

**Queer/Joto:  
Performing the Epidermic Cartography  
of Lesbian and Gay Chicanos**

**By Antonio Prieto**

**Stanford University  
DataCenter's Information Services Latin America**

Prepared for presentation at the 2000 meeting of the Latin American Studies  
Association, Miami, March 16-18, 2000.

Panel "Gay and Lesbian Identities and the Politics of Place"

No portion of this paper may be reproduced without written permission of the author.

©Antonio Prieto, e-mail: [antonio@datacenter.org](mailto:antonio@datacenter.org) or [pretoluiigi@earthlink.net](mailto:pretoluiigi@earthlink.net)

**Queer/Joto: Performing the Epidermic Cartography of Lesbian and Gay Chicanos**

**By Antonio Prieto**

How can one *place* a bicultural, bilingual identity? What is the location of people who move back and forth from one community to another? To speak of place invokes a certain desire for fixity: “know your place,” is the command Power directs to those it wishes to subject, to hold firm so that they will not escape its gaze. Power seeks to fix the subaltern in place, to better survey her, and also to prevent her from engaging in movement, since movement can lead to revolt, upheaval, and revolution.

This paper addressees the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Luis Alfaro, individuals who unsettle the hegemonic cartographies of surveillance. Anzaldúa is today one of the most celebrated Chicana poets and essayists, and Alfaro is a prolific Chicano poet and performance artist. Both devote much of their efforts to community work and education, and both are queer, or to use the Mexican/Chicano terms, she’s a *jota* and he’s a *joto*.

### **Gloria Anzaldúa and *la poética de la frontera***

Gloria Anzaldúa came out to the macho-centric Chicano community as a lesbian when doing so entailed the risk of irreversible stigmatization. In her groundbreaking 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa makes of her ethnic and sexual identities necessary companions in her journey across the subaltern cartographies of Mestiza experience. It is no accident Anzaldúa chooses to privilege the term Mestizo/a. As is known, the term emerged from the clash of Spanish and Indigenous cultures, and was used in colonial Mexico to describe the confluence of these races. Today, most Mexicans are said to be Mestizos, although the term is problematic because it tends to erase ethnic and class difference. Anzaldúa reconfigures the term from within the space of Chicano culture, and proposes the “new Mestiza.” In doing so, she implicitly problematizes traditional Chicano nationalism that tends to be exclusive. Anzaldúa’s Mestiza goes beyond the barrio, breaks closed community walls and traces paths of alliance with other people of color. Her book deploys the US-Mexico border as a trope for Chicana/Mestiza history and culture. Today the border-as-metaphor has been coopted by mainstream academia. But in 1987, the border as a concrete geopolitical *place* came to the forefront of Chicano discourse through the efforts of writers and artists like Anzaldúa.

How to address this place born of war and violence, where people live, and where others cross with or without documents, with or without risk to their lives? Anzaldúa chooses to do so with what I have elsewhere (1999a) called *la poética de la frontera*, a poetics that makes a “Mestiza” mixture of politics, history, poetry, essay, popular song, political manifesto and autobiography. Her opening poem evokes a very personal experience of crossing the fence into Mexico.

I walk through the hole in the fence  
to the other side.

Under my fingers I feel the gritty wire  
rusted by 139 years  
of the salty breath of the sea.

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.

(The poem ends with a stanza in Spanish)

*Yo soy un puente tendido  
del mundo gabacho al del mojado,  
lo pasado me estira pa'trás  
y lo presente pa' delante.  
Que la Virgen de Guadalupe me cuide  
Ay ay ay, soy mexicana de este lado.*

“I’m a bridge/ from the gringo world to that of the wetback/ the past stretches me back/  
the present stretches me forward/ May the Virgin of Guadalupe protect me/ Ay, Ay, Ay,  
I’m a Mexican from this side.”

In the poem, Anzaldúa renders herself as a Chicana Alice walking through the looking glass of a militarized border. She traces how this ritual passage affects her body and psyche, walking to the Other Side, straddling that unstable place at the limits of national boundaries. Time also comes into play in the poem’s concluding stanza where, from the liminal bridge, the past stretches her back (stated colloquially as “me estira pa’trás”), and the future stretches her forward. Again, the image evoked is that of shape-shifting Alice in her journey through the subterranean Wonderland.

Anzaldúa attempts a poetic evocation of pain and joy, the pain of the border impressing itself on her body, the joy of affirming her identity as a “Mexican from this side.” But what side is she speaking from? The poem allows for a strategic space of ambiguity here. Anzaldúa speaks from a liminal, transitional space, what she will later describe using the Náhuatl term *nepantla* “the space of in-between.” A Mestiza utopia that nevertheless refers to a concrete geo-political place: the US-Mexico border where poor immigrant campesinos daily risk their lives. Is Anzaldúa romanticizing a place of risk and violence in her poetic cartography? I think not, as she displays full awareness of the pain suffered by immigrants along that “1,950 mile-long open wound.” In metaphorizing the border as a vortex where cultures collide yet open up to vast possibilities, Anzaldúa anticipates bell hooks’ call for a “space of radical openness” which she describes as “a margin – a profound edge,” a place of risk where a community of resistance is needed (149).

A striking aspect of Anzaldúa’s poem is her concluding use of the very Mexican exclamation “Ay,” one famously employed in *ranchero* love songs. Remember the popular ballad that starts with the verse: “Ay, ay, ay ay, canta y no llores” (“Sing and do not cry.”) “Ay” expresses the inexpressible grief of loss and longing. In other contexts, it can express utter joy

and delight, and a very guttural erotic one at that. Interestingly, Anzaldúa follows the exclamation with the verb “soy,” (“am”) which in Spanish contains the personal pronoun “yo” (I). Thus, the Spanish exclamation “Ay” may code-switch with the English pronoun “I,” linking grief and joy with a border-crossing, bicultural I-identity.

### **Luis Alfaro’s performance of epidermic *jotería***

As I’ll discuss further on, a similar moment occurs in the work of Chicano performance artist Luis Alfaro, to whom I now turn. As in Anzaldúa’s case, Alfaro creates a space for Chicana/o queers. Belonging to a younger generation, he is informed by the 1980’s AIDS activism, and a new Chicano community seeking strategic alliances with other Latinos and people of color. As an artist, he has been influenced by spoken word poets and performance artists. In this vein, his staged work differs radically from, say, *El Teatro Campesino*, in that it is explicitly autobiographical and resorts to poetic and conceptual narratives.

Alfaro is one of the first Chicano performers to explicitly address issues of gay sexuality in pieces such as *El Juego de la Jotería*. This performance was presented both in Los Angeles and Mexico City as part of the binational project “Danger Zone/Terreno Peligroso,” in February of 1995.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Alfaro’s performing body criss-crossed the US-Mexico border, allowing an opportunity to discuss the way homosexual identity politics are recontextualized and adopt different meanings according to place and culture.

His US presentation at UCLA relied primarily on the spoken word, with a minimum of props and a few actions such as roller-skating. The poetic text was full of cultural references easily identifiable by his young audience that responded with hearty laughs and applause. On the other hand, in Mexico City his performance was staged inside the main chapel of the former convent of Sta. Teresa la Antigua, a colonial building that today houses the Centro de Arte Alternativo Ex-Teresa, a government funded facility. The former chapel, roofed with a high dome and still decorated with religious murals, lent a religious atmosphere to the presentation. Alfaro adapted his performance for the Mexican audience so that it had more visual elements than text.

There’s a moment in which Alfaro touched upon the double colonization – both physical and socio-political – that gay Chicanos are subjected to. Slides were projected on the wall with pictures of his naked torso painted with the phrase “Yo soy gay” (“I’m gay”). One image showed his back painted with the words “Queer/Joto.” The fact that the words were painted on Alfaro’s back indicates that someone else wrote them as colonizing stigmas. Elsewhere during the performance, Alfaro wrote “Queer/Joto” on his forehead with a thick felt pen and immediately blurred the words into a messy stain by smearing them with his hand. He then proceeded to slap his face as he cried “yo soy joto, tú eres joto, no soy, sí soy...” Here Alfaro plays with political labels that are still charged with violence no matter how hard the homosexual communities on both sides of the border have strived to make them into badges of pride. He seems to imply the problematic relationship of these signifiers with the subject and his or her vulnerable body. The politically charged signifiers do not correspond neatly with the signified, much less with the alleged referent. Alfaro poignantly addresses the subject’s painful interplay of desire and rejection for a stigmatized identity. During the scene, he (masochistically?) slapped his face, repeatedly, until we could see his skin grow red, his voice quivering as he uttered “I am, you are, I am not, yes you are...” an internal multitude at war with a never fully resolved identity, since identities can never be placed or fixed as in a word or an image. His body may bear the marks of

an identity, but Alfaro problematizes them, suggests these marks are arbitrary, insufficient, yet in spite of all, necessary.

Alfaro's performance exposes the way people are forced to focus their identity on an epidermic level in order to conform to the fascist desire for all to be the same. Not equal, but the same. A sameness that is deceiving, because it doesn't contemplate socio-political equality, while it shows disdain for signs of difference. And difference is feared because it potentially leads to dissidence.

"Queer/Joto" are terms that evoke analogous causes played out in different linguistic and cultural milieus. Alfaro deploys the terms as a binary separated by a forward slash, echoing how the US and Mexico are violently slashed apart. The line suggests the border that separates and unites two cultural ways of being gay. This is important since, as Chicano sociologist Tomás Almaguer maintains, homosexuality is lived differently in Mexico and the US, and Chicanos must negotiate these sometimes conflicting worldviews. "Queer/Joto:" which term is top, which is bottom? Alfaro writes them on his skin, coaxing the viewer's desire for bodies as parchments where identities can be easily "read." But he then smears the terms, renders them unreadable, unmarked. Peggy Phelan has argued that visibility as a political strategy must be deployed with extreme care, since hegemonic power all too easily appropriates the exposed subaltern into its regime of power/knowledge.

As a performer, Alfaro deploys visibility, yet gestures towards the realm of the unmarked, that which cannot be fixed with a label, a photograph, or a performance. He rebels against this fixity, and suffers in the process. In performing the suffering, he attempts to convey a body in pain under the pressure of identity politics. As Elaine Scarry has elegantly argued, physical pain resists its expression through language, yet the subject in pain desperately needs to convey it. "Physical pain has no voice" she says "but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story." (3) While pain, as Scarry maintains, is essentially an unsharable experience, I believe Alfaro succeeds in his performance to convey a narrative of pain by jogging the viewer's memory of similar crises. But he does not stop there, for his work is also full of humor and an understated joy. As Anzaldúa in her poem, Alfaro touches upon the ambiguous threshold where pain and joy collapse in the "Ay" of the self referential "I."

At one point in his UCLA presentation, Alfaro narrates the relationship with his *abuelita* (grandmother). He tells of how he hated her when he was a kid, of how he was disgusted when she sucked the blood out of his wounded finger. Years later, he tells of how he again cut his finger. This time, he was with his gay workmates, and of course no one offered to perform his *abuelita's* house remedy. Fear of AIDS may have played a part in their unwillingness to help. He then had to suck out his own blood, remembering his grandmother, a memory that makes him say:

*I wish for an abuelita in this time of plague;*  
*I wish for an abuelita in this time of loss;*  
*I wish for an abuelita in this time of sorrow;*  
*I wish for an abuelita in this time of death;*  
*I wish for an abuelita in this time of mourning,*  
*I wish for an abuelita in this time,*  
*I wish, I wish,*  
*I, I, Ay, Ay...*

In that last line – as with Anzaldúa's poem – the personal pronoun is transformed into a very Mexican lament, linking his memory and identity with his pain. It is pain because of the

loss of family, of caring. Pain because in times of plague people are so unwilling to help. Alfaro seems to ask: in these times of death and mourning, when one most needs trust and love, where may these be found?

While his performance is full of humor, Alfaro pauses to implicitly ask these questions, and the beauty of his art is his suggestion that the answer lies in compassionate and brave community work. Indeed, he advocates a community that bridges ethnic and gender differences in order to tackle very urgent issues.

In her discussion on the use of the body in militant art, Janet Wolff maintains that, while it can be a site of oppressive colonization, the body can also be a site of political intervention (122). In his work, Alfaro performs the double act of presenting his body as the subject of a discourse, and the oral narrative as susceptible of “incorporation”. He likewise confronts the surveillance regime by denouncing the violence of stigmatization. In Wolff’s terms, he articulates “politics as a gaze”, that is, he displays his body as an object of scrutiny that nevertheless returns the gaze to claim agency. The agency he exerts stems from his reappropriation of a memory that is both personal and collective, and thus concerns us all. Towards the end of his performance, Alfaro challenges his audience to become involved, when he directly asks “Are you friend or foe?, We can accept no half enchiladas here!” And, according to him, the “Whole enchilada” must include the issues of race, gender and class.

### **A Space of Chicana/o queerness**

I believe Gloria Anzaldúa and Luis Alfaro are attempting to accomplish something quite difficult and unique in their work: to create a performative space of Chicana/o queerness. I say performative not only because it is a space played out in writing and stage, but also because it is a shape-shifting space in constant state of negotiation.

This space is queer also in the original sense of the word, that is, strange. Anzaldúa and Alfaro address strangeness in several ways: on the one hand, by evoking an extra-quotidian liminality from which hegemonic discourse and power may be de-centered. On the other hand, they bring up their perceived conditions as strangers, not only to mainstream America, but also to the macho-centric Chicanos and to the often racially blind white gays and lesbians. Anzaldúa and Alfaro thus make powerful contributions to the politics of queer place, as they insist on how gender, ethnicity and geo-political borders inform power relations within and without the Chicana/o and queer communities.

To speak of these issues, both artists expose their vulnerable bodies, whether it be in text or in performance. They trace an epidermic cartography where complex histories and identities may be evoked. As discussed above, Alfaro problematizes the facile reading of identity markers on the skin, thus questioning the hegemonic practices of surveillance and stigmatization from which even subaltern groups are not immune. He smears the labels drawn on his skin, and begins a painful journey towards reclaiming agency. In Alfaro’s performance, and to a certain extent in Anzaldúa’s writing, one is reminded of Franz Fanon’s “native intellectual” in Africa’s anticolonialist struggles, who is willing “to strip himself naked to study the history of his body.” (211) In this spirit, Alfaro and Anzaldúa resist the colonization of their bodies through the poetics of autobiography, a performance of agency that seeks to link their personal pains, joys and struggles with that of other communities.

Both Anzaldúa and Alfaro express a stubborn faith in solidarity across borders. In the midst of postmodern times that declare utopias to be naïve follies, these artists deploy their own utopias: places where hegemony is subverted and a strange queerness may be freely lived.

## References

- Almaguer, Tomás (1995). "Hombres chicanos: una cartografía de la identidad y del comportamiento homosexual", *debate feminista*, año 6, vol. 11, abril, 46-77.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunte Lute Press.
- Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York, Routledge.
- Fanon, Frantz (1963/1991). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- Hooks, bell (1991). *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround.
- Phelan, Peggy (1993). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Prieto, Antonio (1999a). "La poetica de la frontera." *Lucerto, A Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*. Vol. 10, Spring: 38-43.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1999b). "Incorporated Identities: The Subversion of Stigma in the Performance Art of Luis Alfaro," in David W. Foster, (ed.), *Chicano/Latino Homoerotic Identities*. New York & London: Garland Publishing.
- Scarry, Elaine (1985). *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York and Oxford: Oxford university Press.
- Wolff, Janet (1990). *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

---

<sup>i</sup> "Terreno Peligroso/Danger Zone" brought together five Mexican performance artists (Felipe Ehrenberg, César Martínez, Elvira Santamaría, Eugenia Vargas and Lorena Wolffer) and five US Latino performance artists (Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Elia Arce, Nao Bustamante, Luis Alfaro and Rubén Martínez). They performed two weeks in Los Angeles and two weeks in Mexico City.