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Borderlands Studies and Border Theory: Linking Activism and Scholarship for Social Justice

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Abstract

This paper traces contemporary trends in borderlands studies and border theory and argues for a feminist revisioning of border studies as a mode of praxis, linking activism and scholarship. I trace the trends from early borderland studies and Gloria Anzaldúa's analysis of *la frontera* to the institutionalization of border theory in the academy. Scholars influenced by Anzaldúa's work view borderlands as sites that can enable those dwelling there to negotiate the contradictions and tensions found in diverse cultural, class, and other settings. Critical perspectives of this view include concerns that there is "the tendency to construct the border crosser or the hybrid ... into a new *privileged subject of history*" (Vila 2003). I examine tension between empirically-based borderlands studies and cultural studies oriented border theory, address the limits and possibilities of an interdisciplinary border studies, and discuss the dilemmas associated with academic institutionalization and interdisciplinarity. I illustrate the feminist revisioning I recommend with three case examples chosen from contemporary feminist and queer border studies that link local struggles with cross-border organizing against violence against women, labour rights, and sexual citizenship.

This paper discusses contemporary trends in borderlands studies and border theory and argues for a critical feminist revisioning for an interdisciplinary border studies that is shaped by a form of praxis that links activism and scholarship for social justice. Border theory refers to a body of scholarship that has diverse interdisciplinary, political, social, and academic origins but has become institutionalized in the academy and crystallized into a mode of analysis that has quieted its messy beginnings. I examine tension between empirically-based borderlands studies and cultural studies oriented

border theory, address the limits and possibilities of interdisciplinary border studies, and illustrate the approach I recommend with three case examples chosen from contemporary feminist and queer border studies that link local struggles with cross-border organizing against violence against women, labor rights, and sexual citizenship.

I trace trends in borderlands studies and border theory from early borderland studies and Gloria Anzaldúa's analysis of *la frontera* to the institutionalization of border theory in the academy. Scholars influenced by Anzaldúa's work view borderlands as sites that can enable those dwelling there to negotiate the contradictions and tensions found in diverse cultural, class, and other settings. Critical perspectives of this view include concerns that there is "the tendency to construct the border crosser or the hybrid ... into a new *privileged subject of history*" (Vila 2003, emphasis in original). Tensions between social science oriented borderlands studies and cultural studies influenced border theory illustrate the contradictions of academic institutionalization and the limits of interdisciplinarity.

A Note on Terminology

I use three different terms to capture different trends in the field. The frame "borderlands studies" refers to early work in the field. This reflects the early frame developed by interdisciplinary scholars working on issues related to the United States-Mexico border. This frame was institutionalized in the Association of Borderlands Studies and the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. The term "border theory" refers to the work that follows from Anzaldúa's writing and other related perspectives. Finally, I use the term "border studies" to capture contemporary trends in the field. Vila also distinguishes between "border theory" and "border studies" in his contemporary assessment of the field.

Origins and other Metaphors

As an interdisciplinary field borderlands studies developed from the practical goal of building bridges between scholars from different disciplines who were working on issues related to the United States-Mexico border. In order to provide organizational support to the various research projects and interdisciplinary collaborations that had developed over the years, scholars associated with the Western Social Science Association established a section on borderlands studies that served as the springboard for the Association of Borderland Studies (ABS) in 1976 (Stoddard 1982, cited in Klein 1996). As humanities scholar Julie Thompson Klein (1996) observes, by the mid-1990s, borderlands was "not a mature field in either a disciplinary or an

interdisciplinary sense” since she found no “agreement on a reliable lexicon, conceptual tools, and assumptions” (p. 106). Less than a decade later, Pablo Vila (2003) comments that the field crystallized with a dominant frame taken from literary and cultural analyses.

In *Ethnography at the Border*, Vila (2003) notes that the most significant shifts “in border studies and in border theory in the United States” over the past two decades was from the dominance of “sociology, anthropology, and economics and their emphasis on empirical research to literary criticism and its emphasis on theory” (p. 306). In the back cover of the paperback edition of the edited collection *Border Theory* by John Welchman (1996), the text is heralded as “the first comprehensive introduction to the multiplicity of voices and issues being addressed in this vital new field of inquiry, providing a critical context for contemporary discussions of theories of art and architecture, contemporary film criticism, visual culture and cultural politics.” It appears that there exists a consensus that the conceptualization of border theory can be traced to humanities and cultural studies. Despite the dominance of the humanities and cultural studies in the formulation of border theory, ABS remains an association of social scientists (Payan 2009). The apparent disconnect between what constitutes borderlands as an insitutionalized field and border theory as an epistemological frame offers a gateway into the complex relationship among institutionalization and interdisciplinarity, theory and practice, scholarship and activism.

Borderlands, Border Theory, and Disciplinary Border Crossers

The goal of early borderlands studies was to understand the complex processes that shaped politics, economics, and culture along the U.S.-Mexico border. Scholars working on immigration patterns, social control, labour practices, and cultural tensions along the border shared a commitment to empirical investigations and practical problem-solving goals for their research despite diverse conceptual and methodological disciplinary backgrounds. Vila argues that the field of borderlands studies is now strongly shaped by the theoretical insights found in four key texts by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Renato Rosaldo (1989), D. Emily Hicks (1991) and Hector Calderon and José David Saldívar (1991).

Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* has been especially influential in its interdisciplinary reach. In some ways, the broad appeal of Anzaldúa’s work is quite surprising given that it is a passionately written semi-autobiographical account that weaves her own struggles as a lesbian of Mexican American descent with poetry and other literary forms. She opens the book with a quote in Spanish and then intersperses Spanish throughout the text to highlight the

shifting consciousness of those who inhabit *la frontera*. Her opening sentence characterizes the border of the United States and Mexico as an open wound, “*es una herida abierta*’ where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (1987, 25). For Anzaldúa, “the lifeblood of two worlds” merge “to form a third – a border culture” (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). Scholars influenced by her work view borderlands as sites that can enable those dwelling there to negotiate the contradictions and tensions found in diverse cultural, class, and other forms of difference (Vila 2003).

The conceptualization of borderlands as metaphor offered a new way of viewing the border. This view is captured in Anzaldúa’s analysis of the “*new mestiza*,” “*mestiza consciousness*,” and “*nepantla*” [the in-between space]. According to literary scholar AnaLouise Keating (2005/2008), those who inhabit these “in-between” spaces, “who live within and among multiple worlds, and develop what Anzaldúa describes ... as a ‘perspective from the cracks,’ develop a different perspective on borders between identities and “systems of difference” (p.1). It appears that many who adopt Anzaldúa’s framework, if we follow Vila’s critique, view all border dwellers as resistant to “the dichotomies of patriarchal/colonial modernity” (Lugones (2005/2008, 98) and, in this way, essentialize or naturalize the mestiza consciousness of all who reside in the borderlands. However, I argue, Anzaldúa’s approach requires a more nuanced reading that takes into account the broader political, social, and intellectual context that shapes her work as I discuss in the next section.

Vila (2003) points out the disconnect between the border that is theorized in Anzaldúa (1987) and Hicks (1991) and the border that shapes the everyday lives of border dwellers and border crossers. He critiques the cultural studies view of the border and emphasizes “that current mainstream border theory *essentializes the cultures that must be crossed*” and fails “to pursue the theoretical possibility that fragmentation of experience can lead to the reinforcement of borders instead of an invitation to cross them” (Vila 2003, 307, emphasis in original). Vila is especially critical of “the tendency to construct the border crosser or the hybrid (in some cases the Latin American international immigrant in general, but in others the Chicano in particular . . .) into a new ‘privileged subject of history’” (p. 307).

Furthermore, the institutionalization of border theory and its incorporation into a number of different interdisciplinary fields such as immigration studies, women’s studies, and diaspora studies has contributed to the broadening of its application. Vila (2003) is concerned about the widened application of the notion of borders “from the study of issues related to the U.S.-Mexico border to broader themes, in which the metaphor of borders is

used to represent any situation where limits are involved" (p. 307). According to Vila, "border theory now takes as its object of inquiry any physical or psychic space about which it is possible to address problems of boundaries: borders among different countries, borders among ethnicities within the United States, borders between genders, borders among disciplines, and the like" (308). Vila argues that "[t]his approach not only *homogenizes distinctive experiences* but also *homogenizes borders*" (ibid, emphasis in the original).

Interdisciplinarity and Its Discontents

Vila explains that the hegemony of Anzaldúa-inflated border theory is a result of the failure by Anzaldúa and other influential scholars, such as Rosaldo and Hicks, to engage with the rich tradition of "empirical research done in earlier border studies about the topics (race, ethnicity, identity, etc.)" (p. 308). He asserts that: "The erasure of the past is so complete that some people believe border studies and border theories were born with the appearance of Anzaldúa's, Rosaldo's, and Hicks's works" (pp. 308-9). This dilemma, I argue, is, to a large extent, a consequence of the limits of interdisciplinary practice that often goes unacknowledged by those attempting to cross disciplinary boundaries. First, there is an expectation, or at least the hope, that it is possible to master the diverse literatures relevant for different interdisciplinary analyses. However, the explosion of literature in border studies, or in any other interdisciplinary academic enterprise, poses an almost impossible task for a border studies scholar whose goal is to complete a comprehensive interdisciplinary review. Given this challenge, it is important to seek guidance from scholars in the other relevant disciplines in order to understand which literature is the most important scholarship to consult.

Those engaged in building bridges across disciplines for instrumental goals must negotiate different disciplinary frames, methods, and theoretical assumptions in order to move forward toward collaborative problem solving. The extent to which collaborating scholars succeed in making their individual frames, methods, and assumptions explicit depends on the specific requirements of the interdisciplinary enterprise. The differences between interdisciplinarity as a result of problem-solving goals or "*instrumentalism*" as a theoretical or epistemological project leads to two different ways of conceptualizing interdisciplinarity (Klein 1996, 10). The first approach involves "bridge building" between disciplines for practical or instrumental ends, the second leads to "restructuring" of academic knowledge and practices as exemplified by feminist critiques of traditional disciplinary practices (pp. 10-11; see, also, Harding 1987, Smith 1987).

A second challenge for interdisciplinary practice relates to the difficulty in engaging in effective dialogue and problem-solving across, in this case, humanities-oriented and social science-oriented fields. For example, social science scholars who draw on Anzaldúa for their theory or analysis rarely refer to Anzaldúa's poetry or other literary writing when discussing her approach to borderlands. Consequently, her 1987 publication *Borderlands* is typically the sole text cited by both followers and critics. For example, in his criticism of the limits of Anzaldúa's border theory, Vila does not acknowledge publications that contradict his view that she valorizes all border dwellers ability to challenge oppression or to successfully navigate different social worlds. However, in poems like "*sus plumas el viento*," "*sobrepiedras con lagaritjos*," and "*El sonavebitch*," Anzaldúa speaks to the oppression of the exploited men and women who live along the border as well as that of undocumented farm workers in the midwestern United States without romanticizing their ability to resist. For example, Saldívar-Hull (1991/1998) notes that in "*El sonavebitch*," Anzaldúa "exposes the methods by which unscrupulous farmers create a modern-day slave system" and hire undocumented workers, then "tip[ping] off the Immigration and Naturalization Service for a raid before pay day" (p. 216). Anzaldúa was well-aware of the diversity of cross-border migrants and border dwellers. She was also well aware of the painful process associated with mestiza consciousness. Furthermore, she clearly understood that not all border crossers and border dwellers developed similar analyses of their experiences and social location.

The third problem with interdisciplinary practice relates to the tendency to adopt frameworks or conceptualizations out of the context in which they were generated. For example, from within the interdisciplinary site of Women's Studies, Anzaldúa's work is linked to feminist frameworks designed to challenge essentialist views of identity including Chicana feminism (Hurtado 1998), Third World feminism (Mohanty 2003) and postcolonial feminism (Grewal and Kaplan 1994). For example, in the preface to the influential Third World feminist collection, *This Bridge Called My Back*, co-edited with Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga (1981) passionately ties women of color's political consciousness to the material experiences of their lives. Anzaldúa's construction of *la conciencia de la mestiza* and Moraga's approach which has been variously called a "theory in the flesh" (Martinez 2000) and a "theory of the flesh" (Moya 1997) are described as "built from "gut-wrenching struggle" (Martinez 2000, 83) and as providing a powerful "non-essentialist way to ground . . . identities" for the purposes of resistance to domination (Moya 1997, 150). Sonia Saldívar-Hull and other Chicana feminists argue that "Chicana feminism, both in its theory and method, is tied to the material world" (Saldívar-Hull 1991, 220, quoted in Hurtado 1998, 153). Saldívar-Hull

asserts that “[f]or the Chicana feminist it is through our affiliation with the struggles of the other Third World people that we find our theories and our methods” (ibid). Those who draw on these approaches without recognizing the broader feminist epistemological frame that informs their analysis may, inadvertently, interpret Chicana feminist work as essentialist rather than materialist. Moraga’s and Anzaldúa’s feminist materialist perspectives can be situated within the feminist framework of standpoint epistemology (Naples 2003). Standpoint theory retains elements of Marxist historical materialism for its central premise: knowledge develops in a complicated and contradictory way from lived experiences and social historical context. In reworking Marx’s historical materialism from a feminist perspective, standpoint theorists’ stated goal is to explicate how relations of domination are gendered in particular ways. Feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway (1988) explains that feminist standpoint analyses highlight the importance of situating knowledge rather than privileging one site of knowledge production over another. Social-science oriented border scholars, unless engaged directly in feminist theoretical debates themselves, are not likely to find their way to the work that might offer a more nuanced reading of Anzaldúa’s and other nonessentializing analyses of the mestiza consciousness and *la frontera*.

Third World and post colonial feminist critics do point out some essentializing trends within standpoint epistemology. They stress the importance of exploring the diversity of women’s standpoints, rather than assume a singular construction of women’s standpoint (Mohanty 1991; Grewal and Kaplan 1994).as was a tendency in some early standpoint analyses (see, for example, Belenky et al. 1986) In a similar vein, Naples’ (2003) argues for a “strategy for negotiating these challenges” through praxis “ to generate a materialist feminist theoretical approach informed by postmodern and postcolonial analyses of knowledge, power, and language that speaks to the empirical world in which ethnographic research takes place” (p. 24).

The emphasis on praxis -- linking theory and practice – runs through the scholarship on Chicana feminism as it does in much of the work of other feminists writing from the 1970s to the present, although this thread has sometimes been eclipsed by what some critics call “high theory” (Brown 1997) Like many Black feminist authors (see, for example, Crenshaw 1991; Combahee River Collective 1977/1997), early Chicana feminist scholarship includes focus on “welfare rights, childcare, health, birth control, sterilization, legal rights, prison experience of Chicanas, sex roles, images of Chicanas, heroines of history, labor struggles (mostly historical), and organizing” (Córdova 1994, 178, quoted in Hurtado 1998, 154). Border studies is also a

field shaped by praxis (Stoddard 1986). Many early borderlands studies scholars, especially those located in academic sites near the border, also became involved in the everyday struggles of people living on the border. Praxis remains a driving force in many contemporary border research projects

Activist Scholarship and Localizing Analyses

The problem-solving goal of many interdisciplinary projects often involves what has been termed “activist scholarship” (Naples 1998). Activist scholars attempt to develop linkages with activists and policy arenas in such a way as to effectively bridge the activist/scholar divide (Stoeker 1996a, 1996b, 2005). In bridging the boundary between the community and academia for the purpose of social change, activist scholars argue for the importance of praxis to enhance the links between experience, political struggle, and theoretical analysis. I have chosen three different cross-border research projects that incorporate activist goals to illustrate the power of praxis for enriching interdisciplinary borderlands studies: (1) Melissa Wright’s (2006) *Disposable Women and other Myths of Global Capitalism*; (2) Kathleen Staudt’s (2008) *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez*; and (3) Lionel Cantú’s (2009) *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossing and Mexican Immigrant Men*.

In *Disposable Women and other Myths of Global Capitalism*, geographer Melissa Wright (2006) analyzes the ways that Mexican women working in a multinational manufacturing firm along the Mexico-United States border subvert “historical discourses of who they are as women of Mexican descent and where they consequently belong in the multinational firm” (p. 95-96). Drawing inspiration from Anzaldúa, she calls these women “‘maquiladora mestizas’ because they express a cultural identity based on their deft navigation of the multinational maquiladora workplace and the politics of difference that characterize” the firm (p. 95). Rather than focus exclusively on women who are employed at the very bottom of the labour hierarchy, Wright turns her attention to women who are attempting “to scale the corporate ladder in the multinational maquiladoras, where they confront a powerful belief that they, as ‘mexicanas;’ ... are disposable (p. 95).

This shift in attention from the most vulnerable to those trying to make their way up a corporate hierarchy is significant in that early analyses of women working in the factories along the border typically discuss maquiladoras primarily as victims of global capitalism and patriarchy (see, for example, Fernandez-Kelly 1984). In fact, Third World and postcolonial feminist scholars including Anzaldúa, Chandra Mohanty (1991, 2003), and Chéla Sandoval (1991, 2000) critique the failure of many feminists writing in the 1980s to

acknowledge Third World women's agency. By emphasizing their experiences of male violence, colonial processes, economic development, and religious oppression, many Western feminists construct a totalizing image of "the" Third World woman that masks the great diversity in such women's lives and their resistance to oppression (Mohanty 1991; see also Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Hurtado 1996).

In one chapter of her book, Wright highlights the stories of three different *mexicanas* who developed different strategies to challenge the limited expectations of their skill and their worth held by their employers in order to advance in the corporate hierarchy. Wright then poses the question: "Is a political articulation possible between Anzaldúa's version of a radical *mestiza* and the probusiness, *maquiladora* *mestiza* in feminist border politics?" (p.121). The *mexicanas* who are making their way up the corporate ladders of firms along the Mexico-U.S. border are rarely the subjects envisioned by those who adopt Anzaldúa's notion of *mestiza consciousness* nor are they likely to be considered privileged subjects of history. Yet their paradoxical location both within the ruling relations of capitalism and outside it, does place them in an unique social location through which to uncover the complex gendered and racialized processes that sustain transnational capitalism. It should be noted here that these processes can only be revealed through sustained reflection and analysis and therefore may not be directly seen or understood by those inhabiting specific social locations (Smith 1987). Wright's engaged ethnographic approach illustrates the diversity of women whose lives are shaped by cross-border politics and who, in different ways, are challenging the construction of *mexicanas* as passive subjects of history (see also Salzinger 1997). Wright also offers a complex view of resistance, one that avoids romanticizing or essentializing the *la conciencia de la mestiza* of border dwelling women and challenges the reductive use of Anzaldúa's powerful metaphor.

Most contemporary scholars writing about borders continue to examine the geographic borders between nation-states and the borders between legality and illegality that are set through immigration law (see, for example, Calavita 1992; Bosniak 2006). The United States–Mexico border is the subject of ongoing surveillance, militarization, and the politics of fear as expressed in various legislative and cultural constructions that have increased since 9/11 (see, for example, Preston 2007). As Wright demonstrates, despite these measures, citizens of the U.S. and Mexico have developed important collaborative social justice projects to address the increase of violence and needs of laborers and their families on both sides of the border (see also Mendez 2002).

Staudt (2008) details the efforts by scholars and activists who were engaged in contesting the violence against women along the Mexico-United States border. She develops a “border-grounded framework” that encompasses this wide array of institutional and community actors aligned for the purpose of preventing violence against women along the border and in the surrounding communities (p. 25). Originating in local activist networks, the cross-border efforts to confront and end violence against women offers a vivid case of a social justice movement that draws on both interdisciplinary practices and social activism. According to Staudt, the organizing began as a response to a series of rapes and murders of young women in Ciudad Juárez. Between 1993 and 2003 over 370 girls and women were found dead in the desert along the U.S.-Mexico border. Staudt (2008) explains how the activism grew to involve human rights and anti-violence groups, university students and faculty, and cultural workers including Eve Ensler who developed “a monologue on the Juárez murders and visited the border several times” (p. x).

As the Director of the Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTP), Staudt became intimately involved with the organizing efforts and participated in the binational Coalition Against Violence Toward Women and Families at the U.S.-Mexico Border. She quickly became aware of the need for “more research, policy change, and activism agenda” to support the organizing efforts (p. xii). Staudt reports that she “went back and forth, from participant observation and activism to scientific research, with insights from each approval tested, developed, and advanced from the other” (p. xii). By placing insights garnered from economics, political science, sociology, interdisciplinary feminist studies, and cultural studies in direct conversation with everyday activist engagements, Staudt demonstrates the power of a broad-based interdisciplinary framework. She explains that: “Without active participation from civil society and all the drama of art, film, and music that transforms popular culture, democratic change toward social justice is not likely” (p. 157). Furthermore, by placing academic and activist knowledges in dialogue with one another, Staudt’s approach deepens the praxis of movements designed to support social justice along the U.S.-Mexico border and beyond.

In addition to crossing the borders of humanities and social science, the academy and community, activism and scholarship, Staudt and Wright both point out the importance of blurring the boundary between so-called private and public spheres of social life. Feminist praxis has long challenged the discursive and material boundary between private and public spheres (see, for example, Pateman 1988, 1993). Wright’s analysis is especially powerful in her recognition of the tensions between the construction of women’s role through their identities as mothers and how they drew on these identities to

challenge public apathy and inaction with regard to the rape and murders of girls and women along the Mexico-U.S. border. These activist mothers developed a new organization *Mujeres de Negro* (Women in Black) originally established in 1988 by Israeli women in Jerusalem after the first Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule to protest human rights violations by Israeli soldiers in the Occupied Territories. They dressed in black and held a silent vigil each week to mourn the victims of the conflict. By using their gendered identity as women and mothers that links them to the private sphere of the home, instead of as explicitly political actors, they simultaneously challenged the construction of women as tied exclusively to the private sphere and served to reinforce it (see also Bosco 2001; Fegoso 2003; Naples 1998)

Sociologist Lionel Cantú challenges another private/public boundary, one between sexuality and immigration. Sexual orientation is typically viewed as a personal expression of identity and desire that at first thought seems far removed from migratory processes and immigration policy. When Cantú began working on the sexuality of migration, researchers working on gay and lesbian studies and those exploring the processes of immigration rarely engaged in dialogue to identify overlapping issues (see also Luibhéid 2002; Manalansan 2009). The academic institutionalization of these fields reflects the academic division between social science and humanities. As a consequence, Cantú argues, “political economy of immigration approaches ignore how issues of identity are both shaped by the immigration experience as well as constitutive of it”; and “scholars writing in gay and lesbian studies too often privilege the individual and cultural aspects of identity formation” (Naples and Vidal-Ortiz 2009, 1). Like Wright, Cantú also draws on Anzadúa’s (1987) and other Latina and Black feminist scholars (see, for example, Moraga 1981; Collins 1990) as well as social science-oriented immigration literature (see, for example, Bean et al. 1984; Calavita 1992; Chavez 1992, 1994; Portes 1995; Portes and Rumbaut 1996). As the co-editors of his book, which was published after his death in 2002, explain, Cantú’s “queer materialist framework maintains sensitivity to the fluidity of identity and the community context for the development of standpoints, as well as the structural relations of power that contour everyday life” (Naples and Vidal-Ortiz 2009, 11).

Sexuality shapes immigration decisions and personal experiences on numerous levels. First, sexuality can serve as the motivation for those who feel they cannot live openly in their local communities or in response to discrimination due to sexual orientation or to join a sexual partner who has already migrated or who lives in the United States. Second, sexuality influences where, how, and what relationships migrants form in their communities (see, for example, Acosta 2008). Third, sexual identities can be

reshaped through the process of migration. As sexuality studies scholar Hector Carillo (2004) observes, “transnational movements enable queer practices, identities, and subjectivities” (Manalansan 2009, 225). Fourth, immigration policies construct which sexual citizens are welcome to migrate through privileging heterosexual family relationships as the basis for migration. This, in turn, contributes to the construction of legality and illegality (Luidhéid 2008).

Cantú’s (2009) project was to understand the sexuality of migration. His exploration of “sexuality as a dimension of power with a variety of lived experiences and manifestations” (p. 163), originated in his personal reflections and was refined through careful analytic work, and further contextualized through activist engagement. Here we return to the insights of feminist standpoint epistemologists who explain that feminist consciousness or critical consciousness more generally is not a natural expression of female or even feminist identity. It is an achievement born out of reflection on experience and through dialogue, and critical analysis. Cantú developed a “queer political economy of migration” that transcends the borders between social science and humanities and between the fields of sexuality and migration. He emphasized the importance of an historical and materialist specificity that challenges both reductionist or abstract academic work and simplistic activist frameworks. Cantú concludes that “identity is understood as mutable and plural – that is, the subject is the intersection of multiple identities (race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and so forth) that change and have salience at different moments in time and place” (p. 167). His conclusion evokes one offered by Vila’s (2005) in his most recent book, *Border Identifications*, where he writes that

the border is not really one, but multiple, in the sense that not only do different people construct distinct borders and disparate identities around those borders, but those different borders acquire a distinct weight in relation to the different subject positions (and the different narratives within those subject positions) that people decide to identify with (p. 233).

Mexican men who have sex with men are themselves both a distinct and diverse group. When analysis shifts to an exploration of their subject position, scholars in both fields of inquiry, sexuality and immigration studies, are forced to reconceptualize some taken-for-granted assumptions within their fields. Here again we see the power of an engaged interdisciplinarity, one that blurs the line between activism and scholarship and challenges disciplinary or field-specific investments.

Constraints on Engaged Interdisciplinarity and Activist Scholarship

Engaged interdisciplinarity does not fit easily within the traditional academic enterprise. Institutional structures, publishing requirements, evaluation of grants and applications for promotion often disadvantage scholars who draw on diverse literatures and who work collaboratively (especially with nonacademics) or who partner with non-profit organizations or community groups. In addition, activist scholarship is often viewed with suspicion by most academic departments. Consequently, some activist scholars use more politically acceptable terminology like public sociology, action research or service learning rather than activist scholarship to describe their research and community engagement.

Even faculty in interdisciplinary women's studies, sexuality studies, ethnic studies, and Latin American, studies programs find it risky to engage in activist or action-oriented research given the continued need to achieve academic legitimacy. Untenured faculty are especially vulnerable in this regard. Of course, the riskiness of a public commitment to activism varies considerably depending on one's institutional location. Community colleges might reward faculty for what is seen as laudable civic engagement; while a traditional academic department at an elite institution might not accept activist scholarship as appropriate for tenure considerations or promotion.

Fortunately, feminists and other progressive scholars have made their way into the leadership ranks of academic administration and influential academic associations. This has had some surprising institutional effects including the sustained focus on enhancing diversity in academic institutions and community-academic partnerships. For example, former American Sociological Association (ASA) president Michael Burawoy took Public Sociology as the theme for the 2004 annual meeting. Under his leadership, ASA established a task force that is charged with expanding the support for public sociology inside and outside academia. In addition, new publications like ASA's *Contexts* and *Pathways: A Magazine on Poverty, Inequality, and Social Policy* published by the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality have been developed to enhance public understanding of social research and to influence public policy on issues of social concern. New books like Charles Hale's (2008) edited collection on *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* and book series like SUNY Press' *Praxis: Theory in Action Series* offer important outlets for activist research. The number of conferences framed around activist scholarship has grown over the past decade. For example, "Abriendo Brecha *Activist Scholarship* Conference" (2009) sponsored by The Division of Diversity and Community Engagement and the Office of Thematic Initiatives and Community

Engagement at the University of Texas, Austin, is now in its sixth year. The conference “focuses on research and creative intellectual work in alignment with communities, organizations, movements and networks working for social justice” (n.p.). In addition, the growing number of diverse interdisciplinary online journals expand the opportunities for activist scholars to share their research with a wider audience. Community groups can also add links to relevant activist research on their websites to further blur the line between organizing and research, and between activists and academics. All of these new venues can be used to further legitimate this form of scholarship and to create a more visible activist research community.

Conclusion

Contemporary border studies are produced in the context of complex relationships between local community activists, activist scholars located within the academy, and state officials on both sides of the border. Borderlands as a field was originally developed by scholars in the social sciences who may not have paid sustained attention to specific theoretical frames utilized by disciplinarily diverse borderlands scholars as they pursued collaborative research along the Mexico-U.S. border. The descriptive nature of early borderlands research further inhibited the development of a more transdisciplinary theoretical framing. Consequently, early interdisciplinarity borderlands research was generally more additive in approach than epistemologically reconstitutive. The development of border theory from within a more humanities-oriented cultural studies framework filled the theoretical gap but was often taken out of context as borderlands studies scholars adapted it to their research.

Vila (2003) points out that “[f]or scholars doing border studies from the Mexican side of the line, it is difficult to see the border as mere metaphor, as the epitomized possibility of crossings, hybrids, and the like” (312–13; see also Vila 2000; Kearney 2004; Peña 2007). He concludes his critique with a call for a “much more complicated picture of the actual border, where people constantly move from positions of ‘resistance’ to positions of ‘oppression’” (p.325). In fact, border dwellers participate in reinforcing boundaries as well as in resisting oppressive forces. The diversity of class positions and differences in culture, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality also contribute to the dynamics of resistance and oppression. It is the paradoxes and contradictions as well as the complex social, political, and economic processes of *la frontera* that continues to draw the attention of scholars, especially activist scholars, many of whom relate in some way to the challenges of living in the borderlands.

Wright, Staudt and Cantú each demonstrate how a “border-grounded framework” (Staudt 2008, 25) can reveal the complex and shifting nature of borderlands, border dwellers and mestiza consciousness (or in Cantú’s variation, a queer materialist standpoint). Furthermore, as all three emphasize in their cross-border research, borderlands research is “not just theoretical; there are political implications as well” (Cantú 2009, 170). Each scholar highlights the policy implications of their research along with the implications for social justice activism and demonstrate the link between local experiences and global processes of capitalism, migration and globalization. They also stress the complexity of relationships among local actors and those in positions of power to renegotiate constructions of border dwellers, border crossers, and borderlands; thus demonstrating the value of ongoing interdisciplinary research and multifaceted and multi-sited activism along the border.

Their approach to border studies is informed by feminist praxis which emphasizes the importance of collaboration, reflection, action, accountability, and contesting hierarchy and oppressive power relations. It foregrounds the ways in which activism or experience shapes knowledge, an insight that is often lost when theoretical approaches are institutionalized in the academy. It also reflects the fact that theory develops in a dialogic fashion from practice. A praxis-oriented approach requires crossing many different kinds of borders including those drawn between academic disciplines, between scholarship and activism, and between local and transnational politics. From the point of view of feminist praxis it is necessary to create stronger links between local organizing and transnational politics and, in turn, to translate the political strategies and organizing frames developed on the transnational political stage to benefit local social and economic justice movements, which is a core commitment of many activist scholars engaged in border studies.

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