

Mexican Is Not a Race

Wendy Trevino and Chris Chen

April 6, 2017

With the recent publication of a chapbook of sonnets, *Brazilian Is Not a Race*, poet Wendy Trevino excavates a history of racial violence at the borders of the U.S. and beyond. The chapbook also describes a childhood spent in the Rio Grande Valley where the narrator is pressured to internalize the social hierarchies that organize daily life in Harlingen, Texas.

Blurring boundaries of polemic and historical description, the poems trace the roots of these social divisions through the legacy of murderous state and settler border violence. But Trevino balances this account with a less familiar counter-history of militant Tejano resistance, embodied in figures like anarcho-syndicalist Ricardo Flores Magón. By presenting both histories, the work shows how border-making congeals racist “commonsense” assumptions over time, and also interrogates fundamentally anti-black and anti-indigenous Latin American state programs to cultivate cultural unity through “race mixing.” Attentive to the emergence of racial hierarchies out of a history of enslavement and the Spanish and English colonization of the Americas, Trevino’s writing returns to an unsettled past where unity is not a precondition for political action, but a product of it.

CHRIS CHEN. I thought it might be helpful for readers coming to your work for the first time to ask a little about the place where you grew up: Harlingen, Texas. Your recent chapbook, “Brazilian Is Not a Race,” starts off by recounting some childhood experiences of coming up against everyday social hierarchies in a part of Texas that might appear culturally homogeneous to outsiders. One of the first things that struck me about this chapbook was how it refused to “make love and hate/less complicated” by downplaying those divisions.

WENDY TREVINO. First it’s important to understand that the Rio Grande Valley, where I grew up, used to be part of Mexico, and to this day, the area’s population of 1.3 million is something like 90 percent Latinx. People talk about it like it’s this place where Mexicans, or Mexican-Americans, depending on who you talk to, can avoid racialization and assimilation into white culture, because there are so many who share those identities there. But those identities shouldn’t be mistaken for coherent categories of people in relation to race, class, politics, religion.

The myth of racial or Brown unity crumbles when put under basic scrutiny. For example, Mexican nationals spend about \$4.5 billion a year shopping along the Texas border. In McAllen and Brownsville, cross-border shopping accounts for 30–40 percent of total retail sales, and the shoppers are often members of wealthier classes in Mexico (at least, pre-Trump). Yet, the poverty rate in both Hidalgo County and Cameron County (of which McAllen and Brownsville are re-

spectively a part) is above 33 percent. The child poverty rate is above 45 percent. Just across the borders of McAllen and Brownsville, in Reynosa and Matamoros, there are 247 maquiladoras—low-wage factories along the border run by foreign companies—with 174,000 employees who make on average a little more than \$2 dollars an hour. And every year, hundreds of thousands from Mexico and Central America risk their lives to “illegally” cross those borders.

Part of what I’m trying to show in my work is these kinds of class divisions among a supposedly homogenous population. The wealthy Mexicans call the Mexican-Americans “pochos,” which is a derogatory term that emphasizes the lack of fluency in Spanish of Mexican-Americans. On the other hand, the Mexican-Americans supposedly refer to the Mexican nationals as “fresas,” which basically means “preppies,” a term which I think speaks to some class antagonism.

Growing up in the Valley, I always had a sense of this hierarchy within Mexicans, a colloquial category that included Mexicans from Mexico *as well as* Mexican-Americans. As much as the local Anglos wanted to make all Mexicans into one thing, we were clearly not. I don’t want to make it seem like at the top of the hierarchy of Mexicans, there were wealthy Mexican nationals and below them everyone else. There were also wealthy Mexicans, who were really Mexican-Americans.

I should say that I don’t think this oversimplification of who comprises the category Mexican in race relations discourse in South Texas happens just because Anglos want Mexicans to be one thing. The way this flattening obscures racial and class divisions works to the advantage of anyone wanting to maintain unequal economic relations. I hope my work makes clear that Anglos aren’t the only ones who have something to gain by maintaining social stratification in South Texas. There are Mexicans and Mexican-Americans collaborators who have something to gain, too.

CHRIS CHEN. The poems seem intent on questioning how state-sanctioned anti-racist discourse can end up reinforcing colonial racial hierarchies through a language of hybridity. It seems especially timely considering that there seems to be a move to re-biologize race and to conceive of culture as carried in the “blood.” I’m thinking of the popularity of sites like Ancestry.com, whose advertising tagline is “Discover what makes you uniquely you.” Your chapbook turns toward addressing the politics of “mestizaje” in Latin America, a racial discourse with roots in the language of botany and eugenics. The poems seem quite critical of the legacy of José Vasconcelos, for example.

WENDY TREVINO. The lack of uniformity in the way the word “Hispanic” is generally used might explain why the scholar Vera M. Kutzinsky, in *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*, wrote, “[Mestizaje] is perhaps best described as a peculiar form of multiculturalism—one that has circulated in the Caribbean and in Hispanic America, most notoriously in Brazil.” Although it is being used differently by Kutzinsky, Hispanic is a very popular way for people of Mexican descent in Texas to refer to themselves. It’s a way of downplaying their non-European roots, whether consciously or not.

CHRIS CHEN. I know Vasconcelos and Gloria Anzaldúa have different understandings of the political implications of miscegenation. I’m reminded here of critic Jared Sexton’s account of how Vasconcelos’s version of mestizaje preserves an anti-black and anti-indigenous racial order as a “dream of unequivocally hierarchical global integration” whose “eugenicist impulses and implications are unavoidable, casting long shadows over whatever limited threats it presents to the ‘ethnic absolutism’ of Anglo-Saxon white supremacy.”

WENDY TREVINO. During “nation building” in both Mexico and Brazil, elites promoted strong mestizaje ideologies that imagined the prototypical citizens of each country to be mixed-race, although the imagined mix was different in each country. To say a country or place is racially homogenous because everyone’s a “mix” of the same peoples is to acknowledge existing racial divisions without acknowledging the racial hierarchies from which they stem, and as long as there are prisons, plantations, maquiladoras, favelas, etc., one can only ignore these hierarchies and their relation to the racialization of peoples. This conception of mestizaje can also erase whole groups of people, which became clear to me when I returned to Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands* and the story of Malinche.

Malinche was a Nahua woman who served as an interpreter for the Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés. According to legend, she was also mother to the first mestizo child (Cortés’s son), a person of mixed European and indigenous American ancestry, and in that way she was the mother of the Mexican people. The way her name was invoked in the Valley was when a person was accused of being a traitor; either jokingly or not, they might be called “Malinche.” Anzaldua sees her not as a traitor but as a survivor, not as the reason for the fall of the Aztec Empire but as the reason for the survival of its culture into the present. I’d already thought it was strange that Anzaldua never used the word “rape” in telling the story, but after reading Eduardo Galeano, watching some of *Black in Latin America*, and then coming back to Anzaldua, I was also baffled by her inattention to the legend’s erasure of African people, who have been in Mexico since Cortés. Anzaldua does say in a sentence somewhere in *Borderlands* that Mexicans tend not to deal with their African ancestry, which makes her inattention to the issue all the worse, or at the very least, all the stranger.

Looking to explain this erasure, I ended up at Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cosmica*, a text alluded to by Anzaldua in *Borderlands* for its “inclusiveness,” only to discover he supported “racial mixing” but with one of the goals being to literally erase black Mexicans. He even uses the phrase “aesthetic eugenics” when talking about how he believed Black Mexico would disappear in a few decades.

CHRIS CHEN. I think these concepts—race, ethnicity, nation, and culture—are often conflated in popular discourse in ways that can be quite confusing and contested. There’s often no effort made to distinguish between imposed and asserted identities, or to differentiate between the various political projects these identities are defined in relation to. The way in which you describe the discordant relationship between race and culture is to me one of the most striking passages in the chapbook: “We are who we are/To them, even when we don’t know who we/Are to each other and culture is a/Record of us figuring that out.”

WENDY TREVINO. I think it’s important to understand that racial identity is an imposition first and foremost, a “we” defined not by us—who might have less in common than not—in order to make “us” legible to colonizers, slavers, capitalists, the state—who “we” are racialized in relation to. I think about how the transatlantic slave trade abducted people of different ethnicities, people who spoke different languages, people with different religions and traditions, and imposed on them—those who survived—a single identity.

Of course, this isn’t the end of the story. This “we” is also negotiated by us, too. In thinking this way, it’s very hard for me not to feel uncomfortable about Vasconcelos and Anzaldua’s embrace of a “we” based on a shared multiracial identity as emancipatory for those of Mexican heritage—as if racialization, enculturation and (to be real in the case of Anzaldua) acculturation are all the

same thing. And yeah, the subsequent obfuscation of those negotiations I'm talking about is a huge problem, if our aim is the eradication of racism.

CHRIS CHEN. Whether the poems are excavating the retaliatory vision of the 1915 "Plan of San Diego," the revolutionary plot by radicals in South Texas to seize the Southwest from the capitalist United States, or attending to the political radicalism of figures like Ricardo Flores Magón, the chapbook seems to turn toward a relatively less well-known history of Mexican and Mexican-American groups in the U.S. South and Southwest, including the Magonistas and participants in the 1910 Mexican Revolution, who coordinated a militant response to the lynchings and massacres carried out by vigilantes, federal troops, and the Texas Rangers.

The first time I read about the "Plan of San Diego" was in a 1976 speech by the August Twenty-Ninth Movement, a Chicano political group based in Los Angeles that was trying to look back to this early-20th century political moment in the U.S. Southwest for examples of a combative, and simultaneously anti-racist and anti-capitalist politics. Why were you interested in this history?

WENDY TREVINO. I see the radical tradition, in which Ricardo Flores Magón and the "Plan of San Diego" play such significant parts, as a much more promising blueprint for struggle than the celebrations of hybridity offered by Vasconcelos and Anzaldua. As I've already said, the only negotiations I believe are possible between the managers of race and those who are racialized require that those who are racialized return the violence inflicted upon them. The radical tradition I turn to goes even further. It is not interested in "negotiating," but seeks to abolish existing relations of power completely. This tradition demands that we fight back to literally change who the "we" is by changing the conditions under which "we" are reproduced. The Plan of San Diego, acknowledged racial hierarchies, even as it allowed room for the genesis of another identity based on shared struggle, an identity not based on some myth of racial homogeneity but on solidarity in struggle. (It should be noted that the frank praise of violent revolution in the Plan de San Diego caused Flores Magón to doubt its authenticity and intent, because he knew the Texas rebels were unprepared for such an uprising.)

CHRIS CHEN. Anzaldua's reinterpretation of Vasconcelos seems like a good bridge to a question I wanted to ask you, which is to say a bit more about how the figure of Malinche is functioning in these poems and how you see Chicana feminists like Anzaldua—and Cherríe Moraga or Adelaida del Castillo—redefining the meaning of the figure of Malinche as a kind of prototypical "race traitor."

WENDY TREVINO. I think this chapbook is very interested in the importance of a shared politics and in how much space is allowed for disagreement. Political debates within nonwhite groups tend to be chalked up not to class or gender divisions, for instance, or to the possibility that one might be wrong sometimes, but to "illegitimate members of the community," or to people who no longer count or never really counted as part of the community. The state and nonprofits love this diversion. It gets reproduced every time news outlets, politicians, or activists bring up the figure of the white "outside agitator" tricking communities of color into protesting or confronting authority. These stereotypes and assumptions mostly work to maintain the racial status quo.

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Retrieved on 25th February 2021 from thenewinquiry.com
Poet Wendy Trevino argues that a radical new Chicana politics means forging an identity based on shared political struggle, not myths of racial homogeneity—an idea rooted in anarchist struggles along the Texas-Mexican border a century ago

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