Borders and the Making of Trans-American Studies: Exploring Transnational and Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies of the Americas

Dolliver Faculty Seminar | Summer 2013
John Lear and Doug Sackman


Overview
In a remarkable and influential collection of writing—part history, part poetry, part manifesto, part memoir—Gloria Anzaldúa gazed across Mexico’s border with the United States, and saw it 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

Continuing in prose, she observed that “The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta [an open wound] 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”. Since the publication of Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera in 1987, a new wave of border studies has emerged, opening up innovative ways to understand nations, migrations, citizenship, empires, and identities in the United States, Mexico, the Americas, and beyond. While the study of the US/Mexico borderlands has been a particularly busy intersection for scholarship, borders and borderlands have taken root as objects of study and a cluster of questions in a wide range of disciplines and areas. As two scholars define them, borderlands “are ambiguous and often-unstable realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the end points of empire are also forks in the road….borderlands are places where stories take unpredictable turns and rarely end as expected.”

We see the borderlands and transnational scholarship as blazing new paths of interdisciplinary inquiry, with deep and vital implications for scholars across the humanities and social sciences. Because borderlands and transnational scholarship is being pursued globally, the seminar is open to scholars who might find the exploration potentially rewarding even if they do not address the Americas directly in their work. In addition, borders are at once literal and figurative, as they involve many different kinds of cultural thresh-holds: between one place and another; between one race or people and others; between one gender and another; between insanity and normality; between citizenship and marginality, and so on. As such, a focus on borders can be helpful in pursuing important questions across the humanities and social sciences.

All seminar participants will have the opportunity to bring their particular interests to the table. In fact, we hope to have conversations about the status and reorientation of the humanities as they are involved in issues and opportunities opened up by new scholarship on borderlands in the Americas and beyond, as well as developments in interrelated fields such as cultural, postcolonial and American studies. What are the implications, challenges and opportunities for us as teachers and scholars at Puget Sound?

To suggest some of the broader themes we hope to explore in different ways over the course of the seminar, we pose three interrelated questions:

1. Can looking at the Americas as a region help us rethink and teach lived experiences and cultural production that has traditionally been considered

around national categories? And in rethinking national borders, how can we best understand relations of empire, coloniality and power?

2. Can a focus on migration and transnational movements of people, goods and cultures—and the political and economic structures that shape them—help us think about the ongoing exchanges and transformations that constitute the Americas in different ways and places?

3. Can thinking without and across borders help us reconsider traditional disciplinary approaches in faculty teaching and students' learning? Does the field of cultural studies provide coherence across humanistic (and social science) disciplines? Is there a place at Puget Sound for a program on the Americas with cultural studies at its core?

Dates and Times: "Prelude" event on May 15; May 22-24, 28-29, and June 3-7. In order to accommodate the participation of the larger group and two guest speakers, most days we will start the session at 9:30 and end at noon. Seminar will meet in Wyatt 204.

Readings and organization: We will spend the first three days (May 22-24) discussing readings that we the coordinators have chosen on borders in general and the US-Mexican borderlands in particular, as a way to ground the seminar. Three additional days will be led by guest speakers, and the four remaining days will be led by combinations of seminar participants and based on specific readings or presentations that participants select.

Seminar Prelude Event: Elliott Young, Associate Professor of History at Lewis and Clark College and author of Catarino Garza's Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border and co-editor of Continental Crossroads, will help us kick-off our seminar on Wednesday May 15 from 5-7 pm. Young co-founded the Tepoztlán Institute for Transnational History of the Americas, which brings together scholars from throughout North and Latin America for an intensive weeklong workshop on transnational history in a small town outside of Mexico City. He will present work from his forthcoming book, "Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas, 1840s-1940s," and share with us his experiences pursuing borderlands and transnational history at Lewis and Clark.

Guest Speakers: We have invited two very different speakers, one trained in cultural studies and the other a lawyer working closely with migrant communities and involved in shaping immigrant policy. Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, Associate Professor of American Studies and Associate Director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas will lead two sessions (May 28-29), one based on her recent book on the 19th century, Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries, and the other on child citizen subjects and tactics of representation by Dream Activists as part of contemporary immigration debates. Our second guest (June 5) will be Jorge Barón, Executive Director of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, a nonprofit organization providing comprehensive immigration legal services to low-income individuals and families in Washington State. Our session with Jorge will be preceded by an optional visit to the Northwest Detention Center near the Port of Tacoma.

Each seminar participant will either lead a discussion of a reading of your choice, or offer a short “Perspective” presentation, along the following lines.

Reading/discussion: About half of the participants proposed specific research and reading interests closely tied to the topic of the seminar, and we would like you to choose a common reading of 30-50 pages and lead a discussion for an hour during one of the sessions of our last week. Some of you with related interests might work in pairs to design an entire two-hour session. The length of the reading might vary, depending on its nature and whether you coordinate with someone for the entire two-hour session.

Perspectives: Other participants will lead a 15-25 minute session that can be in the form of a formal presentation, or an exchange that can be interactive, involving reading a "text" together during the session, or some combination. In some cases, these can be relating some aspect of the seminar topics and discussions to your own interests, in scholarship and/or in teaching.

Schedule
Prelude Event
May 15, 5-7 pm, Wyatt 304
Elliott Young, Lewis & Clark College

Week 1 (seminar will normally be held in Wyatt 204 and begin at 9.30am)
**Wednesday May 22: Of Borders and Trans-Americanity**

**Readings:**
* Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen, *Borders: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2012). [This short book will be the focus of the discussion for the first part of our first session. We would like everyone to pick out some passage or concept in the book that is meaningful in some way to you or potentially useful in your work (as teacher or scholar), and informally share your thoughts on this connection in one or two minutes. We hope this will help open up discussion for the seminar].


**Additional Resources** [i.e. related readings available on Moodle, but not required for seminar]:
- Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americanity as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World-System” (1992)

**Thursday May 23: Borders, Migration, and Impossible Subjects**

**Perspectives 1: Elise Richman**

**Readings:**


* Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand* [conclusion]: 198-208

**Additional Resources:**


**Friday May 24: Work and Violence across La Línea**

**Perspectives 2: Nila Wiese**

**Readings:**

* Alicia Camacho-Schmidt, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York University Press 2008) [Introduction and ch. 6, 7 and afterword]; 1-17; 237-318

*Film: backyard/traspatio* This film is available to be streamed from the moodle site. If there is interest, we may screen the film on campus on Thursday @ 1.30 pm. Note: this film contains depictions of brutal sexual violence. It fits in with our reading for today and will be part of the discussion, but we understand if you would prefer not to watch the film.

**Additional Resources:**
- Carlos Fuentes, “Malitzan of the Maquilas” from *The Crystal Frontier* In seminar short clip from *Sleep Dealer* (2008)
Week 2
Tuesday May 28
Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, University of Texas
Workshop

Readings

* Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, “He Shoots his Wife before the Deed”: Petra Santa Cruz Stevens and the Gender/Race Politics of Borderlands History.

* Document set

   Historical Contextualization:
   * Guidotti-Hernández, Unspeakable Violence, ch. 2.
   * Karl Jacoby, Shadows at Dawn: A Borderlands Massacre and the Violence of History (Penguin 2008), 49-93; 203-219

Perspectives 3: Nancy Bristow

Wednesday May 29
Nicole Guidotti-Hernández talk, “Child Citizen Subjects: From Dora the Explorer to Dream Activists”

Week 3
Monday June 3
Pepa Lago
Sara Freeman
Perspectives 4: Alison Tracy Hale

Tuesday June 4
Tiffany McBain
Monica DeHart
Perspectives 5: Jan Leuchtenberger

Wednesday June 5: field trip
7.45-9am; Visit to Northwest Detention Center (transportation TBA)
10-noon: Jorge Barón, Northwest Immigrant Rights Project

Thursday June 6
Robin Jacobson
Andrew Gardner
Perspectives 6: Ariela Tubert

Friday June 7
Brendan Lanctot
+ teaching discussion

Participants:
Nancy Bristow, History, African American Studies
Monica DeHart, Anthropology, Latin American Studies
Sara Freeman, Theater arts
Andrew Gardner, Anthropology
Allison Hale, English
Robin Jacobson, Politics and Government
Pepa Lago, FLL, Latin American Studies
Brendan Lanctot, FLL
Jan Leuchtenberger, Asian Studies
Tiffany McBain, English
Elise Richman, Art
Ariela Tubert, Philosophy
Nila Weise, Business, Latin American Studies

Judy Baca, “The Great Wall of Los Angeles” (mural). Detail: Deportation of Mexican Americans during the Great Depression