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The Topography of Borders: Hybridity, Queerness, and Mexican-American Identity in Rigoberto González's *Butterfly Boy*

Gabriela Almendarez

"How quickly I slip from one world to another." – Rigoberto Gonzalez

The border constructed between the United States of America and Mexico exemplifies two main things: that an individual is either inside of the border or outside of it. Borders also reflect the way in which boundaries are accepted or condemned regarding social class and order. In *Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa*, Rigoberto González grapples with both physical and figurative borders that arise at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and family —borders that González eventually uses to remap the way he views his own hybrid identity. Navigating and deconstructing physical and figurative borders enables González to realize that he never stops being one thing to become another, even when moving through unfamiliar territories. Focusing on physical and figurative scenes of movement, this paper examines González growth through the lens of Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of the New Mestiza/o and Marilynn B. Brewer and Sonia Roccas' concept of Social Identity Complexity, showing that González's identity is informed by the very boundaries that deem anything out of the binary of race, class, gender, and sexuality to be off-putting and unnatural. González's use of movement as a narrative technique exemplifies his struggle in being *a part of* and *apart from* his American and Mexican cultures. This movement, which belies the supposed separation of his cultures, argues for the fluidity of identity and a remapping of our cultural topography.

In tune with its hybrid nature, *Butterfly Boy* is both the coming-of-age and coming out memoir of Rigoberto González, a first-generation Chicano who frequently goes back and forth between the United States and Mexico. González grew up in Indio, California amongst poor migrant workers and as a part of a culture that values machismo. As a result of his upbringing, he witnesses the power men like his father and grandfather have over women. In fact, he is rendered powerless in his own relationship with an older man who beats and humiliates him. González's experiences are shaped by the dualism of his identity in both Riverside and in Indio. Of this binary he states that,

> In Riverside [he's] a college sophomore majoring in the humanities and no one knows [he's] involved with an older man who makes love to [him] as fiercely as he angers [him]. In Indio [he's] the son and grandson of farmworkers who have never once hugged [him], but whom [he misses] terribly, especially when [he needs] to run away from the man who tells [him] that he loves [him], loves [him], loves [him] (8).

González acknowledges he is one thing in the presence of certain individuals and another thing when in presence of his family. He learns to navigate these opposing territories and value each one for what they each provide for him. Despite the hardships González faces during his childhood (being heavy-set, poor, and geeky) and during his adulthood (being homosexual), González's story is one of triumph.

In spite of being a story of success, González faces incredible hardships in his quest to find his identity; he eventually realizes identity —specifically his— is complex. In their 2002

article, "Social Identity Complexity," published in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Marilynn B. Brewer and Sonia Roccas propose the concept of "Social Identity Complexity" which investigates "the nature of the subjective representation of multiple ingroup identities" (88-89). The term "in-group" is largely known in Psychology and Sociology as a "small group of people, within a wider context, whose common interest tends to exclude others." A cross-reference term is "out-group" which refers to individuals who do not necessarily "form a group themselves, who are excluded or do not belong to a specific in-group." Brewer and Roccas argue that the social identity complexity concept shows there is an overlap between the groups an individual may belong to at the same time. In *Butterfly* Boy, González is at a constant push and pull between knowing who he is by birth and who he is by socialization. González's hardships arise, not out of being homosexual, but out of being heavyset as a kid, constantly being mocked by his grandfather, dealing with a drunken father, and ultimately by seeing his mother die when he was twelve years old. González grows up with characteristics that hinder him from fully accepting one role. Furthermore, González is not representative of an ideal gay man: he is effeminate, overweight, brown, and in an abusive relationship that renders him powerless when presented with hardship. He justifies the abuse by learning to "bear, even welcome, the pain of his (the lover) mouth" (3). As a result, González fails to portray the conventional characteristics that are associated with his different cultures. Ultimately, he rejects to accept one identity and instead creates a third space where he and others like him are what they choose —all at once.

Brewer and Roccas view groups to be anything an individual chooses to be a participant. For example, two individuals with different identities can share the same religion. Both need to navigate their identities in relation to the in-groups they belong to and the out-groups they are excluded from. Ultimately, Brewer and Roccas state that there are different ways in which individuals come to terms with the group(s) they belong to and these are broken down into four model structures: intersection, dominance, compartmentalization, and merger (90-91). Brewer and Roccas define intersection as "achieve[ing] simultaneous recognition of more than one social identity and yet maintain[ing] a single in-group representation" (90). With this, the authors' are stating that an individual is able to claim that they belong to more than one more social group yet they are able to take those different frames of identity to create a single in-group. Dominance is described as adopting "one primary group identification to which all other potential group identities are subordinated" (90). It is the primary in-group membership that seems to dominate the other memberships that are only referred to as "aspects of the self" rather than a social identity. Compartmentalization is used when an individual expresses that "more than one group identity is important… [and] as a source of social identity, multiple identities can be activated and expressed through a process of differentiation and isolation" (90). An individual has control over what aspect of social identity he or she chooses to express at certain times. Identity is a vast concept that individuals seem to always want to define but never really do since identity always keeps on changing based on acculturation, socialization, and every day life. Lastly, merger is applied when "non-convergent group memberships are simultaneously recognized and embraced in their most inclusive form" (91). In this mode, social identity is seen as the summation of the identities developed/embraced from each of the different cultures. Trying to define identity in relation to merger is problematic for its close and similar relationship to assimilation.

Out of the four model structures, González belongs in the third: compartmentalization since it argues that multiple identities can be activated through differentiation and isolation.

González engages is compartmentalization when he isolates and differentiates aspects of his identity such as his gender, sexuality, class, and education to characterize himself. The memoir is divided into five distinct sections that show different aspects of his multiple social identities. Part 1 is titled *Smarting Points, Starting Points,* and in this section he navigates across borders as he travels from the university town of Riverside to the agricultural town of Indio. The memoir quickly shifts gears in Part 2: *Childhood and Other Language Lessons*, where his former years are explained and his dealing in class/social standing are exemplified. Part 3: *Adolescent Mariposa*, brings forth his life as a homosexual man on the borderline of declaring his queerness or in the passiveness of such affirmations. Part 4: *Zacapu Days and Nights of the Dead* and Part 5: *Unpinned* illustrate Rigoberto's family ties. Overall, it seems that in relation to Brewer and Roccas' compartmentalization model, the structure of González's memoir distinguishes and segregates different aspects of his social and racial identity. While González acknowledges his multiplicity, the way in which the memoir is divided, concedes that there is a division among all of the sides that make up his identity. Division may usually be seen as troubling because it recognizes that there is separation and exclusion. Nevertheless, the structure that González chose to follow exemplifies that he functions outside of the constraints of each. He moves around tagged identities (Mexican, gay, victim), breaks them down, and reconstructs them as he wishes. As aforementioned, Rigoberto is in a constant struggle between understanding the world around him through the different lenses that make him a queer first generation Latino in the United States and in Mexico.

González presents himself as a bi-cultural and bilingual man in search of his identity in a similar way as Gloria Anzaldúa. In the 1987 novel, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa presents herself as a tri-cultural and multilingual woman who lives within hierarchically constructed borders. By presenting herself as a new mestiza, Anzaldúa acknowledges that there must have been something prior to her. She is not "new" in the sense of originality but is instead a canvas of bits and pieces of the past. González and Anzaldúa share many characteristics: both are considered minorities because of their mixed cultures, both subvert the heterosexual culture they were socialized in, and both share their experience of being *othered* in their respective works. Anzaldúa states that she (and other Mestizas) have "learn[ed] to juggle cultures. [They have a plural personality, [they] operate in a pluralistic mode —nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned" (79). Anzaldúa's work also advances philosophical and cultural pluralism. More specifically, philosophical pluralism "represents a belief in more than one ultimate principle, that the world is made up of interacting forces" (Bolin 101). On the other hand, the "goal of cultural pluralism is that ethnic groups will remain intact and that their idiosyncratic ways of knowing and acting will be respected and continued" (Bolin 101). No matter how alike these terms are, there are differences. For example, an individual with hybrid characteristics as opposed to a pluralistic individual whose "ethnic group will remain intact" might be able to navigate a world in which his or her ethnic group is not intact and is instead gearing towards assimilation. Anzaldúa argues that every aspect of identity is embraced and nothing rejected. González's usage of movement as a narrative technique expresses that he is able to move back and forth between his identities so much that he is able to embrace every part of himself and reject nothing. The mestiza —and individual who is of Mexican and Indian descent— will be able to reproduce, maintain, and transform herself (himself) as time changes

and theories evolve meaning that Anzaldúa's own definition of mestizaje and culture will definitely change at some point.

In writing about their experience in America and to some extent writing to an American audience, both González and Anzaldúa must translate their experiences into the English language. Though Anzaldúa hopes for a time where she and other bilingual authors face no need to translate their work, both must do so in *Borderlands* and in *Butterfly Boy*. Despite having to translate their Spanish into English, both author's write in a "forked tongue" and use their experience with both languages to create a mixed language that is neither but both all at once. Anzaldúa reminds us that even language itself presents an ideological border —a border that González chose to confront in his text. Much like Anzaldúa's incorporation of Spanish words and phrases, González's text also mimics the same format. González opens his narrative in English and it is not until the fourth chapter where González provides the reader with its first Spanish word: "*engentarse*" (20). Which is roughly translated to being overwhelmed by a crowd of people, or claustrophobia of being entrapped by large masses of people. In Spanish, the word has a more powerful connotation than just saying a person is overwhelmed. Perhaps González feels that this word, which he recalls his grandmother saying, is a better fit for what he is trying to portray. Furthermore, the next three Spanish phrases are also, according to the narrative, words and phrases González has heard his grandmother saying. The next three Spanish phrases are as follow: "*bajar la cresta*", "*cabeza llena*", and "*desahogarse*" (23, 33). These words lack the same connotation and strength if translated to English. The translation is roughly: "bring down the crest", "full head" (too much thinking), and "vent", respectively. The idea that perhaps only a certain word in Spanish provides the necessary emotion and exactitude and refers back to Anzaldúa's take on language. González seems to engage in a conversation with Anzaldúa and states he also wishes there was no need to translate these powerful words and phrases that only the Spanish language seems to captivate into English. In doing so, the emotion behind key words is lost for the sake of translation.

Mark DeStephano argues that Latino literature has undergone changes in regards to language. It has gone from almost entirely in Spanish, to Spanish and English, to Spanglish, to entirely in England. Of course, every author chooses in what language to write his or her memoirs and novels. This change of language has been a "result of the struggle between members of the first immigrant generation who tended to live in isolation from the mainstream culture and members of the second generation who needed and wanted to integrate more fully into that culture" (105). González faces this same challenge due to the generational gap between his father and his grandfather who cannot understand González's wish to go to college. His father calls him crazy if he thinks he "can just pick up and go like that" (159) and his grandfather calls college a waste of time.

The idea of a hybrid culture or an "in-between space" is something very pertinent in society today. A 2012 survey conducted by Pew Research Center (PRC) revealed that the "nation's… foreign-born population is expected to reach 78 million by 2060." About a third of U.S. Hispanics (34.9%) are foreign-born now yet this projection is expected to fall 7.5% by 2060 as more and more Hispanics give birth to U.S. born children. As of now, according to the PRC, Hispanics already drive about 78% of population growth. Hybridity connects to population growth as more individuals are being born to Hispanic/Latino parents. U.S. born children grow up like González, in the clashing of the culture inherited by their parents and the one in which

they are socialized. There is a division among Hispanics who are foreign-born and those who are U.S. born as these two groups represent different cultures: foreign-born individuals face trying to hold on to their culture and the insistent pressure to assimilate while U.S. born individuals —whose parents are foreign-born— must fuse the culture that has been given to them by their parents and the U.S. culture that has socialized them throughout their life. Individuals who are foreign-born (like González's father) and those who are U.S. born must definitely negotiate their identity between assimilation, class, and race.

Beyond economical barriers, González's experiences are largely impacted by class differences. Once González describes his lover and the abusive relationship he is in, González sets out to get away from Riverside where his lover is and plans his return home to Indio where his father, grandfather, and grandmother work as farmworkers. When aboard the bus, he notes "*How quickly [he] slip[s] from one world to another,*" (8, italics by González). This thought of slipping in an out of cultures is reminiscent of Anzaldúa's earlier statement in which she "continually walk[s] out of one culture and into another" (77). Both González and Anzaldúa posses a dualistic identities and know that they "slip" and "walk" into different cultures. However, their identities -who they are at the core- remains intact since it seems that neither is in a hurry to be accepted. Brewer and Roccas' idea of compartmentalization serves as a challenge to Anzaldúa's definition in that an individual takes aspects of their identities when walking "in and out of cultures" because their compartmentalization method argues that an individual chooses what to leave and what to take.

When González makes it to Indio he notes that "There's a fancy new gas station near the first major off-ramp, but the vehicles are the same beat-up trucks and cars with dented doors that the farmworkers drive to and from the agricultural fields" (11) and also notes that "Any of these bodies wincing at the trappings of their hot clothing could have been me. I feel lucky that this was not my fate" (11). Cars are usually seen as a symbol of movement and liberty. However, in this particular scene the cars are stagnant and probably do not travel much other than "to and from the agricultural fields." Also, the fact that the cars are beat-up and dented showcase that these are cars used for labor and not pleasure since they show the wear of every day life. González looks at the cars and the faces and recognizes that any of the people inside the gas station may be related to him or may have been him had he stayed in Indio instead of going to college. In this moment, González acknowledges that he is part of the group of people present but also realizes that he is not. He is both a part of and apart from the culture before him. The community he used to live in welcome and acknowledge him as one of their own but at the same time resent him for leaving.

Despite having made it to Riverside for college, he notes that he is both welcomed but is also seen as an outsider. When he leaves his lover, González notes "none of these college kids heading on foot toward the university can even guess the secrets [he] keep[s]. This makes [him] want to scream at them. And then a thought strikes [him]. This morning, with a backpack over [his] own shoulder, [he] blend[s] in. [He's] one of them" (8). He recognizes that he is one of the students but it seems that he only attributes this to the backpack that he is carrying. If it were not for the backpack that helps him look like a student and blend in, González might not feel as if he fits in and belongs. In both instances, González is welcomed by both of his cultures. In Indio he sees himself in the people at the gas station and in Riverside he easily fits in with the rest of the students. The acceptance and perhaps unconscious rejection of González demonstrates that "the Chicano forms part of that American society which sometimes accepts and sometimes rejects

him; this societal attitude is not so different from that of Mexico, which in times past has accepted and at times rejected the Mexican-America" (Hinojosa 423). González and presumably other Latinos are able to switch between their different cultures. The transition is not always easy and there are times where hybrid individuals are rejected, even if not publicly. Rejection occurs because a hybrid individual is always a mix of their culture. Since an individual is not able to leave one culture in the presence of the other, his/her dualistic identity and characteristics makes others wary. However, an individual with more than one culture identifies and accepts these parts of him or her that are not always accepted or acknowledged and embraces them as part how he or she sees himself or herself.

Though González is both welcomed and dismissed by his cultures, when González is with his father it seems as if he only experiences disapproval and dismissal from him. When González and his father decide to travel to Mexico, González wants to travel via first-class while his father states that he cannot travel first-class because he does not have enough money to pay for it — González's curt response is, "I can" (20). Nonetheless, his father still purchases tickets for second-class. Such interaction shows the economic and class differences between father and son; the father cannot afford the same luxuries that his son can. At the time González was still struggling to get away from his lover and put some distance between them. Therefore, González lets this first/second class battle slide. In this particular scene, González's mind is much more preoccupied with thinking about his lover. It is peculiar that González's relationship influences the way he travels because as much as he tries to get away from his lover, the very fact that González goes to Mexico and eventually returns to his lover in Riverside not too long after, suggests that he is used to being controlled. Despite being in multiple affairs with men, in each interaction it is the other men who control and abuse González. He is rendered powerless.

González presents various anecdotes of sexual encounters with other men. In a culture that has only known patriarchy and *machismo,* it is difficult to be openly gay or queer without some sort of backlash and exclusion. For example, most of the men González has sexual intercourse with are older, married men who only engage in sex with men behind closed doors. Essentially, the men whom González sleeps with are all a "guy's guy." González's first lover in high school was named Gerardo; a "self-labeled cholo, a tough kid who wore khaki pants and a white T-shirt all year long" (140). His lovers, in some aspect, all represent a *tough* exterior and as such, "nobody questions [their] intent" (143). Though by this time González is speaking about a foreman who singles him out on the field and drives him to a secluded area to engage in intercourse, the same idea applies. No one in school, in the field, at home, questions anything because it was common for such interaction to occur. However, assuming someone had the suspicion that something else was going on, no one expressed such concerns because being homosexual is a taboo —a taboo better kept behind closed doors and out of sight, out of mind. v admits that romantic relationships between men never escalated to such labels because no one ever admits that they are gay. Such realization even led to González's doubt of his own gayness because "this identity was never talked about by any of [them] or eve recognized in the secrecy of dark bedrooms" (144). While this is the closest González gets to declaring/defining his sexuality, he clouds it with the idea that he has not come to terms with it since he has not been exposed to the acceptance of who he is since no one ever speaks about what it means to be gay in the Latino culture. At most, the Latino culture is exposed and informed of how gay men act and present themselves by an exaggerated, almost mocking, media portrayal of gayness. In *Gay*

Hegemony/Latino Homosexualities, Manolo Guzmán argues, “For in a society such as ours, rigidly structured in racially hierarchical terms, an erotic preference for members of one’s ethnoracial group is, however much fabricated, anything but unusual. The love of sameness that characterizes the erotic desires of the Latin loving Latin lover is frighteningly habitual” (61-62). The idea, as Guzmán states, is not entirely surprising —it happens all the time. Guzmán argues that engaging in sexual contact with members of the same race is not surprising either. In fact, González does not question the foreman’s motives when he calls him over. Of the experience he recalls he “never felt any sense of shame” (143). In this scene, queerness seems to shatter the idea that identity has a definition. By stating that identity shatters, individuals may argue that queerness is another category. Various postmodern categories of racial, ethnic, and national identity situate that identity is not a singular essence but a hybrid synthesis of multiple points. Nonetheless, these multiple vectors of identity become static and unchanging. Such postmodern concept of race, gender, and sexuality replace essentialist notions of identity with more diverse and perhaps equally stagnant ones. Queerness exists as a third category, a third bracket that allows identity to be destabilized: neither A or B but C: all of the above.

One of the major scenes within *Butterfly Boy* is that of the bus trip to Mexico González takes with his father; these scenes are broken up in different sections within the narrative. However, each scene presented showcases the generational gap between González and his father (one born in the United States and the other in Mexico). As such, the generational gap is border that González needs to navigate. His father is unaccepting of life in America; particularly, he does not understand González’s choice of going to college and his sexual preference (or implied, as González never really implicitly tells his father he is gay). The reason why González does not reveal his sexual preferences to his father may be due to the fact that “Latin American societies have often denied the existence of gay members in their societies and actively persecuted those who publically embraced such identities” (Cortez 135). There is even a time when González questions his own sexuality. Of this he shares that “for the longest time [he] doubted that [he] was gay [himself] because this identity was never talked about by any of [them] or even recognized in the secrecy of the dark bedrooms” (144). González’s sexual identity is kept in secrecy for a long time because his American and Mexican cultures do not speak about being a homosexual. As a result, González once again faces another border.

From a young age he learns to juggle the juxtaposition that arises out of the heterosexual versus homosexual border. He stops playing with dolls and painting his nails when his father finds out but as he grows up, he engages in sexual relationships with older men. He recognizes that his sexuality is not a phase; “the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders in our reality still” (Anzaldúa 63) and as Beatriz Cortez puts it, “gay and lesbian Latinos in the United States have negotiated between their identities as Latinos, their identities as gays and lesbians, and their identities as members of American society as a whole” (137). González’s sexuality challenges the ideas behind the socially constructed borders of male and females that allow for little movement. However, the challenge is not enough as the border continues to be present and continues to provide the warning that it will always be there. No matter what, the border of sexuality, gender, and identity is what ultimately allow González to understand all of the parts that make him his own individual. The deconstruction and navigation of such different boundaries result in the collective experience of allowing for a unified conscious. González ultimately realizes that he never really stops being one thing. He is multiple things at one single

time and is therefore a new mestizo; a mix of all of the cultures and traditions he is a part of in his socialization.

Traveling from one country to another, González finds, does not change him. He misses his lover while he is in America and while he is in Mexico. He tries to amalgamate his cultures while being in both countries and does not privilege either country. González searches for clues of acceptance from his mother yet he ultimately concludes that his mother "never knew [him] as a gay man and [he] never knew he as the mother of a gay son" (185). The lack of answers with his mother discourages him but at the same time it is probably better that he does not outright know. González does not learn to accept his conflicting culture due to this lack of acceptance from his deceased mother or his father who continuously asks to know more about his life but who rejects him as a gay son.

Fundamental to González's *Butterfly Boy* is the idea that his navigating through all sorts of challenges and setbacks inform his own identity. While many events occur in the memoir, the thought that continues to resonate is that González comes to a crossroad —an intersection of race, gender, sexuality, culture, and family that both supports and hinders González's success. This intersectionality of identities create borders that he must see beyond. Ultimately, the reader takes away that identity is fluid not stagnant like the cars in the gas station in Indio or unmoving like his father's beliefs. Instead, identity is informed by the way in which an individual is socialized and presents identity as complex and ever changing.

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