graffiti on the canal. The word 'Vida'⁴ is painted in curly script accompanied by the colorful portrait of a woman with big eyes, brown and green skin, and a white flower in her long, flowing brown hair. 'BERLIN WALL' is painted in capital white letters against a blue background, with the words so large they run from top to bottom on one side of the canal. The famous portrait of Che Guevara, the Argentine Marxist revolutionary figure in the Cuban revolution, has been replicated, this time in hot pink against a black background. Though it is hard to make out the fading cursive writing, covered by newer paintings, a message about Che reads 'se vive la obra y el pensamiento antimperialista'⁵ and while the middle is illegible the message ends with 'revolucionario de los Estados Unidos America.'⁶ The words 'BORDER PATROL ASESINOS'⁷ are written underneath a painting of the infamous yellow border signs in the region with the black silhouette of a family crossing the border (Carcamo, 2017), both faded with time but still visible. A traffic barrier just above the canal features two separate graffiti messages that call attention to the border itself: 'La frontera donde debe vivir'⁸ and 'La frontera mas fabulosa y bella del mundo.'⁹ On a nearby overpass, which while not part of the canal is still in clear view of those crossing the border into Ciudad Juárez, there is a painting of the White House with a large wall painted around it and labeled 'THE WALL.' The words 'Fuck Trump' are written twice, once on either side of this image.

On the walk across the Paso del Norte Bridge from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso, the messages painted on the canal appear to be directly targeted at U.S. Americans broadly and U.S. politicians more specifically. On the side of the canal that faces the U.S. the message 'DE ESTE LADO TAMBIEN HAY SUEÑOS'¹⁰ has been painted in large, black capital letters. On the side facing the people crossing to the U.S. someone has painted 'NO A LA GUERRA! PAZ! PAZ EN IRAK!'¹¹ A nearby message reads 'QUIEN GANARA?'¹² Someone has painted 'WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION' in large black capital letters underneath the message 'TODOS UNIDOS EN CONTRA DE LA GUERRA IMPERIALISTA'¹³ in capital yellow letters. The faded state of these two particular graffiti messages signifies they may be remnants of nepantlera reactions to former U.S. President Bush's invasion of Iraq. A nearby piece of graffiti art lists 'Texas, Nuevo Mexico, Arizona y California,' states all formed on land the U.S. forcefully took from Mexico. While the message is so faded it is hardly visible, one can make out the words 'reclamamos'¹⁴ and 'nuestra sangre.'¹⁵ The words 'FUCK BORDER' are painted on the bottom of the canal, close to the water. Finally, someone has painted a globe next to an image that appears to be Trump, directly above the words 'He is fucking the world.'

As nepantleras, the border leaves its mark on us and we leave our mark on the border. Holmes (2016) explains ‘we can only understand ourselves through a web of relations to other humans and the more-than-human-world, including the natural and built environments through which we move and to which we develop attachments’ (p. 10). Both the river and the canal become another layer in the geography of the self, informing our relations to the border. The cementing of the Río Grande by the U.S. government was an attempt to discipline the unruliness of the water and human actors in the region. In the canal, where the river runs dry as we write, these nepantlera graffiti artists take up where the water left off to transform the built environment of the canal into a site of resistance and inter-relational communication.

The messages described above are painted in strategic public places, meaning they are dependent on the surrounding border context and grant a specific type of public access to those crossing and those policing the border (Holmes, 2016). Steele (2008) explains the border is a site that simultaneously upholds tradition and produces change, as it ‘physically provides a space in which fluidity/fusion/liminality is empowering – even strong enough to speak for the (now) unspoken’ (p. 104). The canal as a palimpsest allows for new stories of the border to be written, which is significant because, as Anzaldúa argues, nepantleras ‘write to record what others erase when they speak’ and ‘to rewrite the stories others have miswritten’ about them (Anzaldúa, 1981, as cited in Steele, 2008, p. 105). For example, Driver (2012) has demonstrated that graffiti, posters and marches make the streets of Ciudad Juárez a palimpsest that serves as an ecotestimonio of femicide, the mass murder of women that has plagued the city since 1993. These texts ensure the stories of these women, and the crimes against them, will be told. We, in turn, argue that, as a palimpsest, the canal functions as an ecotestimonio of resistance to the U.S. and the border itself; the word ‘RESISTE’¹⁶ also appears in capital white letters against a black background in the canal.

People who exist in nepantla are inherently resistant. As Anzaldúa (2015) explains, ‘Nepantleras function disruptively. Like tender green shoots growing out of the cracks, they eventually overturn foundations, making conventional definitions of otherness hard to sustain’ (p. 84). The graffiti on the border canal also exists in a state of fluctuation since the images and messages are painted over, either by local authorities or other graffiti artists. Like the flowing river, these messages lack permanence but function as an assemblage of meaning that actively communicate resistance. Working together, human and more-than-human nepantleras disrupt the built environments meant to control and discipline them. Where in the past the river changed course, refusing to serve as a static border, nepantleras now paint messages of resistance through differential consciousness on its cemented banks in order to change course, albeit in new and different ways.

Militarization of the U.S.–Mexico border

In a third and final stopping point, we consider how militarization and securitization of the U.S.–Mexico border shapes ecocultural identity through the complex colonial history of the Southwest and the legacy of interstate violence that laid the groundwork for contemporary territorial policing. The border, Anzaldúa (1987) notes, ‘*es una herida abierta*’¹⁷ where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds... Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe’ (p. 25, italics in original). The indeterminacy of the border has justified the constant presence of Border Patrol agents (‘hunters in army-green uniforms’ for Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 11) for decades and, consequently, created an ever-expanding policy apparatus that aims to police the border at all times. Yet, these policies continuously tear open the wound of the borderland by creating untold harms for humans and more-than-humans alike. For instance, the amplification of concerns for border securitization following the 2016 election have enabled immigration officers to turn away asylum seekers before reaching the border, detain

thousands in privately owned immigration holding facilities, and forcefully separate mothers from their children while awaiting immigration court appointments.

Militarization of the border has detrimentally affected human border dwellers, and also has created massive environmental harms. Meierotto (2014), tracing the environmental history of the Sonoran desert (which extends across the U.S.–Mexico border in southeastern Arizona), explains, ‘The environmental impacts of these shifting policies include increasing habitat fragmentation, wildlife disruption, damage to fragile habitats and vegetation, erosion, trash deposits, and the development of new roads and trails that alter the overall surface hydrology’ (p. 639). Militarization of the border is nothing new. Thus, understanding ecocultural identity in the borderlands requires starting from a position that inclusively contextualizes the historical legacy of imperialism, colonialism, and environmental degradation created by border militarization over the last several decades.

Recent political developments have reignited securitization discourses that pose significant dangers to ecosystems and populations along the border. On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump announced his candidacy for U.S. president. In his announcement speech, which contained blistering, xenophobic rhetoric critical of U.S. American foreign policy, then-candidate Trump proposed building a wall along the entirety of the U.S.–Mexico border. While Trump’s proposed policy was ostensibly about securing the border to prevent human migration, his speech echoed securitization discourses prevalent in U.S. foreign policy for decades. Chávez (2012) explains, ‘Militarization of the U.S.–Mexico border has not occurred in response to the War on Terror; instead, it has been the U.S. government’s plan at least since the Reagan administration’ (p. 49). Indeed, the American Immigration Council (2017) notes, ‘Since the last major overhaul of the U.S. immigration system in 1986, the federal government has spent an estimated \$263 billion on immigration enforcement’ (p. 1), much of which is spent to fund armed Border Patrol agents stationed directly along the U.S.–Mexico border fence.

In many areas along the border (especially near populated regions), the border is already secured and heavily fortified with concrete barricades, multiple barbed wire fences, cameras, and various technologies like motion sensors and thermal scanners meant to detect and deter human migration. In short, the border is already heavily policed and militarized. Thinking through ecocultural identity in the borderlands necessitates attention to the contemporary political moment given how the anti-environment and anti-immigrant Trump administration, and its insistence on developing a border wall, will further change human and more-than-human migratory patterns, creating unknown numbers of environmental catastrophes, and further politicize the lives and livelihoods of those who straddle ecocultures in the region. These harmful impacts are already occurring and will only be exacerbated in the future.

The contested terrain of the ecocultural borderland is complicated further by recent legal challenges that have attempted to halt construction of the proposed border wall on the grounds that construction would violate federal environmental standards. On February 27, 2018, U.S. District Judge Gonzalo Curiel rejected attempts by the state of California and several environmental advocates to halt planning of the border wall. The judge noted in his decision that ‘The court cannot and does not consider whether underlying decisions to construct the border barrier are politically wise or prudent’ (p. 2). Implicit in his decision is a move to de-politicize the context of the border wall by rendering the environmental concerns politically inert. Despite the massive ecological implications the wall will have on borderland ecosystems, Curiel’s ruling suggests environmental concerns were *not* considered a legitimate basis for halting construction and, by rejecting the plaintiff’s arguments, creates rhetorical distance that squelches the legitimacy of ecological interests (see Carr & Milstein, 2018, for more on the legal system’s ecocultural ‘invisible sphere’).

In mid-September 2018, the Trump administration began construction of the border wall in a narrow stretch of downtown El Paso. The move to begin construction in the area is

not surprising because, as Anzaldúa (1987) reminds us, ‘The only “legitimate” inhabitants [of the borderlands] are those in power’ (p. 25). In this instance, state-sanctioned legitimacy has entrenched the dominant Western nature/culture dualism by upholding the anthropocentric bias that views environmental matters as secondary to security concerns. The natural environment and, by extension, the more-than-human inhabitants, are being disciplined by the dominant political regime that, for decades, has continuously emphasized the need for securitization and militarization of the U.S.–Mexico border.

Ecocultural identity in the borderland must be framed within the context of militarization. Living in El Paso, Texas, the concrete barricades, metal fences, and concrete canals that have ‘secured’ the Río Grande are inescapable features that define border life. Yet, despite the increasing militarization and the racist, xenophobic rhetoric and violent attacks that permeate the contemporary, division-focused political moment, we do not mean to suggest that, as border dwellers, we are merely docile bodies. On the contrary, as nepantleras, our continued existence in the borderland underscores the resilience required to cross boundaries, build bridges, and continue to thrive.

The desert is hostile in more ways than one, but we persist. The militarization of the U.S.–Mexico border has created environmental chaos that likely only will be magnified in the future, but human and more-than-human inhabitants of the border continue to find ways to migrate, to cope, to heal the ruinous psychic and ecological injuries that are the legacy of centuries of colonization and imperialism. Our geographies of self hold these traumas of colonialism, while at the same time carving out spaces for healing, persisting, and resisting. Nepantlisma, then, is resilience. As nepantleras, human and more-than-human border dwellers resiliently endure the extreme militarization of the border by adapting to the ebb and flow of political forces that shape daily life along the Río Grande. After all, as Anzaldúa (1987) reminds, ‘Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain’ (p. 86).

Nepantla geographies and ecocultural identities

The border, both physical and metaphorical, constructs geographies of the self for those who live and have lived in the region. As nepantleras our geographies of the self include histories of colonialism, evidenced through efforts to control and discipline bodies and environments through limiting the flow of the Río Grande and militarizing the border. These layers of our lived experiences are stacked along with our potential for resistance and resilience, as the river, human, and non-humans push back against this unnatural boundary and continue to find ways to thrive.

The wall and the border that runs through the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez region, however, do shape ecocultural identities and experiences of the self and the body. These geographies are marked by nepantlisma, the feelings of betweenness. Alluvial diffusions of identities are deposited, sedimentary, layered, stacked, eroded, and disseminated. These alluvial diffusions are the strengths that emerge from nepantleras through seeing in new ways, navigating quotidian complexities, embracing creative approaches, and maintaining a differential consciousness, which enable resistance and resilience. Anzaldúa (1987) explains,

La facultad [mental faculty] is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak... .

(p. 38)

This orientation toward the world – in which one is constantly aware of contextual, cultural, and situational nuances – is part of a differential consciousness. Instances of resistance, such as graffiti and moments of resilience, also suggest an orientation toward social and ecological justice that is a central aspect of the nepantlera’s ecocultural identity.

Finally, the nepantlera’s differential consciousness is also a method of sustaining seemingly competing perspectives and perceptions at the same time. In that sense, nepantlisma blurs dualisms: culture/nature, human/non-human, queer/straight, white/non-white, and so forth. The nepantlera understands the world through diffused identities, strategies of resistance, and tactics of resilience. Complex thinking as such also enables deeper understandings of intersectional identities (or, interconnected and complexifying social categories such as gender, race, and class), which we also hold at the same time, even when they conflict or pull us in different directions. Bridging borders and dualisms expands ecocultural identities by allowing for contradictions, inconsistencies, imperfections, and competing views. Recognizing, accepting, and embracing such ways of thinking encourages resilient and resistant orientations focused on the ecological, the cultural, and the linguistic, which demand the interrogation of unquestioned norms and socioecological structures in our society through nepantla approaches, tactics, and strategies.

Notes

- 1 This policing of identity has resulted in violence along the border, most notably in the mass shooting event at an El Paso Wal-Mart on August 3, 2019. Twenty-two people were killed and 24 others were injured in the attack. In a manifesto explaining the motivation for the attack posted online, the shooter claimed he was defending his country from cultural and ethnic replacement by Hispanic immigrants.
- 2 A term used to describe descendants of Indigenous peoples and Spaniards, or the offspring of both the colonizers and the colonized. Editors’ note: The original Spanish words Latino/Latina and Mestizo/Mestiza are gendered. That is, the words refer to female – mestiza – or male – mestizo. The addition of the ‘x’ at the end (or an @: e.g., mestiz@) degenders pluralized Spanish terms, which by grammar rules are masculinized in the plural.
- 3 Acequias are water-sharing networks that originated with local Indigenous peoples and were extended by Spanish colonists. They are dryland communally-built ditch systems used to move river water or snow runoff, primarily for agricultural purposes. They are prominent throughout the U.S. Southwest region and have significance in local peoples’ shared senses of ecocultural identity and senses of relations-in-place (Milstein et al., 2011). For more on acequias, see Hoffmann’s (2020) chapter in this *Handbook*.
- 4 ‘Life.’ English translations of Spanish words will appear as endnotes to avoid privileging English.
- 5 ‘We are living anti-imperial work and thought.’
- 6 ‘Revolutionary of the United States.’ While the correct spelling in Spanish would be ‘América,’ this reflects spelling in the graffiti. Several of the graffiti messages we analyzed were missing accent marks and in this chapter we have chosen to quote them as they appear on the canal.
- 7 ‘Border Patrol assassins.’
- 8 ‘The border where one should live.’
- 9 ‘The most fabulous and beautiful border in the world.’ The correct spelling in Spanish would be ‘más.’
- 10 ‘On this side there are also dreams.’
- 11 ‘No to war! Peace! Peace in Iraq!’
- 12 ‘Who will win?’
- 13 ‘All united against the imperialist war.’
- 14 ‘We reclaim.’
- 15 ‘Our blood.’
- 16 ‘Resist.’
- 17 ‘Is an open wound.’

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