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### **Borders**

Fran Ansley

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2001

# Borders

Frances L Ansley



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Citations:

Bluebook 21st ed.

Fran Ansley, Introduction: Borders, 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 965 (2001).

ALWD 7th ed.

Fran Ansley, Introduction: Borders, 78 Denv. U. L. Rev. 965 (2001).

APA 7th ed.

Ansley, F. (2001). Introduction: Borders. *Denver University Law Review*, 78(4), 965-978.

Chicago 17th ed.

Fran Ansley, "Introduction: Borders," *Denver University Law Review* 78, no. 4 (2001): 965-978

McGill Guide 9th ed.

Fran Ansley, "Introduction: Borders" (2001) 78:4 Denv U L Rev 965.

AGLC 4th ed.

Fran Ansley, 'Introduction: Borders' (2001) 78 *Denver University Law Review* 965.

MLA 8th ed.

Ansley, Fran. "Introduction: Borders." *Denver University Law Review*, vol. 78, no. 4, 2001, p. 965-978. HeinOnline.

OSCOLA 4th ed.

Fran Ansley, 'Introduction: Borders' (2001) 78 Denv U L Rev 965

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## BORDERS

FRAN ANSLEY

*Globalization has obscured the fact that the ecological limits of local ecosystems have already been exceeded because production and consumption are physically separated.*

-Carmen G. Gonzalez, *Beyond Eco-Imperialism*

*The film begins with ... a scene in which a newly wed couple Susan and Vargas is in the process of crossing [from Mexico] to the U.S. for their honeymoon. As Vargas, a "Mexican" detective played by Charlton Heston, approaches his lips to the lips of the Anglo-American wife Susan, played by Janet Leigh, this act coincides with a dramatic explosion ... The juxtaposition of the image of the kiss between the Mexican male and the Anglo female with the explosion in the background recreates for the audience the hysteria projected on to the media by the McCarthyism of the 1950s, and its biological obsession with the danger of infection of the "American" body.*

-Juan Velasco,  
*Making Evil: Crime Thrillers and Chicano Cinema*

*El Cenizo is a poor community [located on the Texas border. It] lacks basic services. . . . Presently, the city does not have a fire station or a fire engine . . . [A] high incidence of health problems . . . stem[s] from frequent flooding, dust and heat. One in four adults over twenty-five years old in El Cenizo has a high school degree . . . Four in five of the residents only speak Spanish . . . There are no adult education programs. The city has only one elementary school.*

*On August 3, 1999, El Cenizo . . . adopted an ordinance which . . . mandates that all city functions . . . be conducted and posted in . . . the predominant language of the community . . . The Mayor and Commissioners of El Cenizo . . . claim that since the passage of the ordinance, they have seen an increase in the level of civic participation of their constituents.*

-Maria Pabon Lopez, *The Phoenix Rises from El Cenizo*

As the foregoing quotations suggest, the three articles in this cluster are in some ways wildly divergent and in many ways filled with paradox. They are different in tone and focus, they are informed by different kinds

of sources, they examine different kinds of social and intellectual practices, and they use different tools to explore the objects of their analysis. They stress both separation and contact, violent rupture at one moment and wholesome healing the next. But the articles converge in important ways as well. The editors of this volume have defined them as “the cluster on borders,” and it is easy to see why they chose to highlight that common thread.

Two of the articles in this group begin with a very concrete border that exists in a particular physical location: the 2000-mile boundary between Mexico and the United States. The third article engages the contemporary discourse of “free trade,” an intellectual and geo-political project deeply preoccupied with national borders and with strong prescriptions regarding which people and organizations in the world should control the meaning of those borders and define their operation. Taken together, the three articles in this cluster illustrate several important themes of LatCrit scholarship. They also demonstrate some of the special contributions that LatCrit scholars are bringing to more general efforts to develop a progressive anti-racist theory and practice that is equal to the task of understanding and changing the contemporary world.

At a moment like the one in which I am writing, a time after September 11, 2001, when national borders are being breached but also fortified in unprecedented ways, when transnational perspectives, peoples, and other entities are stepping onto center stage, when being able to see a given problem from both sides of a heavily disputed boundary has become a particularly precious but endangered capacity, the contributions of LatCrit to the process of understanding borders may be more crucial than ever. The articles in this symposium, and most of the introductions that accompany them, are based on talks given at a meeting in the late spring of 2000, and they were put into final form no later than summer 2001. I am sure that by the time the authors in this symposium have a chance to read their words in print, they will see them, at least in part, as poignant messages from another era—from a time that was far from “innocent,” but was surely less filled with dread and less heavy with inflicted and threatened suffering than is the present time.

Nevertheless, even a cursory glance at the collection will also remind future readers that well before the recent bloody turn, there was already dread and suffering enough to challenge the best of our thinkers. Such a glance will show them that themes lifted up by LatCrit scholars before September 11 were already pointing us toward problems and possible responses that have only grown more pressing and more important with the intervening weeks.

This introduction comes too late for me to speak as though the events of September 11 and of subsequent days had not occurred.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps that fact is to the good, because having to speak in a way that acknowledges those events may require and allow me to build something of a bridge between the unusually disjunct times in which the initial writing and the later reading of this symposium's offerings will take place. But I am sure the timing will also impose its costs. My hand is far from steady at this point, and my vision far from clear. Smoke still rises from the rubble of September 11, and the work of identifying bodies in New York City inches agonizingly forward. Meanwhile, bombs are falling on Afghanistan. Likely their rubble is smoking too, and who can say when the smoke will clear?

### I. THE BORDER IN LATCRIT THEORY

If ever there was a physical location with special significance for LatCrit theory and practice, it would have to be the U.S.-Mexico border. That long, violent, contradictory, material and imaginary line produces so many startling effects, causes so much unnecessary suffering, has itself been the subject of so many rounds of varying representation, and embodies so many cogent lessons in history and power, it is a compelling subject of study and reflection for anyone interested in the current state of the world. But for LatCrit scholars, The Border—both as place and as metaphor—presents itself as an all but imperative concern.

Of course the border is significant for several of LatCrit's core communities, and for many different reasons. The line itself represents the physical extent of U.S. conquest over Mexico, memorialized in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and now marked by the line itself. It symbolizes the restrictiveness of U.S. immigration policy toward Mexican persons. The border lives vividly in the memories of countless Mexicans who have crossed it illegally in order to enter the U.S., and sounds resonantly in the narratives they tell to friends and kin, and sometimes tell nowadays to the larger public as well. Moreover, the border has come to symbolize policy conflicts with countries well beyond Mexico, and it is often seen in the U.S. as a border that separates our nation not only from Mexico, but from "all places Latin" or even all places in the third world from all those brown and black countries to the South.

Beyond the line itself, with all its subtle complexity and raw simplicity, "the border" is also a geographic and cultural region. These long hot borderlands have a special character of their own, displaying languages, foods, musical expressions, human institutions, and social practices found nowhere else on earth, different on each side of the interna-

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1. The lateness is of my own making: other introducers were more timely in their submissions. Perhaps this is the place to thank the gracious editors of this law review for their patience, and to express my appreciation for the chance to participate in this symposium.

tional line, but intimately and intricately related across it. These unique border cultures are the subject of no small amount of projection and fantasy by people in the interior regions of both the U.S. and Mexico. One should be wary of easy generalizations or stereotypes about these cultures. Even through properly cautious eyes, the border region is remarkable. One source of the region's distinctiveness, of course, is the border itself, with the imperatives it has imposed upon the people who live there, and the creativity with which they have responded.

Over the past ten years or so, the border between the two countries has become a subject of interest for another reason as well: its special significance for the new neo-liberal gospel of free trade. As a particularly raw interface between unequal trading partners within the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the U.S.-Mexico border has come to symbolize much of what critics say is wrong with that trade agreement and others like it.

For instance, opponents of NAFTA and of the more recently proposed hemisphere-wide Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) complain that if most goods are now to be allowed to move freely across borders, then people should be able to do so as well. These opponents protest the radically different and patently racial treatment accorded to human crossers at the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders, and they question how such a difference can reasonably be justified. Critics also point out that the gap in average wealth and median income between the U.S. and Mexico is so extreme that conjoining the two economies into a regional trade and investment block produces dramatic and unjust effects. They note that many other free trade areas, such as the European Economic Community, have taken great pains to accompany or precede the lowering of trade and investment barriers with significant transfers of material and informational resources directed toward less-developed countries to help close and soften gaps between the wealthy and poor nations and thereby minimize foreseeable pathologies.

In these debates both critics and supporters of neo-liberalism have pointed to some of the practices and institutions on the border as exemplars of what "free trade" presages for the rest of the world. For instance, NAFTA opponents predicted that the regional trade agreement would impose the "*maquiladora* model" throughout North America, and warned that it would bring with it the environmental problems, worker exploitation, and community disintegration so characteristic of the export processing areas along Mexico's northern frontier. Meanwhile, supporters pointed with pride to the dizzying growth rate and job proliferation in border towns that were sites of mushrooming *maquiladora* development in Mexico. They also argued that the industry constituted a smashing success as a development strategy for countries like Mexico that have an excess labor pool.

## II. THREE TAKES ON BORDERS AND THE BORDER IN THIS SYMPOSIUM

The articles in this cluster invite us to think about the border between the U.S. and Mexico, and also about global borders generally, from these different perspectives. In some cases, the border examined is a physical place, in others it is an organizing principle or cultural emblem, in others a focus of ideological dispute and policy debate.

### A. *Beyond Eco-Imperialism*

Carmen Gonzalez, in *Beyond Eco-Imperialism*, engages the border-challenging project now being pressed by supporters of "free trade" under the banner of neo-liberal economics. The neo-liberal project seeks a new set of global trade and investment rules that would favor multinational corporations and international investors. Meanwhile, it would weaken local and national legislative authorities that previously had jurisdiction over economic ground rules within their respective borders. It would also weaken many of the political constituencies that have traditionally been able to use the organs of popularly elected government to secure statutory protections for the vulnerable and redistribute social surplus. Gonzalez criticizes this expanding global regime of free trade, arguing that it leads to environmental degradation in poor countries, and lets the rich countries off the hook for the heavy role they play in pollution and resource depletion worldwide.

She structures her analysis around a kind of border: the deep geopolitical divide separating the world's North and South, criticizing in particular the unequal "North-South distribution of the environmental consequences of liberalized trade." She illustrates her case by reference to the Northern export of hazardous waste and the steady march of deforestation in both temperate and tropical zones. At every step, she points out the asymmetry of global environmental dynamics.

For instance, she reports that the North generates the lion's share of the demand for forest imports, and further that the primary beneficiaries of expanded harvesting of forest products are multinational timber companies headquartered in the global North. Meanwhile, Southern countries are pressured into ever-greater depletion and export of forest resources by pro-free-trade international financial institutions. These institutions can dictate domestic policy to countries laboring under the inequitable and unmanageable debt now commonly borne by countries in the global South.

Like other critics of corporate-led globalization, Gonzalez also attempts to sketch at least the broad outlines of an alternative to the presently dominant neo-liberal line on trade and the environment that she finds so lacking with regard to social justice or ecological sustainability. She suggests that Northern countries should curb their "over-consumption." Likewise, transnational corporations should be made ac-



countable to local individuals and communities and should be subject to effective regulation. Further, she says that local environmental movements should be closely observed, and individuals and communities should be adequately armed with entitlements and tools that could enable them to vindicate claims of human rights related to the environment.

Gonzalez aims to debunk two important myths that she believes are common in debates about free trade and the environment: first, that "environmental protection is a luxury that developing countries can ill afford," and second, that "industrialized countries have generally played a leadership role in the protection of the global environment." In her view, both myths need to be inverted. As to the first myth, that environmental protection must await further growth and economic development in the global South before it is advisable or practical, Gonzalez maintains that environmental protection is presently indispensable for the personal well-being of poor people in the global South, and often for the preservation of their cultural integrity as well. As to the second myth, that the North has led the global way in environmental protection, Gonzalez argues that the consumption patterns of Northern countries can only be maintained because these countries have appropriated the natural resources and waste sinks of countries in the global South, a pattern that is both inequitable and unsustainable in the long run.

### B. *Making Evil*

In *Making Evil*, Juan Velasco introduces a handful of artistic representations of the U.S.-Mexico border and asks us to contemplate multiple contrasts among them. One is an Orson Welles *film noir* from 1957, two others are documentaries by Chicana filmmaker Lourdes Portillo from 1988 and 1994. In these works of art, the border becomes a place both real and imaginary, geographic and cultural, located and free-floating.

Velasco first examines the 1957 Hollywood film by Orson Wells, *A Touch of Evil*. He criticizes Welles for harnessing his powerful cinematic talent to the job of promoting a "hysteria projected on to the media by the McCarthyism of the 1950s, and its biological obsession with the danger of infection of the 'American' body." He is not particularly assuaged by Welles' inclusion in the script of Quinlan, a "bad guy racist," who is shown to be overtly and violently anti-Mexican, in a way that seems obviously intended to be repugnant. In Velasco's estimation, the audience is most likely to come away from the film, not with a broad or deep critique of Quinlan's anti-Mexican bias, but with the message that the "touch of evil" infecting Quinlan was spawned in a corruption created by the mongrelization and *mestizaje* of the border.

Velasco describes with an acute eye how the film presents the border as a place of danger linked to forbidden transgressions of "normal" race and gender bounds. In its opening scene, the newly-wed kiss of a mixed-

race U.S.-Mexican couple, who have just penetrated the U.S. by crossing the border for their honeymoon, seems to trigger a violent explosion. Abstracting from the film's plot, Velasco suggests that "the border becomes the opening in the body, and the Mexican-American becomes the viral contamination that undermines the biological immunity of the body politics of America." He points out that this vision of the border as a place of corruption and contamination is not restricted to Anglo artists, and points to *Labyrinth of Solitude*, a 1950 novel by Mexican author, Octavio Paz, in which Mexican-American youth are portrayed as disturbing and dangerous cultural hybrids in the borderlands twilight of a Los Angeles slum.

Velasco goes on to contrast Welles' and Paz's treatment of the border with representations by Chicano and Chicana artists. Invoking first Américo Paredes' *With His Pistol in His Hand*, a 1959 study of the *corrido*, or Mexican border ballad, and next Gloria Anzaldúa's meditation and cry of protest in her 1987 book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Velasco claims that these Chicano/a writers, both working in times of anti-Mexican backlash, succeeded in creating texts that celebrated the border and the very "multiplicity, hybridity and liminality" that apparently made Welles shudder.

Velasco then moves to a deeper look at a pair of films by Chicana filmmaker, Lourdes Portillo. In Portillo's work, he says, the crossing of boundaries is represented to be a wholesome and integrative act that carries with it the potential power to heal and to create. Her camera follows Mexican people who settle with little concern for boundaries, carrying their traditions with them to new homes, and continuing to nurture ritual and cultural expression in modest, everyday ways that both endure and change. Portillo's aesthetic is one that values and celebrates boundary-crossings of many kinds, including the bounds of gender and sexual orientation. The identities she finds well-suited for navigating the world as she knows it are fluid, dynamic and multicultural. *Mestizaje* in this vision becomes a source of strength rather than corruption.

### C. *The Phoenix Rises from El Cenizo*

In the third article of the trio, *The Phoenix Rises from El Cenizo*, Maria Pabon Lopez examines the story of one small Texas-Mexico border town whose political leaders in 1999 passed a "Predominant Language Ordinance" mandating that city functions, meetings and notices would be conducted and posted in the predominant language of the community. Note that the ordinance is colorblind in the sense that it prefers no one language over another. Note also that it takes special pains to assure that those who do not speak the predominant language can easily exercise their generous translation rights simply by requesting them. The ordinance turned out to be a novel step that catapulted the town briefly into the national and even international spotlight. It also sparked an out-

break of rude attention from anti-immigrant groups and individuals. However commonsensical El Cenizo's grassroots initiative might seem to some, it generated significant opposition and alarm when it was first made public.

Despite the initial firestorm, Pabon Lopez's article suggests that things in El Cenizo since the ordinance have gone without significant uproar or upset. The main change she reports is gratifying, but hardly startling: the residents of El Cenizo are now more involved and more interested in participating in the affairs of their local government than they were when city business was conducted in a language that the majority of them could not understand.

Pabon Lopez provides helpful context for understanding the controversy and for assessing the city's action. She describes the *colonia* phenomenon that has come into existence along the Texas and New Mexico borders. Immigrants often bring with them to the extremely poor counties along the U.S. side of the international boundary, practices and skills they learned in Mexico, where rural migrants to the city must often make housing for themselves in precarious settlements at the urban fringe. Adapting these practices to new U.S. environments, immigrant communities at the border have established a variety of *colonias*, neighborhoods usually lacking infrastructure or secure title at least at the beginning, but providing a way for very poor families to create shelter for themselves and to work gradually toward secure home ownership, even in situations where traditional financing is out of the question.

Pabon Lopez describes the particular community of El Cenizo in vivid detail: its beginning as a barren *colonia* with few resources, the continued poverty of many of its residents, the paucity of their educational options, the predominance of Spanish as the spoken language of the community, the hard jobs people do. These jobs usually involve a long commute by private bus to Laredo, and the INS frequently targets these bus lines. The agents are authorized to proceed with only minimal legal restraints, and this important freedom for law enforcement officials is justified by the highest authorities on grounds of the community's close proximity to the border.

To read Pabon Lopez's description of El Cenizo is to know that a distinctive culture exists along the Texas-Mexico border. To read U.S. Supreme Court opinions on police stops near the border is to know that fear and loathing of border crossers is alive and well in U.S. jurisprudence. To read the tale of El Cenizo's ordinance and its matter-of-fact defense by El Cenizo city officials is to know that borderlands culture is not solely created by passive inheritance or forged through experiences of victimization.

As Pabon Lopez asserts, El Cenizo residents are engaged in the process of active civic and cultural production, establishing the reality of substantive citizenship even while many of them are under the real cloud of possible deportation. Just as they are building physical shelter with their own hands, and establishing legal title through financial and often political struggle, they are constructing through local legislation a new kind of borderlands citizenship that should serve as instruction to other local polities in how to revive and invent democracy.

### III. SIGNS OF LATCRIT AT WORK

A number of themes characteristic of the larger LatCrit project are evident in these three articles. Set out below are a few of the salutary things these articles do that situate them in the emerging LatCrit tradition. It is hardly a complete list of LatCrit themes, or even of the themes in the three papers at hand, but perhaps it offers one way of seeing how these pieces fit into the exciting larger project represented by the LatCrit initiative. Here are some things that LatCrits do:

A. *Identify, praise, and support anti-subordinationist practices by Latino/a communities and Latino/a writers and artists*

Juan Velasco lifts up Américo Peredes and Lourdes Portillo, while Maria Pabon Lopez describes and honors the actions of people in El Cenizo. It is important to any group that its members and its artists have intellectuals who are interested in finding their stories and celebrating their accomplishments. Groups need intellectuals who will be critical as well as celebratory. They need readers and listeners who can speak the necessary languages, who are willing to reach out in respectful and inclusive ways, and who are possessed of sufficient background information to understand what is being said.

LatCrit scholars are well situated to play this role for Latino communities in the United States, and for Latino writers and artists of the past and present. It is inspiring to see Maria Pabon Lopez, for instance, identify a small and relatively powerless community that has undertaken a praiseworthy and creative democratic initiative, to watch her build a description that includes first-hand interviews with the principles (some of these apparently conducted in Spanish), and to share the fruits of her investigation with a wider public. Her article also provided a very concrete kind of support to El Cenizo by laying out the results of her doctrinal research in a way that would have been invaluable to a litigation team had it been necessary to mount a legal defense of the El Cenizo ordinance.

Similarly, it is illuminating to be the recipient of Juan Velasco's knowledge about the Chicano literary canon and the related but different world of Mexican literature. He not only introduces readers to Latino/a writers and artists, but he helps us to see what they are doing and to dis-

cern important themes that run through much Latino/a writing. If Pabon Lopez helps readers appreciate the citizenship-building activities of low-income Latino residents along the border, Velasco helps readers see how generations of Latino/a writers have built on each other's work and have shared in the elaboration of central themes.

In a more global context, Gonzalez points out the lack of local voices and grassroots perspectives in the case for "eco-imperialism" mounted by free traders. For instance, at one point Gonzalez discusses a recent article on the practice of locating "shipbreaking" activities in third world countries (that is, the dismantling of ships for scrap, with much attendant exposure to hazardous materials). She notes that the article includes interviews with owners and overseers from the Indian shipbreaking industry, but "[n]ot a single Indian environmentalist is quoted in the article despite the fact that India has one of the largest environmental movements in the world," and she then cites readers to sources where they can learn more about these Indian movements.

*B. Mobilize outsider vantage points to support and inform critique of dominant ideologies and to expose false norms that exclude or oppress Latino/a people and communities*

LatCrit scholars celebrate oppositional activity from the grassroots and the margins, but they also voice critiques of dominant perspectives and activities radiating from the top and center. Carmen Gonzalez does a superb job of exposing dominant myths in the debate over the environment and free trade. She works to de-throne what she calls the "carefully constructed media image" that environmentalism is a "new form of imperialism, whereby the environmental preferences and priorities of the wealthy countries of the North are imposed on the poor countries of the South."

It is especially significant that Gonzalez chose to turn her attention to a wedge issue where dominant interests in the U.S. are attempting to rally and display support for their international investment policy agenda from leaders of poor third world countries—including Mexico, with its *maquiladoras* and its (highly problematic) membership in "North America," but including many other countries in Latin America as well. Using an outsider perspective, Gonzalez is able to avoid having her perceptions captured by the multinational corporations and free trade ideologues on the one hand, or by the often-provincial U.S.-based environmental movement on the other. Instead, functioning as a kind of "outsider within," a person with one foot inside and another foot outside the national norm, she takes the view of poor people in the global South, and builds her analysis and recommendations from that foundation.

Similarly, Velasco unpacks Orson Welles' filmmaking to expose and critique its messages about the border and about the people of all colors

who live there. Pabon Lopez, in turn, contrasts the El Cenizo ordinance to English Only rules and shows how unflattering the result is to the latter, because it throws their bias and narrowness into such high relief.

*C. Create mirrors, opposites, dangerous complements and reversals of dominant ideology*

In addition to celebration of existing and emergent anti-subordinationist practices, and in addition to critique of dominant ideologies, LatCrit scholars can and do create alternatives. Velasco, for instance, describes in lively detail the ways that filmmaker Lourdes Portillo is working to create a different vision of borders and borderlands, one that embraces some of the very aspects that Welles and Paz seemed to dread, but one that also shows these aspects to be supportive of harmony, peace and well-being, rather than conflict and depravity.

For her part, Gonzalez proposes an alternative vision for protection of the global environment. This alternative would demand self-examination and change by the over-consuming North rather than continued striving for growth in that region. It would impose greater restrictions on multinational corporations rather than the radical unleashing that characterizes most current international trade deals. It would stress local control and local input, rather than their obliteration as things of the past. It would also suggest use of human rights law as the best source of ordering rules for the new global economy, rather than the construction of new trade and investment charters that give rights only to states and international investors.

Meanwhile, El Cenizo's Predominant Language Ordinance is in two different senses a reply to and inversion of English Only. In the immediate context, of course, it is different because it establishes Spanish as the language of public meetings in El Cenizo. In a larger sense, however, it is not just a flipped image, but a more deeply different one. It embraces no particular language, but articulates a preference for substantive access geared to the concrete situation, coupled with minority language rights for speakers not proficient in the locally dominant language.

*D. Serve as a bridge between cultures and worldviews*

This bridge theme may well be implicit in those already set out above, but I believe it merits separate treatment. Many LatCrit scholars, because of their languages, cultures, experiences or studies, are in a position to serve as guides for members of the dominant culture, or for members of other subordinated communities who want to know more about Latinos/as. They are often in a position to move in the opposite direction as well, serving as guides for Latinos/as who want to know more about native-born or other cultures. These roles can produce problems, of course, but they are much needed in a situation where racial formations

are changing in some respects and stubbornly remaining unchanged in others.

In this trio of articles, Gonzalez lifts the international curtain for a moment and shows readers something of how the global economy looks to poor people in poor countries. Velasco introduces readers to important works by Latino artists and the themes that absorb them. And Pabon Lopez shares with readers a concrete look at life in one emblematic town on the U.S.-Mexico border. These acts of bridging and connection perform a great service.

#### IV. IN THE AFTERMATH OF SEPTEMBER 11

It is hard to look at this trio of articles and not think about September 11. It is unsettling even to read the parts of Velasco's article that describe a seemingly normal international entry that erupts into an utterly unexpected—but perhaps dreadfully predictable—explosion. It is particularly seering to read the parts of Gonzalez's article that describe the maldistribution of environmental costs and benefits and caution that we should attend to this inequitable and destabilizing pattern. (She remarks, for instance, "The North, with 20% of the world's population, currently consumes a disproportionate share of the world's resources, including 85% of the world's timber, 75% of its metals, 70% of its energy, and 60% of its food.")

Beyond this particular trio, it is hard to think about LatCrit commitments as a whole and not think about September 11. Certainly LatCrit scholars are likely to share a special concern for immigrants' rights, and any advocate for immigrants has had to shudder at the possibilities for private and state-sponsored backlash that have loomed on the horizon since that day.

Now more than ever, it seems that the voices of "outsiders within" will be imperiled in various ways, but desperately needed. If it was important before September 11 to have a Carmen Gonzalez helping people in the U.S. to build an internationalist vision, introducing us to third world environmentalists, and reminding us how U.S. consumption patterns look from beyond our borders, then it is all the more obviously important today. If it was important before to learn about immigration policy, to understand the operation of our boundary to the South, and to stand for the rights of outsiders among us, then it is all the more obviously crucial today.

If we needed before September 11 to learn from scholars of literature and popular culture about the ways that images have shaped our perception of color and culture and nationhood, then it is even more important to do so now. On that day some men gone mad became nightmare artists, took the stuff of popular culture and drew indelible images

in a real blue sky, using the bodies and lives of real people - including their own - to send a message straight to the American people. How will Americans receive and interpret that message, and what tools will be available to them for this unprecedented task?

It is easy to imagine further nightmares, launched by farflung and desperate networks of terrorists, or by the United States and its own farflung world systems. Certainly one can imagine a monstrous rebirth of the hysteria and "biological obsession with the danger of infection of the 'American' body" that Velasco saw in *Touch of Evil*. Surely if there was ever a time when such fears were likely to flourish and develop in dangerous directions, this would be that time.

Nevertheless, I also see some signs for hope. It is not only people like LatCrit theorists, progressive social activists, and anti-WTO demonstrators who are now asking whether present levels of gross inequality and absolute deprivation in the world are sustainable. Many people are newly motivated to question and learn about the history of a foreign policy that includes such disturbing facts as training of the Taliban in Afghanistan, support for massacres of indigenous people in Central America, accommodation of corrupt royalty in the Middle East, unmistakable contributions to the deep and worsening impasse over Israel and Palestine, and the whole host of past and present policies that seem either clearly or possibly connected to the present situation.

Of course questioning and recognizing past sins is hardly the same as seeing a way out of the emergency we are in. But surely nothing solid can come without such questioning and recognition. In any event, it is my conviction that members of LatCrit, using the tools of analysis developed by LatCrit scholars and seeking direction from the principled commitments of LatCrit activists, can and should play an important role in the national and international debates and decisions to come.



