

(UN)SAFE SPACE IN THE BORDERLANDS: WRITING QUEER WOMEN OF COLOR INTO HISTORY

Thayse Madella¹*

¹Universidade Federal de Sergipe, São Cristóvão, SE, Brasil

Abstract

This article intends to analyze how Xicana literature navigates (un)safe spaces in the Borderlands. As women, who, more often than not, are also queer, the literature of Xicana authors constantly struggles to find safe spaces in the Borderlands. The historical novel *Forgetting the Álamo* (2009), by Emma Pérez, illustrates the mobilization of spaces into (un) safe ones. The novel, by remembering the presence of queer Xicanas in history (in the aftermath of the battle of the Álamo), constructs (un)safe spaces in a constantly changing geographical location. The pervasiveness of coloniality is always already endangering the safety of one's existence. The instability of these "safe spaces" renders them, at the same time, unsafe. This paradoxical relationship opens the possibility of the fractured locus, where colonial and non-colonial discursive practices meet and are rearticulated.

Keywords: Decolonial studies; (un)safe space; Xicana literature; *Forgetting the Álamo*; Chicana studies.

* English professor at UFS, holding a Ph.D in English from Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC) and a master's degree in the same field from the same university. Email: thaysemadella@academico.ufs.br. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0954-6953>.



Xicana¹ literature, more often than not, portrays the dangers and pleasures of living in the Borderlands. As Xicanas navigate marginalized spaces, the issue of (un)safety becomes prominent. The pervasiveness of coloniality is always already endangering the safety of their existence. As a strategy of survival, they build bridges in which they can safely defy coloniality. The instability of these “safe spaces” renders them, at the same time, unsafe. This paradoxical relation opens the possibility of the fractured locus (Lugones 2010), where colonial and non-colonial discursive practices meet. To illustrate how (un)safe spaces are constituted in Xicana literature, this article will analyze the historical novel *Forgetting the Álamo* (2009), by Emma Pérez. This work writes the presence of queer Xicanas into history and constructs (un)safe spaces in a changing geographical location where violence and danger against women of color is ever more present. The queerness of the protagonist connects her along the journey to people that protect her, or allow the feeling of safety to surface, even if only for a short amount of time. Because (un)safety is constantly changing, movement is the only possible way for survival. It is evident, in this work, how mobilization between danger, protection, and (de)coloniality constructs unstable bridges that offer brief moments of safe spaces.

Theorizing (un)safe space from a decolonial perspective

Decolonial thinkers have discussed how the pervasiveness of coloniality has reached societies in such a deep way that it is difficult to find spheres of daily life in which its presence does not exist (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000; Lugones 2007 and 2010). Geopolitics, race, gender and power relations are some of the ways coloniality shows its presence. Seeking homogenization and erasure of difference, coloniality enforces a relationship in which Europe stands for the norm, and the rest must be controlled, a process that is constantly met with resistance. The non-colonial exists and takes advantage of the cracks of discourse to open the fracture that allows the presence and multiplication of differences. The paradox of intertwining the colonial and the non-colonial surfaces, in the literature to be analyzed here, in the bridges that allow (un)safe spaces in the fractured locus. I use the term “(un)safe” exactly because of its dialectical existence, which, in turn, becomes paradoxical for the need to abide by opposing meanings. In this sense, it is only possible to think of safe spaces if considering them (un)safe.

According to a number of authors, safe space is not only related to the protection against physical threat, but also against emotional and psychological harm (Cisneros & Bracho 2019; Goode-Cross & Good 2008; Holley & Steiner 2005; and others). The Roestone Collective, in the article “Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualization” (2014), discusses the concept as relational, porous, and productive (1348). One instance of this complex definition is exactly in relation to domestic violence: “(white) patriarchal [...] social norms deem private space safe and public space threatening for women [...]. However, this association [...] erases the reality of domestic violence that occurs in spaces ‘falsely deemed safe

for women, such as the home” (Roestone 1349-1350). The authors, thus, argue that the binarism safe/unsafe is paradoxical and requires continuous negotiation in the process of creating spaces that comfortably and consciously receive vulnerability and diversity.

Unsafety, to some extent, can work as a catalyst for change, for action, for seeking new alliances. Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) argues that the potency of taking risks is crucial to construct bridges. Calculated risks make connections, loose borders. In “(Un)natural Bridges, (Un)safe Spaces”, the author affirms that “[t]o step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded” (Anzaldúa 246). The concept of bridging presumes connections, close relations between once separated parts. Although a bridge may seem stable, constructed out of steel – or rocks, as the Natural Bridges, in California, described by Anzaldúa – they actually change and move. Time and necessity act upon these structures of passage and force them to change as the need for different connections emerges. They fall and are rebuilt as needed: “Change is inevitable, no bridge lasts forever” (Anzaldúa 243). In this sense, bridges are embedded with (un)safety, for they connect subjects to the unfamiliar, they open new breaches that need new bridges, becoming unstable. For Anzaldúa, a person can deal with unsafety from a perspective of seeking out understanding (*conocimiento*), which can build bridges, or use this feeling to feed our fears, which would build walls. Through Anzaldúa’s theorizations, a bridge becomes home for coalition and movement while *conocimiento* is the impulse moving us forward, forcing us out of oppressive conditions into moments of crossing, where changes are possible. Thus, *conocimiento* and bridges, i.e. connections, are hand-in-hand. *Conocimiento* is a journey and “detour is part of the path” (Anzaldúa 2015, 133).

If bridges, as a metaphor for connection and in-between states, function as a mobilized “home” so one can negotiate a journey through *conocimiento*, they can also serve as a metaphor for paradoxical spaces. The authors of the Roestone Collective advocate for a space that accepts contradictions and multiplicities. The collective believes in the importance of feeling “safe enough”, but not too comfortable. For them, paradoxicality accommodates “multiple overlapping and different identities”, challenging the “traditional mappings of social norms”, where “marginalized identities are both embraced and destabilized” (Roestone 1355). Drawing from the studies of Gillian Rose, in *Feminism and Geography* (1993), such paradox comes to existence when peripheral subjects need to deal with geopolitical dynamics imposed by a hegemonic ideology while still trying to create another, less oppressive, form of occupying spaces.

In Rose’s theorization, the subject of feminism inhabits the paradoxical space. In this sense, “the spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside – are occupied simultaneously” (195). Based on the discussions about the “elsewhere of

discourse”, ignited by Theresa de Lauretis (1987), Rose calls for a “geographical imagination” capable of producing a “plurilocality” (208) for the marginalized subjects. Developing on Rose’s debate, Caroline Desbiens (1999) articulates the importance of maintaining the creative locality of the subjects elsewhere, but still within the territory of language: “Attuned to the everyday, this much-needed altering of existing frameworks—the creation of an ‘elsewhere within’ as de Lauretis understands it—seems to me a priority” (183). I agree with Desbiens that the site of creation cannot go *beyond* the hegemonic discourse, for it is within this realm that the everyday life of marginalized subjects must be transformed. Elsewhere is the site of the paradox because it is here, within discourse.

De Lauretis affirms that “‘elsewhere’ is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations” (Lauretis 25). Reading de Lauretis to theorize paradoxical space, Rose uses the terms “elsewhere” and “beyond” as synonymous. Desbiens, thus, questions this relation, calling attention to the fact that, in de Lauretis’ “The Technology of Gender”, “there is plenty of evidence in her writing that this sphere is nevertheless located inside the patriarchal structures women know and confront everywhere” (Desbiens 182). Just to bring one evidence, de Lauretis continues the above passage by saying “I think of it as spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati” (Lauretis 25). Thus, if we agree that its margins are still a constitutive part of discourse, and that “the interstices of institutions” are also part of the institutions, de Lauretis’ “elsewhere” is paradoxical exactly because it inhabits the resistance that is also constitutive of hegemonic discourse. This reading may seem, somehow, painful; however, if my interest is in the materiality of everyday spaces – with their oppression and resistance – going *beyond* hegemonic discourse reaches a utopian realm that, although fruitful to some extent, is not transformative of the reality that affects marginalized subjects.

Therefore, Rose’s plurilocality dialogues with Anzaldúa’s theorizations of bridges and *conocimiento*. A bridge becomes a paradoxical space elsewhere, with connections that guide subjects to breaches that need new reconfigurations to allow, once more, new bridges. Reconfiguring is key to reconceptualization in terms of a paradox, thus granting the mobility, instability, and complexity that *conocimiento* requires to flourish. Reconfiguring brings the creative imagination that Anzaldúa, Rose, Desbiens, and others claim in the debate of transformative theorizations. According to the Roestone collective, “because safe spaces are porous spaces, they can neither maintain separation entirely nor indefinitely” (1361). As Rose states, “strategic mobility is actually feminism’s great strength” (27). (Un)Safety, in this sense, is mobilized through constant reconfigurations.

Towards a decolonial perspective, I articulate the paradoxicality and the relationships that form (un)safe space to what Maria Lugones calls fractured locus (2010). Throughout the analysis of the literary text presented, the hinging between the colonial impositions and the resistance against them emerges on

the bridges that allow movements between worlds. The fractured locus is the plurilocality, the elsewhere of discourse, when perceived from a decolonial perspective. According to Lugones,

As the coloniality infiltrates every aspect of living through the circulation of power at the levels of the body, labor, law, imposition of tribute, and the introduction of property and land dispossession, its logic and efficacy are met by different concrete people whose bodies, selves in relation, and relations to the spirit world do not follow the logic of capital. [...] The movement of these bodies and relations does not repeat itself. It does not become static and ossified. Everything and everyone continues to respond to power and responds much of the time resistantly—which is not to say in open defiance, though some of the time there is open defiance—in ways that may or may not be beneficial to capital, but that are not part of its logic. From the fractured locus, the movement succeeds in retaining creative ways of thinking, behaving, and relating that are antithetical to the logic of capital. (754)

The author tries to find the breaches through which the colonized subject is not only subjected to this position, but, looking at daily lives, they can resist and respond to the pervasiveness of coloniality. While coloniality homogenizes through categories, Lugones' debate on decolonial feminism deviates from this categorical logic, arguing for "seeing the colonial difference, emphatically resisting her epistemological habit of erasing it" (Lugones, 753). Thus, if, on one hand, homogenization and erasure are colonial technologies acting to maintain hierarchies of power, on the other, the colonized is not only defined by these ideological tools, but come to existence, in the fractured locus, in conflict, contradiction, and multiplicity,

In her works, Lugones recurrently emphasizes the relevance of coalition and knowing others who resist oppression in the process of disrupting the modern colonial gender system and the coloniality of power (2007; 2010). For her, coalition "impels us to know each other as selves that are thick, in relation, in alternative socialities, and grounded in tense, creative inhabitations of the colonial difference" (2010, 748). She continues, arguing that "the histories of resistance at the colonial difference are where we need to *dwell* , learning about each other" (753). The dwelling, though, is temporary, for *conocimiento* requires movements. If strategic movements are too a form of resisting oppression, once more mobilizing the concept, I choose to read Lugones' "dwelling" through the lenses of Anzaldúa's turtle, carrying home in her back, constructing it from a feminist architecture (Anzaldúa 2007, 43-44). Anzaldúa's *conocimiento* and home enmesh in the fractured locus of Lugones to broaden the perspective of dwelling the colonial difference to a mobile form of abiding at the same time specifying the construction of coalitional bridges to a Xicana theorization.

In the context of Xicana studies, this research discusses space through the lenses of Gloria Anzaldúa's theorization of the Borderlands: sites of struggle, where different cultural and social codes contradict one another while they all

work as constitutive of the subjects living in this in-between space. These subjects, she calls *mestizas*. For the author,

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. [...] [T]he lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who [...] go through the confines of the normal (Anzaldúa 25, original emphasis).

The Borderlands encompass complex intertwining geographical and psychological spaces. Their contradictory and complex relations challenge any simplistic system of binary oppositions, forcing an intersectional perspective that takes into consideration a myriad of connections, both within one's own self and in relation to others. As Anzaldúa states, "*la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (100, original emphasis). If the borders work in constructing a separation between us and them, then people living in the Borderlands are not us nor them, at the same time that they are both. Thus, in this space of contradictions, ambivalences, and struggles, the constant state of transition, the tolerance for ambiguity, the inner war a *mestiza* undergoes results in the possibility of a new consciousness – "a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*" (99, original emphasis). As Anzaldúa explains, "within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture" (100). Adding to that, there are also the commonly held beliefs of cultures in relation to gender and sexuality which attack women and queer people. *Xicanas*, politically conscious of the contradictory position they inhabit, build themselves from this specific position of confrontation, ambiguity, and transition.

The concept of the Borderlands dialogues with the political definition of space defined by Doreen Massey. In her work *For Space* (2005), spatiality is constituted while it constitutes the subjects in the interrelations, multiplicities, and internal negotiations within space. The author states three propositions to discuss the politics of space:

First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny [...]. *Second*, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space. If space is indeed the product of interrelations,

then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space as co-constitutive. *Third*, that we recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. (9, original emphasis)

Through this concept, Massey argues, exists the possibility of a political use of space, in which both history and future are open. Thus, spaces are constituted by the encounters of multiple and heterogeneous trajectories, always in relational perspectives. Still according to Massey, Postcolonial studies (and I would include Decolonial studies as well) break with homogeneity of space when scholars in the field question the geographical relations of power and the colonial homogeneous histories which focus their official versions on the white Eurocentric perspectives of any event: “Not only should the European trajectory be ‘decentred’ it could also be recognised as merely one [...] of the histories being made at that time” (Massey, 63). Therefore, retelling stories from the periphery of hegemonic power destabilizes assumptions about center/margins, developed/underdeveloped (binary relations that imply the superiority of one side in detriment of the other) and bring to the fore the multiplicities of trajectories and knowledges embedded in geographical locations.

For Xicanas, territory and land are literal spaces that inform and propel their struggles. Indigenous land demarcation and reservations, the Mexican-US war in the 19th Century that changed the border between Mexico and the United States, and immigration and border crossing are issues that (in)form their works. The materiality of these issues is present in the constitution of the Xicana subjects. The hegemonic historical version of these conflicts produces erasure and the construction of stereotypes, which affect the real embodiment of the subjects living in the Borderlands.

The Borderlands respond to the specific characteristics of the plurilocality. When Anzaldúa affirms that borders “define the places that are safe and unsafe” (25) and theorizes the Borderlands to blur such definitions, the paradoxicality is already there. When the worlds grate against one another and bleed, this blood blurs the boundaries and participates in forming bridges. Thus, although the pain and danger surrounding the life in the borders are real, the affinity and affect that are also part of this relationship are embodied as well.

Mobilizing (un)safety in Emma Pérez’s *Forgetting the Álamo*

Emma Pérez’ *Forgetting the Álamo* remaps Texas from the perspective of a genderqueer Xicana character. In a historical novel that rewrites the impact of the aftermath of the battle of the Álamo, *Forgetting* is a first-person narrative of a young woman trying to survive as well as exact revenge from the violence she and her family suffered in the North-to-South invasion of the white population in the territory that now is Texas. For this analysis, there are three stances where space is

affected in paradoxical terms: 1) the body, 2) the places where interaction between characters resignifies spaces, and 3) the geographical nationalistic division of territory. Although I am working with three dimensions of space that, apparently, are distinguished, these stances are, rather, in a continuous process of influencing one another, so they cannot be considered as separable. I will begin my analysis from point number three, for this discussion can also present the historical context of the narrative, which is also crucial for the movements materialized in the novel. I will weave in the other stances as they emerge throughout the discussion.

The geographical nationalistic division of territory is at the crux of a novel set in a post-Álamo embattled Texas. Eliana Ávila (2018) points out that the term “invasion” or “silent invasion” is usually a reference to migration from South to North (712), as, in colonial discourse, diasporic subjects from Latin America escape their undeveloped context in search for a (post-)modern territory. For the context of *Forgetting the Álamo*, another constitution of a diasporic subject is necessary. In *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999), Emma Pérez herself discusses the movement of both populations and borders that constructed racialized diasporic subjects in the context in which the novel takes place. Set in 1836, in a Texas that has just become independent from Mexico, before its annexation, it is important to foreground that Mexicans, Indians, and Spanish-Mexicans were already constitutive of this territory. However, “even before the region became a territory of the United States, Mexico passed a colonization law in 1824 to encourage foreigners to settle in the sparsely populated area, hoping it would serve as the buffer between Mexico and the U.S.” (Pérez 82-83). This law brought to the area a great number of “Euroamericans, who greatly outnumbered the small population of [...] Mexicans” (82). With the ever-growing population of Euroamericans, mainly English speakers, in the region, the dissatisfaction with the centralizing Mexican government also grew. This is the context that ignited the war. In this sense, those who were, first, locals to this territory, soon were constituted as diasporic subjects without necessarily physically moving. The supposed development of the place is constituted by its whitening process, which, in its turn, also constitutes the process that marks racialized others. Although hegemonic history constructs the discourse of invasion in migration from South to North, the history of Texas told by its marginalized subjects functions to counteract this understanding of invasion, since the invaders, here, are the white colonizers coming from North to South to occupy a once foreign territory.

Pérez (re)writes the historical events occurring after the battle of the Álamo from the perspective of a genderqueer non-normative protagonist, Micaela Campos. This period marks the war between Texas and Mexico, when the former separates from the latter, becoming independent until 1845, when it is annexed to the U.S. Pérez’s work contests the official narratives that construct the violence of this context as “a price to pay” for the development of the – soon to be annexed – territory of Texas. In a normative linear temporality, Mexico is considered belated, thus, its separation as an independent country and its later annexation to the United States are treated as forms of development. This idea of development

is racialized in a colonial standpoint that disregards Mexican and Indigenous cultural codes as related to an undeveloped past.

In *Forgetting the Álamo*, the supposed heroes who fought in the war against Mexico are questioned. Firstly, the main plot of the novel puts Micaela, a young woman of color of Indigenous and Mexican descendants, passing as a man hunting down three marauders to revenge the death of her siblings, the rape of her mother and the assault to her family ranch. In the story, these white men fought on the same side of the war as her defeated uncle and father. In the voice of Elsie, a family friend who runs a whorehouse,

“Them boys ain’t heroes. They ain’t no better than a buncha drunks who come here whoring expecting me to open up my doors when they want, waking up my girls when they’re all filthy and smelly. Now folks are talking heroes. [...] I swear it didn’t use to be like this. Ten, twenty years ago, it was downright peaceful here. Quiet, peaceful, everybody worked hard.” (Pérez 2009, n.p)

Thus, the novel puts into question the heroic acts of the men fighting for Texas independence. The violence produced by the invasion of the white men in this territory is countered by a peaceful² time before the invasion. In this sense, the hegemonic idea of development that sees the violence brought by the war as “a price to pay” for progress is disrupted, because, for the marginalized groups of people living in these changing borders, the life before it was more peaceful than it is in the diegetic now. The narrative reinforces that the changes coming to this territory were not an advancement for these racialized people against the white hegemony: “Tejas was not changing for the better. Not for our kind anyway” (n.p). Rather, for them, the changes mark a period of increasing violence, including rape and genocide.

In this background, Micaela travels throughout Texas and New Orleans to find the marauders who raped members of her family and ransacked the ranch where they lived. In the racist and misogynist mess that the territory had turned to, Micaela passes as a man to be allowed entrance in places where women were forbidden and to protect herself against sexist violence. She embodies and performs a gender other than the one assigned to her at birth. However, although successful in entering places designated only for men, she cannot embody a skin color different from her own:

The same bartender who was accustomed to ordering me out squinted his eyes at me. I inched my way to the bar and slapped down a coin.
“We don’t take no meskin pesos no more. Ain’t you hear?”
“I need some help,” I said.
“Help? The days for helping the likes of you is done gone. Now get on outa here before I get you throwed out”. (n.p)

Her racialization as part of the white invasion can be read as a fractured locus, for bringing to the surface the construction of racism as enmeshed in the process

of colonization. The growing racism resulting from the war between Texas and Mexico transforms a native person of that land into an abject, who, in the words of the bartender, does not deserve any help. The use of the slur “meskin” reinforces the discrimination. The colonial gender system that racializes Micaela is the same that, despite passing as a man, creates the pervasive lingering fear of being discovered. She inches her way because she needs to check if her disguise works; she is cautious of her woman’s body underneath the masculine performance. If, as a man, she is threatened for being a person of color, as a woman of color the dangers could easily escalate. The number of rapes in the narrative, including the one suffered by the protagonist, shows that Micaela’s decision of embodying a male persona is in fact a form of transforming her body into a safe space within perilous places, such as the bar, and the region of Texas.

In Xicana literature, spatializing the city between safe and unsafe is one strategy used to criticize the barriers that jeopardize and limit the movements of vulnerable people. Linda McDowell (1996) affirms that “depending on their position in the social structure, people are differentially located in space [...] [And] it is often women who have the most spatially restricted lives [...], trapped in the net rather than free in (cyber) space” (30). For Micaela, being a woman is not the only factor trapping her circulation to limited places, but her skin color and ethnicity also function as entrapments in a city that is becoming overloaded with white people. Her disguise, then, even if partially, gives her freedom to go into male-only establishments. The connections between her body and the territory become evident once her safety as a person depends on passing in an invaded region. She does not subvert the rules of the city; rather, she subverts her own body to fit the rules that otherwise would exclude her. Strategically, her gender disobedience fits her in the rules of the city for her survival. Her body serves as a shelter against the violence taking place in the region.

In a novel centered on passing as a strategy of survival, recognition functions as bridges between marginalized groups. Clara and Lucius, other marginalized characters in the novel, will recognize the protagonist as a woman. With Clara, Micaela’s queer sexuality brings safety after witnessing so much violence: “I breathed in the moonlight’s air feeling warm and secure from her nearness. I sat up and took a long deep breath and filled my lungs with something unknown to me. Something that was not sorrow. I did not recognize all I felt” (Pérez n.p). For Micaela, feeling secure is unrecognizable until she meets Clara. Micaela and Clara’s love story first takes place in a ranch called *El Paraíso* – and for the short moment they are together in this place, one may argue, Micaela does feel like she is in paradise. Soon after they fall in love, racism and violence throw the protagonist back into her journey. Throughout the novel, most of the times that Micaela feels secure is when she is near Clara, as they are separated and reunited in their journey. Paradoxically, in a violent and prejudicial territory, it is in the materialization of queer desire that Micaela finds protection.

The specific places where interactions occur are constituted in and against hegemonic discourse. Bars constantly appear as places where Micaela’s safety is

threatened, where she is only protected to the point that no one knows she is a woman. Even then, her ethnicity cannot be hidden, keeping her constantly in the presence of danger. However, when she finds Clara, in Galveston, the bar is reconfigured to the extent that, although the main floor is still a menace, the room where Clara lives on the second store becomes a place of tranquility: “I let myself be pulled back down and I did not rise from that bed or leave her room for days. To be with her meant my inner turmoil subsided momentarily and I was hopeful again about some kind of future for me but only if she was in the future I envisioned” (Pérez n.p). She is haunted by the violence with which she is entwined (present in passages marked by her alcoholism and in the ghost she talks to in the saloon), but still having peaceful moments. The juxtaposition of the room and the saloon is symbolic of a paradoxical space. They are both in the same building and they are connected, but interactions allow one part to be considered safer than the other. However, they are not completely isolated from what happens in each room, reinforcing the porosity of spaces. In this building, safety is constructed where the protagonist can live her desire. These cravings are emotional, affective, and material:

Clara slid to the center of the bed and lying back, reached for my fingers and held them. [...] Her breath slowed and deepened and I gleaned her breasts rising and falling through her gown. When I placed my head on her soft bump of a belly, she twirled a strand of my hair and I whiffed the scent of lavender and rose petals from her skin. She gripped my hand and turned to face a wall of books piled high and strewn across the floor, dog-eared and marked from her self-schooling. (n.p)

Their affection is evident, in this scene, by the way they touch and feel each other. The description of their relationship intertwines the physical contact, their feelings, and senses. It is through touching, talking, and feeling each other's body that they construct their relationship. The description of Clara's scent and body is enmeshed with the description of objects in the room, reinforcing the connection between affectivity and space. The room has no shelves to put the books, so they are piled on the floor. In one passage, the window in the room is described as “small”, in another, the chair as “stiff”, and the bed as “squeaky”. In general, the room is described as poor; its redeeming quality is Clara's presence. Although Clara is the source of Micaela's tranquility, she is also the one to bring emotions that Micaela considers a “character flaw” (Pérez n.p). The protagonist's jealousy and violence are the reasons for the couple's continuing separations that force Micaela into her journey. In Galveston, jealousy makes Micaela beat up another man, which forces her to run away to New Orleans. The bar as a place for violence counteracts the room as the one for peace. Her actions, then, force her to leave this place where, even if it were only in a room and momentarily, she finds hope and tranquility.

On a different kind of connection, Micaela spends a night in a stable talking to Lucius, an enslaved man who is cleaning horse dung and brushing the animals

while his enslaver is in a bar. Sharing stories is their bridge: “I suppose that in telling his story, he comforted himself as well” (Pérez n.p). Lucius tells the stories of violence, torture, and atrocities he lived, and they make Micaela comfortable about sharing her own stories of death, sadness, revenge, and murder. In opposition to the bars, where she cannot be recognized, in the stable, the marginalized subject recognizes her from the beginning. In the periphery of the city, in the places where the dominant narratives arrive ever so slightly, these characters create their safe space to share experiences and to resist erasure from history. A stable is not automatically safe – so much so that Micaela is raped in one. What constructs the peripheral place as protected from violence is the interaction between the characters. This safety is juxtaposed to Lucius’ description of Texas: “You might as well get yourself back to Mexico and leave this place to ole whitey because, darlin, it’s slave lynching country and it’s Mexican killing country and it’s Indian scalping country and it’s going to be that for a mighty long time” (Pérez n.p). Thus, in a place where racialized discrimination is ever present, the violence of the geographical region contrasts with the protection of the stable. For Micaela, danger is personified in Lucius’ enslaver, who comes to the scene while she is there. First, he thinks he remembers meeting Micaela before: “It’s the meskin boy. I seen that face before”, so he can testify her whereabouts to her enemies, which would mean death. Second, he cannot notice that she is not a meskin *boy*, for it would not only show her disguise but it would put her as a woman in jeopardy. Coming from the bar, he is drunk and “toppled over, landed on horse dung and dozed off” (Pérez n.p). Micaela and Lucius share their stories and construct their connections under the sleeping presence of a menace, knowing that their encounter must finish before he wakes up and the stable ceases to offer protection.

The paradox of the space surfaces both in the presence of the enslaver and in relation to the previous stable scene (Micaela’s rape). They prevent considering any space ontologically safe. They also indicate the pervasiveness of the colonial system that threatens the lives of these people. Still, some bridges allow moments of security, where the fractured locus can be enacted. Hence, the paradox. Micaela feels safe enough to confess to Lucius her feelings for another woman. The confession of Micaela’s desire helps to construct a sense of alliance between them. Her story builds a relationship based on complicity and understanding. The stable, like the room Clara shares with the protagonist, is the “elsewhere” of the bar; although part of the discursive practices that marginalize both Micaela and Lucius, they have somewhat more freedom here than in places normally occupied by hegemonic subjects. By the end of this chapter, the two stable scenes are connected when Micaela, as the narrator, says: “what I didn’t tell Lucius was the thing I had yet to admit to myself. The night of Juana’s death, they had done to me what they had done to her and for too long now I had denied it” (Pérez n.p). Linking these two scenes in similar spaces, one of unthinkable violence and the other of affinity and comfort, highlights that no place is essentially safe; rather it depends on the connections between the myriads of forces interacting in simultaneity and multiplicity.

As previously discussed, queerness offers safety for the protagonist that other instances of her life fail to offer. In the epicenter of a “slave lynching country and [...], Mexican killing country and [...], Indian scalping country” (Pérez, n.p), as Lucius describes the territory of Texas after the independence from Mexico, land, violence, and the production of colonizing discourse are on the making while Micaela strives for survival. The enmeshment of desire and the Indigenous heritage of these characters, in this context, functions as a counternarrative against a colonality that questions the hegemonic discourses about spatial temporalities.

The non-normative sexuality of Micaela questions the unilinear hegemonic temporality and binarism that constructs Anglo-Eurocentric societies as civilized and native ones as barbaric and belated. Her lover is a mestiza woman, like her, with whom Micaela can recognize herself. This love story considers the importance of their heritage in a construction against a background of erasure of the Indigenous participation in the Borderlands:

It was said mama was india and her grandmother on her mother's side was Tonkawa, a people descended from the wolf, but those who said this spoke in whispers. Others whispered she was mulatta, having inherited her great-grandfather's tanned skin of a Spanish Moor, but her father's family claimed she was Española, as pure and Spanish as they were meant to be, descendants of the Canary Islanders that arrived a century earlier. (Pérez n.p.)

The use of terms such as “it was said” and “whispers” highlights the difficulty of recovering parts of one's heritage that are considered racially inferior. Whispering appears as a sign of shame, a part of the self that is better to keep silenced. However, the silencing process is never complete, so the whispers emerge. The rewriting of historical events to include these same characteristics that hegemonic perspective tries to silence needs to use whispers, little hints that are obscured by erasure.

The counterpoint of whispers is the claiming of European heritage. While others whisper, the family “claims” an impossible purity, impossibility materialized in the “tanned skin” of the mother. The tanned skin does not carry any truth about origins. It can be an Indigenous or Moor heritage, depending on who is telling the story. Anyhow, the body becomes the place where the visibility of impurity contradicts the fallacy present in the discourse of pure Spanish. The difference between claiming and whispering marks the discourse of colonality within the colonized subjects. Similarly, “it was said” evidences the lack of historical sources even for those living the experiences they are trying to tell. The passive voice obliterates the subject who recounts the family history and gives an aura of uncertainty to the statement. Nevertheless, Micaela's narrative finds in the whispers a name to her ancestry. She calls them Tonkawa, rescuing this heritage, even without concrete proof, since she only has whispers and stories told by a passive voice.

Contrary to the whispering of *mestizaje*, as is narrated, Micaela and Clara bring forth in their relationship the Indigenous part of their selves. In this context,

Clara states: “Most folks don’t know what to make of me,” she said. “Some think I’m white like my grandfather, and others, they see my papa’s blackness shining through me. It’s mostly Mexicans who call me India. They wanna see my mother’s blood” (Pérez n.p.). Comparing to how Micaela’s family used to mention their heritage, Clara’s description foregrounds her *mestizaje*, not in whispers, but as a loud constitutive of her self. The trouble others face in categorizing her is not described as inferior characteristics intrinsic to the self, as might be perceived in the whispers. Instead, Clara embraces that different people read her in different ways. In Clara’s description of herself, neither being white as her grandfather, black as her father, or Indigenous as her mother is a reason for shame. More than that, neither of her heritages is relegated only to her past, her ancestry. Her historical construction is brought by her as constitutive of who she is, in the present. This present, then, is not anachronized as a traditional past. In other words, none of these characters are mythologized or frozen in a past that idealizes purity. Micaela desires Clara, her *mestizaje* and the relationship to her origins. Hence, that which is considered by dominant discourses as relegated to the past, as primitive, erased by genocide, is used to connect these two characters. This desire also moves Micaela to seek more about her own heritage by recognizing her own *mestizaje* in Clara. It is a desire that moves her in the direction of the desirable object, and also moves her into rethinking her own self.

Thus, the fact that Clara is *mestiza* affects her connection to Micaela. The latter affirms that “I realized my love for Clara was as bound up in her past as what we had right then in her tiny room” (Pérez n.p.). In this sense, their relationship moves from past to present, reconstructing a connection that recognizes Indigeneity’s relevance and participation in the process of *mestizaje*. The protagonist supposes that their proximity to Clara’s “real home brought up things she had a need to remember” (Pérez n.p.). As these are characters who are constantly on the move, and as such, the story is also a fictional travel writing, they are still informed by concepts of “home” and “real”. Home, however, is related to ancestry more than the materiality of a place. As the conversation goes, we learn Clara is a descendant of a coastal tribe, Karankawa, so being in Galveston, a bay city closer to the land of her ancestors, is considered near her “real home”.

The relationship between these two characters constructs safety and recognition that leads the narrative to associate the traditional heritages of the *mestiza* to a protection against the daily violence of their context, counterarguing the dominant ideology that considers the anachronized past as repression. The presence of ancestry and their connection to the land in *Forgetting the Álamo* work as a counternarrative to the hegemonic discursive construction of Indigeneity. These characters name their origins and live them in the present. They are not only “Indians”; they are Karankawa and Tonkawa, and these ancestries (in)form their routes and affect to places and to each other. Mobilization is not a movement distancing oneself from one’s roots. Similarly, reclaiming and recognizing belonging to a land is not a movement towards fixity. Rather, as it is perceived in *Forgetting the Álamo*, displacement is related to a concept of home that unfolds

forced diasporas within one's own country. Thus, as a counterpoint, mobility – and in the case of this novel, mobility triggered by desire – becomes an act of using displacement to recover historical events and parts of the self that colonial violence tries to erase.

Micaela is in a constant geographical movement. Her only chance of survival is by moving. When she tries to go back home, she is arrested for a crime she did not commit, despite her killing, robbing, and assaulting other people on her journey. Safety is directly connected to movement, still, keeping home as a place of return. To continue her journey, she builds bridges along the way, connections that are sensitive to the plurilocality in which they are constructed. Despite the presence of bridges that allow her to fulfill her journey in the company of others, even so they are momentaneous and strategic forms of survival, the breaches that break these connections also mobilize her journey. Violence is not a price to pay for development. Nevertheless, violence is constant in Micaela's journey. Thus, the (un)natural bridges and breaches must be reworked and mobilized so she could create safe, although momentaneous and paradoxical, spaces to live – more than just survive.

Pérez (re)writing of the conflicts in the Borderlands inverts and disrupts predetermined concepts of affinity, development, and space. The novel not only decenters a dominant historical narrative, focusing on the protagonism of a mestiza, but also emphasizes the importance of (re)visiting the historical past in order to allow new readings. Both the work itself and the protagonist do that to decolonize the borderlands, which otherwise is constructed as belated. *Forgetting the Álamo* acts in what Cherríe Moraga (2011) calls “a life of writing against amnesia” (85-86). In this novel the white colonizers bring other levels of violence that displace subjects to a diasporic position in a constant confrontation that engenders and racializes them against white hegemonic social norms. As a response to the normativization of space under Eurocentric oppressive powers, Micaela breaks the norms by finding safety in a non-normative relationship with a mestiza woman.

In this novel, desire exercises movements between danger, safety, and decoloniality. The work hereby analyzed articulates the positionalities of the characters from a Xicana perspective, contextualizing and evidencing that these identifications affect their desire and their relationships to others and space. These characters also participate in reconstituting the spaces they occupy from these Xicana standpoints; they use their locality to complicate simplistic perceptions of the Borderlands. *Forgetting the Álamo*, set in the 1830s, (re)writes the conflicts following the battle of the Álamo, effectively changing the general jargon “remember the Álamo”. The atrocities lived by Micaela should be in the realm of forgetting. Ironically, the novel re-members queer Xicanas into history. The novel decenters a dominant narrative of a historical event and rewrites the traumas of many invaded territory inhabitants. The protagonist can only survive through movement and gender non-conformity. Her brief moments of peace are constructed through her non-normative desire and bridges with other marginalized people.

If coloniality homogenizes spaces and delimits movements, the decolonial processes present in this novel expand the belongings of Xicanas and complicate spaces where they interact. Women's desire, so often under repression and control, takes the protagonism of these different configurations and reconfigures safe and unsafe, functioning as a propulsion to face danger, and construct bridges.

Notes

1. The term Xicana, with an "X", marks an epistemological shift in a decolonial standpoint. The term highlights a close connection to Indigenous and Mexican communities, while still reinforcing a feminist perspective. The shift in the signifier brings this intersectional approach closer to marginalized subjects (the "x" is the Nahuatl spelling of the "ch" phoneme).
2. The idea of peacefulness here can also be questioned through an Indigenous perspective, since this time Elsie's character is mentioning is still after the Spanish colonization of the Americas, in which genocide is already part of the Native peoples' history.

References

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "(Un)Natural Bridges, (Un)Safe Spaces." *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, edited by Analouise Keating, Duke UP, 2009, pp. 243–48.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Analouise Keating, Duke UP, 2015.
- Ávila, Eliana de Souza. "Temporal Borderlands: Toward Decolonial Queer Temporality in Latinx Literature." *The Cambridge History of Latina/o American Literature*, by Laura Lomas and John Morán González, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 711–36.
- Cisneros, Jesus, and Christian Bracho. "Undocuqueer Stress: How Safe Are 'Safe' Spaces, and for Whom?" *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2019.
- Desbiens, Caroline. "Feminism 'in' Geography. Elsewhere, Beyond and the Politics of Paradoxical Space." *Gender, Place and Culture*, no. 2, 1999, pp. 179–85.
- Goode-Cross, David T., and Glenn E. Good. "African American Men Who Have Sex with Men: Creating Safe Spaces through Relationships." *The American Psychology Association*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2008, pp. 221–34.
- Holley, Lynn C., and Sue Steiner. "Safe Space: Student Perspectives on Classroom Environment." *Journal of Social Work Education*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2005, pp. 49–64.
- Lauretis, Teresa de. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Indiana UP, 1987.
- Lugones, María. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." *Hypatia*, v. 22, n. 1, p. 186–209, 2007.
- Lugones, María. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2010, pp. 742–59.
- Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage, 2005.

- McDowell, Linda. "Spatializing Feminism: Geographic Perspectives." *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, by Nancy Duncan (Org.), London & New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Mignolo, W. *Local Histories/Colonial Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.
- Moraga, Cherrie. *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.
- Pérez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1999.
- Pérez, Emma. *Forgetting the Alamo, or, Blood Memory*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.
- Quijano, Anibal. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from the South*, vol. 1, no. 13, 2000, pp. 533–80.
- Roestone Collective. "Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualization." *Antipode*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2014, pp. 1346–65.
- Rose, Gillian. *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. Polity Press, 1993.

Submission date: 05/11/2024

Acceptance date: 05/03/2025

Guest Editors: Alinne Balduino P. Fernandes, Melissa Sihra