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## BORDER QUEERS: WRITING THE GENDER OF BOUNDARIES

A comparative reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Ananda Devi's *Ève des ses Décombres*

*Et moi, je suis quoi ? Je ne suis pas un esclave, c'est sûr, même si quelque part dans ma lignée il y a eu un homme et une femme enchaînés qui ont regardé vers moi et qui m'ont dit, au-delà du temps, tu seras libre. Je ne suis pas esclave, mais il me semble qu'il n'y a que ça, autour de moi. Mettre le pied en avant, franchir un seuil, tourner le dos, ça, ils ne peuvent pas. Parce qu'ils ont façonné leurs chaînes, ils se croient libres. D'ailleurs, partir en avant les mènera vers quoi ? Vers le bout de l'île, qui est le bout du monde.<sup>1</sup>*

(What about me, what am I? I know I'm not a slave, even if a man and a woman among my ancestors were chained up and saw me through the eons separating us, and told me: You will be free. I'm no slave, but maybe everyone else around me is. Putting one foot in front of the other, crossing a threshold, turning their back on things, that's something they can't do. They made their own chains, so they think they're free. And where would they go, if they wanted to move on? The end of the island, which is the end of the world.)<sup>2</sup>

Clélio may not know who he is, but the police think they do: a murderer. When seventeen-year old Savita is found dead in a dumpster in Troumaron – the fictional *cit * on the outskirts of Port Louis where the latest novel of Mauritian writer Ananda Devi is set—no one struggles to believe he did it, not even his own mother. The boy who would be free is exactly the one who ends up in chains, for a murder he did not commit. Freedom is the brutally frustrated aspiration all four main characters of Devi's novel have in common: Savita, suitcase in hand, is on the verge of leaving Troumaron, when she is stopped in her tracks by the sight of Ève, lying semi-conscious by the sea, after being sexually abused by a group of men. Ève, whom Savita brought back to life, often daydreams of building another life with her, away from the streets where she sells sex. Sad, who roams the streets of Troumaron with his gang at night, but reads Rimbaud during the day, and plans to leave Mauritius to become a famous writer.

Freedom, or its absence, is what defines them. "I am not (a) slave," Cl lio repeats, but even his own words betray him. Using *quoi* in place of the more human *qui* discloses his barely repressed anxiety about still being someone's property, a mere object, even so many years after his enslaved ancestors bid him be free. But slavery is like a phantom limb, capable of causing the sort of physical pain which restricts one's movements long after it has been amputated from the social body.

What do the 'self-made' chains of the people of Troumaron consist of? Cl lio associates them with their inability to cross its threshold and leave. Therefore, *either* he is saying that freedom is a thing which exists in certain places but not in others, *or* that freedom is the very ability to go from one place to the next, that is movement itself, or the possibility of movement. While the former surely cannot occur without the latter, it's important to note Cl lio's belief that even if those around him *could* leave, they would never get past the coast, because "the end of the island is the end of the world." This is an extraordinary statement,

worth examining in more detail. Which island, exactly, is he talking about? Mauritius, where Devi places her fictional *cit * by positioning it between Port Louis and Mount Signal,<sup>3</sup> would be the obvious answer. Consider, however, the following observation in Marc Shell’s *Islandology*:

The logician John Venn, originator of the Venn diagram (‘a group of circles that may or may not intersect according as the logical sets they represent have or have not elements in common’), has something to say about such questions of definitional islandness. ... He brings up the parallel case where ‘a navigator sail[s] round an island and then pronounce[s] it to be an island.’ If circumnavigation alone makes a ‘land’ and ‘island,’ says Venn, then the eighteen members of Ferdinand Magellan’s crew who made it back to Portugal after their three-year voyage should have concluded that the planet Earth was an island.<sup>4</sup>

If we take this hypothesis seriously, could we then conclude that, according to Cl lio, freedom does not exist anywhere on Earth, either for those who make their own chains, or perhaps, more worryingly, for everybody? To be able to trace the boundaries of ‘the island’ means establishing where it is possible for individuals to exist freely; that is to say, simply to exist, and where it is not. It means having to think about *what* we are, and *where*—which, following Heidegger, are one and the same:

When we speak of man and space, it sounds as though man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. It is not that there are men, and over and above them *space*; for when I say ‘a man’ ... in saying this word I think of a being who exists in a human manner—that is, who dwells.<sup>5</sup>

In many ways, * ve de Ses D combres* is a book about borders and boundaries, about where identity begins and where it ends, and for whom. The walls of Troumaron are a presence in and of themselves, obsessively rising everywhere within the text. It feels as if an impromptu cement maze was being built around the reader, walling her or him up inside the book, like its characters. “[I]l y a trop de murs autour de vous, et des murs derri re ces murs”<sup>6</sup> (there are too many walls around you, and walls beyond those walls), as Cl lio puts it, from inside his prison cell.

I would like to argue that  ve, the titular heroine of the book, as a woman of colour who displays non-normative sexual behavior, is situated at the intersection of multiple identities (often reified ones at that), and consequently becomes a stop-over, a frontier everyone goes through, a wall where everyone leaves their mark, tracing the boundaries of their selves: “*Mon corps est une escale. Des pans entiers sont navigu s. Avec le temps, ils fleurissent de br lures de ger ures. Chacun y laisse sa marque, d limite son territoire.*”<sup>7</sup> (My body is a stop-over. Entire sections have been explored. Over time, they blossom with burns and cracks. Everyone leaves some trace, marks his territory.)

I propose to do this by reading Devi’s novel through a classic work by queer Chicana writer Gloria Anzald a’s landmark work, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza – La Frontera*. Anzald a’s intersectional positionality is so similar to  ve’s (“Her body, a crossroads, a fragile bridge, cannot support the tons of cargo passing

through it,”<sup>8</sup>) as to encourage explicit comparison, in order to analyze the complex and multifold ways in which marginalized identities come to represent the border within which normative lives are constituted. As Mimi Sheller puts it:

Race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are bodily practices of differentiation that surface at the intersections of multiple forms of state ordering, moral regulation, self-discipline, and the systems of governance that endorse and make possible regimes of free citizenship.<sup>9</sup>

Before setting out to prove the ways in which I deem this comparison to be a fruitful one, however, an explanation is needed as to why it is even possible, in view of the obvious differences in linguistic and ethnic origins between the two authors and the characters they created. Devi’s novel is set in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Mauritius, a small island in the Indian Ocean separated from the African continent by Madagascar. Having been colonized by Dutch, French and British explorers, the Republic of Mauritius, independent since 1968, is home to Western European, Eastern African, Indian and Chinese citizens, who originally came to the island as settlers, slaves, indentured servants and immigrants respectively. Its languages, all three of which are present in Devi’s novel, are French, British and Mauritian Creole.<sup>10</sup>

Gloria Anzaldúa (both the writer and the protagonist of *Borderlands*), on the other hand, is a “Mexicana de este lado,”<sup>11</sup> that is, a Mexican from the Southwest of the United States (Texas, in her case). In the first chapter of her book, which is part memoir, part poetry and part historical and political non-fiction, Anzaldúa (re-)tells the story of how her homeland was inhabited and invaded by many different peoples throughout the centuries, before being colonized by the ‘Anglos’. The oldest evidence of Indian settlements in Texas dates back to 35000 BC. The Conchise people and their parent culture, the Aztecs, were nearly wiped out following the Spanish Conquest of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. From then on, Central and South America were mainly populated by *mestizos*, individuals of mixed Spanish and Indian descent. Those who settled in the Southwest also married North Indian Americans, contributing to form “an even greater *mestizaje*,”<sup>12</sup> which was subject to further increase ever since the colonization by United States of America over the first half of the nineteenth century. The mixture of religions, ethnicities and languages which exists to this day in the Southwest is therefore truly remarkable, with some individuals speaking as many as eight different languages/dialectal variants.<sup>13</sup>

The main goal of this essay is exploring how the disenfranchised queer woman of color<sup>14</sup> destabilizes the very borders she comes to symbolize, independently of time and space. To borrow Homi Bhabha’s apology for his wildly divergent selection of works and texts in *The Location of Culture*:

The historical specificities and cultural diversities that inform each of these texts would make a global argument purely gestural ... But the ‘unhomely’ does provide a ‘non-continuist’ problematic that dramatizes – in the figure of woman – the ambivalent structure of the civil State as it draws its rather paradoxical boundary between the private and the public spheres.<sup>15</sup>

There is something revolutionary and universal in the figure of women like Gloria and Ève, which has the potential of crossing national, temporal and linguistic boundaries. Bhabha had a point when he said that, in doing away with “the transmission of national traditions” as a “major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature.”<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, it is the texts themselves which are asking to be considered in conjunction with others inspired by the same experiences. Anzaldúa writes:

Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials.<sup>17</sup>

The queer, the misfits, the poor and the lost: all those who do not belong can be, and inevitably already are, joined together, as Clélio also affirms:

*des siècles à être ennemis, esclaves, coolies, c'est une lourde histoire, n'empêche, et à chaque occasion elle refait surface, des siècles que ça dure et c'est pas près de finir croyez-moi, même si nous, les enfants de Troumaron, nous nous en fichons de religions, des races, des couleurs, des castes, de tout ce qui divise le reste des gens de foutu pays, nous les enfants de Troumaron, nous sommes d'une seule communauté, qui est universelle, celle des pauvres et des paumés.*<sup>18</sup>

(Over the centuries we've been enemies, slaves, coolies, it's a nasty history for sure, which is why it keeps happening again and again, it's been going on for centuries now and it's not going to end anytime soon, believe me, even if we the children of Troumaron don't care about religion, race, color, caste, everything that divides all the other guys on this shitty island, we the children of Troumaron, we're a single community, and it's a universal one, this community of the poor and the lost.)

The choice of the name Ève is, of course, deliberate: it invites one to think of the first woman, the archetypal temptress. For both Ève and Gloria, the fact of their gender is of tantamount importance to the way in which they are allowed to exist in the world. Anzaldúa writes: “For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother.”<sup>19</sup> Ève sleeps with some men in exchange for gifts and favours, but not always, not with everyone. Her refusal to accommodate their needs, coupled with the visibility of her relationship with Savita, infuriates the men around her: “*Ils veulent des cadres rigides. Fille à marier, fille à prendre et à jeter. Ce sont les deux seules catégories qu'ils connaissent. Mais je n'appartiens ni à l'une, ni à l'autre. Cela les dépasse et les exaspère.*”<sup>20</sup> (They have fixed ideas. A girl to marry, a girl to conquer and toss aside. Those are the only two categories they can understand. But I don't belong to one or the other. So they end up baffled and angry.)

For the woman of color, the instability of not fitting into any of the recognizable, pre-approved categories is greater still, and it leads to paralysis:

“Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. ... Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.”<sup>21</sup> Women like Gloria, their bodies ‘turned to stone’, do not simply inhabit the border-lands; they *are* the border, they *are* the wall. It is a physical, tangible sensation. It’s a bodily matter. From as early as she can remember, Ève’s perception of herself, even more explicitly than Gloria’s, bears a striking resemblance to a militarized border: “*Sur mon berceau ne s’est penchée aucune fée. Quand j’ai ouvert les yeux, je crois que j’ai tout de suite vu ma vie en face de moi : une surface de pierre, des barreaux aux yeux, un bâillon sur la bouche et du métal au cœur.*”<sup>22</sup> (There was no fairy at my crib. I think that when I opened my eyes I suddenly saw my whole life in front of me: a stone wall, bars over my eyes, a gag in my mouth and metal in my heart.) What remains to be established is *how* and *why* Gloria and Ève’s bodies are constituted as border walls in the first place.

According to Judith Butler, the body exists, or materializes, through the production of an “effect of boundary, fixity and surface.”<sup>23</sup> Building on Butler’s premise, Sarah Ahmed goes on to argue that “there is no body as such that is given in the world: bodies materialize in a complex set of temporal and spatial relations to other bodies.”<sup>24</sup> Skin can be thought of as “the boundary line of the body,”<sup>25</sup> which “marks and polices the difference between inside and outside,”<sup>26</sup> between ‘me’ and ‘not-me’. As Heidegger would have put it: “A boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.”<sup>27</sup> The skin contains and protects our internal organs and vital fluids, and yet it is also the very thing that makes us open to the outside, the organ through which contact with others occurs, Ahmed observes:

the materialization of bodies involves not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are touched by others ... The skin provides a way of thinking about how the boundary between bodies is formed only through being traversed, or called into question, by the affecting of one by an other.<sup>28</sup>

Touching, therefore, and the desire or refusal to touch are of paramount importance in the creation of what Freud would have called the “bodily ego”. This is particularly evident in the case of Sad’s ‘creation’ of Ève through writing on the wall, which he sees as a sublimation of his desire for her: “*Ce soir-là, allongé dans mon lit, j’ai pris un feutre et j’ai commencé à écrire des choses sur murs, près de ma tête. Bien sûr, c’étaient des choses sur Ève. ...J’ai tellement écrit sure elle que parfois je me dis que j’écris aussi sa vie, et celle des autres, et celle de tous.*”<sup>29</sup> (That night, lying in bed, I took a marker and began writing on the wall by my head. Of course, I wrote about Eve. ... I’ve written so much about her that sometimes I think I’m actually writing her life, and other people’s lives, and all of our lives.) Writing, therefore, comes to be defined as an inherently masculine act which creates the female body it desires to touch and fill with his bodily fluids: “*Les phrases sur mes murs ne sont plus écrites à l’encre noire mais blanche, et le stylo se remplit et se désempplit tout seul, en un incomparable*

*jaillissement.*"<sup>30</sup> (The sentences on my wall are no longer written in black but in white, and the pen fills and empties all by itself, in incredible spurts.) Sad writes on Ève-as-wall with his ink, his semen, his blood: "*Je tache les murs de ma chambre de mes interrogations, je les ensanglante du jus de mots.*"<sup>31</sup> (I mark the walls of my room with questions, I bloody them with the juice of words.)

Anzaldúa claims the act of writing for herself in strikingly similar terms: "I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become. ... *Con imágenes domo mi miedo, cruzo los abismos que tengo por dentro. Con palabras me hago piedra ... Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre.*" (with images I tame my fear, and cross the chasms I have inside. With words, I turn to stone ... I write with the ink of my blood.)<sup>32</sup> By writing her own story, Anzaldúa wrestles the violent power of language away from Man and takes it into her hands. Like Sad, she writes with her own blood, indicating how visceral, and how sexual, the operation of writing is. But like Ève, as the subject (an inherently submissive term) of a text, she is 'turned to stone', referencing the inherent fixity of the written word. But unlike her Mauritian counterpart Gloria/Anzaldúa does not stay 'petrified' for long. She is the writer of her own story, and as such she always has the option of (painfully) re-writing herself, "kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it."<sup>33</sup>

Nowhere is Ahmed's formulation of the skin as a boundary of the self expressed more clearly than here. It is also important to note, however, that the construction of the self, is not a one-off event, with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. As Butler famously argued, on the basis of Derrida's deconstruction of Austin's speech act theory,<sup>34</sup> identity requires constant 'citation'. Performing one's (gendered) identity is a never-ending, iterative and compulsive process:

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *traversía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape "knowing," I won't be moving. ... "Knowing" is painful because after "it" happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before.<sup>35</sup>

Ève would have agreed: "*Chaque chose que j'ai apprendis laisse une blessure dans mon corps. Le savoir est douloureux et chèrement acquis.*"<sup>36</sup> (Everything I learn leaves a wound on my body. That knowledge is painful and hard-won.) Like Anzaldúa, she eventually refuses to resign to the passive role of being written by men's phallic pens. Her turn will come to brandish the weapon that will allow her to leave *her* mark on the body of a man, a concept which Devi highlights by placing it at the very beginning ("*Ma marque s'imprimera sur un front, entre les sourcils. C'est pour cet instant que je suis née.*"<sup>37</sup> (I'm going to leave a mark on a forehead, right between the eyebrows. I was born for this moment.)) and at the very end of the text: "*Je vais laisser ma marque juste au centre de ses sourcils. Ensuite je me n'irai. Je m'échapperai par la violence. Il n'y a pas d'autre issue.*"<sup>38</sup> (I'll leave my mark right between his eyebrows. Then I'll leave. Violence as my escape. There's no other way out.) Having shaved all of her hair in a symbolic act of destruction of her femininity (and even more importantly, having had her

mother do it), Ève heads towards her teacher's house, to exact revenge for the murder of Savita,<sup>39</sup> whose death represents a painful crossing, the acquisition of a new state of knowledge and of self, a destruction of Ève as border: it is in this sense, I believe, that Ève emerges, as a new entity, "out of her ruins".

After Savita's death, there is no other hope of getting out of Troumaron if not through violence. Savita represented Ève's only alternative both to the violence of men and to the poetry of Sad, which, to her, are one and the same:

*Sad parle de poésie quand nous sommes seuls. Mais il n'a aucune idée de la poésie des femmes. La poésie des femmes, c'est quand Savita et moi, on marche ensemble en synchronisant nos pas pour éviter les ornières. C'est quand on joue à être jumelles parce qu'on se ressemble. ... La poésie des femmes, c'est le rire, dans ce coin perdu, qui ouvre un bout de paradis pour ne pas nous laisser nous noyer.*<sup>40</sup>

(Saad talks about poetry when we're alone. But he has no idea about the poetry of women. The poetry of women is when Savita and I walk together step by step to avoid the ruts. It's when we pretend to be twins because we look like each other. ... The poetry of women is laughter in this lost place, laughter that opens up a small part of paradise so we don't drown ourselves.)

Her relationship with Savita is the only one that 'opens' a 'sliver of paradise'; a sharp contrast from the otherwise overwhelming imagery related to constrained and constraining people and places. *Bout*, however, also means 'end', and it is the very same word which Clélio used to designate 'the end of the island, which is the end of the world'. In fact, the foundational moment of Savita and Ève's relationship occurs when Savita finds her 'shipwrecked', her face 'drowned'.<sup>41</sup> But if the *bout* is that of the island, how can they walk out of Troumaron and into it without drowning? And if the end of the island is the end of the world, where would they go, even if they could walk on water?

The threatening and corrosive image of water is one that recurs throughout the book: Ève compares herself to a sinking paper boat in re-telling the story of her first sexual encounter: "*L'eau imbibait mon ventre, mes flancs, mes jambes, mes bras*"<sup>42</sup> (Water seeped into my sides, my stomach, my legs, my arms); then to a sand bag thrown inside a boat and washed by the water, after being raped by a group of men.<sup>43</sup> She imagines slipping away underneath its currents.<sup>44</sup> The significance of water in this context is better understood by reading Devi, once again, in conjunction with Anzaldúa:

I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean  
where the two overlap  
a gentle coming together  
at other times and places a violent clash.

Across the border in Mexico  
stark silhouettes of houses gutted by waves,  
cliffs crumbling into the sea,  
silver waves marbled with spume  
gashing a hole under the border fence.<sup>45</sup>

Anzaldúa here identifies as the border through her self-positioning "at the edge

where earth touches ocean”. If we understand Ève and Anzaldúa’s bodies as having been socially and forcibly constituted as borders, it quickly becomes clear that water, seen here as a primordial, disruptive force that does away with human artifices, seems intent on destroying them: “The sea cannot be fenced/*El mar* does not stop at borders.”<sup>46</sup> This is one possible interpretation, but there are others.

The opposition between earth and water, or land and sea, is crucial to the definition of island; namely, a portion of land which is entirely surrounded by water: the island begins where the water ends. This particular meaning of the English word ‘island’, Shell argues, is derived from the French ‘*insulet*,’ and is centered on the difference between land and water. Another, “historically prior” meaning comes from the Norse term *is* meaning ‘water-land’, used to indicate:

the mixture of water and land at the limiting, or defining, ‘coast.’ Even as the biblical God separates water from earth (thesis), the Bible represents an earlier, even original identity between earth and water (antithesis) that suggests ... the sort of malleable, ever-changing humid material, or clay (*adam*) familiar to coastal cultures, from which the biblical God made the first human being (*adam*).<sup>47</sup>

Shell’s point about the dialectics of earth and water allows me to highlight how Anzaldúa seems, in those first few verses, to fall into the ‘trap’ of Hegelian dialectics. For as long as the primal elements of earth and water are seen as separate and opposite, they shall destroy one another; they shall cancel each other out in order to create a third meaning, a synthesis.

The borderlands Anzaldúa inhabits also seem to be dialectically constituted: “the U.S.-Mexican border,” she writes “*es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture”<sup>48</sup> It seems far-fetched to attribute Hegelian influences to Anzaldúa, but in order to ascertain whether or not she subscribes to such a view of identity I will have to examine some passages in more detail. In the opening poem, the U.S.-Mexico border is described as a:

1,950 mile-long open wound  
 dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,  
 running down the length of my body,  
           staking fence rods in my flesh,  
           splits me        splits me  
           *me raja    me raja*  
 This is my home  
 this thin edge of  
           barbwire.<sup>49</sup>

The border wall is simultaneously an open wound created by the violent penetration of a flat surface by a sharp, pointed object, and that very same object. In *Borderlands*, the border is consistently portrayed as a sexually ambiguous space; it 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 the forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead: in short, those who cross over, pass over, go through the confines of the “normal”.<sup>50</sup>

There are multiple levels of identification going on here: it is unclear whether Anzaldúa simply inhabits this space or whether she is the space itself. Although the border (“thin this edge of barbwire”) is “her home” and she clearly identifies with *los atravesados* (“those who cross over”) who populate it, both the land and its inhabitants are “in a constant state of transition”, transgression, re-configuration. In verse, however, it seems as if Anzaldúa sees herself (myself/me/me/me/me) as the flat surface which the wall splits in two; that is to say, the land itself.

Later on, she tells the story of a “*muchacha*” who was talked about as being “*una de las otras*”, one of the others, because she was a woman who had a vagina for half the year and a man with a penis for the other half, a *myta y myta*. The sexual ambiguity of Anzaldúa’s wall, as both vagina and penis, spreads through the lands which it splits in two and by which it itself is split open (as wound), and among the people who inhabit them, the *atravesados*, of whom she is one:

There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds ... I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.<sup>51</sup>

The theme of sexual ambiguity is also central to Anzaldúa’s exploration of the mythology surrounding the figure of the Serpent. Even as popular wisdom would have them as phallic symbols (“A snake will crawl into your *nalgas*, make you pregnant”<sup>52</sup>) serpents represent much more in Chicana culture. To demonstrate this, Anzaldúa provides an etiology of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the most universally revered saint in Mexico, whose Indian name is *Coatlalopeuh*, which is “descended from, or is an aspect of, an earlier Mesoamerican fertility and earth goddesses,” the earliest of which is *Coatlicue*, or “Serpent Skirt”, a “creator goddess, mother of the celestial deities,”<sup>53</sup> who “contained and balanced the dualities of male and female, light and dark, life and death.”<sup>54</sup>

In so doing, however, Anzaldúa shows herself to be heavily “dependent on the figure of transgender”, as Jay Prosser noted, by singling out the reminiscence of the *myta y myta* as a paradigmatic example of how foundational texts of queer studies, of which Anzaldúa is one, make use of the transgendered identity to bring to light the inherent fictitiousness of concepts such as sex, gender and sexuality. Prosser argues that this process takes place not just in terms of contents covered, but also at a meta-level, insofar as queer studies “sought institutionalization by traversing ... methodologies (feminism, postmodernism) and identities (women, heterosexuals) already in an institutionalized place.”<sup>55</sup>

This particular use of the transgender as a concept in the theorization of queer identities has more recently come under fire because, in its celebration of fluidity and (anatomical) ambiguity, it threatens to erase those trans individuals who seek to permanently cross over to either side of the wall and make a stable home there. As J. Halberstam<sup>56</sup> put it, the queer butch is made out to represent

“fluidity to the transsexual man’s stability, even as she represents stability (by staying in a female body) to the transsexual man’s fluidity (gender crossing).”<sup>57</sup>

Judith Butler’s analysis of Venus Xtravaganza<sup>58</sup> in the cult documentary *Paris Is Burning*<sup>59</sup> illustrates Prosser’s point well. Venus is a Latina pre-operative transgender woman, who is killed in a hotel bedroom at the age of twenty-three, presumably while engaged in sex work, her only source of income, with which she was hoping to save enough money for gender reassignment surgery. Although the culprit was never found, Butler and Livingston’s narratives suggest that she was murdered by a client upon his finding out that Venus had a penis. Prosser argues that Venus is “murdered not for being a woman of color but for failing to be one. At work in Venus’ murder is not the fear of the same or of the other, but fear of bodily crossing, of the movement in between sameness and difference: not homo but transphobia, where trans here signifies the multileveled status of her crossing.”<sup>60</sup>

Prosser argues that Butler celebrates Venus’ body only insofar as it retains its ambiguity, i.e. by displaying feminine characteristics whilst still preserving a penis, because it is politically subversive. If Venus had had the chance to undergo surgery, as she wished to do, and then get married and live in a house in the suburbs complete with washing machine (“I’d like to be a spoiled, rich, white girl”, she famously said) Butler believes she would have “succumb[ed]” to the heteronormative myth that having a vagina is what makes one a woman:

that Butler figures Venus as subversive for the same reason Butler claims she is killed, and considers indicative of hegemonic constraints the desires that, if realized, might have kept Venus at least from this instance of violence, is not only strikingly ironic, it verges on critical perversity. Butler’s essay locates transgressive values in that which makes the subject’s real life most unsafe.<sup>61</sup>

Prosser does well to highlight some of the potential issues arising from assigning pride of place to ambiguity and hybridity in the hierarchy of queer-making traits. Anzaldúa’s text was (and remains) a pioneering effort in its genre, like Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and finally Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994). The formulation and celebration of hybridity was an important and necessary step, on which later writers and critics have since built ever more nuanced understanding of identity, but it does little to ease the discomfort that the condition of ‘unhomeliness’—which Bhabha sees as the distinguishing trait of the colonial and postcolonial condition—brings to its subjects.<sup>62</sup>

He cites, as an example, Renée Green’s installation *Sites of Genealogy*, for which she used two floors of an entire museum to challenge the assumptions tied to the automatic associations of up/down, heaven/hell, black/white. Bhabha found her use of the stairwell as a liminal space particularly thought-provoking—and he might be right, of course, but a staircase, though it serves the important function of connecting different floors, is not a place where one might live, dwell, or be, in the Heideggerian sense. Gloria and Ève, in their own different ways, seem to me to be stuck in an Escherian Penrose staircase, rather than being allowed to have a room of their own.

It is certainly important to recognise the historical importance of the concept of hybridity in queer and postcolonial studies, if one is also mindful of the need to

avoid sacrificing yet more bodies to the altar of political subversiveness whilst denying them the chance to be what Sarah Ahmed would term ‘bodies-at-home’.

As Shu-Mei Shih recently wrote, “everyone should be given a chance to become a local,” to dwell.<sup>63</sup> I would like to conclude by analyzing one last excerpt from Anzaldúa: “And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.”<sup>64</sup> Although it may seem that the *cultura mestiza* is here being set up in opposition with the possibility of ever going home, this sentence could also be taken to mean that she is setting out to build in the Heideggerian sense of *bauen*, ‘to build’, which is the same as the Old German word *buon*, ‘to dwell’, and as *bin* in *Ich bin*, ‘I am’.

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<sup>1</sup> Ananda Devi, *Ève de ses décombres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Ananda Devi, *Eve Out of Her Ruins*, trans. Jeffrey Zuckerman (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum Pub, 2016). I use Jeffrey Zuckerman’s translation throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 13. The name “Maurice”, however, is only mentioned once towards the end of the novel, on p. 136, when Clélio, in conversation with a lawyer following his arrest, wonders whether the death penalty has been abolished in Mauritius or not. Throughout the book, any environment outside of Troumaron is barely sketched out, which encourages the reader to move away from thinking about the events of the novel as specific to a certain place (the island of Mauritius) and time (the present), but rather pushes her or him to think of Ève’s story (as the name itself also indicates) as a universal one.

<sup>4</sup> Marc Shell, *Islandology: Geography, Rhetoric, Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 101.

<sup>6</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 136.

<sup>7</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza – La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987) 74.

<sup>9</sup> Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 22.

<sup>10</sup> This brief summary of the island’s history is based on Jeffrey Zuckerman’s, in the Afterword to his translation of Devi’s book into English. See Devi, *Eve Out of Her Ruins*, 92-93.

<sup>11</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> “Some of the languages we speak are:

1. Standard English
2. Working class and slang English
3. Standard Spanish
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
6. Chicano Spanish ...
7. Tex-Mex
8. *Pachuco*” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 55).

<sup>14</sup> If my intuition is right, Ève and Gloria also share the burden of living their non-normative, female sexualities in a predominantly Christian environment: “The Catholic and Protestant religions,” Anzaldúa writes, “encourage fear and distrust of life and of the body; they encourage a split between the body and the spirit and totally ignore the soul; they encourage us to kill off parts of ourselves.” (*Borderlands*, 37).

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- <sup>15</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge: 1994), 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 12.
- <sup>17</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 84.
- <sup>18</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 104.
- <sup>19</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 21.
- <sup>21</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 20.
- <sup>22</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 61.
- <sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 9.
- <sup>24</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 40.
- <sup>25</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 42.
- <sup>26</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 45.
- <sup>27</sup> Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," 100.
- <sup>28</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 45.
- <sup>29</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 28.
- <sup>30</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 74.
- <sup>31</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 16.
- <sup>32</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 72. All translations from Spanish are my own unless otherwise specified.
- <sup>33</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 49.
- <sup>34</sup> See Jay Prosser, "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism" in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald Hall (New York: Routledge, 2013), 37.
- <sup>35</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 48.
- <sup>36</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 51.
- <sup>37</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 9.
- <sup>38</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 151.
- <sup>39</sup> Ève and Savita's biology teacher kills Savita to protect his reputation, after realizing she has seen him have sex with Ève.
- <sup>40</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 30.
- <sup>41</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 64: "*Et puis, au college, je suis tombée sur une Ève naufragée, sur un visage noyé ...*" (And then, at school, I came across a shipwrecked Eve, her face drowned ...)
- <sup>42</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 18.
- <sup>43</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 77.
- <sup>44</sup> Devi, *Ève*, 29.
- <sup>45</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 1.
- <sup>46</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3.
- <sup>47</sup> Shell, *Islandology*, 18.
- <sup>48</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3.
- <sup>49</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 2-3.
- <sup>50</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3.
- <sup>51</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 19.
- <sup>52</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 25.
- <sup>53</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 27.
- <sup>54</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 32.
- <sup>55</sup> Prosser, "Judith Butler," 33.
- <sup>56</sup> J. Covers both the name Judith, under which the article in question was published, and Jack, the name which Professor Halberstam currently uses.
- <sup>57</sup> Judith Halberstam "Transgender Butch: Butch/ftm Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum" in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 305.
- <sup>58</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 381-95.
- <sup>59</sup> *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston (Off White Productions, Inc., USA, 1990), 35 mm.
- <sup>60</sup> Prosser, "Judith Butler," 49.
- <sup>61</sup> Prosser, "Judith Butler," 50.
- <sup>62</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 9.

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<sup>63</sup> Shu-mei Shih, “Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production” in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, ed. Shu-mei Shih et. al., (Columbia University Press, 2013), 37.

<sup>64</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 22.