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Cognitive Borderlands: Understanding Marginalized Identity in the Work of Ada Limón, Ashley Hope Pérez, and Carmen Maria Machado

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Para Dulce y Mireya, mis estudiantes y maestras

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Hay tantísimas fronteras
que dividen a la gente,
pero por cada frontera
existe también un puente.
-Gina Valdés, qtd. in Anzaldúa (107)

There are so many borders
that divide people
but for every border
there is also a bridge.
-Translated by Monica Barbay

Stretching from California's golden shores to the blazing white sand beaches of Texas's gulf coast, there is a border between the United States and Mexico. This treacherous 1,933-mile-long line acts as a division between two countries, two cultures, two peoples. Along this border, there exists approximately 700 miles of metal fencing topped with spirals of barbed wire, and this literal and metaphorical boundary has long been a point of contention in American politics; while some view the division as unethical, inhumane, and alienating, others see it as necessary protection from unknown, and therefore unsafe, entities. On the far-left side of the border, the Pacific Ocean rages, the waves unphased and unstopped by these fences, resurrecting the dividing structures when the tide pulls out. Along the Texas-Mexico portion of the border, the Rio Grande's muddy waters flow swiftly, eroding a deeper line in the earth with every passing year. And, along much of the border, paved highways and dirt roads send cars and horses speeding back and forth, Border Patrol searching for any signs of life for seizure. In the first twenty days of September 2023 alone, an average of 6,900 illegal migrants were apprehended by Border Patrol *per day* attempting to cross the border (Montoya-Galvez). This number continues

to steadily rise every day, month, and year, creating more strife and tension with each passing moment. Yet, the border remains.

Along the border, cities like Juárez, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, once united, are cleaved apart by 18-foot-high metal fences. They sit across from one another, juxtaposing American and Mexican cultures, yet they are connected through the transmission of people, goods, and ideas over the Paso del Norte, Stanton-Lerdo, and Ysleta-Zaragoza bridges. These bridges foster a "porosity of the border" and facilitate the creation of a new culture: a synthesis of American, Mexican, Anglo, Spanish, and indigenous cultures (Eastaugh). This new culture is a border culture: it is not wholly Mexican, nor wholly American; it is uniquely and completely its own. Yet, far too few recognize it as such, and certainly very few *value* it as such. Gloria Anzaldúa, a Mexican-American literary scholar, writer, queer theorist, and social theorist, describes this border and borderland as such:

> The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [*is an open wound*, my translation] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the 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*[1] live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer,

[1] Los atravesados, translated literally, means "the traversed." Anzaldúa uses this moniker here to illustrate those caught in between, those outside what is considered normal. I use this moniker throughout to refer back to this quote and Anzaldúa's description.

> the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato [*sic*], the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." (25)

This borderland not only represents a place of in-between, but also a border people. Los atravesados balance precariously, strung between cultures, both physically and psychologically. They are Mexican and American, indigenous and Spanish, simultaneously all yet none. Their minds are crowded with divisive fences, rivers, and roads constructed from the expectations, behaviors, ideals, and norms of contrasting cultures, leaving an "emotional residue" from incongruous boundaries. And, just as the tall metal fencing and the Rio Grande's fast-streaming waters mark a land partitioned, these boundaries in the mind create cognitive borderlands, or areas of tension within one's psyche where contrasting perceptions of identity collide.

Anzaldúa's groundbreaking theoretical and creative collection of essays entitled *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* provides foundational ideas and principles to consider the physical, mental, and emotional struggles of those living along the U.S.-Mexican border. This thesis furthers this discussion by contemplating what happens psychologically to those residing in physical and cognitive borderlands, including but not limited to the U.S.-Mexican border. Specifically, I develop a framework to conceptualize borderlands of the mind, focusing on people-groups who experience multiple kinds of marginalization. I argue that these layers of marginalization negatively impact one's sense of self, fostering a cognitive divide between societal expectations and personal dispositions. In particular, I concentrate on three sometimes overlapping groups notably affected by cognitive borderlands—women, persons of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community—as they mediate different versions of their identity in a white-dominated, patriarchal, and heteronormative society. I use ideas presented in Anzaldúa's

Borderlands, double- and triple-consciousness theory, intersectionality, gender studies, queer theory, and identity studies to guide my argument, as well as to analyze three contemporary works by Latin-American women: Ada Limón's *The Carrying*, Ashley Hope Pérez's *Out of Darkness*, and Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*. In each chapter, I focus on one novel and one cognitive borderland foregrounded in that narrative, woman, race, and LGBTQ+ respectively. Ultimately, I show the ways in which these authors and theorists help to build a new culture—a borderland culture—that serves as a bridge between warring societies, ideologies, and people.

Cognitive borderlands, though present only in the mind, are similar to physical borderlands in many ways. Like Anzaldúa's description of the U.S.-Mexican border, cognitive borders are divisive; they psychologically separate one from others, highlighting the many ways one's personal understanding of self might not align with cultural and social expectations of one's identity. In other words, these cognitive borders encompass the space where alternate versions of identity, self-influenced versus socially-influenced, battle one another for control. These "sides" of the border can also be exclusionary: those struggling in the in-between find themselves pressured to choose one side or the other, yet they may never find comfort or safety in either choice. These cognitive borderlands are ripe with tension, as versions of self collide with one another, offering no possibility for true resolution. Like the ever-moving waters of the Pacific Ocean and the Rio Grande, this psychological in-between is constantly fluctuating as one's self-influenced identity and society's ideologies grow and change. And, like los atravesados, who live along the U.S.-Mexico border, those caught within cognitive borderlands find themselves residing outside of what is considered "normal"; they are half-breeds, constantly

attempting to reconcile, or at least survive, the contrasting parts of their identity that are fighting for dominance.

To better illustrate cognitive borderlands in the minds of marginalized persons, I offer an analogy: imagine a road dividing two distinct places, like the U.S. and Mexico. In the center of the road, there are double yellow lines, signifying a border between these two places. On both sides of the double lines are single lanes of traffic, each filled with honking cars going in opposite directions, meaning any crossover would cause a collision. On the far side of each lane is a solid white line, representing the edges of the road, and thus, the boundaries of the borderland. Beyond the borderland, past the white lines, are two opposing ideologies regarding identity—like the contrasting cultures of the U.S. and Mexico. In this cognitive borderland, one side of the border represents society's social norms, expectations, behaviors, and views surrounding one's self, and the other side one's personal understanding of self. For persons who are members of marginalized groups, this understanding of self often contrasts society's expectations of them. For example, in patriarchal societies, women are often marginalized, and they must contend with the ideologies surrounding their gender in a male-dominated environment, which might be quite different from their personal understanding of self. To further this example, consider a woman who does not want to have kids and does not view herself as a mother living in a society where all women who are able are expected to have children. Her perception of self (non-mother) is in contrast with her society's expectations of her (to become a mother) and, thus, her cognitive space resembles a borderland—a busy road divided by two perceptions of self, her personal understanding of identity on one side and her society's expectations of her on another.

To further this analogy, picture this woman standing in the middle of the road, one leg planted firmly in each opposing lane, just as her psyche is divided between two contrasting ideologies—to be or not to be a mother. Obviously, standing in the middle of a busy road is not an ideal place for her to be, as traffic surrounds her, cars rushing by on either side. She wants to get out of this tense situation—to make a decision regarding motherhood—and doing so would require running across the road, firmly entrenching her in one perception of self or the other. How she decides to move and her resulting position relative to the border can represent how she presents herself socially, or what I term as her performance identity.[2] On the one hand, she could run across the road towards her society's expectations of her, performing an identity that is socially-influenced—she adheres to her culture's expectation of becoming a mother. On the other hand, she could cross to the opposite side of the road, performing an identity that is self-influenced—she knows she does not want to be a mother and presents herself to society as such. Because of the pressure to choose one or the other, and due to the difficulty of crossing the road in either direction, she might remain straddling the border, never crossing the road at all. Yet, due to the dangers of standing within the borderland, in the midst of heavy traffic, our hypothetical woman may prefer to choose a side, attempting to escape the tense phenomenon of being stuck in the middle.

If one—specifically, one whose personal understanding of identity contrasts society's expectations—performs an identity that is socially-influenced, they choose conformity, aligning themselves to the social norms, behaviors, and ideologies of that culture. This conformity can happen in degrees: one can fully cross the border, run past the borderland, and fully submit to

[2] In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the concept of gender performance, as outlined succinctly in the prologue to the 2nd edition (pgs. viii, xv-xvi), and at length throughout the book. Similar to her, I'm arguing that we perform our identity, not just our gender.

social expectations; or one can inch past the border, remaining largely in the borderland, only performing an identity that is moderately socially-influenced. Ultimately, the further one distances themselves from the border, the more entrenched they are in that culture or identity.

For persons of marginalized identity, there are numerous reasons why one might choose to conform and perform a socially-influenced identity. In their 1955 *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* article entitled "A Study of Normative and Informational Social Influence upon Individual Judgment," the prominent psychologists Morton Deutsch and Harold B. Gerard outline two types of conformity: normative conformity and informational conformity. Normative conformity occurs when one conforms with societal norms to fit in or to avoid rejection (Deutsch and Gerard 629). Normative conformity often involves compliance, a form of conformity described by Herbert Kelman in his article "Compliance, Identification, and Internalization: Three Processes of Attitude Change" as "when an individual accepts influence because he hopes to achieve a favorable reaction from another person or group" (53). Normative conformity does not mean that one inherently agrees with or believes the ideas to which they conform, but that the results of complying are more favorable to that of not conforming. For example, our hypothetical woman might conform to her society's patriarchal standards by having children, even if she does not see herself as a mother. This would allow her to fit-in and fulfill the cultural expectations of her as a woman. The social benefits of conformity might outweigh the threat of ostracization should she choose a self-influenced identity and not conform. Though this example of compliance focuses particularly on the positive results of conformity, one might also comply to avoid discrimination or punishment. For example, should our hypothetical woman be a victim of forced pregnancy, she would not have any option but to comply. Throughout history, many socially marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ community have had no choice but to comply;

the punishment for noncompliance could be countless horrors, including but not limited to death. In 2023, “At least 67 countries have national laws criminalizing same-sex relations between consenting adults” (#Outlawed). Therefore, normative conformity, whether to gain benefits or to avoid punishment, is a valid and common phenomenon for those residing in cognitive borderlands.

The other reason Deutsch and Gerard give as to why one might conform is informational conformity. This phenomenon occurs when one lacks the knowledge on how to behave, so one looks to a social group for guidance (Deutsch and Gerard 629). Often, this means that one internalizes the views of the group and adopts them as their own. A lack of representation could be a reason for informational conformity; if one has never seen, experienced, or heard non-normative ideas of self, one might not know or understand the contradictory ideologies present in their minds, turning them towards conformity rather than choosing self-influenced identity. For example, our hypothetical woman may have grown up in a culture and household that foregrounds motherhood. She might internalize the cultural norms surrounding her as she journeys towards adulthood, especially if her culture and household tell her that anything other than motherhood for women is unacceptable. While she may not know or understand that she is conforming, her decision to deny her self-influenced identity in favor of social expectations leads to informational conformity.

For one whose personal understanding of self differs from societal expectations, nonconformity, or performing a self-influenced identity, may be preferable to conformity. Nonconformity is when one embraces their non-traditional, atypical self, not aligning with the social norms thrust upon them. Again, this can happen in degrees: perhaps one chooses self-influence in only some facets of their performance identity; or maybe one completely disregards

social expectations and behaviors to perform an identity resembling as much of their self as possible. Regardless, nonconformity is performing self, in one form or another, over social ideology. For example, our hypothetical woman may choose not to be a mother, presenting a version of self that conflicts with her patriarchal society's expectation of her. While nonconformity is perhaps a preferable route in some senses, as one gains some relief from tension by publicly acknowledging and even welcoming their differences, it is not always a choice, a safe choice, or an ideal choice. One possible outcome of nonconformity is rejection. Anzaldúa describes the experience of rejection as follows: "Rejection strips us of self-worth; our vulnerability exposes us to shame. It is our innate identity you find wanting" (110). Rejection can go hand-in-hand with discrimination, another possible result of nonconformity. By not conforming, one challenges the dominant powers at play in their culture(s), and the result is often those powers fighting back. So, one might choose nonconformity, but in doing so, they also open themselves to the negative results of publicly refuting normative society.

Through conformity or nonconformity, one might move out of their psychological borderland and "choose a side," but movement is not always an option or a preferred option. Some who find themselves in a borderland choose to remain—or are forced to remain—in the borderland. This existence, however, is difficult, as it means standing in the middle of the road, amidst heavy traffic, or remaining in a dissonant cognitive state. Cognitive dissonance was first coined by Leon Festinger in the mid-1950s in his book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*: "I am proposing that dissonance, that is, the existence of nonfitting relations among cognitions, is a motivating factor in its own right. By the term *cognition*, here and in the remainder of the book, I mean any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behavior" (3). In the case of our hypothetical woman, she experiences cognitive dissonance

when her own perception of self—not a mother—clashes with society's idea of who she should be—a mother—as these cognitions are inconsistent. Anzaldúa also illustrates the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance in *Borderlands*:

Because I, a *mestiza*,	Because I, a person of mixed race,
continually walk out of one culture	continually walk out of one culture
and into another,	and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same	because I am in all cultures at the same
time,	time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,	soul between two worlds, three, four,
me zumba la cabeza con lo	my head buzzes with the
contradictorio.	contradictory.
Estoy norteada por todas las voces que	I am guided by all of the voices that
me hablan	talk to me
simultáneamente.	simultaneously.
-Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands* 99)	-Translated by Monica Barbay

This sensation of balancing so many contrasting perceptions of self is cognitively taxing. Further, those who are marginalized, or are multiply marginalized, experience cognitive dissonance levels that are untenable. As such, many search for resolution from the dissonance.

Of course, it seems natural that one would want to reduce or avoid all-together feelings of dissonance. Festinger's study showcases how cognitive dissonance is a motivating factor, and he identifies different ways one might attempt to assuage cognitive dissonance: changing one's behavior, changing one's cognitions, or changing one's environment (19-22). Let's return to our hypothetical woman in order to unpack these. First, our hypothetical woman might change her

behavior by choosing to have children, diminishing the pressure of societal expectations by fulfilling them. Second, she might change her cognitions by, for example, changing her ideas surrounding motherhood—perhaps she decides that she does want to be a mother—also reducing the dissonance between two conflicting perceptions of self; or, conversely, she might add reasons why she does not want to be a mother, furthering her conviction that she does not desire motherhood. Lastly, she can change her environment—she could surround herself with like-minded women who reaffirm her cognitions surrounding motherhood. Though Festinger lists all of these methods as potential tools for reducing cognitive dissonance, is their effectiveness guaranteed? Unfortunately, the answer is no: these methods do not always grant success in assuaging cognitive dissonance. Festinger states, "It seems clear that the person may encounter difficulties in trying to change either his behavior or his knowledge. And this, of course, is precisely the reason that dissonance, once created, may persist. There is no guarantee that the person will be able to reduce or remove the dissonance" (6). Thus, for those who reside in cognitive borderlands, dissonance often remains. It might also be worth noting that each of these methods requires change on the part of the individual, not the cultural or social systems surrounding the individual; and changing one's self, or knowledge, or environment is not always possible.

Further, the harsh reality of marginalized identities and cognitive borderlands is this: even if one crosses the border and remains on one side, they have never really left the dissonant state of a cognitive borderland. If one conforms, they feel the cognitive dissonance between their perception of self and their performed, socially-influenced identity. If one does not conform, they suffer from external dissonance between their own perception of self and what their culture expects of them. And if they remain in the borderland, they must constantly war between two

ideologies in their mind. Marginalized persons are never truly free from living in a cognitive borderland, or from the cognitive dissonance that remains between self and society. As such, people need to be able to live in the borderland without backlash from their societies. Their cultures, and other cultures, need to hear their voices, learn their stories, and accept their differences, allowing them to live and even thrive in their dissonance.

Over the last century, many authors have managed to share their stories and voices despite persistent marginalization. Their texts are often aimed at two audiences, two people-groups pulling them in opposite directions. Yet, they validate the in-between, showing both groups that living in a cognitive borderland is a valid and not altogether uncommon existence. Perhaps one of the most formative examples of this is W. E. B. Du Bois's seminal collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folks.* In this beautiful work, Du Bois develops the theory of double-consciousness, describing the stuckness that a bi-racial person feels between two cultures, mediating two societal versions of who they should be. He writes:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
>
> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, —this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self…He

> would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (8-9)

In this selection, Du Bois speaks of a split in his soul between two worlds, two cultures, and two expectations of identity. Similar to the previous examples referencing our hypothetical woman, the idea of double-consciousness could be thought of as a cognitive borderland—two cultures separated by a border, marked by double yellow lines on a busy road. One side of the border represents Du Bois's white, American, Anglo culture; the other side of the border represents the Du Bois's African, Black culture. Both of these cultures have perceptions of who Du Bois is and should be, and they both place pressure on him to conform. As such, Du Bois stands in a precarious position trying to reconcile two cultures' expectations, ideologies, and values in one mind. However, he is unable to do so; he refuses to "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism," forcing himself to stand in his cognitive borderland, in the middle of the busy road, unable to find safety on either side of either border (9). His only hope is that the traffic around him, or the people in both cultures, allow him to stand in the middle of the borderland unharmed. In reality, this rarely happens.

As a person of color, Anzaldúa shares a similar experience to Du Bois's description of double-consciousness. In *Borderlands*, she writes:

> We call ourselves Mexican-American to signify we are neither Mexican nor American…This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we

> don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. *A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.* [*Sometimes I am no one, nobody. But even when I am not, I am*, my translation]. (84-85)

This quote highlights the ways in which this border creates cognitive dissonance in one's psyche. Standing in the center of the busy road, between two cultures, unable to cross to either side, one finds themself outside the confines of any established culture.

Though double-consciousness aptly describes Du Bois's and Anzaldúa's challenges as people of color, it does not fully describe the cognitive dissonance that can result from the multiple layers of marginalization that Anzaldúa and other women of color experience as members of several ostracized groups. Anzaldúa not only contends with cognitive dissonance in relation to her race, but also as a woman and member of the LGBTQ+ community. To address this complexity, Black female theorists developed a framework to understand their cognitive dissonance as women *and* persons of color: triple-consciousness theory (TCT). Nahum Welang, a professor of English Language/Literature at the University of Stavanger, describes the multifaceted issues TCT addresses:

> Black women, due to the physical and psychological anguish they have historically endured on both fronts of race and gender, are fated to view themselves through three lenses and not two: America (represented by the hegemony of white patriarchy), blackness (a racial space that prioritises the interests of black men) and womanhood (a hierarchical gendered identity with white women at the top and black women at the bottom). Accentuating this threefold conceptualisation of black womanhood is crucial to

> understanding their marginalised existence in the intermediate space between race and gender. (298-99)

As previously stated, double-consciousness and the divide between two cultures generates cognitive dissonance in the psyche. Imagine the amount of dissonance that is created by three contrasting cultures—triple-consciousness—meeting at a border.

To help conceptualize triple-consciousness in the context of borders, consider the tri-point border of Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. The border between Peru and Brazil is marked by the Amazon River, and in the middle of that river, the border between Colombia and Brazil extends out in a perpendicular direction, creating a point where all three borders meet. Each of these countries could represent pieces of an African-American woman's identity. She is a member of three bordered identities: white, American, Anglo culture, represented by Peru; African, Black culture, represented by Colombia; and patriarchal culture, represented by Brazil. Like the tri-point border, her cultures grind up against one another, creating a complex borderland of ideologies within her psyche. And like the heightened tension between indigenous communities, drug cartels, and three governments at this tri-point border, individual cognitive dissonance abounds in this borderland (Luna and Cerri). Now, imagine the cognitive borderlands of Anzaldúa and similar persons who deal with tri-point, quad-point, and penta-point borders. How do these layers of marginalization effect cognitive dissonance within the psyche? And how does that cognitive dissonance affect them?

Because there has traditionally been no framework to talk about the ways some people are marginalized in multiple, often overlapping social-justice issues, Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the theory of "intersectionality." In her famous 2016 TED Talk entitled "The Urgency of Intersectionality," Kimberlé Crenshaw states:

> I would go on to learn that African-American women, like other women of color, like other socially marginalized people all over the world, were facing all kinds of dilemmas and challenges as a consequence of intersectionality, intersections of race and gender, of heterosexism, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, all of these social dynamics come together and create challenges that are sometimes quite unique. (10:46)

The reality is that Anzaldúa and other women of color "have never had the luxury of fighting a singular fight. [Their] lives have always existed at the intersection of race, class, and gender" (Lomax-Reese). These unique challenges due to intersectionality often lead to "many [members of marginalized groups falling] through the cracks" of social justice reform and being "abandoned to fend for [themselves]" (Crenshaw 3:55). While Crenshaw's TED Talk started the conversation surrounding these complex and interconnected issues—quite literally when she asked the audience to "say her name," or repeat the names of women killed by police brutality—acknowledgment of these issues is only the first step. Now, it is ever important that those who have the privilege of residing outside of cognitive borderlands *listen to* and *learn from* those who remain at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. These marginalized voices provide representation for los atravesados and help those of privilege develop empathy and understanding for people and experiences unlike their own, creating a society ready for positive action and change.

Along with Anzaldúa, Crenshaw, Lomax-Reese, and the countless other women of color telling their stories, Latin-American authors Ada Limón, Ashley Hope Pérez, and Carmen Maria Machado open the door for conversations about cognitive borderlands and dissonance through their writing. Their work illustrates their personal experiences and consists of the creative stories of similarly marginalized characters, giving voice to los atravesados, those who have long been

forgotten and cast out. In crafting and publishing these narratives, they create a space where those outside of the borderland can enter in and stand with them, experiencing their cognitive dissonance, suffering with them, even if for only a moment. And, for those who stand in similar borderlands, these authors provide representation, demonstrating that borderlands are valid spaces in which to reside. They facilitate the creation of a new culture: a border culture, where los atravesados embrace their cognitive dissonance—because it is real, and it is theirs.

In this thesis, I analyze one work by each of these authors, focusing on one cognitive borderland per work in order to expound upon issues specific to each form of marginalization, gender, race, and sexuality respectively. The first chapter discusses *The Carrying* by Ada Limón, a collection of poetry examining cognitive dissonance between Limón's self-identity as a woman and her culture(s)'s ideal woman. Often focusing on motherhood, she also discusses themes of infertility, pregnancy, grief, and loss, illustrating the multi-faceted and complex border created within her mind due to her gender. The collection ultimately offers no resolution from this cognitive dissonance; like heavy baggage, she carries contradictions with her daily. But, by illustrating her cognitive battle in her poetry, she brings light to issues that so many women share, though usually silently and solitarily. Indeed, her validation of this space shows readers that they are not alone in their dissonance. She shows readers a new woman, a product of many ideologies, una atravesada woman: someone who embraces dissonance and lets it guide her as she navigates the curvy, rocky road of her cognitive borderland.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I discuss Ashley Hope Pérez's *Out of Darkness*, a historical fiction novel that illustrates cognitive dissonance in the minds of racial minorities and mixed-race persons living in white-dominant cultures. Pérez follows Naomi, Wash, Beto, Cari, and Henry, as they traverse the racialized society of New London, a town residing in the physical

borderland of Texas and Mexico. Naomi is Mexican while Beto and Cari, Naomi's half siblings, are half-white. They often pass as white in their community, as their light skin and white father, Henry, make their racial identities questionable. These characters must wade through countless narratives about their races and are constantly attempting to reconcile the ways they see themselves and each other with the ways their community sees them. Ultimately, the characters succumb to the racial tensions pervading their lives, and none of the characters have a happy ending. Through this harrowing narrative, Pérez demonstrates the historical impact of borders, both physical and metaphorical, and how these borders still pervade modern culture. Further, as a banned book, this novel highlights the ways that the stories of los atravesados are still silenced, and how, now more than ever, it is imperative that these stories are shared—for representation, to foster empathy, and to facilitate change.

In the third and final chapter of this thesis, I examine Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*, a ground-breaking memoir discussing the cognitive borders that divide the psyches of members of the LGBTQ+ community living in heterocentric societies. Throughout the memoir, Machado details her experiences in an abusive relationship with another woman. Due to a lack of queer representation in American culture, she questioned the validity of her experiences as a victim of abuse, wondering if sapphic relationships were just more passionate. Machado's book is an offering of what she herself didn't have: the story of a queer woman who experiences love in significantly similar *and* different ways to the cultural narratives that surround her. In the experiences she shares, she demonstrates the cognitive dissonances between the way society views queer people, how queer people view other queer people, and how she views herself. In the new border culture Machado is helping to create, LGBTQ+ persons are not alienated; rather, they are welcomed into a culture that celebrates their queer identity. This

representation challenges pervading ideologies, showing that queer people are human, and they have human emotions, good and bad, just like everyone else.

In her preface for the first edition of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa concludes with an invitation "from the new *mestizas*": "Today we ask to be met halfway" (20). In telling their stories, Anzaldúa, Limón, Pérez, and Machado have held out their hand, inviting those on either side of the road to join them in the borderland, embracing the dissonance of the rushing traffic. The reader, then, has the opportunity to stand with them and experience their struggles, letting it wash over them and influence change. And, with a community willing to open their hearts and minds to the struggles of others, those residing in the borderland can find safety standing above the traffic—because "por cada frontera / existe también un puente [for every border / there is also a bridge, my translation]" (Valdés, qtd. in Anzaldua, 107).

Chapter 1: Another Kind of Mother

She had some horses she loved.

She had some horses she hated.

These were the same horses

-Joy Harjo, qtd. in Limón (*The Carrying* i)

In the years leading up to the 2016 American presidential election, candidates from both the Republican and Democratic parties sought to define the roles and responsibilities of women, among other marginalized persons, particularly regarding marriage, reproductive rights, and the family unit. According to the Republican Party's 2016 Platform, "Traditional marriage and family, based on marriage between one man and one woman, is the foundation for a free society and has for millennia been entrusted with rearing children and instilling cultural values" (11). Implicit in these words are cultural expectations that women be wives, submit to their husbands, have children, and raise those children in line with the patriarchal traditions and expectations held over them. And, with the election of the Republican Party's Donald Trump came a resurgence and promotion of these traditional, evangelical values as gospel.

During Trump's presidency, these values reigned supreme, evidenced by the policies and laws upheld, added, subtracted, and shot down on Capitol Hill, like the new "domestic gag rule" prohibiting Title X funded providers from discussing abortion and family planning options with patients, and the limiting of women's access to free contraceptives under some health plans (Ahmed). Further, Trump ensured his lasting impact through "the appointment of judges who

respect traditional family values and the sanctity of innocent human life" (Republican Party 13). Perhaps the most alarming piece of evidence that women's rights were in jeopardy came in 2022: with the help of conservative, Trump-appointed Supreme Court justices, *Roe v. Wade*, a landmark case for the reproductive rights of women, was overturned, inordinately impacting women's freedoms and autonomy.

For women who do not conform to these cultural expectations, the suppression and oppression inflicted by these norms creates a cognitive borderland dividing patriarchal culture and a woman's own sense of self, fostering dissonance. Moreover, for women of color, or women at the intersections of other marginalizations, the dissonance is in response to multiple cultures and multiple parties. Gloria Anzaldúa details this intersectional experience in *Borderlands*:

> Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey.
>
> Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits. (42)

Residing in the in-between is the reality for countless women, especially as American culture, and similar patriarchies, push to strengthen and reinforce traditional gender roles. Within this tumultuous climate, the current United States Poet Laureate, Ada Limón, shares her own contemplations, questions, and responses to the pervading cultural ideologies regarding what it means to be a woman. Like Anzaldúa, she lives in an in-between—a cognitive borderland—awash in dissonance. Specifically, her poetry collection entitled *The Carrying*, written during the

2016 election season, explores a question that no doubt was and continues to be shared by so many women: what was I—a woman—made for?

This chapter analyzes Limón's *The Carrying* in response to this question, in particular unpacking the collection's exploration of contrasting perceptions of what it means to be a woman and the cognitive dissonance that results from having to navigate those borderlands. Limón uses lyric poetry imbued with imagery, unfettered by rigid structure, and guided by aural awareness of breath to present a life lived between two opposing ideologies, namely, America's ideal woman versus one's own personal goals, sentiments, and viewpoints. In this collection, Limón contemplates women's bodies, marriage, motherhood, and infertility, showing how, as she says in a conversation with Camille Dungy, "we're always two people, that public-facing self and the interior self," or how women often find themselves standing in a cognitive borderland, caught between differing understandings of self (Books 29:40). Ultimately, Limón's raw, unhampered words articulate and represent cognitive experiences shared by so many who find themselves caught in the middle, ultimately helping to create and validate a place where women can decide for themselves what it means to be a woman.

As previously stated, *The Carrying* was written during a turbulent time in recent American history, but also during a particularly difficult period in Limón's personal life. In 2015, Limón struggled to get out of bed most days due to debilitating vertigo. She was in a near-constant state of pain and dizziness, frequently preventing her from even walking. She references her struggles with her health often in *The Carrying*:

> Pain pills swirled
> in the purse along with a spell for later. It's taken
> a while for me to admit, I am in a raging battle

> with my body, a spinal column thirty-five degrees
>
> bent, vertigo that comes and goes like a DC Comics
>
> villain nobody can kill. ("Wonder Woman" 4-9)

Also during this time, Limón and her partner decided to start trying to conceive, later realizing they struggled with infertility. And, when the fertility treatments Limón underwent worsened her vertigo symptoms, the couple had to make difficult decisions on how to proceed (Crowley).

Obviously, the physical, mental, and emotional pain of these experiences influenced Limón's writing and overall content in *The Carrying*. Nevertheless, Limón forced herself to write a poem a day, and half of the collection is the result of this effort. She herself noted that a large portion of the collection was written as private reflection:

> Honestly, probably half of *The Carrying* was written with the idea of writing for myself to explore things that I was going through—infertility, whether or not we were going to have a child, all of these things. And I just had to write them because I had to *write* them, but I had to write them also with [the idea that] these will not go anywhere…Because if I thought of an audience and really engaged with an audience in that original state, I don't think I would have written the poems that are here. I think I would have been…I don't want to say "censoring," but I think there would have been…a pleasing, maybe, a politeness, that was happening…And so I think that just knowing that maybe no one would read it, that I could just write what I wanted to write, allowed me to be maybe more my monster-y self. (Books 30:38)

This process of "writing with the door shut" led to the creation of a poetry collection so exposed and vulnerable that the reader cannot help but experience Limón's cognitive borderlands and dissonance with her (32:54).

While Limón illustrates many cognitive borderlands throughout this collection, like being a racial minority and chronically ill, one borderland is foregrounded: the role of women and women's bodies. Returning to the metaphor of a busy road in relation to Limón's collection, one side of the border represents culture's expectations and perceptions of women, namely, as wives, mothers, and attendants to men. Anzaldúa likewise discusses the traditional expectations of women in her culture as such: "For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother" (*Borderlands* 39). While other options like education are now popularized and even celebrated, the pressures placed upon women and their bodies by culture linger; Anzaldúa continues, "Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother—only the nun can escape motherhood" (39). As evidenced by the political climate and values lauded in current American culture, this emphasis on women adhering to traditional gender roles has, in essence, not changed. There is an expectation and push for women to become wives and mothers, even if they pursue other avenues. Society often looks at women and their bodies through the eyes of patriarchy—of men—their bodies never completely their own, free of the influences of culture.

For many women, however, the identities and lives they have engineered for themselves do not align with the expectations of culture; thus, their own perceptions and feelings about their bodies represent the other side of the border. These women's sense of self is at odds with their culture's ideologies, creating a borderland rife with cognitive dissonance in their psyche. Limón is one such woman whose perception of self does not fit the cultural mold, as this collection makes clear. Throughout *The Carrying*, her poems showcase her position in the center of her cognitive borderland, in the middle of a busy road, stuck between her personal sense of her body

and the expectations of her culture. And like the traffic on that busy road, cognitive dissonance abounds and attacks her as she tries to find her footing within that space.

For example, in her poem entitled "Sacred Objects," Limón examines the objectification of women's bodies, putting her readers in the headspace of a woman's personal experience with sexual harassment. The poem, written in the form of a paragraph, details a road trip pit stop, such a banal and ordinary event, that quickly turns menacing. The poem opens with a neutral, even peaceful scene: "The dog's in the car and the / weather's fine" (2-3). Then, as the speaker pumps gas, "A man in his black Ford F-150 / yells out his window about my body" (3-4). The speaker details the type of truck driven, as if her mind catalogs the experience in case the information is needed. Noting the generally masculine, dark colored, and large vehicle further adds to the imposing, almost threatening air of the driver, especially as the driver yells at her from the protection of a vehicle while the speaker is left vulnerable outside her own. The speaker continues by attempting to recount what was said:

> I actually can't remember what
> it was. Nice tits. Nice ass. Something I've been hearing my whole
> life. Except sometimes it's not *Nice ass*, it's *Big ass* or something a bit
> more cruel. (4-7)

The fact that the speaker is unable to recount what was said is at odds with her ability to remember the exact make, model, and color of the truck the man was driving. This proves the potential danger of the situation—she remembers identifiable information about the vehicle—yet also reaffirms the speaker's sentiment that this message is "something [she's] been hearing [her] whole / life" through her inability to recount the specifics of his words. This message is also supported through the blend of his words with other memories—"sometimes…it's *Big ass,*"

implying that the message is slung at her frequently enough that this encounter is just par for the course (4-6). Further, the use of enjambment quickens the reader's pace, speeding through the memory, as if this message is par for the course for the reader also; there's no need to linger on an experience so familiar to most women. And the reality is that this message *is* familiar in a culture where men see women's bodies as vessels for their own pleasure, as objects rather than as fully realized human beings.

Exactly halfway through the poem, the speaker's tone shifts suddenly when she encounters a different man in his truck. It says, "Right then, a man with black hair, who could be an / uncle of mine, pulls by in his truck and nods" (8-9). After the first, threatening man, this man puts the speaker at ease; he acknowledges her and feels familiar, even familial, to her. Then, the speaker details the man's trailer:

> He's towing a trailer
>
> that's painted gray with white letters. The letters read: *Sacred Objects*.
>
> I imagine a trailer full of Las Vírgenes de Guadalupe—concrete,
>
> marble, or wood—all wobbly from their travels… (9-12)

Line 10 is the only line in the entire poem that does not end in enjambment, emphasizing the importance of these "*Sacred Objects*" by forcing a full stop and a moment to reflect. Though the true sacred objects are never revealed, the speaker imagines them as statues of La Vírgen de Guadalupe, the most venerated, worshipped, and respected woman in the Western world. The speaker continues:

> All of these female
>
> statues hidden together in this secret shadowed spot on their way to
>
> find a place where they'll be safe, even worshipped, or at the very least

allowed to live in the light. (12-15)

The speaker juxtaposes her previous sexual harassment with the assumed treatment of these statues, clearly displaying the cognitive border between culture's disrespect for women's bodies and the way the speaker wishes women's bodies were treated—as sacred, safe, and "allowed to live in the light" (15). However, Line 15, the final line of the poem, complicates the previous three lines: even La Vírgen de Guadalupe may not be treated as she deserves. This, combined with the fact that the narrator is talking about the worship of a statue—an object, not a person—signifies that, though the speaker wishes that Las Vírgenes fare better than she does, they (and the woman they represent) will never be treated as they truly deserve—as sacred *persons* instead of sacred objects. The poem ends in a wistful tone, showing the speaker's dream of being treated as more than an object for men, but understanding the reality that the best a woman can hope for is being "allowed to live in the light" (15).

Limón further investigates the objectification of women's bodies and the resulting cognitive borderland in "Bust," a poem describing a news story about a young Colombian woman whose breasts were used to smuggle cocaine. The narrator starts by describing the radio personality detailing the story: "The shock jock's morning jawing clangs / in its exaggerated American male register" (5-6). The "clanging" of the shock jock's voice is illustrated aurally by the narrator's use of harsh vocal sounds and stresses on the first (and usually only) syllable in each word of Line 5—the SHOCK JOCK'S MORN-ing JAW-ing CLANGS. Further, the narrator's use of "shock jock" speaks to the rude and crude nature of the radio show, as these types of radio hosts are generally loud and controversial. The narrator relays the story he told:

the twenty-four-year-old Colombian

woman whose breasts had been hacked

open and stuffed with one kilogram
of cocaine swiftly admitted the smuggled
property because she was in dire agony.
Wounds rupturing, raging infection,
she was rushed to a Berlin hospital. (8-14)

The narrator's tone while telling this story is mournful, even angry, as evidenced by her choice in adjectives: "hacked," "stuffed," "dire," "rupturing," "raging" (9, 10, 12, 13). The narrator's use of enjambment in Lines 8 through 11 speeds the story along, as if these news stories are common enough that the reader does not need long to understand the situation. However, she ends the use of enjambment with "agony," forcing the reader to pause and pay attention, further emphasizing the woman's "agony" (12). Then, the narrator's use of enjambment once again in Line 13 illustrates the woman's "rushed" ride to the hospital (14). The speaker continues, relaying more of the woman's heartbreaking backstory: "Her three kids were home in her country / where she worked in agriculture" (15-16). But the shock jock does not comment on this part of the story, choosing instead to make horrific, inappropriate comments about the woman's body:

The rude radio
disc jockey licks his lips into the studio's mic
and says something about motorboating
her tits jammed with nose candy (18-21)

This language is in stark contrast to the way the narrator talks about the woman. While the disc jockey focuses on her breasts as source for his pleasure, the narrator sees the person behind the story—a woman trying to provide for her children, destroying her health and well-being in the

process. Immediately, the narrator relates this woman whose breasts have been "hacked" to her friends' contemplations about mastectomies:

> I'm
> thinking of my friend who's considering
> a mastectomy to stay alive, another who
> said she'd cut them off herself if it meant
> living. (21-25)

For these women, and for the woman whose breasts were "hacked" for transporting cocaine, their bodies make it possible for them to live their lives; they are, of course, more than objects for others (9). For these women, their bodies and their chests are "[masterpieces] of anatomy" (45). In this poem, as in "Sacred Objects," Limón displays the contrast in how women see their bodies versus how their culture—namely men—see their bodies, and how this contrasting perception can create intense cognitive dissonance in the minds of women—especially as they are continually bombarded with the objectification of their bodies on day-time radio and the sides of trucks and other popular outlets representing and communicating cultural ideologies.

Throughout her collection, Limón examines the borderland of women's physical bodies, but she also includes other borderlands as well, like the expectation of women to become wives and how they should fill that role. Similar to how women do not always see their bodies in the same way their culture does, some women do not fit their culture's expectations of a wife, or do not wish to become wives, creating another complex borderland regarding womanhood. On one side of the border are the cultural expectations of women to marry and then fulfill the traditional roles of a good wife. Across the border, some women do not wish to marry at all or to marry a man, and some who do marry do not wish to adhere to these traditional gender roles and

expectations within their marriage. For those women, Limón included, they stand in the midst of a traffic-filled road, attempting to find their place between self and culture, experiencing the cognitive dissonance of this clash of expectations.

Though several poems discuss this borderland, like "Almost Forty," "What I Didn't Know Before," "Love Poems with Apologies for my Appearance," and "After His Ex Died," no other poem in Limón's collection speaks to this borderland more effectively than "Wife." In it, the narrator presents a complex cognitive borderland contrasting the traditional and cultural expectations of a wife with her own inept performance of that role. The poem opens with a statement of discomfort with even just the label: "I'm not yet comfortable with the word," ostensibly referring back to the title of the poem (1). The inclusion of "yet" suggests a division between comfort and discomfort, with the label and perhaps even with the identity. As the poem continues, the speaker highlights the similarity between the words the titular "Wife" and "life":

> I'm not yet comfortable with the word,
> its short clean woosh that sounds like
> life. (1-3)

By giving "life" extra weight through placing it at the start of a new line, the narrator evokes all the implications and expectations that the identity of wife holds—submitting to one's husband, having children, and being a caretaker of both house and family (3). The somewhat playful, contemplative tone of the poem shifts a few lines later, however, when the speaker explicitly and accusingly asks, "Wife, why does it / sound like a job?" and follows this by listing a wife's "job description" according to a "famous / feminist": "*a wife…will keep my / clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced / when need be*" (7-11). "Wife," the speaker notes, is "a word that could be made / easily into maid," adding that "A wife…does, fixes, soothes, honors, obeys" (11-13). She

then includes a Dr. Suess-esque nursery rhyme: “Housewife, / fishwife, bad wife, good wife” (13-14). This “One Fish Two Fish” revision suggests that the cultural definitions and expectations of women as wives are learned early, from childhood. The first half of the poem makes clear that there is a distinct, cultural ideology surrounding what a good wife is and does, and the use of enjambment at the end of every line moves the poem forward quickly, mimicking the way this narrative is constantly chasing women.

The poem shifts even more drastically after the rhyme, when the speaker asks “what’s the word for someone” and lists attributes that characterize her: “who stares long / into the morning, unable to even fix tea,” “who cries / in the mornings, she who tears a hole / in the earth and cannot stop grieving” (14-16, 18-20). Though the speaker clearly dislikes, and perhaps even disagrees with, culture’s definition of wife, those narratives still affect her and negatively impact the way she sees herself. These lines display a clear and heart-breaking feeling of inadequacy. Who and what is she if she is not a good wife? The final lines of the poem showcase the borderland in which the speaker resides: the land between what culture expects of her and how she views herself as a wife. The last attribute the speaker lists is a plea for safe residence within the borderland: she wants to be “the one who / [isn’t]…diminished / by how much she wants to be yours” (22-24). What if, the poem asks, women could be wives *and* themselves? Yet, this ideology is often villainized, even by other women. Anzaldúa writes:

> How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being *hociconas* (big mouths), for being *callejeras* (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives? (*Borderlands* 38).

This cultural expectation for women to be wives, and a specific type of wife, creates dissonant cognitive borderlands in the psyches of countless women who "[want] to be something other than housewives" (38).

Often following the expectation for women to get married is the pressure for women to have children. Motherhood represents another cognitively dissonant space in the womanhood borderland, and it is certainly the most prominent thread woven throughout *The Carrying.* On one side of this cognitive border is culture's expectation for women to have children, while the other side of the border represents a life without children. This borderland—especially as shown in this collection, written while Limón and her partner were actively trying to conceive—is a particularly difficult minefield in modern society, as women navigate the expectations placed upon their bodies by society. For many women, including Limón, the motherhood borderland is further complicated through infertility and/or difficulty carrying to term. And, as Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands*, "Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children" (39). Therefore, for many who choose to or have to remain child-free, they remain in precarious states of psychological dissonance as they stand amidst a turbulent borderland.

In a poem entitled "Would You Rather," the speaker juxtaposes these lives—motherhood versus remaining child-free—as she tries to choose between the two. The poem opens with the speaker describing the game Would You Rather, which she plays with her partner's nieces/nephews. In this game, two choices are presented, and one chooses which option they would rather have. Usually, the choices are quite silly, as the speaker shows early in the poem:

…Would you rather

have fiery lasers that shoot out of your eyes,

or eat sundaes with whip cream for every meal? (4-6)

The duality of this game is represented even in the stanza structure: couplets juxtaposing two options. She continues, "We dealt it out quick, / without stopping to check ourselves for the truth," implying that they might not always be honest when answering, especially as they are not fully weighing the implications of their choices (7-8). Perhaps, with more consideration, the speaker would choose differently. Or, perhaps there are influences at play that point her towards one choice over the other. Further, the game provides only two set possibilities—this or that—creating a black-and-white version of life when, in reality, decisions are rarely so cut-and-dry. What if one could not control the fiery lasers shooting out of their eyes? Or what if the whipped cream was from a can rather than homemade? Would that alter the decision? Thus, the speaker implies the game is flawed; it does not always show the truth of what one would rather choose. The speaker continues by showing another flaw: that the player must choose between two non-comparable things—like apples and oranges. She says:

We played so hard that I got good at the questions, learned

there had to be an equality

to each weighted ask. Now I'm an expert at comparing things

that give the illusion they equal each other. (9-12)

The speaker highlights how each comparison—like fiery laser eyes versus perpetual sundaes—seem equal but are inherently not. They give the illusion of equality, but they are so different that they cannot truly be compared, making the game a farce. Eventually, the speaker's tone turns serious; she shows how her life is reminiscent of the this-or-that game. She asks herself: would you rather have children or not have children? Yet, as she's already shown, life is never so back-

and-white. She and her partner struggle with infertility, making this decision infinitely more complex. She says:

> You said our Plan B was just to live our lives:
> more time, more sleep, travel—
>
> and still I'm making a list of all the places
> I found out I wasn't carrying a child. (13-16)

In Lines 13-14, the speaker reveals that she and her partner chose to have children, but their other option seemed equally as good: to live their own lives free as they please. Yet, when Plan A is taken away due to infertility, as evidenced by Lines 15-16, Plan B does not seem so equal. She still clings to Plan A, carrying the memories of finding out she isn't pregnant with her everywhere she goes, signifying how this decision is far from simple. Further, her use of passive language when saying "I found out I wasn't carrying a child" implies that the decision is not even in her control. If she is unable to get pregnant, then there's no choice to be made—the game really is a farce. Thus, there is a level of cognitive dissonance present not only from trying to make a decision on motherhood, but also dissonance due to her inability to conceive and wanting to. As she states, "The game," and her choice regarding motherhood, "is endless and without a winner" (27), as is the cognitive dissonance that follows her to "all the places / [she finds] out [she isn't] carrying a child" (15-16).

This cognitive borderland and the dissonance due to infertility is further explored in the poem, "The Vulture and the Body." In this poem, the speaker uses imagery to illustrate the pain, pressure, and grief she carries as a result of her infertility and juxtaposes it with the hope she retains during fertility treatments. The poem opens with a stark and tension-filled statement: "On

my way to the fertility clinic, / I pass five dead animals" (1-2). Immediately, a dark, foreboding tone is created by aligning a fertility clinic, a place of promise, with death. The speaker expounds upon that dark tone by listing the dead animals as well as the orientations and positionings of their corpses. For example:

> First a raccoon with all four paws to the sky
>
> like he's going to catch whatever bullshit load
>
> falls on him next. (3-5)

After describing all five animals, the speaker says, "I want to tell my doctor about how we all hold a duality / in our minds: futures entirely different, footloose or forged" (16-17). Like in "Would You Rather," the speaker weighs two options for her future: one that is "footloose," where she is free to move as she pleases without restraint—without children—and one that is "forged," created through having a child. And, by acknowledging the reality of this duality, the speaker imbues the poem with a sense of both longing and loss, showing how one can desire and mourn aspects of each life simultaneously.

When the speaker reaches the fertility clinic, she meets with her doctor, who says, "*Things are getting exciting*," to which the speaker thinks, "*But what about all the dead animals?*" (26-27). Though the doctor sees potential in a successful conception, she remains unsure; she sees so many bad omens, representing the dissonant worries plaguing her mind. What if he's wrong and she is disappointed again? What if she does conceive, but is unable to carry to term? And what about the life she envisioned for herself—a life where she does not have to account for any children? The speaker wants to escape this state of cognitive dissonance: "Some days there is a violent sister inside of me, and a red ladder / that wants to go elsewhere"

(29-30). Again, there is a duality in her mind, other realities that she both wants and doesn't want. She's stuck in this dissonance, and "left to pull [her] panties up like a big girl" (28).

On her drive home, the speaker reflects upon both the doctor visit and the roadkill:

> The white coat has said I'm ready, and I watch as a vulture
>
> crosses over me, heading toward
>
> the carcasses I haven't properly mourned or even forgiven. (32-34)

Though according to her doctor the speaker is "ready," she is not mentally ready to conceive (32). Further, the switch in diction from "doctor" to "the white coat" creates distance, both from the doctor himself and the message he relays (32). She still thinks of another life, one without children, but also hasn't "properly mourned or even forgiven" the carcasses—the babies she's lost—thus proving how cognitive dissonance remains in her mind even as she moves closer towards a decision (34). Then, the speaker directly asks, "What if, instead of carrying / a child, I am supposed to carry grief?" (35-36). Posing this thought as a question expresses the speaker's doubt about her prescribed future. She is unsure what the best path forward is, and she is not sure that having a child is that path for her; perhaps, she was meant for something else. She continues, "The great black scavenger flies parallel now, each of us speeding, / intently and driven, toward what we've been taught to do with death" (37-38). Like the roadkill on the side of the street, she's been taught by culture to move on and move forward, and if the doctor says she is ready to move forward, then she should. Yet, the "black scavenger" remains an ominous sign. What should she do? The poem offers no answer or resolution, leaving the reader in the speaker's state of cognitive dissonance.

The titular poem "Carrying" further discusses the borderland of motherhood by directly posing the question of what women are made for, specifically biologically. The poem starts by illustrating a November sky and an autumn scene, focusing on a pasture filled with mares. The speaker considers herself as she stands watching the mares and a dog, stating, "I'm not large from this distance, / just a fence post, a hedge of holly (7-8). These metaphors assist the reader in picturing the speaker as tall, like holly growing high around an estate, and lean, like fence posts. Then, her mind travels to her own mare, "a few farms over," "her belly barrel-round with foal" (14, 15). This image contrasts the speaker's own body, hinting that the speaker is not pregnant like the mare. Yet, the speaker continues by saying the mare might not be pregnant, but "barrel-round" with the "idea / of foal," signifying the horse's function to reproduce, and possibly the speaker's own pervading thoughts regarding pregnancy (15-16). This image introduces a question of biological essence—what is the purpose of a female body? Is not the very definition of a female a being who can carry and give birth to young? The speaker continues, supporting this idea by saying:

> It's Kentucky, late fall, and any
> mare worth her salt is carrying the next
> potential stakes winner. (16-18)

Yet, the speaker is not pregnant; by stating that "any / mare worth her salt" is pregnant, she implies that her own worth as a woman is in question. She returns to thoughts of her own mare:

> Ours, her coat
> thicker with the season's muck, leans against
> the black fence (18-20)

This image of her dirty horse, unable to stand on her own, weighs on her mind, and she describes that her own body is "empty, / clean of secrets, knows how to carry her" (21-22). This could refer to her ability to take care of her mare—to "mother" her—even as her body is "empty" of her own children (21). The speaker ends the poem with a slightly different tone than some of the previous poems I've analyzed. She says, she "knows we are all meant for something"; the tone here is less reminiscent of cognitive dissonance and more confident and assured that she has a purpose in this world, mother or not, yet the "something" suggests she has not yet figured out what (23).

As Limón wrote this collection and experienced her own cognitive dissonance regarding motherhood, she ultimately decided to stop fertility treatments and pursue a life carrying something else. In an interview with NPR, Limón stated:

> As a society, we often add so much value to motherhood and mothering. And it's amazing and lovely. And there's so much unsung domestic work that goes on with motherhood. But there's also this other part of womanhood that sometimes gets ignored, which is we, too—those of us that are childfree—are creating and putting things into the world. And I felt like going on the journey with fertility treatments really made me look into myself and the way that I actually held some of those truths and some of those false truths about what was valued. (Limón, Interview)

Though our culture values motherhood above all else for women, Limón highlights the ways that women and their contributions are overlooked through this narrow picture of womanhood. Limón and many other women have chosen to create and add to our world in so many other ways, and these alternate pictures of womanhood are valid and valuable, too. Limón proves just this in "Maybe I'll Be Another Kind of Mother." In this poem, the speaker juxtaposes two

images representing alternate life paths. First, she relays a conversation between several women she overhears:

> Women gathered in paisley scarves with rusty iced tea,
> talking about their kids, their little time-suckers,
>
> how their mouths want so much, a gesture of exhaustion,
> a roll of the eyes, *But I wouldn't have it any other way*,
>
> their bags full of crayons and nut-free snacks, the light
> coming in the window, a small tear of joy melting like ice. (5-10)

Evidenced by the speaker's unenthused tone and critical word choice in describing motherhood and children, like the phrases "time-suckers," "a gesture of exhaustion," and "a roll of the eyes," one can conclude that motherhood is not the speaker's preferred life path (6-8). Yet, the speaker notes the value in this existence by describing the mothers' apparent happiness through their statement "*But I wouldn't have it any other way"* and the "tear of joy" she sees. But she wants to be "another kind of mother," one who creates art: "No, I'll be elsewhere, having spent all day writing words" (11). And for her, this existence is just as beautiful; she tells the reader about her own happy life, one filled with writing, familial warmth, and fun movie nights. For the speaker, these lives, though different, are both valid.

This speaker's celebration of other kinds of mothers mirrors Limón's personal ideologies, as she has chosen to be another kind of mother. In an interview, she says, "Isn't it cool that, even if I don't get to be a physical mother, the people who'll read my work will somehow be affected?" (Crowley, "Every"). Anzaldúa likewise discusses this: "Today some of us have a

fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons" (*Borderlands* 39). Yet, these other choices are so often villainized. And *this*—the unacknowledgement of women's autonomy and the judgement of alternate contributions to our communities—is the issue that must change.

Thus, works like *The Carrying* and *Borderlands* serve as acknowledgement and recognition for countless women's cognitive borderlands and dissonance resulting from the villainization of self-determination. The definition of "woman" is different for every person who uses that title, and often one's own definition is not in full alignment with the cultural expectations of woman. At the same time, many of the experiences women have are shared, like doubts about motherhood, confusion over what it means to be a wife, and the difficulties that arise from physical female bodies in a world in which the norm is male. In writing this collection, Limón articulates these experiences, validating the struggles so many women face, giving women the power to name their realities:

> When Eve walked among
> the animals and named them—
> nightingale, red-shouldered hawk,
> fiddler crab, fallow deer—
> I wonder if she ever wanted
> them to speak back, looked into
> their wide wonderful eyes and
> whispered, *Name me, name me.* ("A Name" 1-8)

Works like *The Carrying*, works that question the long-held traditions and expectations of womanhood, facilitate a new culture—a border culture. For those women who experience similar

cognitive dissonance in that space, Limón provides representation, showing that they are not alone in this confusing, tenuous state. For those who do not share these experiences, Limón, through her patchwork quilt of life experiences, draws the reader in, lets them experience the cognitive dissonance with her, and releases them back into the world with hopes that there can be change. Because, with enough women who embrace their cognitive dissonance, and with enough people who give women room to be who they are, we can create a border culture where women can define for themselves what it means to be a woman.

Chapter 2: Racial Borders—Lines You Don't Cross

"This is East Texas, and there's lines. Lines you cross, lines you don't cross. That clear?"

-Ashley Hope Pérez, *Out of Darkness* (131)

Gloria Anzaldúa, the powerful Chicana feminist whose theories have served as the backbone of this thesis, was born in 1942 in a town called Raymondville, Texas. In this border community, Anzaldúa experienced racism that ran deep. Norma E. Cantú and Aída Hurtado describe this borderland in their Introduction to the fourth edition of *Borderlands*:

> South Texas is an arid geographical area that begins in Brownsville, Texas, the south-most tip of the United States and runs up from the mouth of the Rio Grande, the river that divides Texas from Mexico, to Roma, Texas. El Valle, as it is commonly referred to by most Mexican Americans living in the area, is a unique blend of U.S. and Mexican culture, history, language, and ethos. It is also an area that is profoundly racist and isolated from the rest of the United States as well as from the rest of Mexico…For Mexican Americans, El Valle is equivalent to the deep South for African Americans. Even today, the racism in the Valley is neither hidden nor apologized for by many of its white residents. At the time that Anzaldúa was attending schools in South Texas it was not uncommon for children to be physically punished for speaking Spanish in and outside of the classroom. Mexican culture was explicitly considered inferior to U.S. culture and the ethos was one of compulsory, complete and absolute assimilation to U.S. culture, language, and norms. The terrible irony was that in some areas of the Valley at least 85%

> of the residents were of Mexican descent whose families had, like Anzaldúa's, resided in the area before Texas was part of the United States. (4-5)

Throughout *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa details some of her childhood experiences growing up as a person of color in a white-dominated culture. In one such example, she recounts speaking Spanish at school:

> I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for "talking back" to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. "If you want to be American, speak 'American.' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong." (76)

She continued to encounter racism even at the collegiate level when she attended the University of Texas at Austin. In the forward to the third edition of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color,* an anthology she edited alongside Cherríe Moraga, she describes her experiences: "As a Chicana, I felt invisible, alienated from the gringo university and dissatisfied with both el movimiento Chicano and the feminist movement" (xxxv). Anzaldúa discusses these feelings of isolation and alienation throughout much of her writing and scholarship, working towards inclusion and acceptance for all Chicanas and other marginalized persons.

Unfortunately, Anzaldúa's experiences with racism are not unique; many Mexican-Americans, and other persons of color, have encountered and continue to encounter similar racially and culturally charged discriminations and aggressions. Ashley Hope Pérez, another Latinx author and theorist, also grew up in East Texas and endured similar injustices. Like Anzaldúa, she attended UT Austin and eventually earned her PhD from Indiana University,

studying comparative literature and focusing on Latinx literatures. In 2015, she published her second book entitled *Out of Darkness*, a historical-fiction novel set in the town of New London, Texas in 1937, a town just ten miles from Pérez's hometown and a historical setting just five years before Anzaldúa's birth. In this chapter, I examine *Out of Darkness* and its portrayal of racial minorities and mixed-race persons living in a predominantly white culture. Presented in Pérez's novel are three main cognitive borderlands: being a person of color in a white-dominated community; living in a culture that is not one's own; and being a mixed-race person, belonging to two or more cultures and races simultaneously. These borderlands are visible in the black, Mexican, and Mexican-American main characters: respectively, Wash,[3] Naomi, and Beto and Cari. Due to their racial and cultural backgrounds, these characters experience varying levels of discrimination, pressure to assimilate, cultural and lingual erasure, and cognitive dissonance. Ultimately, this hyper-racialized fictitious community shows the ways racial minorities, both black and brown, have historically been marginalized and disempowered, and how the resulting cognitive borderlands foster dissonance in their minds. Pérez places the reader in these characters' dissonance, bringing awareness to how these experiences affected and continue to affect racial minorities in American culture today.

Out of Darkness takes place in the town of New London, Texas, and reimagines the events that occurred before and after a gas explosion in 1937. The narrative begins around six months prior to this event, introducing the reader to Naomi Vargas, a seventeen-year-old Mexican woman, and her two younger half-siblings, seven-year-olds Roberto, or Beto, and Caridad, or Cari. The three move to New London from San Antonio, where they previously lived with their grandparents, to stay with Beto and Cari's father, Naomi's stepdad, Henry Smith. Like

[3] While Wash's character presents evidence of cognitive borderlands and dissonance, I will be focusing on the experiences of Naomi, Beto, and Cari for the purposes of this chapter.

many white men in New London, Henry works long days on the oil field. Naomi and her siblings befriend a local black boy named James Washington Fuller, or Wash. Wash spends many afternoons playing with Beto and Cari, teaching them to fish and exploring the woods, while Naomi hesitantly tags along. Eventually, Naomi and Wash develop a romantic relationship, though it is threatened when Henry decides he wants to marry Naomi. Ultimately, Naomi and Wash plan to run away with Beto and Cari to a place that might accept a multi-racial couple and family. But, on March 18, 1937, Beto, Cari, and Naomi's school is demolished in a gas explosion, killing Cari and countless other teachers and children. Blamed for the explosion, Wash becomes the subject of intense violence, narrowly escaping a lynching in front of his own home. Wash and his family, Naomi, and Beto make a plan to escape town, but it is foiled when Henry catches Naomi sneaking out of the house. Henry follows Naomi into the woods where she meets Beto and Wash. In a scene of countless horrors, Henry ties Wash to a tree and then beats and rapes Naomi, beats Wash, and attempts to force Beto to shoot Wash and Naomi; however, Beto shoots Henry, leaving him dead. Sadly, Naomi and Wash both succumb to their wounds, leaving Beto alone in the woods. Wash's father later finds Beto amid the horrific scene and takes Beto back to his grandparents' house in San Antonio. The novel ends with an Epilogue, in which Beto, after much difficulty, eventually thrives and becomes the first Mexican-American to graduate from UT Austin. Out of necessity, he tells his story, writing about the horrific fates of his "black-brown-white" family (387).

Though the text is fictional, it is based on real events. In her Author's Note, Pérez states that the New London school explosion "is still on record as the deadliest school disaster in the United States" (*Out* 395). According to the Texas Historical Association, "Of the 500 students and forty teachers in the building, approximately 298 died. Some rescuers, students, and teachers

needed psychiatric attention, and only about 130 students escaped serious injury" ("New London"). Likewise, the social and racial tension presented throughout the novel has historical precedent; Perez states:

> With the exception of the explosion, the tragedies that unfold in the novel are products of my imagination. Still, they are generally consistent with documented occurrences in other parts of Texas and the South during the 1930s. There is considerable historical precedent for the racism, sexual abuse, violence against minorities, and other distressing facets of life portrayed in the novel. (*Out* 395)

Further, Pérez says she was fascinated by the factual account that "at least one of the children killed in the New London explosion was likely Hispanic" (396). All of these events and facts led her to craft a narrative exploring racial violence and marginalization, ultimately hoping to "bring to light experiences and narratives that might otherwise go unacknowledged" (395).

This genre also allows Pérez several creative opportunities unavailable to the other authors I examine in this thesis. While Limón and Machado's texts are autobiographical, showing their personal cognitive borderlands and dissonance, Pérez uses fictional characters to imagine how similar borderlands affect everyone differently, focalizing the text through multiple points-of-view. For example, while Wash experiences cognitive borders dividing how his culture sees him as a black man versus how he sees himself, he is confident in his worth and who he is, often fighting back when he is expected to fall in line: "He didn't want to be…chained to [saying] 'yessirs' forever" (179). Naomi, on the other hand, experiences much cognitive dissonance, unsure of how to interact with her society as she navigates her culture's expectations of her and her self-understood identity. Pérez also includes chapters from the point of view of Henry and "The Gang," a group of local, white, often male schoolmates, representing the

ideologies of the larger white community, showing their feelings and recording their commentary on the main characters. Showing these borderlands from multiple angles—from both outside and inside the borderlands—helps the reader to understand the complexities of these borderlands and the cognitive experiences of all those involved. Though this genre requires different methods, Pérez achieves the same effects as our non-fiction authors, that of displaying the deeply negative effects of trying to navigate cognitive borderlands.

One of the most harmful borderlands presented in this novel is being a person of color in a white-dominated society. To conceptualize this borderland, let's return to our road metaphor. On one side of the road is whiteness and culture's perceptions of other races, while the other side of the road represents a person of color's race and their perception of self in relation to their race (rather than in relation to whiteness). For example, Naomi is a person of color in a predominantly white community. Therefore, her psyche is divided between her society's perceptions and expectations of whites and people of color, and her own perceptions of self. Often, her perceptions of herself are vastly different from her white counterparts' views of her. This difference in perception leads to cognitive dissonance, as she tries to navigate a society that actively disregards and discriminates against her.

This cognitive borderland is most clearly illustrated in Naomi's interactions with Mr. Turner, the local grocer, and her challenges buying food for her family. Soon after Naomi and the children move to New London, Henry places Naomi in charge of most household tasks, including the cooking and grocery shopping. New London, however, is much smaller than San Antonio, and she knows of only one grocery store in town: the white store. With no other options, Naomi tries to enter the store, but she is caught by Mr. Turner. He stops her, saying, "Where you think you are, girl?" (43). After Mr. Turner's wife steps in, possibly to defend her,

Mr. Turner says zealously, “So there’s brown ones and black ones, that don’t matter. What matters is that they don’t sully up my store…You’re greasin’ up my floor just standing there” (43). When Naomi begs to be allowed in, saying “I need to buy things, sir,” Mrs. Turner tells her, “The hours for your kind are posted at the back door” (43). From Mr. Turner’s point-of-view, who also represents the ideologies of his white community, Mexicans are seen as less than; dirty. Yet, this contrasts with Naomi’s perception of herself, as she does not believe that Mexicans are “filthy” (44). Naomi’s internal reflections show she knows better than to enter a white store: “She did know; she wasn’t a fool. Back home, she never would have gone into a store in the white part of town. But there was only the one grocer here as far as she knew, and the man had told her plain enough to come back during colored hours” (47). The borders that Naomi comes up against produce an internal dissonance plagued by questions she must consider as a resident of New London—where does she fit in? How does she navigate a culture that villainizes her?

This borderland and the resulting cognitive dissonance are made even more complex due to the varying levels of discrimination present for Mexicans and blacks. Due to her dark skin tone, many wonder if Naomi is black, including Wash: “I thought…well, I thought you were…You know, from Egypt Town…Colored folk, I mean” (44). But, as evident from the treatment of Naomi and Wash throughout the novel, blacks are given a lower status than Mexicans. While Naomi can somewhat interact and journey in white spaces, like becoming a student at the white school, blacks are kept completely separate from whites. Because of Naomi’s dark skin color, the white community views her as something worse than even a “filthy Mexican” (44). Naomi considers the larger implications of being seen as not only Mexican, but as colored: “It might make trouble. She wasn’t worried about herself; she already knew she wasn’t wanted here…But if Henry heard that people in his town saw her not just as Mexican but

as colored, he might try to send her back and keep the twins. She couldn't risk it" (47). Not only does Naomi have to navigate white culture's perceptions of her as Mexican, but also the implications of them viewing her as colored. And, especially due to her desire—need—to watch over her siblings, she experiences a large amount of cognitive dissonance, stepping on eggshells, as she interacts and lives with white persons.

To stymy further negative interactions with the white town, and to prevent them from questioning her race and rights in white spaces, Naomi covertly begins shopping at the black grocery store in Egypt town. Yet, Naomi isn't exactly welcomed into this space, either. The shop owner, Mr. Mason, lightly warns her against shopping at the black grocery store, hinting that it may cause problems if people "make talk": "[there are] good people here in Egypt, but maybe you should think about shopping elsewhere" (55). Naomi, in response, tells Mr. Mason, "Mr. Turner didn't want me in his store. I'd have to go clear to Overton, almost five miles" (55). Then, Mr. Mason puts Naomi's daily reality into words: "You're sort of…in between" (55). Naomi does not fit into white culture, but she also does not fit into black culture, which means that in New London, there is no place for her. This outsider status leaves Naomi stranded in her borderland, unable to cross into white culture, but also not welcome to openly accept and promote her Mexican identity.

This issue comes to a head when Henry realizes that Naomi has not been purchasing her groceries from the white store. When Henry goes to the store to buy some ginger ale and crackers for the sick twins, Mrs. Turner informs Henry that Naomi does not shop there and, further, that her husband had kicked her out: "The girl. I think she come in once some time back, but you know how Amos is. We didn't realize she was kin of yours. Sorry about that. I can talk to him. If she wants to come back in, I mean" (114). This quote emphasizes the point that, as

Mexican, Naomi is not welcome in white spaces except through her connection to her white family. Even with this tie, though, Naomi is treated poorly and judged for her presence, again illustrating how Naomi cannot truly exist in any spaces—white or otherwise—in New London. After the conversation with Mrs. Turner at the store, Henry confronts Naomi, demanding to know where she gets their groceries. After admitting she purchases their food from the black grocery store in Egypt town, Henry is livid. He says, "You've been feeding us nigger food? Feeding it to me? Feeding it to my kids?" (131). Naomi tries to fight back, saying, "There's nothing wrong with the food, and you know it" (131). But Henry does not care: "This is East Texas, and there's lines. Lines you cross, lines you don't cross. That clear?" (131). This language clearly illustrates Naomi's borderland as a person of color living in a white space—to Henry, and in this white-dominant community, whiteness is supreme, and people of color should be kept separate, away, on the other side of literal and symbolic borderlines. Henry blinds himself to Naomi's race, pretending that she is white and that she can fully exist in white spaces. Yet Naomi cannot forget, and Henry's expectation for her to be like other white persons conflicts with her own identity as Mexican and a person of color. Whether Henry likes it or not, Naomi is already straddling those lines she shouldn't cross. She will never be white, and Henry demands that she not be Mexican, so she remains stuck in the middle of her borderland, stuck in her cognitive dissonance.

Another borderland that is illuminated in *Out of Darkness* is the clash of two different cultures (which is, of course, bound up with the clash of two different races). This is especially demonstrated in the characterization and life of Naomi, who is Mexican, yet living in the United States. Her cognitive borderland is made up of, on one side, American culture, which is white-dominated, and on the other side, Mexican culture. In the middle of this road, straddling the

double yellow lines, is Naomi as she tries to navigate living in American culture, yet holding onto her Mexican heritage. And, especially during the time period that this novel takes place in, American culture, and particularly the south, was intolerant of immigrants and other cultures, especially Latinx, non-white immigrants. Therefore, Naomi experiences much cognitive dissonance as she tries to make a home in a new culture.

One example of an event that creates this borderland for Naomi is the Americanization and white-washing of the children's names. When Naomi, Beto, and Cari first move to New London, Henry changes their names when he registers them for school. Naomi Vargas becomes Naomi C. Smith, substituting her mother's last name for Henry's generic, white last name. Similarly, Beto and Cari become Robbie and Carrie Smith. Henry chooses to call them by these Americanized names throughout the novel, never acknowledging their real names, even in private. Naomi especially hates these bastardized names because they disregard their mother's memory and strip them of their Mexican heritage: "Henry had taken away the twins' names, too, registering them as Robbie and Carrie, never mind that her mother had named them Roberto and Caridad in the days before she died" (22). While Henry says he changed their names because it "would be simpler…to have everybody enrolled under the same last name," he does not say the truth: he wants to deemphasize their Mexican heritage and encourage the community to think of them as white (22). These name changes create a stark dissonance in Naomi between who she feels she is, as a Mexican woman, and who she is supposed to be while living in New London—an American, white woman. She says: "'Smith' was a slick, faceless thing, a coin worn smooth. Maybe that was why [Henry] did not understand that carrying a name was a way of caring for those who'd given it. Naomi Consuelo Corona Vargas. That was her name. She closed her mouth hard around it. Let him handle her silence" (22). Naomi's real name is part of her identity, an

acknowledgement of her Mexican heritage, and more importantly, a connection to her mother, who remains one of the people she cares for most. By changing her name, Henry, and the culture he represents, take away a part of her, stripping her of her own histories. Unfortunately, openly disagreeing with Henry on this matter could put her and/or the twins in danger, so she does the only thing she can to fight back: she remains silent and refuses to say the new name. She chooses the side of the border that remains true to her self and her Mexican roots.

Beyond taking away their names, Henry takes away another core aspect of the children's identity: their language. Naomi, Beto, and Cari are all native Spanish speakers, but one of Henry's rules for living with him is that they "don't talk Spanish in the street or at school or anywhere" (9). Again, Henry attempts to de-emphasize their Mexican heritage through forcing them to speak English. This language erasure is extremely harmful, as Henry, and American culture, is teaching them that their native language is wrong and shameful. Anzaldúa experienced similar censure in her own childhood. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa consistently speaks on the harmful nature of language erasure and how it goes beyond erasing just language: "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" (81). Erasing one's language erases aspects of one's identity. How does one act and behave in such situations of forced assimilation? This is a question that Naomi, Beto, and Cari ask constantly. For example, when writing a letter to their grandparents, Beto and Cari question if they should write their letters in English or in Spanish (28). They are, once again, split between their two cultures, their minds full of dissonance regarding who and what they should be and already realizing that their answers are dependent on different audiences. After much debate, Beto decides to write in English and Cari in Spanish, choosing between their heritage and their

new culture (28). This example represents questions that they will have to ask—and answer as individuals, not twins—for the rest of their lives: Who am I? Who am I, if I am not allowed to use my native tongue? Am I Mexican? Am I American? This cognitive dissonance leaves them questioning their value and the value of their heritage.

Another way Naomi is forced to assimilate to American culture and experiences a cognitive borderland is through the food she cooks. Throughout the novel, Naomi assumes the traditional roles of a wife and mother, like taking care of the home and Beto and Cari, even though she is neither. For example, Henry tasks Naomi with cooking for the family. As she grew up in Mexico and San Antonio with her Mexican grandparents, she only knows how to cook Mexican food. Yet, she knows better than to cook Mexican food for Henry. She has a stark memory from her childhood of her mother cooking a huge Mexican feast for Henry: "Her mother had made beautiful enchiladas rojas for him, each corn tortilla lovingly rolled around the stewed chicken and onions and tomatoes and then spread with the sauce she made herself" (190). But Henry's response was less than grateful:

> He'd swept the food onto the floor, yelled that it was sombrero slop. He had ordered Naomi to stay at the table, too, but forbade her to touch the food her mother had served. He sat there with his arms crossed until Estella made him boiled carrots and fried potatoes with bacon. Only then did he let her clear away the shattered dishes. Estella had cut herself on a plate and hidden the bleeding finger in a dishrag. (190)

From a young age, then, Naomi was taught that Mexican food, and further, her culture, were less than American food and culture. Furthermore, Henry is not the only person to villainize Mexican food and Mexicans in general. These hateful ideologies run deep, even infiltrating the minds of the children of New London, surrounding Naomi and her siblings outside their home as well.

One prominent example of this is when Naomi cooks tortillas for a potluck. When the family prepares to return home, Naomi grabs her dish and notices that the tortillas "had not been touched. Not one" (41). To further add to this humiliation, two girls hide in the woods to see who brought the "goofy flat pancakes" (41). They then proceed to taunt and tease Naomi, saying, "Don't you know how to make pancakes? And why'd you bring 'em to a picnic? Ain't no picnic food no how" (41). Naomi attempts to remain calm, but she struggles to do so: "They were children. There was no reason to be embarrassed, but she was" (41). When Naomi tries to explain that they are tortillas, not pancakes, the eldest girl says to her sister, "Ain't she stuck-up, though?" (42). Naomi does try to adapt by cooking traditional American food, but she has no experience making it: "Henry forked up a slice of ham from the platter and dribbled a glob of lumpy pepper gravy onto a biscuit. Naomi watched and waited for a complaint. She'd never cooked this kind of food before, and it showed" (21). After her failed American meal and the scene at the picnic, Naomi asks her neighbor, a kind woman named Muff, to help her learn how to cook traditional Southern American food, like biscuits. To thank Muff for her help, Naomi offers to teach her how to make Mexican food, but Muff politely refuses: "I'd like that, but [my husband] Bud, he's just a country boy…Bud likes his chicken-fried steak and mashed potatoes" (70). Once again, Naomi is stuck in a cognitive borderland between her Mexican roots and her new community's expectations for her to be American, even in the food she cooks. Naomi finds great value and beauty in the food that represents her Mexican heritage, but in New London, that food—and by extension, Naomi—is different, loathsome, and un-American.

The above example also presents a third borderland presented in this novel, largely seen through Beto's character and, less regularly, Cari's: being a mixed-race and/or multicultural person in a white-dominated culture. Unlike the previous borderlands discussed in this chapter,

this borderland is a tri-point border. To conceptualize this borderland, consider once again the borderland of Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. For Beto and Cari, one side of this tri-point border—Brazil—represents their white, American heritage and that culture's expectations of them. Another side—Colombia—represents their Mexican heritage and that culture's expectations of them. Lastly, the third side—Peru—represents Beto and Cari's perceptions and ideologies of themselves. Beto and Cari are Mexican and American simultaneously—they are mixed race and multicultural. Thus, they must contend with both culture's ideas of who and what they should be, while also acknowledging their own ideas of self. This juggling act can create intense cognitive dissonance, as shown throughout the novel through the sections that are focalized through Beto's point-of-view.

The most impactful example of this borderland and the resulting dissonance occurs at the end of the novel when Henry forces Beto to take part in the vicious, violent attack on Wash and Wash's father, and later on Wash and Naomi. After the gas explosion, Wash is blamed by the townspeople once they find out he had been one to suggest using the run-off gas to reduce the school's expenses—but also, as the novel makes clear, because he is black and the townspeople need someone to blame. Therefore, a mob of angry men, all white, storm over to Wash's house. Henry joins the mob and forces Beto to come as well. The text says repeatedly that Beto "did not want to be [there]," not only because of the violence unfolding, but because Henry forces him to be one of the perpetrators, committing hate crimes against someone he sees as family (346). The mob starts terrorizing Wash by stoning him, and Henry hands Beto a stone. The scene proceeds as such: "Henry grabbed his son's chin and wrenched it upwards. 'This,' Henry nodded at the crowd of pale men, 'is our side.' He grabbed the rock from Wally and pushed it into Beto's left hand" (351). Henry creates borders here—"sides"—and he expects Beto to fall into line—to

become a white man, just like his father. But, Beto does not want to be on this side: “Beto dropped [the rock]” (351). Henry once again threatens Beto by saying, “Pick up the goddamn rock and throw it through a window. This ain’t a game, boy. Unless you want to be the one they’re pissing on next,” because as much as Henry tries to forget, Beto is still a person of color, too, and even Henry knows that this town, this culture, marks anything not white as inferior (352). Henry is directly forcing Beto to disown his Mexican heritage and choose his white, American self because white is the only option deemed worthy. And Beto, still so young, cannot stand against Henry: “He could not speak, could not even look at Wash. All those eyes. Beto hurled the rock. Glass shattered, and the keys of the old upright piano jangled. He could hear Peggy crying. A rush of shame flooded him, and he ran” (352). Even though he gave into the act of violence, Beto cognitive dissonance abounds, and he does not completely forget his self and his true character. When he runs away, he searches for Pastor Tom, the town’s preacher, and asks him to help. It is Pastor Tom who convinces the mob to back down, but not before Wash and his father are severely injured, their house, car, and shed burned down, and scarecrows are hung from a tree to resemble the fate they narrowly avoided.

Beto’s cognitive dissonance is shown further as the scene continues in the woods behind Henry’s house. Immediately after the mob attack, Wash, Naomi, and Beto try to escape the town—and Henry’s—wrath. But Henry catches them and confronts Naomi and Wash, once again forcing Beto to be on his side. When Henry realizes that Naomi is in a relationship with Wash, he is livid. He screams, “A nigger, Naomi?...You take up with this nigger all the while you was being cold to me? Me loving you and you acting like that was nothing?” (374). Henry then forces Wash to stand against a tree, and once again makes Beto complicit in the act by having him tie Wash up. Beto continues to fight his father, but Henry threatens to shoot Wash if

Beto does not act. Then, Henry forces Beto to watch him rape Naomi. He says to Beto, "Look at me, son…Now I'm going to show you another side of what it means to be a man. What do you do with a field of your own? You plow it" (376). Once again, Henry tries to force Beto to be the person he, and his culture, thinks he should be.

The scene reaches a violent, horrifying conclusion when Henry tells Beto to shoot Wash and, if he refuses, threatens to shoot Naomi. Beto's cognitive dissonance reaches untenable levels as he begs Henry to let Naomi and Wash go; he cannot choose to harm Wash, "who had taught him to fish. Wash who had taught him to handle a hammer. Wash who made the woods magic. Wash who had saved him. Wash who loved his sister" (379). Beto's version of Wash cannot be reconciled with his father's racist, vile ideologies (379). Tragically, when Beto chooses not shoot Wash, Henry makes good on his threat and shoots Naomi, and she is mortally wounded. Henry then shoots Wash as well, blaming both wounds on Beto. As Beto watches his sister and his friend die, he chooses a side, the side of his own sense of self—he shoots Henry, and Henry dies. Yet, Beto's cognitive dissonance never fades. He moves back to San Antonio, where he once again lives with his grandparents. The text says: "San Antonio took him back, but it was not the same," demonstrating the ways in which these experiences never leave him. They will forever impact his life and future. He carries his dissonance with him everywhere he goes.

The novel closes with an Epilogue that follows Beto, the last remaining family member, as he continues his life. He reminisces on the "black-brown-white group," his true family—a moniker devoid of cultural or identity markers, just colors that merge together. Beto "did not forget"; he takes up the task of sharing this story, to show that the "dead are not always right," and to show the ways borders ripped apart his family and his life (392). He pens his story, telling

the world what happened and exclaiming that it is his job—and our job—to "carry [the dead] with us," because we can learn from them and the tragedies of our past (387).

While this narrative is fictional, it presents very real truths of a past America, and reflects borders and borderlands that still pervade our culture today. As Beto does in the story, Pérez carries this history and provides context for the "silences that need to be amended," because it *is* our job to recognize past injustices and to analyze the ways they continue to impact persons of color and other marginalized groups within and outside of America. Pérez closes the Epilogue with a narrator that speaks directly to the reader, arguing that it takes all of us to amend silences:

> It wasn't that Beto wanted to tell the story. It was that he had to...They had been happy, for a time, before the rules found them. Before the terrible price was exacted for their transgressions. For the crossing of lines. For friendship, for love...He wrote until the story was there, outside of him. Terrible in its truth.
>
> He needs you, reader. All he asks is that you take the story up and carry it for awhile. (393)

While borders do still divide us—physical, metaphorical, and cognitive—Pérez advocates for a new borderland, one where all, "black-brown-white," can live together without fear, judgment, or retribution. Ultimately, her novel is a poignant reminder that friendship, love, and family transcend borders and should be allowed to flourish freely and unfettered.

Chapter 3: "Homophobia" and the Fear of Going Home

"'If you want to be my friend, you must do two things. First, forget I am a lesbian. And second, never forget I am a lesbian.' This is the curse of the queer woman—eternal liminality. You are two things, maybe even more; and you are neither."

-Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House* (135)

When teaching at a college in New England, Gloria Anzaldúa and a fellow lesbian professor met with two lesbian students to discuss their struggles as outsiders in a conservative, majority heterosexual scholarly community. In discussing homophobia, one of the students said, "I thought homophobia meant fear of going home after a residency" (Anzaldúa 42). And Anzaldúa thought:

> How apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza* ["the Race," my translation], for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear—that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage. (42)

For many, a home is a physical space where one feels free and safe to let their guard down and be their most authentic self. This haven can represent a cognitive space as well; one can "feel at home," the saying goes, indicating a feeling of comfort in most anything—a body, a culture, a geographic place, a racial or sexual identity, and so forth. Yet, LGBTQ+ persons do not always

have a space where they feel at home, either physically or cognitively. American culture, and many cultures worldwide, villainize queerness, and as such, LGBTQ+ persons often have a fear of going home, or a fear of embracing their queerness, because, in many spaces, they might face rejection. This "homophobia" can plague their mind, resulting in cognitive dissonance.

In her memoir entitled *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado reflects upon a home—both a physical and cognitive home—she built with her ex-partner, a person she deeply loved but also a person who was mentally, emotionally, and physically abusive; and because of that abuse, the memoir is also a working-through of the fear she had of going home, both to the physical place and in her own mind—a mind filled with cognitive borderlands. Though titled the "Dream House," the home Machado and her partner created together was also a nightmare: it was a place of love and hate, healing and hurting, trust and abuse. She writes,

> The Dream House was never just the Dream House. It was, in turn, a convent of promise (herb garden, wine, writing across the table from each other), a den of debauchery (fucking with the windows open, waking up with mouth on mouth, the low insistent murmur of fantasy), a haunted house (*none of this can really be happening*), a prison (*need to get out need to get out*), and, finally, a dungeon of memory. In dreams it sits behind a green door, for reasons you have never understood. The door was not green. (72)

Though this memoir ends with Machado's healing, it also shows what it took for her to get there. Rife with dissonance, cognitive and otherwise, Machado constructs her memoir as a work of creative nonfiction, connecting her experience to the lives and realities of countless LGBTQ+ persons. In this chapter, unlike my previous chapters, I analyze only one borderland as it is foregrounded in *In the Dream House* and Machado's experiences: the border dividing her

culture's heteronormative ideologies and expectations, and her self-understood queerness. In a world where queer stories are often silenced, this text offers representation for LGBTQ+ persons; and, in sharing her story, Machado also invites those outside of this borderland to feel her cognitive dissonance with her, helping them to gain some understanding of realities dissimilar to their own.

In 2017, Machado released her first book entitled *Her Body and Other Parties*, a collection of short stories connected by themes of women's autonomy, women's bodies, violence against women, and sapphic relationships. *In the Dream House* followed shortly after in 2019, a memoir spanning many years, from her childhood through her relationship with an unnamed ex-girlfriend. In writing this memoir and detailing the highs and deepest lows of their abusive partnership, Machado disobeyed her ex-partner's demand as written in "*Dream House as* Omen": "You're not allowed to write about this…Don't you ever write about this. Do you fucking understand me?" (44). In reflection, Machado states, "Fear makes liars of us all," because she originally acquiesced to this demand (44). Yet, Machado becomes a liar when she shares her story, deciding that the need for this memoir, and to highlight queer realities often silenced, was more important than her fear.

Like many LGBTQ+ persons, Machado experiences a cognitive borderland living as a queer person in a culture that villainizes queerness. Though American culture has made progress towards queer acceptance, like the Supreme Court's 2015 ruling to legalize same-sex marriage in all fifty states, members of the LGBTQ+ community are still marginalized and considered deviants in many spaces. This prejudice runs deep, and as such, queer persons find themselves at, as Anzaldúa says, the "bottom of the ladder," even below women. She writes:

> Women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above deviants. The Chicano, *mexicano*, and some Indian cultures have no tolerance for deviance. Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants. Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common. The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore subhuman, in-human, non-human. (*Borderlands* 40)

This intense discrimination, pervasive queerphobia, and cultural intolerance for "deviance" can create a cognitive borderland in the minds of those who identify as queer. To conceptualize this borderland, we return to our analogy of a busy, traffic-filled road. In the middle of the road, double yellow lines mark a border representing sexuality. One side of the road and the land beyond represents heteronormativity. In American culture, and in many other heteronormative societies, heterosexuality is the social standard, continually reinforced through pervading ideology, customs, and structures—social and otherwise. As Adrienne Rich argues in her article entitled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," American culture promotes the theory of compulsory heterosexuality, or the idea that heterosexuality is the "default" sexuality, and that heterosexuality is forced upon all persons from infancy.[4] This typically means persons living in American culture face immense pressure to be, or at least act, heterosexual. Yet, many persons do not identify as heterosexual, and the other side of the border/road and the land beyond can represent one's homosexuality and/or queerness. Thus, LGBTQ+ persons are left standing in

[4] In Rich's article, she uses several exemplary texts from other authors to illustrate compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormative culture's ideologies regarding sexuality. One such quote from Alice Rossi says, "'Biologically men have only one innate orientation—a sexual one that draws them to women,—while women have two innate orientations, sexual toward men and reproductive toward their young'" (12). Further, Rich states that this sentiment is quite common—shared by many.

the middle of the road, caught between their society's expectations of heterosexuality and their own queer sexuality and pressured to cross the road in one direction or the other; they could cross the road towards their culture's expectations for their sexuality—to be heterosexual—and present themselves to their culture as heteronormative; or, they could cross the road towards their self-influenced sexuality, choosing to present themselves as they are—queer. However, because of the way heteronormative cultures fear and persecute queer persons, choosing to publicly embrace one's queerness can be extremely dangerous.

This borderland between heteronormativity and queerness, and the challenges of being openly queer, are illustrated countless times throughout *In the Dream House*. Machado's performance identity is queer; she chooses to embrace her self-influenced identity and acknowledges her same-sex relationships in public. This "out" existence, however, opens her to ridicule, rejection, and even violence. Machado describes one such experience in "*Dream House as* Road Trip to Savannah," one of her first experiences resulting in physical violence due to being openly queer: "On your last day in town, a drunk man accosts you on the street. You are holding [your partner's] hand when he comes up and grabs you. She shouts, 'Let her go!' and does a martial arts move on his arm. He backs off in surprise, telling you to both go fuck yourselves, and staggers away" (27). Machado describes this scene quite objectively, using few adjectives and straightforward diction. By not going into great detail, Machado's starkness deemphasizes the uniqueness of this experience—this rejection and violence is real and not wholly unexpected when openly showing one's queerness. Yet, Machado's reaction demonstrates how impactful this scene really was for her: "You tremble for the better part of the next hour" (27). Though Machado may have known the risk she was taking in openly embracing her queerness, being accosted is still scary and traumatic; knowing the risk does not mitigate the

shock from being attacked. The narrator's use of second person to describe this scene is also intriguing, as it puts the reader in the experiential position of the narrator, simulating the harrowing experience of being assaulted themselves. This choice in point-of-view also signifies one particularly poignant aspect of this experience for Machado: one can hear about the dangers of being openly queer, but it does not feel quite real until it happens to *you*. And as this was one of Machado's first experiences being attacked for her queerness, the lasting impact of this scene on her psyche cannot be stated enough. Machado continues to describe this scene by illustrating her partner's reaction: "She says, 'I know this is new to you, but I've dated a lot of women. This is just par for the course. This is the risk you're taking'" (27). The partner's reaction, or lack of reaction, stands in stark contrast to the narrator's, proving the partner's claim that this experience is "par for the course," and highlights the cognitive and emotional confusion and discomfort of the narrator (27).

While Machado shows many examples of how her culture attacks her for her queerness, much of this memoir also discusses how those attacks can come from "inside the glass house," or from others who identify as queer, making this borderland even more complex (78). Throughout the memoir, Machado recounts the abuse she suffered at the hands of her ex-partner, like when her partner touches her "in a way that is not filled with love" for the first time:

> The next day, you get into a fight about almost nothing at all…You decide to walk away, go sit in the kitchen…
>
> Your girlfriend comes into the kitchen, and asks, "What are you reading?" as her hand starts to circle your arm. "I'm—" you start to reply, and her fingers tighten…
>
> Her grip goes hard, begins to hurt. You don't understand; you don't understand so profoundly your brain skitters, skips, backs up. You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp

> you can…You don't know what to do. This is not normal, this is not normal, this is not normal. (56-57)

This excerpt shows Machado's cognitive dissonance in that moment—she knew her partner loved her, yet the way her partner hurt her did not align with that love, making her "brain [skitter, skip, back up]." Suddenly, Machado had to reevaluate what she knew about love in an attempt to reconcile these two conflicting images. For a while, she believed her partner when she said "*this is what it's like to date a woman*," and that "lesbian relationships are, somehow different—more intense and beautiful but also more painful and volatile, because women are all of these things too" (45). But, in retrospection, Machado understands the abuse she suffered throughout the relationship as something deeper: "I think about this because it gets at this question of the way that queer abuse feels like—is—homophobia, the same way abuse in heterosexual relationships feels like—is—sexism" (233). In other words, in the same way that heterosexual domestic abuse stems from the internalization of patriarchal narratives—sexist ideologies transmitted through one's culture—queer abuse results from the internalization of heteronormative, homophobic ideologies. Attacks from "inside the glass house" ultimately derive from the same borderland—heteronormative versus queerness—that outside attacks do (78).

Internalized homophobia, or hate for one's own queerness, can stem from the negative perceptions of queerness transmitted through heteronormative culture; when constantly faced with the negative narratives and stereotypes of queer sexuality, one can be influenced to believe these narratives as true, leading to "feelings of self-disgust and self-hatred" ("Internalised Homophobia"). Many queer persons, including Machado and Anzaldúa, deal with some form or

level of internalized homophobia. Anzaldúa describes her own experiences with internalized homophobia and queer identity as such:

> There are many defense strategies that the self uses to escape the agony of inadequacy and I have used all of them. I have split from and disowned those parts of myself that others rejected. I have used rage to drive others away and to insulate myself against exposure. I have reciprocated with contempt for those who have roused shame in me. I have internalized rage and contempt, one part of the self (the accusatory, persecutory, judgmental) using defense strategies against another part of the self (the object of contempt). As a person, I, as a people, we…blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something "wrong" with us, something fundamentally "wrong." (*Borderlands* 67)

As Anzaldúa says, living in this heteronormative/queer borderland can leave one in "agony," their psyche "split" and dissonant because of their differences, leaving them scrambling to escape their culture's rejection and narratives of "inadequacy" (67). They can "[internalize]" the "rage and contempt" of their culture, "[terrorizing themselves]" because of this alleged wrongness. And sometimes, that internalized hate for one's own queerness can turn outward in the form of rejecting someone else's queerness, as Machado states in the previously referenced quote: "queer abuse feels like—is—homophobia" (233). Her ex-partner's internalized homophobia resulted in physical, mental, and emotional abuse against Machado. This ultimately left Machado stranded in the borderland, rife with cognitive dissonance, experiencing attacks from both sides of the border—from heteronormative culture *and* queer persons who internalized their culture's homophobia.

Machado's cognitive dissonance, especially as a result of the abuse she endured, is described in many scenes throughout the memoir, but is also reflected in its very structure. Machado breaks her story into tiny, nonlinear pieces—moments, thoughts, and experiences captured in the form of vignettes. She states that these pieces, rather than an intentional style choice, were representative of her cognitive strain:

> You will spend the next few years of your career coming up with elaborate justifications for the structure of the stories you were writing at the time—telling them to young readers in classrooms and audiences at bookstores; once, to a tenure-track job search committee. You say, "Telling stories in just one way misses the point of stories." You can't bring yourself to say what you really think: I broke the stories down because I was breaking down and didn't know what else to do. (148)

By breaking her story down into pieces, Machado shows the reader her tenuous mental state during this time period—her own mind was in pieces—while simultaneously allowing the reader to experience the dissonance with her; because the reader gets her story in pieces, they have to be willing to enter into a state of potential confusion and not-knowing in order to fully understand her experiences. This text pushes against the typical form of a narrative—linear and logically progressing—reinventing style and structure to fit *her* story and frame of mind, all further illustrating the cognitive dissonance she experiences in her borderland of queerness and queer abuse.

Another way in which this memoir aesthetically depicts cognitive dissonance is through the disparate styles of the vignettes, which range from non-fiction to fiction, dream-like to reality, physical to psychological. Some vignettes depict memories, vivid descriptions of the

author's experiences, like in "*Dream House as* Inciting Incident," when Machado describes her first encounter with her ex-partner:

> You meet her on a weeknight, at dinner with a mutual friend in a diner in Iowa city where the walls are windows. She is sweaty, having just come from the gym, her white-blonde hair pulled back in a short ponytail. She has a dazzling smile, a raspy voice that sounds like a wheelbarrow being dragged over stones. She is that mix of butch and femme that drives you crazy…
>
> Every time she speaks, you feel something inside you drop…She touches your arm and looks directly at you and you feel like a child buying something with her own money for the first time. (15)

This vignette is incredibly detailed, not only focusing on the scene itself, but also Machado's feelings as she experienced them in that moment. These hyper-realistic vignettes show the reader foundational, stark memories from Machado's relationship, highlighting key moments she remembers with the most clarity. Yet, many of the vignettes are not this clear, like the following vignette entitled "*Dream House as* Memory Palace," where Machado takes a dream-like tour through a house filled with her past romantic interests and encounters, including "the driveway: [lined with] all the boys who liked you as a girl," "the back patio: college," and "the living room, the office, the bathroom: boyfriends, or something approximating them" (17). Some vignettes are symbolic, like "*Dream House as* Man vs. Self," in which Machado describes a dog she frees, but who does not run away: "She could have run. The door was open. But it was as if she didn't even know what she was looking at," a symbol of Machado herself while in her abusive relationship, staying even when "she could have run" (119). Many of the vignettes are also historical and/or theoretical—real stories and commentary on those stories, portraying the realities of queer abuse

and erasure. For example, "*Dream House as* Epiphany" is just one line: "Most types of abuse are completely legal" (112). Though all of these vignettes contrast so greatly in style and move back and forth between happiness and terror, taken together they present a complex, connected image of Machado's experiences navigating her borderland. The reader is left to connect the pieces, sometimes even left wondering what is fact or fiction and, in doing so, experiences a small representation of the cognitive dissonance Machado felt when trying to pick up and put together her own pieces.

One of the main challenges Machado faced in putting these pieces together and telling her story was silence, a silence she faced in her own desire to hide these painful memories and her partner's insistence on taciturnity, but also the cultural silencing of queer stories and experiences. In fact, Machado begins her memoir with a prologue focusing on this silencing, which the scholar Saidiya Hartman calls "'archival silence'" (*In the Dream House*, 4). In this prologue, Machado considers the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's words on archival silence and speaks to her personal experiences as a victim of this "gatekeeping": "'When the historian of queer experience attempts to document the past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present.' What gets left behind? Gaps where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into" (4-5). Like many LGBTQ+ persons in the borderland of heteronormative culture versus the self, Machado fell through the cracks, never finding context for the abuse she experienced at the hands of her partner. Further, the lack of resources on queer abuse led her to question the validity of her experiences—if she cannot find record of this happening to others, did it really happen to her? This isolation left her drowning in cognitive dissonance, alone in "impenetrable silence" (5).

However, as Machado points out in her prologue, the lack of representation surrounding queer abuse, and abuse more generally, does not signify the lack of that abuse, just that those experiences have been hidden. Machado writes: "The abused woman has certainly been around as long as human beings have been capable of psychological manipulation and interpersonal violence, but as a generally understood concept it—and she—did not exist until about fifty years ago. The conversation about domestic abuse within queer communities is even newer, and even more shadowed" (5). In "*Dream House as* Cliché," Machado further demonstrates this lack of representation, yet also its prevalence, through the story of Anne Franklin. In a 1984 edition of the *Gay Community News*, Franklin wrote that she was once stoned by her partner while at a French beach. Machado reflects upon this story, stoning, and the symbolism of stones within the LGBTQ+ community. She writes:

> The *stoning*.* This image has followed me for so long; what both has been and is a punishment for homosexuality, inflicted by the woman she loved. Swimming out into the ocean to get away. *Stone*. Stone butch. Stonewall. Queer history studded with stones, like jewelry.
>
> [cited as a footnote in the original] *I think about this because it gets at this question of the way that queer abuse feels like—is—homophobia, the same way abuse in heterosexual relationships feels like—is—sexism. (233)

Throughout the memoir, Machado states how uncommon it is to find stories of queer abuse, especially in history, and says that Franklin's story is rare. Yet, in her reflections, Machado shows how "queer history [is] studded with stones, like jewelry," proving how common this violence truly is, even if the stories have been left out of the archive. Machado's reference to "Stonewall," the famous riots by the LGBTQ+ community that became violent after police

intervention, further illustrate the commonness of this homophobia and abuse against queer persons, both from inside and outside of the glass house (77). In making a connection to heterosexual relationships and sexism in the footnotes, then, Machado proves that abuse is not just a queer experience, but a *human* experience—a shared history for heterosexual and homosexual persons alike (233). Therefore, though Machado felt isolated and alone—cognitively dissonant—due to archival silence, she writes a narrative that not only breaks her silence but also starts to chip away at the archival silence.

Another way that Machado simultaneously portrays archival silence and a lack of resources while also breaking the silence and providing resources is through copious, yet largely unfruitful, footnotes. Typically, in research papers, an author uses footnotes or similar parenthetical insertions to provide evidence for their claims. Machado, similarly, makes claims, or describes moments of her life regarding queer abuse or the queer experience and supplements these claims/stories with "evidence." However, because there is little actual evidence of queer abuse due to its erasure, Machado's footnotes call attention to this lack of representation by subverting the reader's expectations; rather than providing evidence to support her claims, her footnotes often just add her own further thinking on a point or will align her experience with common narrative motifs. For example, in "*Dream House as* Famous Last Words," in a footnote attached to the one-sentence-long vignette where Machado's partner says, "We can fuck…but we can't fall in love," Machado points her reader to "Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* (Indiana University Press, 1955–1958), Type T3, Omens in love affairs" (21). The vignette itself feels like an omen; quoting her partner, saying nothing else, and connecting the threat to an archetype in all love

affairs is eerie and ominous. But also, in linking her experience to archetypal characters and story types, Machado once again suggests that her story is common and shared: "Even if the dominant culture considers you an anomaly, that doesn't mean you can't be common, common as fucking dirt" (232). She shares common experiences with other minorities, other victims of abuse, and others who have faced discrimination—including many non-queer persons. Thus, Machado argues that queer persons are not that different from non-queer persons.

However, that reality is not the world that Machado and other queer persons inhabit. Instead, they exist in a borderland in which they are looked down upon; they are not treated or seen as worthy of respect, civility, kindness. Machado makes this clear in her exploration of another facet of the heterosexual/queer borderland: the pervading negative ideologies and stereotypes of LGBTQ+ persons circulated by heteronormative culture, and how those illustrations of queers often contrast their own perceptions of self. As Machado and Anzaldúa point out countless times in their work, queer persons are seen as "deviants," "fundamentally 'wrong,'" and "villains," (*Borderlands* 40, 67). Machado states the problem as such:

> There is a question of representation tied up in the anguish around the queer villain; when so few gay characters appear on-screen, their disproportionate villainy is—obviously—suspect. It tells a single story…and creates real-life associations of evil and depravity...I know I should have a very specific political response to them. I know, for example, I should be offended by Disney's lineup of vain, effete ne'er-do-wells (Scar, Jafar), sinister drag queens (Ursula, Cruella de Vil), and constipated, man-hating power dykes (Lady Tremaine, Maleficent). (47, 46)

In choosing to focus on Disney movies, Machado draws attention to the harmful narratives and stereotypes of queer persons most Americans have known since childhood, making the point that

these negative ideologies are introduced and reinforced early, fostering heteronormativity and laying the groundwork for the development of homophobia. Further, the characters listed are *the* villains of some of the most iconic, celebrated, classic, and successful Disney movies of all time—*The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, *The Little Mermaid*, *101 Dalmatians*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, respectively; and, what's more, *all* of these movies have been re-made in recent years, proving their lasting impact on culture—on both children and adults of multiple generations—and the prevalence and power of these narratives in our communities. Thus, cultural media, and culture more broadly, teaches and reinforces heteronormative, queerphobic ideologies, making the borderland of heteronormativity and queerness even more volatile and tense.

Because of these negative narratives and stereotypes that exist and persist about queer persons, Machado states that queer persons have to be "twice as good" as their heteronormative counterparts, constantly attempting to change their culture's perception of them—from villain to human (228). She calls this need for "good PR" the "minority anxiety":

> But that's the minority anxiety, right? That if you're not careful, someone will see you—or people who share your identity—doing something human and use it against you. The irony, of course, is that queer folks *need* that good PR; to fight for rights we don't have, to retain the ones we do. But haven't we been trying to say, the whole time, that we're just like you?
>
> It's not being radical to point out that people on the fringe have to be better than people in the mainstream, that they have twice as much to prove. (228)

And, in Machado's case, "[sharing her] identity" *did* embody the negative perception already surrounding queerness: her ex abused her. Thus, Machado experiences this "minority anxiety," wondering if her story will be "[used] against [her]," somehow proving that queer persons *are*

"villains" and "deviants" (*In the Dream House* 228, 67, *Borderlands* 40). But, if she doesn't tell her story, how many other queer persons will feel the same isolation and silence she encountered while being abused? If she doesn't tell her story, she only adds to the silence.

So, she tells her story: "I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon, and that it can look something like this. I speak into the silence. I toss the stone of my story into a vast crevice" (5). Her story "put[s herself], and others, into necessary context," showing queer persons as they actually are: *humans* who occasionally "[do] something human" (5, 228). Instead of letting readers walk away from her memoir seeing queer persons as villains, she flips the script and shows that her story, and this borderland, are more complex than the cultural narratives would have us believe. After spending entire paragraphs listing the many queer villainous characters and their abhorrent qualities, proving the negative portrayals of queer persons in media, Machado surprises the reader by arguing that these characters are actually potentially freeing and inspiring. She writes:

> And yet, while I recognize the problem intellectually—the system of coding, the way villainy and queerness became a kind of shorthand for each other—I cannot help but love these fictional queer villains. I love them for all of their aesthetic lushness and theatrical glee, their fabulousness, their ruthlessness, their *power*. They're always by far the most interesting characters on the screen. After all, they live in a world that hates them. They've adapted; they've learned to conceal themselves. They've survived. (46)

As Machado points out, these characters are more than just villains; they are survivors, and they are powerful in the way they defy their society. They have been persecuted, but they have fought back. They embody emboldened persons who exist and are here among all the other heroes and princesses. Machado continues:

> As it turns out, queer villains become far more interesting among other gay characters…They become one star in a larger constellation; they are put into context. And that's pretty exciting, even liberating; by expanding representation, we give space to queers to be—as characters, as real people—human beings. They don't have to be metaphors for wickedness and depravity or icons of conformity and docility. They can be *what they are*. (47)

Here, Machado demolishes the heteronormative/queer borderland by showing how this expanded representation, queer characters as villainous and heroic and everything in between, allows queer persons to be seen and to see themselves as human beings, fundamentally the same as any other person. Machado states, "*Queer* does not equal good or pure or right. It is simply a state of being—one subject to politics, to its own social forces, to larger narratives, to moral complexities of every kind" (48). In other words, queerness does not equate to villainy. These queer villains do not represent queer persons, but rather, persons (regardless of sexual orientation) who are villainous. Just like heteronormative persons, queer persons are and can be villains, but they can also be the very best of humanity. And, as Machado points out:

> We [as queer persons] deserve to have our wrongdoing represented as much as our heroism, because when we refuse wrongdoing as a possibility for a group of people, we refuse their humanity. That is to say, queers—real-life ones—do not deserve representation, protection, and rights because they are morally pure or upright as a people. They deserve those things because they are human beings, and that is enough… (47)

When queer persons are judged for or reduced to their moments of villainy, they are denied their humanity, their fundamental *same-ness*—because all humans have moments of villainy. All

persons deserve the freedom and grace to make mistakes, and the opportunity for atonement—"because they are human beings," and that is all that should matter (47). So, as Machado states: "Bring on the queer villains, the queer heroes, the queer sidekicks and secondary characters and protagonists and extras. They can be a complete cast unto themselves. Let them have agency, and then let them go" (48). Let queer persons be who they are, and who they can be.

While Machado theoretically destroys the heteronormative/queer borderland by showing queer persons as human, fundamentally the same as all persons, the reality is that this borderland does and will continue to exist. It will take many more years, decades, and many more story-tellers and silence-breakers for these cultural narratives surrounding queerness to evolve; they are so engrained in our lives and psyches that significant change will take time and effort. But, through this memoir, Machado "speak[s] into the silence," asking for recognition of her, and other queer person's, humanity, and begs for the freedom for queer persons to be who they are. She creates a small crack in the borderland road, a tiny fissure that can spread and effect change. And for those who remain standing amidst the borderland, Machado says *I am here, and you are not alone*, helping to create a place—building a new home—where those who need to tell their stories can, and those who need to hear can listen.

Chapter 5: Un Puente

"Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you—from the new mestizas*."*

-Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* (20)

Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted three marginalized groups—women, people of color, and queer persons—in each chapter, analyzing the ways these groups experience cognitive borderlands, as evidenced by Ada Limón's *The Carrying*, Ashley Hope Pérez's *Out of Darkness*, and Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*, respectively. These cognitive borderlands, like busy roads filled with traffic, are turbulent and create difficult environments for those stuck in the middle. In *The Carrying,* Limón investigates what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society, and the pressures and expectations placed upon her and her body. Limón contemplates the sexualization and objectification of women's bodies, the role of wives, and her own conflicting thoughts regarding motherhood, showing her cognitive dissonance regarding alternate perceptions of who and what she should be. Ultimately, she decides to be "Another Kind of Mother," an artist that creates beautiful, meaningful poetry for the many women who need her words. Pérez, in her historical fiction novel entitled *Out of Darkness*, shows the realities of people of color, mixed persons, and persons living in cultures not their own, and how America and other white-dominant societies can foster cognitive borderlands full of dissonance in their minds. This is primarily explored through three of the main characters: Naomi, who is Mexican, and Beto and Cari, who are Mexican-American. Pérez states in her Author's Note that, though the story is fictional, it closely mirrors stories of racism in the South during this time period, and how these stories have traditionally been silenced. But through Beto—in the novel—and Pérez—

in real life—these historical realities and their lingering effects are finally being pulled "out of darkness" (*Out* 393). Finally, Machado presents another borderland, being queer in a heteronormative society, and illustrates how this borderland and the negative narratives surrounding queer persons pervade our culture, even in the minds of those who are queer. She talks of the pressure to prove these villain narratives wrong, and how it feels when these narratives are proven correct. But, by way of telling her story, Machado destroys the queer/heteronormative borderland, showing how queer persons are not that different from heteronormative persons, and providing a new safe space for queer persons to reside and talk about their stories.

While I focused on one type of marginalization per text and chapter, all of these authors, including Gloria Anzaldúa, whose theories and work serves as the foundation of this thesis, stand at the intersections of multiple marginalizations. All of these authors are women *and* persons of color. Machado and Anzaldúa experience(d) borderlands due to their sexuality, as well. For these authors, and for other multiply-marginalized persons, these borderlands can be layered, overlapping, making their cognitive spaces more complex and daunting, and the cognitive dissonance even heavier. Though these three texts are different in many ways, including topic, style, genre, and overall content, all three produce the same effect: they pull readers into the extensive, pervasive cognitive dissonance that results from being an atravesado, an outsider, within their communities, allowing those outside of the borderland to experience what it feels like to constantly face that traffic-filled road. And, for those inside the borderlands, these authors create a safe space to speak up or rest from the constant barrage of traffic, a place of recognition and community.

I argued at the end of my third chapter that Machado bulldozes her borderland, showing the unnecessary nature of these borders; yet the reality remains that the borders dividing marginalized persons from dominant culture exist and persist. But, by bringing readers into these borderlands, all the authors I analyze take steps toward breaking down the borders—and if readers take up the invitation and read, listen to, and sympathize with these experiences, the borders will become more permeable. This dissipation is perhaps more needed now than ever before because these borders are becoming more divisive *every single day* due to measures taken by normative culture to discount and erase marginalized persons, such as book bans. In fact, three of the four texts analyzed in this thesis have been banned in school districts across the country due to their discussions of race, gender, and queerness. These bans and other anti-DEI measures further ostracize marginalized persons from dominant culture and reinforce the harmful narratives surrounding them. One of the guiding principles of my thesis is this: what might happen if we not only stop banning marginalized stories, but encourage these stories to be shared and spread? What if, as Anzaldúa asks, "we [meet] halfway" (20)?

I believe that we—both those inside and outside the borderlands—can help to build a bridge over the traffic-filled, busy road. For those outside the borderlands, this means we must *listen* and *learn from* those inside the borderlands. We need to embrace the stories that make us feel uncomfortable, and we must recognize banned books for what they are: the stories that most need to be told and heard. And we can't stop there—we must take up this discomfort and work towards change. For every person who listens, learns, and acts, we create a foundation, add a brick, or insert a support beam, slowly building a bridge from one side of the border to the other. Simultaneously, when those inside the borderland like Anzaldúa, Limón, Pérez, and Machado, tell their stories, they add pieces to their own side of the bridge, extending out from the other side

of the border. Further, they provide representation for those just like them, letting them take a small step onto an incomplete bridge—a small respite from the pressures of the traffic-road still raging beneath them. When the efforts of those outside the borderland meet those inside of the borderland, when marginalized persons are met halfway, we can effect change: a full, strong, bridge that spans from one side of the road to the other, fostering that "porosity of the border," and allowing those inside of the borderland to find safety above the road and away from the traffic (Eastaugh). Like the real-life border cities of Juarez and El Paso, connected through the Paso del Norte, Stanton-Lerdo, and Ysleta-Zaragoza bridges, we can create a new culture—a border culture—that is a fusion of multiple cultures, ideologies, and persons.

Perhaps, one day we will bulldoze the borders that divide us, creating a safe space for people to be *who they are*, un lugar sin fronteras. But until that day, the borderland remains, and a bridge is *necessary*. A bridge allows marginalized persons the opportunity to be whoever they want to be: members of the dominant culture, their self-understood identity, or a mix of the two. Most importantly, a bridge connects both sides of the border—connects people—allowing those outside of the borderland in, and those inside out, as they need. So, for now, we will "[meet] halfway," and on a future day, when we create that place without borders, we will celebrate as a group, all respected, appreciated persons in a united human community.

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