

**From Here and There: Crossing Cultural Borders and Permeating the  
*Piel de Palabras***

By

**Robyn Lopez Melton**

A THESIS

Submitted to

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Robyn Lopez Melton for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in International Studies in Liberal Studies presented on September 6<sup>th</sup> 2007. Title: From Here and There: Crossing Cultural Borders and Permeating the *Piel de Palabras*

Abstract Approved: Dr. Neil Browne

Immigrants must cross two barriers when entering the United States, the physical border and a cultural border created by a set of exclusive cultural values and profits-before-people economic ethics. Immigrants, coerced by unstable and desperate economic situations, risk their lives and leave behind their families to cross the physical border in search of something better for their children. After replanting themselves in a strange land they are faced with the second, cultural border. This border manifests in the lives of immigrants as oppression and exploitation. Language, in the form of *pieles de palabras*, delimits immigrants by alienating and criminalizing their identities. Our economic system and our own participation in the exploitation and oppression of this community hide immigrants from our consciousness, placing a metaphoric tinted window between immigrants and our consciousness.

Despite alienation and blatant discrimination, immigrants build lives, families and communities. The push and pull between the immigrants' culture of origin and the mainstream American culture leaves the immigrants in a unique placeless space coined by Gloria Anzaldúa "the borderlands." This psychological space is a space of great oppression, but because normal cultural rules do not apply in the borderlands, it can be a place of great opportunity. The borderlands create a space where language and culture can be reinvented and a new inclusive consciousness can be carved, in which the tinted glass is shattered and the *piel de palabras* is permeated.

Bachelors of Arts in International Studies in Liberal Studies  
Thesis of Robyn Lopez Melton  
Presented on September 6<sup>th</sup> 2007

Approved:

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Dr. Neil Browne, Assistant Professor of English, OSU-Cascades

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the collection of Oregon State University. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request. I also affirm that the work represented in this thesis is my own work.

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Robyn A. Lopez Melton, Author

*“Shifting how we think about language and how we use it necessarily alters how we know what we know”—bell hooks*

I entered a restaurant today, an old fashioned burger place I frequented with my husband when I was pregnant with my daughter. There is a window between the dining room and the corner with the dishwashers, one machine and one human being. At first sight there is nothing special about the window; it is a highly efficient way to get the dirty dishes to the dishwasher. The man behind the window, now, he is special. He was the only Hispanic working in the restaurant today, tirelessly cleaning dish after dish, accepting every dirty napkin and used coffee cup shoved through the window. I cannot tell you if he enjoys his job or feels a sense of accomplishment as he pulls a rack of clean dishes out of the dishwasher. The top portion of the window is covered with a darkly tinted sheet of plexi-glass. The tinted window hides his identity, leaving only his hands and his work visible to restaurant guests. No one knows who washes our dishes; this immigrant is to most like the dishwasher he loads and unloads, a machine that does a job that needs to be done. Faceless, tucked away in a corner and surrounded by our mess, he was a stark comparison to the cooks whose white faces were framed by a brightly lit window filled with burgers and fries.

Our country is a young nation built and maintained by waves of immigrants. Our history is wrought with civil rights movements. America, the nation that attempts to spread freedom and access to opportunity throughout the globe, has tucked an entire community away in a corner. We have created a cultural window in which we allow ourselves to see the work produced by this population, but not the persons doing the work. We tint the window so that we do not have to see whether or not the person behind

the window enjoys doing our dirty work. The tinted window sanctions our dehumanizing treatment of these undocumented immigrants. We have culturally blinded ourselves to the fact that this population is exploited for our own personal gain.

The photo below was taken in October 2004 during a motorcycle rally along the border between the United States and Mexico. The image shows the two barriers that immigrants must cross when coming to the United States. On the far right we see the physical border separating the Mexico, on the right, from the United States. The line of people and motorcycles represents the cultural border—a set of exclusive cultural ideals that create an attitude of superiority and often hatred towards the immigrants and people of Latino decent living in the US. I will be examining the effect language has on creating and reinforcing this cultural border as well as presenting ideas to use language to perforate the cultural border.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> American Border Patrol. 2007. American Border Patrol. June, 2007 <[www.americanborderpatrol.com](http://www.americanborderpatrol.com)>.

Throughout my work I will use the phrase *piel de palabras* which translates literally to “skin of words” to complicate our understanding of the meaning of the word label. We tend to label and stereotype individuals or groups as freely as we stick price tags on items at the grocery store—with the assumption that the label can be peeled off as the value of the product goes up or down. However, as we use language to categorize or classify people we must remain conscious of the power of language. The words that we use create our perceptions of ourselves and others. *Pieles de palabras* are not simply labels that can be peeled away; the language that we use is internalized and becomes a part of the self. Just as our physical skin forms the body’s interface with the physical environment, the *piel de palabras* becomes the person’s interface with her or his own culture.

Language and culture are mutually and reciprocally influenced. A culture is defined by the language it speaks and language is defined by the culture it serves. Language, the words we choose, yields power. bell hooks writes, “Shifting how we think of language and how we use it necessarily changes how we know what we know.”<sup>2</sup> Becoming conscious of the language that we use, and why we use it can change our understanding of our culture. Much of my argument is about breaking down barriers, borders, classifications and the *piel de palabras* created by the language we use—all of which delimit and engulf the immigrant population. However, I must first identify, define and outline my focus population. Adrienne Rich illustrates this paradox in her poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” She writes, “This is the oppressor’s language yet I

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<sup>2</sup> hooks, bell. Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. New York:Routledge, 1994. p. 174



need it to talk to you.”<sup>3</sup> Before we can begin to tear down socially and linguistically constructed borders and permeate the *piel de palabras*, we must first find a common ground from which we can recognize that they exist.

The language we use when describing immigrants who have entered the United States by means other than with a valid passport and/or visa define and create our perception of this population. The political stance of the labeler is revealed by the *pieles de palabras* he/she chooses to use. Those sympathetic to the struggles of the immigrant culturally envelop this population with *pieles de palabras* such as undocumented immigrants, undocumented workers, immigrants, or they may choose not to define this population by their immigration status. Others less sensitive to these struggles often see the immigrants as criminals and therefore use dehumanizing and criminalizing *pieles de palabras* such as alien, illegal aliens or illegal immigrants to create a different identity for the immigrants. Wetback, a more weighted *piel de palabras*, is a racial slur that pokes fun at the dangers of border crossings, minimizing the experience of the immigrant. Again, these *pieles de palabras* reveal our perceptions of the population, while at the same time defining the relationship of the immigrants with our culture.

Apart from using the *piel de palabras* as a tool to illustrate the oppression and exclusion of the immigrant community, I also employ my own personal experiences living and working professionally within this community to exemplify the reality of the everyday struggles of immigrants. The use of my experiences emerges from a second wave feminist theory that states that the personal is political. This theory contends that personal experiences, lifestyles, and possibilities are not dictated exclusively by personal

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<sup>3</sup> Referenced in hooks, 167

choices or preferences but are confined by the broader political and social society.<sup>4</sup> Hence, my personal life and experiences are politically bordered and determined by the social conditions within which I live and limited by the *piel de palabras* that encapsulates my identity. By To improve my personal experiences I must inclusively address political and cultural systems and structures.

This theory has also evolved into the opposite form as well meaning that to improve cultural and political structures I must address my personal experiences. Sharif Abdullah in *The Power of One* embodies this theory calling those who realize the potential power in personal choices and experiences “the power of mobilized people.” He states that, “The most potent force on Earth today is the power of mobilized people. It is also the most unused.”<sup>5</sup> Through examples, Abdullah demonstrates that taking responsibility for one’s own actions and reassigning responsibilities from political systems and structures back on to the individual provides individuals again with personal power to make choices and changes locally and globally.

Throughout my argument I will be exploring the struggles of the Latino and immigrant communities by oscillating between the personal and the political. At times I will be looking at how my personal experiences represent a common experience because my identity and actions are confined within political and social systems and my own *piel de palabras*. I will also look at how my experiences and the experiences and actions of individuals and groups of rouge patriots, immigrants, activists and writers create these political systems, structures and *pieles de palabras* through personal experiences and

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<sup>4</sup> Editorial: *The Personal is Political ?*. July, 1997. Z Magazine Online. August, 2007  
<<http://zena.secureforum.com/Znet/zmag/articles/julyeditorial97.html>>

<sup>5</sup> Abdullah, Sharif. *The Power of One: Authentic Leadership in Turbulent Times*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1995. p. 36.

actions. Finally, I will explore ways to break through this cultural phenomenon and create more inclusive cultural systems and structures.

I am, and therefore my work is, highly influenced by radical activists and feminists of color, namely Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks. The personal experiences of these women have given me a greater understanding of the social and political limitations of my own experiences, while, at the same time, providing raw insight into the collective experiences of women of color living in the United States. These eloquent feminist writers have followed a similar life path. They both come from working class families and lived in communities with high racial turmoil. As young women they each were confined by their own *piel de palabras* that attempted to keep them within their communities and under the influences of patriarchy and racism. Through a deep desire for knowledge these women found strength to permeate their *pieles* and a distinct understanding of the world. Each activist followed her dreams and made their way through the higher education system. By seeking for new ways of seeing the world they have become strong activists for women, people of color, lesbians and many of the other communities who are trapped within the borders of their own *pieles de palabras*. These radical activists are known for their daring ability to challenge norms, and are strong leaders because of their bold look into the place of women of color in America. Both activists, in their own right, have challenged the mainstream feminist movement showing that the mainstream feminism excluded and even undermined the experiences of women of color.

My focus lies on the influences of language, political and social systems on the Hispanic community. These influences are culturally constructed and embody a common

cultural perception or understanding of the way the world works. Much of our perception of reality originates from information readily available to the masses—technology and pop culture. My research includes music, television programs and websites to encapsulate this common perception of this community hidden behind the tinted glass.

The experience of the undocumented immigrant is markedly unique. Although the US has a long history of oppression, and immigrants throughout its history, have not been exempt from this story, the undocumented immigrant population faces multiple layers of oppression stemming from racism, legalized oppression and economic disadvantage. To begin to recognize the oppression faced by members of this community, their motives to enter into this country must be understood. Although each individual is compelled to cross the border for her own personal reasons, social, political and economic initiatives between the governments of the United States and Latin American countries have created the circumstances that compel immigrants to enter the US.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has had devastating effects on the Mexican farming economy since 1994 when it took effect. By 2002 farming jobs in Mexico had dropped by 1.3 million, while at the same time US corn exports had increased by 240% and Mexican corn prices had fallen 70%.<sup>6</sup> This agreement, sold as a partnership that would better the economies of all North American countries, has left thousands of Mexican families with no subsistence.

The social results of this economic initiative have been devastating. To counter the effects of NAFTA and ensure the survival of families, children drop out and look for ways to bring in income to help support their families. Children work long days in fields,

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<sup>6</sup> Letters from the Other Side. Dir. Heather Courtney. 2006. DVD. Front Porch Films, 2006.

washing car windows on busy city streets, working in the family *puesto* [booth] at the local market, or sell *chicle* [chewing gum] on the streets. Other children, whose families have no land, *puesto*, or stable housing or who face other social struggles such as single parenthood, addiction issues, disabilities, disease or incarceration can end up on the streets, in child prostitution, or mixed up in gangs, drugs or thievery.

Each immigrant has a story, and has left a life behind. The opportunity, the American Dream, and a deep desire to prevent their children from living a life infected with suffering, pain and desperation coerce immigrants to risk their lives and come north. In response to being asked why he was willing to endanger his life and leave his family to come North, an immigrant being arrested by the border patrol answered, “*Para que [mis hijos] no sufran lo que uno sufre.*” [So that [my children] don’t suffer what I suffer.]<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, families or individuals, compelled by their desperate situations, make the decision to come in search of a better future. Desperation and lack of options compel these men, women and children to risk their lives in an increasingly dangerous venture. In 1994, the same year NAFTA went into effect, the state of California entered into an economic recession. In reaction to this recession the state began to tighten up its border in an attempt to keep undocumented workers from entering the state.<sup>8</sup> As has been seen in every following attempt to stop the passage of immigrants, this action did not result in slowing the number of immigrants entering into the United States yearly. Instead, immigrants have had to find new routes between the two countries.<sup>9</sup> Immigrants have been forced into the harsh desert lands that are the border. Left vulnerable to the

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<sup>7</sup> All Spanish/English translations are mine. Quote from, Rights on The Line: Vigilantes at the Border. American Friends Service Committee. DVD. 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Courtney, 2006

<sup>9</sup> Courtney, 2006

elements immigrants are lead into the desert—some are mugged and left by the coyotes (people, usually men, who lead the crossing expeditions), some suffer and or perish from heat exhaustion, or dehydration, some walk for days under the hot sun only to be captured by *la migra* [immigration] on the other side.

This push into the desert has taken power out of the hands of the immigrants and into the hands of the coyotes. In 1994, the average coyote fee was around \$300, and just 6 years later it was nearly 7 times that amount at around \$2,000.<sup>10</sup> Coyotes charge more because their job has become more dangerous and because immigrants depend more on their ability to find a route through the dangerous terrain. The further out into the desert the immigrants are forced, the more they depend on a coyote to bring them safely to the other side.

The push to tighten the borders has not dramatically changed the number of successful border crossings, but the number of immigrant deaths has steadily increased. In fact, the yearly confirmed death toll has climbed from 61 in 1995 to 464 in 2005. News reports tracking day to day losses have predicted that 2007 will be the deadliest year for immigrants yet.<sup>11</sup> The political call for National Security has tinted our glass and we are voluntarily blinded to the deadly results of these politically rationalized actions. In fact, the current administration has passed funding for continued fencing along the borders, inevitably causing more casualties in the war to protect our country. Laura, the widow of an immigrant who suffocated along with 17 other immigrants in the back of a semi truck in Texas in 2003, begs for a solution, “How many more deaths does it take for

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<sup>10</sup> Courtney, 2006

<sup>11</sup> Courtney, 2006 and 2007 stat taken from numerous broadcasts of Univision Noticiero, 2007

the U.S. government to do something? Let it be on their conscience that since our tragedy many more have died and many more will.”<sup>12</sup>

Border control has recently been associated with national security—a current political buzz word. National security and rouge patriotism have been combined on the Arizona Border. The Minutemen Civil Defense Corps are a citizen group started in Arizona with a mission “to secure United States borders and coastal boundaries against unlawful and unauthorized entry of all individuals, contraband, and foreign military.”<sup>13</sup> This volunteer group of primarily white men donates its time and other resources to patrol the border with the objective of keeping America safe. Minutemen or other vigilante groups cannot legally make arrests or detain immigrants entering the US. Nonetheless, this group employs planes, trucks, ATV’s and man power to reinforce the work of the border patrol agents. As Minutemen spot immigrants, they notify the border patrol of the location and number of immigrants. Often times they lead long chases through the desert to ensure the immigrants are unable to escape before the arrival of the border patrol.

The Minutemen’s “safety of America” objective has transformed into rogue patriotism. One of the Minutemen’s major concerns is proving to the federal government that border security is feasible and vital to the security of the nation. Frustrated with the government’s slow start on the promised wall, this group has begun to build high tech fences on parts of the border that run through private property. These fences are called Simcox fences, named after Chris Simcox a co-founder of the Minutemen. The figure below shows posts being placed on a ranch in Arizona. The resources to build the fences

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<sup>12</sup> Courtney, 2006

<sup>13</sup> [Minuteman HQ.com](http://www.minutemanhq.com). 2007. Minuteman Civil Defense Corps and Declaration Alliance. August, 2007 <[www.minutemanhq.com](http://www.minutemanhq.com)>.

are donated by citizens sympathetic to the Minutemen's work. In fact, if you donate a fence post, the minutemen will weld an engraved plaque with your dedication onto your post. For a smaller donation they will place a small American flag on a post in your honor.<sup>14</sup>



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The minutemen are politically savvy and produce publicly appealing images of their mission and operations. The reality of this group of volunteers is much different from the political image portrayed. Although the group denies the validity of these stories and states that they use strictly non violent coercion to help the border patrol, there have been many reports of rouge violence and killings along the border. Vigilantes carry guns, yet claim not to use them. Many immigrants are found shot to death each year along the border. Another disturbing fact about the Minutemen is that investigations of members, volunteers and affiliated groups discovered that many have connections to other white supremacist groups.<sup>16</sup> Hence, many of the white men who are standing alone in the desert

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<sup>14</sup> Minuteman HQ.com

<sup>15</sup> Photo from Minuteman HQ.com

<sup>16</sup> *Rights on the Line*, 2005



armed with guns and an environment of rouse patriotism are actually there to act out the hatred that they feel towards others who are different from themselves.

In spite of the tightening of the borders and the efforts of the vigilante groups it is estimated that there are currently between 11-12 million undocumented immigrants residing within the United States. It is hard to keep 12 million faces behind a sheet of tinted glass, and through the efforts of activists and other immigrants, the existence of this once invisible immigrant population is slowly is coming into the mainstream consciousness, resulting in a polarizing political and social debate. Each side agrees that there is a problem, but debate the roots of the issue. One side considers the immigrants to be the problem, and the other sees a systemic problem.

First I will look at what I call the legalistic perspective. This group wraps the population in a *piel de palabras* that says that these people are illegal aliens and because they are not legal residents they should not be here. Therefore, aliens are not entitled to any rights afforded to citizens or legal residents of the US. This legalistic perspective creates an us-versus-them attitude and an idea of exclusivity—they see the US as having limited resources that cannot be shared with the other. This group sees the immigration situation as a problem caused by the immigrants themselves, not as a problem caused by American society.

On the polar-opposite side of this argument is the group that believes that the immigration problem is created by an unfair system that allows the exploitation of human beings for the economic benefit of many. This group does not focus on the immigrants as the problem but on the circumstances, oppression and economic abuse of this population. They work from a humanitarian perspective, from the belief that human beings deserve

equal rights and equal access to opportunity regardless of their race or nationality. The roots of the problem are not issues of legality or illegality but racism, classism, capitalism and ethnocentrism. By recognizing that much of the desperation felt by the immigrants deciding to migrate to the US is a result of by economic initiatives such as NAFTA and other Free Trade agreements, the problem becomes systemic, not individual, and the blame is shifted from the immigrant to the system.

The legalistic group sees the immigrants as abusing our social service system and taking resources from citizens that deserve them. A major argument is that immigrants live off of welfare. I currently work in the social service field, and although my organization does not discriminate on the basis of immigration status, my personal experience working with other agencies including the Department of Human Services (DHS) is that without a valid social security number a person cannot qualify to receive services. An immigrant family in Oregon cannot receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) which is commonly called welfare. They do not qualify for food stamps or even for the Oregon Health Plan (OHP). The only way a family can receive assistance from DHS is if they have a family member with a valid social security number which generally means that they have a child who was born in the US. These children are US citizens and therefore qualify for services, but that does not mean that the entire family qualifies. For example a family of 5 in which the parents are ineligible for social security numbers and whose oldest child was born in Mexico before they migrated to the United States would only qualify for OHP for the two younger children born in the US—the parents and oldest child would remain without medical insurance. A single mother, even if her child was a US citizen would not qualify for TANF because it is the mother

who must qualify for TANF not the child. Families without any documented members are unable to receive food stamps often leaving children hungry and parents desperate.

The legalistic perspective also argues that illegal immigrants cause over-crowding in our educational institutions leaving their children with a lower quality of education, using this *piel de palabras* to suggest an invasion that affects their children. Many fight against bilingualism in the schools and feel that the children of aliens should not have the same right to education as their “American” children. They also point out that there are many aliens within our criminal justice system and that taxpayers are paying thousands of dollars each year to provide room and board for these criminals who should not have entered the country anyway.

Because this legalistic perspective perceives the problem as caused by the immigrants themselves they look for solutions that focus on getting the problem out of “our” country. They define these human beings with the *piel de palabras* illegal alien, dehumanizing the person and identifying her/him as a criminal. This legalistically minded group sees the immigration crisis as a problem with obvious and simplistic solutions. Simply put, this population broke the law and they should pay the consequences--find them, deport them and the problem is solved. Supporting laws that make life harder for immigrants such as the “true ID” laws that require persons soliciting a drivers license or other identification from the DMV have a social security card or other laws that require police officers to inquire about suspected immigration status, this legalistic minded group attempts to make it harder for immigrants to reside in their communities.

This group justifies their arguments by stating that those who want to come to the U.S. and find a better life are welcome here, as long as they do so legally. Citing their

belief that it is the immigrants' problem, not a systemic problem, this group advocates that Mexico fix its own problems, or, in moments of humanitarianism, that we should help Mexico fix its problems. Feeding on the current atmosphere of fear sparked by the events of 9/11 this side of the debate argues for the reinforcement of the borders to keep America safe, ignoring the consequences to those on the border.

The humanitarian perspective contradicts the legalistic perspective's claim that the undocumented immigrants place a strain on the social service and educational systems. Most undocumented immigrants pay taxes each year and yet are not entitled to the same benefits afforded to citizens. Moreover, a portion of every paycheck is allotted to Social Security, a benefit that most will never see. Refuting the argument that immigrants cause overcrowding, this perspective recognizes the over-crowding of schools not as a dilemma caused by immigrants, but, again, by a system in which education is undervalued and therefore under funded. In fact, regardless of citizenship of the students, school districts are allotted extra funding for each child whose first language is not English. This funding in theory is to provide the support that these children need to excel in school, but often ends up in the general fund and is spent for other purposes. In short, many people use welfare, our schools are overcrowded and our criminal justice system costs taxpayers money, but this is not the result of immigrants living within the United States but of a system that needs to be fixed.

Moreover, the solutions proposed and being carried out right now cause more problems instead of resolving solutions. Recognizing the circumstances that compel immigrants to come in search of a future for themselves and their families, human beings should not feel obligated to risk their lives and be exploited because they choose to try to

make a better life for their families. Once here, fear of persecution and deportation along with language and cultural barriers keeps them in vulnerable situations. Most have left behind extended families, and tight-knit communities, finding themselves in a society that values, individuality, independence and initiative. They are trapped by their *piel de palabras* that tells them that they are illegal or even aliens. This *piel* becomes internalized and can begin to self identify as criminals and strange outsiders who do not and cannot fit in or feel a sense of home.

The National Security initiatives and resulting laws are problematic and unduly focused on and directed at immigrants. The supposed political and social benefit of these laws is to keep persons without legal status from being able to live within our social structures and to be able to track true identity of anyone getting an ID card, thereby keeping America safe from this population. The results are much different. To return to the example of the “True ID’s,” most immigrants prefer to have a driver’s license and insurance while driving around in America. Before the passage of the laws requiring a social security card to get a drivers license, most immigrants could go to the DMV and would have to pass a drivers test to receive their drivers’ license. Now that a license is not a possibility for most but the need for transportation is still the same many are forced to drive without a license. Without a license insurance companies will not insure a driver. Results—more uninsured and uneducated drivers on the streets.

The other piece of this argument is that of “true” identification. Logically the DMV and law enforcement wanted to hold individuals accountable for their ID’s and cut down on fraud and fake ID’s. This is a valid point and should be addressed. The problem lies in the way they check for true ID. By requiring a social security number the DMV is

excluding the population of 11-12 million immigrants that do not qualify for a social security number. If those of this population who did not get their ID cards before these true ID's laws took effect are now unable to obtain a government issued ID card, how accountable are they for their identification. If there is no legal record of their name, where they live or even that they exist how are they supposed to be found if they commit a real crime, or if they hit a car and run because they don't have insurance? Taking away DMV issued identification cards has not made immigrants more accountable for their identification it has forced many into an even more invisible and venerable place.

The true intentions of this law are also revealed in its enforcement. Both my husband, a Mexican man with an accent, and me, a white women with English as my first language and American cultural skills, have attempted to do business in the DMV since the enforcement of the true id laws. My husband has been asked to show a social security card and I have not, revealing a racial and cultural profiling in the enforcement of these laws.

Through my experience in the enforcement of this law, my fear is that the other laws will also be racially and culturally aimed. In parts of the country, primarily in border towns and in the state of Arizona other laws aimed at immigrants are passing.

Laws that:

- ◆ Require law enforcement to check immigration status of all persons involved in an incident.
- ◆ “No help” laws stating that anyone aiding undocumented persons in any way can be fined or prosecuted.
- ◆ Require an immigration status check when applying for housing.

If the trend from the “true ID” laws continue through these laws it will be Hispanics and other persons of color and/ foreign descent that will have to prove and reprove their legal right to reside in the United States. I will not have to carry my passport for fear of being pulled over and having to prove my citizenship, but my daughter with her honey skin, dark eyes and hair, could be interrogated repeatedly about her citizenship.

The laws being passed and the increase in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) roundups do not provide solutions, just more systematic problems. An ICE raid will pick up an immigrant suspected of not having the proper documentation. She will be held, processed, sometimes allowed a trial to appeal her deportation and then be deported. There are between 3 and 4 million American children with undocumented parents.<sup>17</sup> Through the process of deportation, families, lives, and children are ripped at the seams. As parents are taken, children, potentially millions of children, are left behind without one or both parents, left in their country as their parents are returned to theirs. They are separated by distance, and by laws and cultural boundaries.

Immigrants that have spent years putting down roots, who have bought property, started families are beamed back to a place that they may no longer consider home. Wives, daughters, sons, husbands, partners, pets, friends, coworkers, bosses are left behind to try to fill the loss of a provider, a lover, a parent. This process of deportation separates families and often leaves the most vulnerable population—children—with no one to care for them but the state. Other deportees are those who were brought as young children to the United States by their parents. They have grown up, acculturated, been educated in and lived nearly all of their lives in the United States. Some are deported to countries they have never visited with no language skills and no family or friends to

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<sup>17</sup> “Seperacion de Familias.” Don Franscisco Presenta. Univision. Miami. 5 Sept. 2007.

return to. Nonetheless, their immigration status affords them the risk of being ripped from the country they call home and dropped into a foreign one. Surprise ICE raids and massive roundups are not the answers to the immigration predicament.

Here we come to a complex predicament. One of the most difficult barriers facing immigrants is the feeling of homelessness. Imagine a rare pink flower who has been forced from his native land because there was not enough water to survive. He was replanted in a place with water to spare. This pink flower begins to put down roots in his new garden. But the larger, native red flowers grow leaves that block the sunlight from hitting the pink flower, this is their land and they control the sunlight. The pink flowers have a special nutrient in their leaves that helps the red flowers. Each time the pink flower is hit by a ray of sun he remembers that he is lucky to be in this land of plentiful water and must be happy with the bit of sun he gets to survive. The pink flowers rarely grow big enough to compete for sunlight. The pink flowers are only allowed to survive and stay in this land of plentiful water because of the nutrient that helps the red flowers flourish. The only time that the pink flowers can compete with the reds is when they are planted together in families. The older pink flowers surround the younger ones and create space for the sunlight to hit the little ones. The laws of nature say that the pink flowers should be in their native land because that is where their seeds first sprouted. The red flowers remind the pink flowers of this law. Every now and then, one of the replanted pinks that is vital to the survival of the family group is taken away back to his native land. The roots that he worked hard to sprout despite the conditions of this new land are ripped up. His family is left to fend for themselves and he is replanted again in his native land. He feels again at home in the hot sunlight, but his roots have modified to living in a



land with water and the dry dirt feels strange and foreign. His family has stayed behind because they too are unaccustomed to the dry dirt of the native land, some of their seedlings sprouted in the new land and don't know the life in the old land. This is his land, but he has left, grown and changed. Where does he belong?

A common phrase within the Hispanic community says that the immigrant is *ni de aqui ni de alla* [not from here nor there.] Ricardo Arjona, a popular Latin pop singer/songwriter brings this sense of nowhere-ness to life in his song entitled "Mojado." Arjona sings,

*El suplicio de un papel lo ha convertido en fugitivo,  
Y no es de aquí porque su nombre no aparece en los archivos,  
Ni es de allá porque se fue.*  
[He is turned into a fugitive by the torturous documents  
And he is not from here because his name doesn't appear in any archive  
And he is not from there because he left.]<sup>18</sup>

The laws tell immigrants they cannot be from here unless they were born or have the opportunity to become naturalized here. But they are from here because they make great sacrifices to come here and many begin to build lives and communities when they arrive. They are not from here because their *piel de palabras* informs them that they are cultural outsiders. They are from here because their hard work sustains the economy. They are not from here because their hearts and loved ones left behind call them back to their former communities. They are from here because their hearts and loved ones here need them to stay. The immigrant lives in a transient state, a space between two cultures, between two countries and between two competing sets of norms and values.

Gloria Anzaldúa in her theoretical autobiographical book *Borderlands/La Frontera* identifies the life of a Chicana as a life in the "borderlands." Anzaldúa identifies

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<sup>18</sup> Arjona, Ricardo. "Mojado." *Adentro*. Norte, 2005.

the borderlands not only as a geographical place or physical location, but also as a psychological space<sup>19</sup>. The borderlands are nowhere and everywhere. A borderland exists any place two or more cultures cross. The idea of not being from here or there creates a borderland space in the minds and communities of immigrants, their lives being the link between the two cultures.

Anzaldúa's honest self examination of both the mainstream white and mainstream Hispanic cultures pushing and pulling at the borderlands culture reveals the patriarchal nature of both. Those living within this borderland are in a constant state of great vulnerability because they do not have a place, or unifying identity. Immigrants in this state are trapped within multiple layers of *pieles de palabras* from each bordering culture. *Pieles de Palabras* become internalized and instead of unifying the community with a common identity, individuals are alienated and left to fend for themselves. This alienation can be compared to the struggles of the feminists of color against the mainstream feminist movement which while working towards equality for women, alienated the experiences of women of color and excluded the unique experiences and multilayered oppression of this population leaving them in their own borderlands—their experiences limited by the patriarchal cultures within which they live because of their gender, but excluded from the feminist movement because the racial oppression of their experiences were not included in the mainstream feminist consciousness. Norma Alarcón, a Chicana feminist articulates this argument in her essay “The Theoretical Subjects of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism” found in Gloria

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<sup>19</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria, Borderlands/La Frontera. New York: Aunt Lute, 1987.

Anzaldúa's book entitled *Making Faces, Making Soul Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*. She argues,

The pursuit of a “politics of unity” solely based on gender forecloses the “pursuit of solidarity” through different political formations and the exploration of alternative theories of the subject of consciousness. There is a tendency in more sophisticated and elaborate gender standpoint epistemologists to affirm “an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures” with one breath, and with the next to refuse to explore how that identity may be theorized or analyzed by reconfirming a unified subjectivity or “shared consciousness” through gender. The difference is handed over with one hand and taken away with the other.<sup>20</sup>

Alarcón's argument explores different layers of culture-language, race and gender—and articulates that each of these layers can be wrapped in a *piel de palabras* that limits and alienates the individual experience. By focusing only on the unity of experiences of one of these *pieles* the experiences of the others tear apart any unity. Identity of self and identity of community depend on the relationship between all of the layers of consciousness. The immigrant's layers of consciousness are wrought with *pieles de palabras* and their sense of place, self-identity, and feeling of community are fragmented by these *pieles*. The pink flower that was allowed just enough sunlight to survive and produce the nutrient needed by the dominate red flower was thankful to the red flower. Oppression in the form of *pieles de palabras* works the same way. Immigrants' *pieles* tell them that they need to be thankful for the opportunity to live in this country and therefore accept the exploitation. Giving with one hand and taking with the other. Immigrant's *pieles* tell them that they are Hispanic and therefore a welcome part of the Latino community within the United States, but their experiences, the experiences from their home countries and communities, alienates them from the common American Hispanic

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<sup>20</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria, ed. Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990. p.364

community leaving them in a no-persons-land, a borderlands in which identity and community is fragmented by the bordering cultures.

Racism and classism magnify the *piel de palabras* limiting immigrants and the Hispanic population as a whole by altering a common perception of this population. Not only does the immigrant internalize the terms illegal, alien or wetback but as a society as a whole we internalize these labels and use them to rationalize our exclusive attitude towards the immigrants. In Spanish, and among the immigrant population itself, the *pieles de palabras* originally used by the mainstream society to identify this group as different, have become internalized and transformed into a way this population self-identifies. These *pieles* have become nearly interchangeable in everyday conversation; immigrants refer to themselves as, *ilegales, mojados, inmigrantes, indocumentados or trabajadores indocumentados*. Before relocating to the US, these individuals did not relate to their cultures through skins that identified them as illegal, or as aliens. These internalized *pieles de palabras* limit their potential to integrate fully into mainstream culture by defining them as separate and different. Nevertheless, the immigrants use these *pieles de palabras* to unify their own unique experience. Taking back the language is a form of taking back power that we have seen in other oppressed groups throughout history. Immigrants, by self identifying as *mojados* [wetbacks], have taken away some of the power from the dominate culture.

Recently there has been a political and cultural shift that has created a more mainstream focus on immigration issues. The Latino community has responded to the increase in ICE roundups and the built up frustration coming from by an increasing awareness of exploitation and the injustices of living in fear. Immigrants have begun to

stop listening to what they hear from the dominate culture. They are less likely to believe that because of their status they should have to live like second class citizens. In the spring of 2006 a series of pro-immigrant rallies and marches took place in cities large and small throughout the country. These rallies lead up to a nationwide event on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2006. The day was to be *un día sin inmigrantes* [a day without immigrants.] Immigrants, regardless of their status, were to remove their economic presence from the country for one day. Not to work, not to spend a single dollar of their hard earned money, the idea was to prove the larger American community's economic dependence on this group. The group that they accuses of causing crime, and economic drain. Immigrants and those sympathetic to the plight of the immigrants were told to wear white t-shirts, carry American flags and attend rallies in simultaneous marches throughout the US.

Events during the weeks leading up to this culminating event caused some immigrants to decide that participating in the nationwide protest was too risky. During the last weeks of April rumors of massive immigration roundups spread through communities everywhere.

Here in Bend there is a very rapid underground information system within the Hispanic community. Early in the last week of April 2006, I received a call from my husband---immigration was in town and his construction crew was going home. In an effort to verify the information, I called some of our other friends and they confirmed that yes immigration was in town and that they, too, had left work. The news on Univision noted increases in immigration roundups and raids in communities throughout the country. This rumor of immigration raids in Bend confirmed the suspicion that someone

was afraid of what would happen if there was a day without immigration. Someone was scaring the immigrants into keeping quiet.

The rumor cycled in and out, being refuted and then revalidated, throughout the week leading up to May 1<sup>st</sup>. The newscasters stated that although rumors were flying through communities throughout the country, officials from Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) denied an increase in raids and roundups. Confirmed or not, the damage had been done. Immigrants had missed work for fear of deportation. Immigrants had confined themselves to their homes not able to do their regular shopping. They had once again been reminded that they did not belong in this country. Their *pieles de palabras* had been reinforced, they were illegals...powerless and at the mercy of INS.

The *dia sin inmigrantes* was not a complete failure. Hundreds of thousands of people did not work, businesses closed, and children did not attend school. Protesters took to the streets in droves—clad in white t-shirts and American flags. The rallies of March 1<sup>st</sup> 2006 brought the plight of the immigrant into the consciousness of the average American. They did not, however, provide a representation of what America would look like without immigrants. Because many immigrants missed work due to the rumors of INS raids, many could not afford to take another day off. Others were still intimidated enough by the scare tactics that they did not feel they could leave their homes and take to the streets. As for the no purchases aspect, many immigrants traveled long distances to attend rallies, requiring full gas tanks, hotel rooms and food costs. Others who hadn't dared leave their homes during the raids needed basic subsistence for their families.

I informed my work that I would not be working on May 1<sup>st</sup> because an America without immigrants means an America without me; I will take my daughter and follow

my husband to Mexico if he is forced to leave. We attended the march at the Oregon State Capitol. As we walked through the streets of downtown Salem surrounded by thousands of strangers united by a common understanding of deep frustration and a feeling of hopefulness for the future, I looked at the sea of faces marching towards the same goal. Most of the time, mine was the only white face in the crowd. Throughout the day I did see a few others: a multi-racial group of students marching with a banner depicting the world united, a middle aged white couple working hard to speak Spanish to a Hispanic woman, and a few others scattered throughout the crowd. It's not that people of other races weren't around; reporters and spectators stood along the sidelines and peeked from the top of buildings, some smiling, some clapping, others just looking as though they hoped we would pass so that they could get on with their day, and there was the group of about 15 anti-immigration protestors. However, of the estimated 12-14,000 participants in the march I could visually identify less than 20 people not of Latino descent.

I thought back to another time in American history when the country was divided and newscasts covered mass protests in cities all over the South. Generations later the images of children being washed down the street with fire hoses and masses of black citizens coming together to demand dignity, respect and a future for their children remind us of the systematic oppression that our country and society has condoned since the beginning of its history and of the courage of some to stand up to the face of this oppression. That sunny spring afternoon 43 years after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail" I too felt the blinding absence of the white moderate. Dr. King wrote,

...I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate... Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

...I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fan in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.<sup>21</sup>

In the years between that spring day in 1963 and the spring day in 2006, the participants in the movement have changed, but the cause and the stumbling blocks have stayed the same. I know people who comprehend and condemn the exploitation of undocumented immigrants and who believe that a solution is essential to the future of our country, yet did not feel compelled to participate. There are those who spend their lives fighting for civil rights may they be lawyers, feminists, activists, gay and lesbian leaders, NAACP officials, college professors, pro-life or pro-choice activists, social workers, legislators, or average everyday citizens who believe that all persons deserve equal rights and privileges, who did not participate in these protests for civil rights.

This absence of participation from “outsiders” reveals a significant cultural norm in our society, one that has not changed since the civil rights movement began in the 1950’s. American cultural values include a value of exclusiveness, a value that too often tells us that we are different and separate from other groups. Our own cultural *piel de*

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<sup>21</sup> King, Dr. Martin Luther, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” African Studies Center. 27 Feb. 1994. University of Pennsylvania. Aug. 2007. <[http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)>



*palabras* has become impermeable, even to our own consciences. Our cultural identity has become the window of tinted glass that allows us to separate our selves from those that are oppressed and blind us from the undeniable fact that we all participate in the oppression and exploitation of the immigrant population.

My *piel de palabras* informed me that I was an outsider within the crowd at the march that day. I had to fight the feelings inside that told me that because I was a white, legal citizen, and I therefore could not understand *their* fight for *their* rights. It was not me or my experiences or my irreversible connection to this protest that told me that I did not belong. The fear of losing a family member in an ICE raid is something I live with every day. The *piel de palabras* wrapped as tightly around my consciousness as my white skin around my body sent messages that went against all intellectual and emotional reason.

Whether or not we participate in pro-immigration rallies or the rogue patriotism of the vigilante groups along the border, we all contribute to the oppression and exploitation of the Latino population. In fact, we benefit from this system that keeps immigrants in second class positions. I ate a peach this morning and chose not to peer through the tinted glass to discover where the peach came from. I bought it at the grocery store earlier this week. I hand picked it out of the pile of peaches neatly stacked in a pyramid. I paid 98 cents per pound for my peaches, a great deal because they are in season. I took them home and my daughter happily ate one, the sticky juice running down her face. We all go to the grocery store, choose our foods, bring them home and eat them; this is how our society works. We don't think about who stacked the peaches into an eye-pleasing pyramid, except when he is around offering samples. We never even see the human being

that drives the truck from the packing plant to the grocery store. The workers who sort our peaches and remove the rotten or misshapen ones are hidden behind the tinted glass. Moving back further, there is a person who transports the peaches from the orchard to the packing plant. And then, stuck deep in a corner where no one will ever find them are the men, women and children working long days in the orchards picking the peaches that will nourish my child. My peaches are the result of the work of an army, and I paid 98 cents per pound. How many of these men, women and children, mostly immigrants, struggle to feed their families so that I can cheaply nourish my own?

Again, we all participate and benefit from this system. I don't want to pay more for my fruit nor do I want another child to go hungry so that I can feed my own, but I also don't see another option. The tinted window protects me from the reality of my role as an oppressor. This tint is darkened by images that we are sold through marketing. *Under the Feet of Jesus* is a coming of age story about a young Hispanic girl who has only known the life of a migrant worker. Helena Maria Viramontes juxtaposes the reality of Estrella's brutal world of picking grapes to the image of the white woman printed on red raisin boxes.

Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman in the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil, and she did not know how to pour the baskets of grapes inside the frame gently and spread the bunches evenly on top of the newsprint paper, reset the frame, then return to the pisca again with the empty basket, row after row, sun after sun. The woman's bonnet would be as useless as Estrellas's own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Viramontes, Helena Maria. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume: New York, 1995. pp. 49-50.

Viramontes' eloquent writing evokes this powerful juxtaposition between the image that we are sold, and the reality of the work it takes to produce that neat red box of raisins. This juxtaposition reveals how systematically we separate our selves and our consciousness from the daily reality of the “white sun” and the “magnetic weight” of the basket lived by the immigrants actually picking our fruit. The raisins are wrapped in a label deliberately designed by a marketing plan to sell a product. This image sells us more than a product; it sells us the continuation of a lie. The Sun-Maid raisin label was created in 1915.<sup>23</sup> For over 90 years, the young woman in the fluffy red bonnet has been hiding the sweat, sore muscles, and impoverished living conditions of the men, women and children who actually pick the grapes to make the raisins. “Row after row, sun after sun,” for 90 years we have eaten the dried brown grapes without a thought about the bitter lies we swallow together with the sweet fruit.

The raisin box is just one example in many of how our glass is tinted by common images, leaving agricultural workers in the fields, their straw hats useless under a mighty white sun, and us driving past eating our raisins in our air conditioned cars. However, not all immigrants are agricultural workers. One can find immigrants in all areas of our economy, but most often undocumented immigrants do the jobs that are under paid and often most physically demanding. We rely on immigrants take care of our most basic needs—food, shelter and domestic work. Immigrants provide us with food through their hard work in agriculture and in the kitchens in a vast array of restaurants from fast food joints to the finest of dining. Luxury homes selling for hundreds of thousands and even millions of dollars are crafted by crews of Hispanic men and women. Here in Bend, the

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<sup>23</sup> The Raw Feed. April 23, 2006. Mike Elgan. September, 2007 <[www.therawfeed.com/2006/04/new-sun-maid-raisin-girl-is-all-cgi.html](http://www.therawfeed.com/2006/04/new-sun-maid-raisin-girl-is-all-cgi.html)>.

construction industry came to a near standstill during the protest in May of 2006.

Immigrants clean up our messes in hotels and in our own homes. And, arguably the most important role in our society, that of child rearing, is filled in many homes by a live-in nanny who, more often than not, is an immigrant.

Our tinted glass keeps us from appreciating that this population does the jobs that we do not. Sharif Abdullah in his text *Creating a World that Works for All* writes, “We live in a society that perpetuates a great lie; that our social institutions, our communities, our lifestyles, our relationships with the environment, our shared world view are basically okay, even desirable.”<sup>24</sup> This lie originates from valuing exclusivity, the feeling that I am separate, and from an increasingly disturbing set of economic ethics where profits come before people. We justify our exploitation of the immigrants that do our dirty work with this lie, unwilling to work towards a new consciousness, an inclusive consciousness in which we collectively believe, “All beings, all things, are One. Our lives are inextricably linked one to another. Because of this, we cannot wage war against anything or anyone without waging war against ourselves.”<sup>25</sup> To start the movement towards social justice, towards a change in the treatment of immigrants, towards an inclusive society we must first change the way we identify and define ourselves and our communities. As we wrap immigrants up in the *piel de palabras* we are not only limiting and bordering their ability to integrate and function in our society, but we are also limiting our own ability to see the potential of including immigrants.

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<sup>24</sup> Abdullah, Sharif. Creating a World that Works for All. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1999. p. 51

<sup>25</sup> Abdullah, 12.

I have outlined that the physical border separating Mexico and the United States is only the first barrier immigrants must cross; the discrimination and oppression they face once inside the United States is a much greater barrier. Our participation in this systemic oppression and exploitation is supported by our cultural values of exclusiveness and because our tinted glass blinds our consciousness to our own contribution. Hispanic immigrants throughout the United States live in an in between space, a place coined “the borderlands” a unique place where cultures mix and clash simultaneously. The access to power within the borderlands culture is limited by the patriarchal nature of the two bordering mainstream cultures. Power can only be shared equally by entertaining alternatives to traditional patriarchal thoughts and values.

The in-between nature of the borderlands community lends itself to great oppression or great power. A doorway is the threshold between two rooms, and once in the doorway one has two choices—forward into one room or backwards into the others. Those who see the borderlands as a doorway with one culture on one side and the other on the opposite are limited in their access to power. They are stuck between two existing rooms, two imperfect cultures unable to accept them. Either they stay in the uncomfortable doorway and never fit in either culture or they leave one culture behind, sacrificing a part of who they are and carrying baggage from the culture left behind. Those who see the borderlands as a door way with three unpleasant choices will only find oppression in their pathways. They have internalized the social consequences of the *pieles de palabras* and are unable to move under the weight of these consequences.

The borderland is a place of great oppression but also can be a place of great potential for power and growth. Because the cultural rules do not apply within the

borderlands, there is the opportunity to create new rules and alternatives to traditional thinking. The borderlands can be much more than just a doorway between two places. By letting go of traditional dichotomous thinking, the borderland stretches from a rigid doorway into a winding river bed infinitely long and ever changing. In this new borderland one can choose his or her own point of entry into each bordering culture. She is free to move in and out of both cultures while moving laterally to explore and experience each culture as she wishes. In her exploration of both cultures, she is in charge. She can accept or reject ideals and values from both river banks, pulling them in and building her own social structures, norms and values. But she does not walk alone; others too walk along the dry riverbed in search of a new consciousness. The borderland doesn't have to be a lonely place; others are trapped within the riverbanks as well, some are involuntarily stuck in the borderlands because of social and political limitations on their experiences, and others choose to stand within the borderlands in a courageous attempt to create a community that works for all. Whether one enters involuntarily or voluntarily, the riverbed that separates these two cultures is not a comfortable place to exist.

Gloria Anzaldúa also embodies this separation of two cultures in the form of a river; she writes,

But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions...At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.<sup>26</sup>

Anzaldúa's "somehow healed" leaves the actual treatment between the mortal combatants ambiguous. The healing comes within the borderlands, from those willing to live and

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<sup>26</sup> Anzaldúa, 1987. p. 100.

grow out of the deep oppression. To move towards this new consciousness, one must be willing to stand in the crossfire. One must stand in the riverbed as others fire words from bank to bank, shouting at each other, at those within the riverbank, and at themselves, at their own sense of helplessness. Those standing between the mortal combatants must find tools to create a common ground, a ground in which both parties can stop yelling and listen.

To listen, one must be able to understand what is being said. Language is one of the cornerstones of culture. Through language a culture is perpetuated and passed down. A community finds and communicates a common ground through language. Culture and language are intricately intertwined, and vital in the development of identity. Because our relationships between people depend on our ability to communicate; language determines how we relate to people. Through our relationship with our community and culture and individuals around us we form our own identity. The *piel de palabras* is an example of how language itself can work to limit our own identities. Language is a part of our identity essential to our relationships with the world. Gloria Anzaldúa, a woman fluent in many dialects of English, Spanish and Spanglish iterates the deep relationship between language and identity.

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish and as long as I have to accommodate the English Speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Anzaldúa, 1987, 81.

Powerful language speaks powerfully. Anzaldúa's powerful language gives us a look at the layers of her consciousness. Anzaldúa also uses the image of the skin to describe her relationship to her identity. "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity..." Her eloquent language answers a question asked to me by my four year old daughter. She asked me, "Mommy, are you Mexican or American?" With out a second thought, I replied, "I'm American, honey." Puzzled, she said, "but mommy, you speak Spanish." Any answers I had for that reply were too complex for her four-year-old cognitive capacity. With no reply from me she formulated her own answer, "Mommy, you're Mexican and American." My daughter's simple logic broke through all preconceived socially constructed notions of ethnic or racial identities, and illustrates Anzaldúa's own conclusion. , "...I am my language." My daughter, at a nearly instinctual level, understands that language identifies a culture and creates an identity.

Anzaldúa recognizes that her *piel de palabras* has affected her perception of her language and has therefore called into question the legitimacy of her own identity. As she questions the regional dialects and mixtures of English and Spanish—Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, Spanglish—that have developed in the mixing and clashing of cultures within borderland communities, she indicates that these languages are not considered legitimate in the mainstream bordering cultures. By questioning the mixing and creation of languages, the mainstream culture is questioning the legitimacy of the borderlands culture itself as well as the identity of Anzaldúa, a Mextiza product of the borderlands. Using language to fight language, the mainstream culture limits the potential power in these languages with *pieles de palabras*. By calling Spanglish a bastard



language or questioning the ability of the Tex-Mex speaker to speak either mother language, a person's place within the dominate mother culture is questioned.

Despite the dominate culture's attempts to hamper this act, the mixing and changing of language is a necessary act within the oppression of the borderland. Because language is necessary to find a common ground, it is impossible to completely reject the existing languages. Again, Adrienne Rich expresses this theory, "This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you."<sup>28</sup> Rejection of the oppressor's language is not possible, communication is a necessity. Along these same lines, bell hooks examines how enslaved black persons reacted to the oppressor's language.

Needing the oppressor's language to speak with one another [enslaved black persons] nevertheless also reinvented, remade that language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination. In the mouths of black Africans in the so-called "New World," English was altered, transformed, and became a different speech. Enslaved black people took broken bits of English and made of them a counter-language. They put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of the English language.<sup>29</sup>

This passage when applied to the immigrants in the borderlands could read; needing the oppressor's language to speak with one another, immigrants nevertheless also reinvented, remade that language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination. In the mouths of Hispanics in the so-called free country, English was altered, transformed and became a different speech. Latinos took broken bits of English and made them a counter-language. They put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of the English language, and Spanglish was born.

Spanglish is a language created by mixing English and Spanish and is spoken by persons within the borderlands everywhere. The creation and continued use of Spanglish

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<sup>28</sup> hooks, 167

<sup>29</sup> hooks, 170

indicates that there is a population that lives within the borderlands, a community being pushed and pulled linguistically to speak one language or the other. Those who speak Spanglish have some mastery of both languages and choose to mix and match the languages to suit their linguistic and cultural needs. Both English and Spanish have words, phrases, idioms and expression that are unique and cannot be exactly translated or expressed in any other language. By creating this counter-language, Spanglish speakers are able to more freely express their ranges of expression; they criss-cross borders between the languages weaving the languages together, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph or conversation by conversation.

The creation of a new language is highly criticized and the legitimacy of the Spanglish language is questioned because Spanglish challenges traditional thinking. “They put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to rethink the meaning of the English language.”<sup>30</sup> Spanglish creates a consciousness inaccessible to monolingual individuals and communities. This counter-language is necessary not only because it makes borderland expression possible, but also because it, just as any language, helps to create a common identity and culture for those within the borderlands. Having to rethink the meaning of language means having to rethink the meaning of culture and therefore give up power. Hence, the mainstream cultures have worked to keep Spanglish illegitimate.

However, Spanglish is currently becoming legitimized. Spanglish is becoming the preferred language of much of the Latino youth population.<sup>31</sup> This population, which has grown up within the struggle between cultures is the product of the mixing of the

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<sup>30</sup> hooks, 170

<sup>31</sup> “*Spanglish: Mi Vida Remixed.*” *Mun2 News*. *Mun2*. Miami. 20 April 2007.

cultures, and although much of this youth has been corrected by parents, teachers and other adults imploring them to speak one language or the other, they have mastered expression through Spanglish. With an entire youth culture identifying and expressing themselves in Spanglish, the music and television industries have capitalized on a culture's need for expression. Pop culture creates and fulfills cultural and social needs, especially those of youth. The Spanglish media produced by musicians, television producers and advertisers officially recognizes this youth culture and helps fulfill its need for bilingual expression, while at the same time has begun to legitimize the Spanglish language by making it more readily available to the mainstream.

Reggaeton, a new genre of music, has been around for about 13 years but has only moved into the mainstream Hispanic youth population within the last 5. Reggaeton is a unique type of hip hop reliant on Spanglish for its intra-cultural flow. An emerging edgy genre and a new form of expression, reggaeton today is what rap was in the early 90's. Reggaetoneros (performers) sing and rap in Spanglish, using their bilingual lyrics and bicultural messages to speak to bilingual Hispanic youth borderland experiences. Up beat and on the edge, the hip hop rhythms and talented performances appeal to the mainstream youth culture. bell hooks writes, "In Contemporary black popular culture, rap music has become one of the spaces where black vernacular speech is used in a manner that invites dominant mainstream culture to listen—to hear—and, to some extent, be transformed."<sup>32</sup> Reggaeton is taking Spanglish into the homes of the mainstreams, and as its popularity grows it will help legitimize not only the language of the borderlands, but also the culture. As Reggaeton begins to legitimize Spanglish it will begin to permeate the *piel de palabras* limiting not only the language but also the culture Spanglish expresses.

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<sup>32</sup> hooks, 171.

Spanglish lyrics speak to persons on both sides of the borderlands, making the tinted glass more transparent to those willing to listen.

Furthermore, Spanglish is available to those who are not fans of pop music. The television industry is also speaking to the bilingual Hispanic youth culture. Mun2 is a Spanglish channel available throughout the US on cable or satellite television. Mun2 caters to Latino youth; broadcasting music videos, movies, advertising and MTV-ish programming, nearly exclusively in Spanglish. Many of the programs and advertisements are not fully accessible to people not fluent in Spanglish. For example there is a program in which musicians introduce their favorite music videos whose title is displayed in a text message-like Spanglish form—2RSLVJ . You have to read the symbols in Spanglish and understand the resulting meaning in Spanglish to comprehend the title of the show. As we read the symbols one by one—2 (English) R (Spanish) S (English) L (English) VJ (English word for Video Jockey)—the sounds come together to say, “*Tu Eres el VJ*” [You Are the VJ]. Not only does this crossing and mixing of sounds, meanings and languages create a Spanglish title it also incorporates the technologically savvy mindset of today’s youth. By catering to the Hispanic youth population and using their language of choice, this station, ultimately owned by NBC, is able to create a space where languages and cultures mix, legitimizing the experiences of this population that will eventually be the leaders of the Hispanic community.<sup>33</sup> Reggaeton and bilingual television are streams that lead into the Spanglish tributary that works to fill up the riverbed that is the borderlands.

bell hooks sees language as vitally important in the creation and recreation of culture and society.

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<sup>33</sup> [About Mun2](http://holamun2.com/about-mun2). Date Unknown. Mun2. 1 Sept. 2007 <<http://holamun2.com/about-mun2>>.

By transforming the oppressor's language, making a culture of resistance, black people created an intimate speech that could say far more than was permissible within the boundaries of standard English. The power of this speech is not simply that it enables resistance to white supremacy, but that it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies—different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview.<sup>34</sup>

The power of Spanglish is not just that it isolates and keeps monolingual speakers at bay, but that it provides the space suggested by hooks “alternative cultural production” and different ways of thinking and knowing that [are] crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic world view”—exactly what we are looking for in the borderlands—new social systems and structures created from alternate, inclusive ideologies. Sharif Abdullah reminds us, “Remember, the problem is not The Mess; the problem is the consciousness that creates The Mess. The Solution, therefore, must be an alternate state of consciousness.”<sup>35</sup> The problem is not the immigrants or the exploitation of the immigrants but the consciousness that creates the exploitation and oppression of the immigrants. Our cultural values that allow us to see ourselves as separate keep us from taking action, and our ‘profits before people’ business ethics allow us to value money more than human dignity. The *pieles de palabras* that envelop the immigrants both are a result of and help to formulate our personal and cultural understanding of the immigrant struggles.

Although a common identity through Spanglish has begun to create a connection between the two bordering cultures, the riverbed cannot be filled simply with Spanglish speakers. Spanglish is just one tributary filling the river. Rivers, flowing towards the ocean, are filled by innumerable tributaries, each unique and necessary to the river's survival. Anzaldúa's “somehow healed” is not simply finding a common language with

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<sup>34</sup> hooks, 172

<sup>35</sup> Abdullah, 1999, 44.

which we can all communicate; the complexities of creating a new consciousness must include finding a space and means for dialogue, but must not exclude those who cannot speak Spanglish but are willing to think and live cross culturally. The use of Spanglish must not isolate monolingual individuals who are willing step into the riverbed and work towards a new consciousness; language is simply a tool that can be used as it is needed to create a cultural identity. Monolingual participants must, however, not downplay or minimize the importance of Spanglish as counter-cultural tool and have the obligation to communicate through a cross-cultural, albeit monolingual consciousness.

My daughter, born to a Mexican father and an American mother, will grow up in a home where cultural borders are crossed and cultures are mixed and mashed together. Through my family and my work within the immigrant population, I have found my way into the borderlands. My most important labor is to show my daughter that she is not stuck in a doorway or trapped within her own *pieles de palabras*, but that she can find her power within the riverbed. After reading *Borderlands/La Frontera*, I wrote a letter to my daughter that I will give to her 10 years from now when she turns 15. In this letter I offer her the opportunity to search for her power within the two cultures she lives between. I explain how I have found my place in the borderland, hoping that she too will find her place. I wrote, “I want to share with you where I have found my place within this culture; my power and my passion comes from this borderland. I am not Mexican, Chicana, Latina or Hispanic by race. I am a white woman who has chosen, through lifestyle choices and by conscious decision to live within this borderland. Living in this borderland by choice is full of advantages and disadvantages. I will never be one of you

by birth right or by blood; I am excluded from part of what it means to live within this culture because I come from different roots.

Yet it is this difference that gives me power. I have the power of a bridge. A bridge connects two different places by creating a pathway that enables those who want to cross from one place to another. A bridge is limited by the people who choose use it. A bridge placed where no one needs it or where no one can find it is useless. My job has been to build my bridge in a way that it is easily accessible to people on both sides of the river. If I built a bridge that only the mainstream culture recognized as a bridge, then only half of my potential would be utilized and vice versa. My job is to start from both banks of the river and build, brick by brick, cable by cable a bridge that is inviting to those from both banks. My bridge will always be under construction, and I cannot build it by myself. Each day I learn something new, or a new person steps into my life and I have to replace a brick in the bridge that I am building.”<sup>36</sup> Because I live, socialize and work with immigrants, I have placed myself within this borderland. I have chosen to step into the uncomfortable consciousness that is the riverbed. I have found needs that my experiences give me the power to fill. I can be a link between two cultures, a bridge that leads others to find their own place within the borderlands. A common ground in which individuals, communities and cultures can meet. I have found a way to see through the tinted glass and open my consciousness to my participation in the oppression as well as the movement towards change.

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<sup>36</sup> Lopez Melton, Robyn. Letter to Nayeli Eve Lopez Melton. Winter, 2006.

Anyone who is willing to make the tinted glass transparent and take responsibility for his or her role in the oppression and exploitation of immigrants may join those stuck in the crossfire of words in the riverbed. Everyone willing to look for a bridge or a tributary into the riverbed will find their potential within the borderlands. The “white moderate” is a huge missing link in this new civil rights movement. How would the public reaction and response to the May 1<sup>st</sup> rallies have been different if even 20% of the participants were racially and culturally diverse?

Even as the tint on the glass lightens, the act of taking action remains difficult—the riverbed is a scary place to step into, but a river without sufficient water cannot flow and goes no where. Each individual must search for his or her own point of entry, may it be through a tributary or by just holding her breath and jumping in. As more people are willing to work towards a new consciousness and exist within the borderlands, the dry river bed becomes muddy. These new participants bring new gifts, talents and perspectives to the movement, attracting more persons to the river. The muddy riverbed becomes a small stream. The stream of consciousness is now visible to the two bordering cultures, and more people begin to ponder the creation of a new river. As the stream begins to flow, sparkling and flashing in the sunlight, some who have been shouting across the banks are intrigued by the sparkling new ideas below. They begin to listen to the foreign gurgling of the stream and realize that by listening instead of shouting, the differences that had once been so defined were disappearing in this strange gurgling stream. The curiosity to understand the gurgled message lures them into the stream of consciousness. As the stream of consciousness embarks, more of the river pulls more from each bordering culture, the dry riverbed becomes a swiftly flowing river. A river



built on community, inclusivity, and a new consciousness. Those left standing on the banks shouting at each other can no longer hear each other because of the loud river rushing at their feet, their shouts get lost in the chattering flow of a new consciousness.

The fluidity of water facilitates the resilient persistence of a river. Obstacles in river paths do not stop the river flow; the water simply flows around the obstacle, or works persistently to carve its own path through the earth towards its destination. The unfaltering pull of gravity guides every river towards the same destination, the deep, mysterious and life giving sea. There are many obstacles downstream that will try to impede the gravitational pull towards a new consciousness. Sometimes we will simply change our path and flow around the obstacles, and other times we will have to cut our own path to continue our journey.

With the fluidity, persistence and necessity of water come possibility--the possibility to permeate the *piel de palabras* and carve through the tinted glass. Like water permeating the dry earth, rejuvenating the life hidden beneath the soil, our consciousness will permeate the *piel de palabras* and give life to the identity below the skin. Our water can first slowly and persistently wash the tint away from the window, and then, like a river cutting a deep canyon into the unforgiving earth, our consciousness will cut through the glass. Broken, the window pane will fall to the ground, shattered and powerless. How bright will the world appear as we strip away these now powerless layers of consciousness?

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