

# QUEERING THE BORDER

ESSAYS



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and stimulate readers."

—*Booklist*

EMMA PÉREZ

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Arte Público Press  
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Recovering the past, creating the future

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Said s/he to the world

Working from shared perspectives on the body and its relationship to the natural world, Adela C. Licona scholar-activist-photographer photographs scholar-dancer Cara Hagan in the dried alkali lakebed of Summer Lake, OR. "Said S/he to the World" is an image from the "Shedding Skin" series of photographs that use the lakebed context to explore environmental desiccation and human/terrestrial relations. Assuming there is always more to see, this collaboration searches for ways of experiencing the world through a visual expression of relational inseparability. "Shedding Skin" is a visual production of and for developed intimacies with the land undertaken to cultivate conditions and possibilities for rekindled kinships and sustainable cohabitations with the human and non-human world.

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PARA LUZIA, TE ADORO MIJA



# Table of Contents

Preface ..... ix

## **Sitio y Lengua (Site and Discourse)**

Nopales (2015).....3  
Cages (2018).....5  
An Epistolary Love Poem to Sor Juanx (2019).....7  
Letter to Gloria Anzaldúa (2020) .....11  
Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a  
Chicana Survivor (1991) .....21

## **Queering the Border**

Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of  
Excavating the Invisible and Unheard (2003).....49  
Gloria Anzaldúa: La Gran Nueva Mestiza  
Theorist, Writer, Activist-Scholar (2005) .....61  
It's Not about the Gender in My Nation, But about  
the Nation in My Gender: The Decolonial Virgen  
in a Decolonial Site (2011).....75  
Decolonial Border Queers: Case Studies of  
Lesbians, Gay Men and Transgender Folks in  
El Paso/Juárez (2012) .....95  
So Far from God, So Close to the United States:  
A Call for Action by US Authorities (2003) .....113



# The Decolonial Imaginary Revisited

The Imaginary as Will to Feel: Beyond the Decolonial Turn in Chicanx/Latinx Feminism (2020).....	121
Trio.....	135
Notes.....	143
Acknowledgements .....	163

## Preface

When Arte Público Press approached me about reprinting essays I'd published throughout my career as an historian and aspiring creative writer, I hesitated because the early articles seemed dated. I realized, however, that a book such as this provides a map of one's evolution. The selected works in this collection begin with recently published prose poems that expand upon my notion of "sitio y lengua," site and discourse, a concept I proposed in the essay, "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor," in 1991. It was no coincidence that the idea came to me as I sat at my kitchen table in Houston having just returned from completing graduate school in California. Back in Texas, I felt immersed in familiar sights, sounds, tastes and smells. I became acutely aware of how much the space had imprinted my writing and as a result these simple words in Spanish, "sitio y lengua," emerged as an interpretive tool. I'm pleased the term has been taken up and popularized even if I may not agree with everything I claimed in that early piece. Still, I do think "sitio y lengua" honors sites we inhabit within our communities and acknowledges methods of communication, whether through food, or music, or poetry, all of which can inspire us to create new language that illuminates our past and present.

After graduate school, I was fortunate to land a job on the US-Mexico border at the University of Texas, El Paso. Living on the border from 1990 to 2003 guided many of the essays in section two. It was there that I began to imagine the queering of

space and the decoloniality of language, which for me meant asking, how can we uncover the lives of those deemed invisible and how do we decolonize our minds? Those of us trained in the 1970s and 1980s were already posing questions to rectify the erasure of our stories and the neglect of our voices. We became determined to fill gaps and silences. In the mid-90s when queer studies transpired and facilitated the “queering” of bodies and documents, I wrote “Queering the Borderlands” to make a plea for locating the silences and gaps in methods often not legitimated in the academy.

By 1990 when I was writing drafts of *The Decolonial Imaginary*, I hadn’t read tracts on the decolonial as theory or practice, other than Franz Fanon and Gloria Anzaldúa. The current decolonial school of thought had not yet developed as it has in the twenty-first century. I had come across the term, decolonial, in an interview of postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, who refers to herself as a decolonial scholar, making the argument that decoloniality is a process. I studied postcolonial theory the summer of 1993 at the School of Criticism and Theory, and I realized Chicana colonial history was not at the stage of “post” colonial. Instead, Chicana, Latina and Indigenous populations in the US live inside an ongoing process of decolonization. This means eradicating the colonial socioeconomic conditions in which we have found ourselves since the colonization of the North American continent in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. For me, the process commences with freeing the mind from our colonialist, patriarchal mindset. I coined “decolonial imaginary” to scrutinize how we interpret the world and to argue that we must look inside ourselves to dismantle oppressive ways of being. I continue to think of the decolonial imaginary as a deconstructive, interpretive tool—not to be confused with the tangible outcome of the decolonial project, meaning land. It’s important to note that for Indigenous nations, the process of decolonization is meant to restore land.

In the last essay under the title, “The Decolonial Imaginary Revisited,” I attempt to move beyond the decolonial turn to emphasize once again the import of the imaginary to discuss something I refer to as “the will to feel.” In the article, I turn to the possibility of personal and collective transformations if we are willing to recognize who we have become and who we are becoming because of and despite historical and psychic trauma. In other words, the dictum, “feel your feelings to get to the healing,” articulates the will to feel beyond the flesh and into the psychic terrain that Anzaldúa had already been traversing.

I have been fortunate to belong to a cohort of scholars and writers who temper our writings with our voices, our experiences and our feelings. We proclaim a phenomenology of self, a perspective grounded in personal and collective experiences from geographic, virtual and psychic locations—all this and more have shaped this collection. I’m indebted to Arte Público Press for reprinting these reflections.

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Tucson, Arizona  
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