



BRAZILIAN IS NOT A RACE

Wendy Trevino

COMUNE

EDITIONS

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PURVEYOR OF POETRY & OTHER ANTAGONISMS

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& I'm not sure how important that is
When you're from Ukraine. I don't give a fuck
What Elizabeth Bishop said. Never
Did. You can like her I'm just saying I
Don't care what she had to say about race.
I will not center some racist settler
Woman's mistaken ideas about
The world in order to make love & hate
Less complicated. Why destroying what
Destroys you is more difficult than you
Expect every time: that complication.
Which is to say I'm not sorry: Clarice
Lispector was white, that passage sounded
Anti-black & that's not "fucked up" to say.

When I said race is relational what
I meant is people are racialized in
Relation to other people who have
Power. It isn't enough to not like
Mexicans. Where I'm from, many of us
Mexican-Americans resented
The Mexicans who came to South Texas
To shop for designer clothes. They were rude
& treated at least the working class &
Poor & undocumented Mexican-
Americans as bad as the "Anglos,"
Which is what we called the white people, who
May or may not have hated Mexicans
Who worked with a few of them anyway.

I took dance classes with two Mexican
Girls. They went to private school in Brownsville.
I remember thinking one of them was
Very pretty. I remember seeing
Them shopping in the mall once & my mom
Pointing out how they were shopping alone
With their parents' credit card & she watched
With what seemed like awe as the pretty one
Paid for an expensive GUESS jean jacket
& complimented her taste. My cousins—
Some of them—were Mexican too. I thought
I was whatever they were. Those teenage
Girls shopping with their parents' credit card
Were definitely from Mexico though.

A childhood friend was visiting while
I wrote this poem. I tried to explain what
I'm talking about here to him & said
"Like Beth Singerman & Ruth Kohn [kids
From middle school] were Argentinian."
"They were?" he asked. "Yeah & they were also
White, which is why they hung out with the white
People & why you thought they were just your
Run-of-the-mill white people," I said. It
Might have been the case that some of their white
Friends didn't think they were white enough, since
They were Jewish or not U.S. born. Can't
Say for sure. We weren't close for very long.
They split us up in high school, like they do.

My childhood friend who was visiting
While I wrote this poem, had visited our
Hometown by the time he met up with me
In San Francisco. He said it had changed.
He said that since Hurricane Katrina
Harlingen's Black population had grown.
He said, "Thank God." I told him that only
Recently had I realized that some of
Us were Afro-Latino. Actually
I said I had realized some of us were
Afro-Mexican & mentioned our friend
Marco as an example. He said, "That's
Right. He was Puerto Rican." Actually
He said he was Cuban. We were both wrong.

Our friend Becky has blocked out her memories
Of our elementary where, according
To my childhood friend, she never
Felt welcome. “Because Becky was Black,” he
Said. I asked him if she thought of herself
As Black, if he had asked her about it.
He said he had & that she had thought to
Herself for a second before saying
“Yeah.” Mexican is not a race either.
Even when Rob Wilson would get angry
& call my childhood friend Messcan
Even when he told me he liked me but
Couldn’t date Mexicans, Mexican was
Not a race—not even in the 80s.

Where am I going with this? I thought
I knew. It makes sense that whenever race
Comes up, I think about the Rio Grande
Valley—“the Valley” as anyone
Who knows the place calls it. That’s where I learned
I’m not white & what that means & how what
That means changes & doesn’t & to who.
Harlingen (where I was born & raised) is
The whitest town in the Valley. Anglos
Made up about 10% of the town
When I lived there. My extended family
Lived in Brownsville & La Joya. Anglos
Made & make up less than 7%
Of both of those towns. Where is this going?

Gloria Anzaldúa was also
From the Valley. Her Wikipedia
Page says she was born in Harlingen like
Me. I read *Borderlands/La Frontera:
The New Mestiza* in college, after
One of my Philosophy professors
Recommended it to me. At the time
I was more than anything excited
To be from the same place as this published
Writer, but to be honest, I didn't
Understand how "living between cultures"
Made us special. I didn't even see
How the "cultures" were distinct. I still don't.
Her approach didn't resonate with me.

Anzaldúa died from complications
Associated with diabetes
In 2004. She was 61.
Around the same age as my Aunt Licha
Who also died from complications
Associated with diabetes
Around that time. Imagining these two
Women—one in Santa Cruz, the other
In Harlingen—dying, it's hard not to
Reflect on what I know about their lives.
How different they were. My aunt loved reading
Too, but the Bible. Her approach didn't
Resonate with me either, but my love
Of reading was always compared to hers.

My dad would always say we were people
Of the mud—Native, Spanish, mud. My mom
Would say, “No seas Malinche,” sometimes.
I always thought that was a thing, rather
Than a person you could be, then later
After reading Anzaldúa, I thought
One day I would write about Malinche.
After Anzaldúa, who insisted
The demise of the Aztec Empire
Wasn’t one woman’s fault, who understood
That the Aztec’s treatment of other tribes
Contributed to their own destruction
As it subverted solidarity
Among Natives against the Spanish. Yeah.

II

Looking at the story of Malinche
Only got me so far. *Genesis* by
Eduardo Galeano, the first book
In his *Memory of Fire*, got me
Farther. *Black in Latin America*
With Henry Louis Gates, Jr. did, too.
How do enslaved Africans fit into
The story of Malinche? Where were they?
That story became more interesting
More important to me than Malinche's.
In the Americas, only Brazil
Had more African slaves than New Spain. From
The time of Cortés to the election
Of Guerrero, there were African slaves.

Mestizaje refers to the general
Process of mixing ancestries. Some say
As an ideology it's kind of
“An alibi for the nation” — tied to
Nationalist interests, it celebrates
Racial diversity even as it
Denies social realities that are
As real as they are divisive. It has
Circulated in the Caribbean
& in Hispanic America — “most
Notoriously in Brazil” — though now
In decline. In Mexico, the goal under
This ideology was the homo-
Genization of all ethnicities.

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When I say “the homogenization
Of all ethnicities” I mean the goal
Was to erase Black Mexicans. José
Vasconcelos’s essay “La Raza
Cósmica” begins with him explaining
How he thinks the human races evolved
& it only gets worse as he goes on.
He sounds like a Nazi as he lays out
A hierarchy of races with Black
At the bottom & white at the top, though
He imagines a mixed race, a new shade
Of white, that will trump them all. He sounds like
A Nazi who believes “the Indian’s
A good bridge” between the Black race & white.

Vasconcelos believed “the Indians”
Did or would eventually see themselves
As Mexican first—even after he
Laid out that hierarchy of races
He believed that. You can share a country
Like you can share a culture—with people
Who want you to disappear, who would take
Everything from you & still want you gone
Who would ask that you stand by silently
Or actively help as they make others
Disappear & all involved might enjoy
Dancing to “La Bamba” & not even
Know it was originally a song
Sung by African slaves in Veracruz.

The story of Malinche always seemed
Sexist to me so its anti-blackness
Isn't that surprising, but beyond that
Story, there are others I share with those
Of Mexican &/or Latin descent
The mere mention of which will remind me
Of how I felt when I found out César
Chávez was no friend to people
He called "wetbacks," will remind me of all
The Latinos working for the Border
Patrol & Immigration & Customs
Enforcement (ICE), will remind me of how
Vasconcelos describes the white race as
One split into Anglos & Latinos.

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction
Maintained by constant policing, violence
Always threatening a new map. It takes
Time, lots of people's time, to organize
The world this way. & violence. It takes more
Violence. Violence no one can confuse for
Anything but violence. So much violence
Changes relationships, births a people
They can reason with. These people are not
Us. They underestimate the violence.
It's been awhile. We are who we are
To them, even when we don't know who we
Are to each other & culture is a
Record of us figuring that out.

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Why didn't Anzaldúa write about
The Plan of San Diego? She mentions
"Mexican-American resisters"
robbed a train in Brownsville in October
1915 & the brutality
Of white vigilante groups & Texas
Rangers that followed, but she says nothing
Of the Plan, its appeal to all factions
Of the Mexican Revolution to
Cooperate in a struggle against
The United States, the way it echoed
Writings in Ricardo Flores Magón's
Newspaper *Regeneración*, which had
Its share of subscribers in the Valley.

One of those subscribers—Aniceto
Pizaña wrote a 21-verse poem
About leaving San Benito after
Suffering anti-Mexican abuse.
He says, “With suffering and pain that grows
Greater / I say that there are Mexicans
Who hate and despise their own race...to lick
The feet of the Americans.” It’s hard
To say who precisely Pizaña is
Referring to when he says “Mexicans”
& there’s the familiar conflation of
Nationality & race, but the lack
Of solidarity among people
Of Mexican descent against Anglos...

It's still like that. Pizaña moved away
from San Benito, in any case
& settled in Brownsville, where he did find
Like-minded people, who also subscribed
To *Regeneración*—like Emilia
Rodriguez, a widow who supported
Herself as a seamstress & took part in
A women's discussion group. She might have
Especially appreciated the September
3rd issue in 1910, its front page
Coverage of both “ethnic exclusion
Of Mexicans by whites” in Texas &
Mujer Moderna's editor living
In exile in San Antonio.

According to passengers who survived
The attack & robbery of the train
Anzaldúa mentions in *Borderlands*
The “resisters” chants included “Viva
Aniceto Pizaña!” It makes sense.
A posse of Anglos that included
Texas Rangers & other officials
Had raided his ranch just two months
Before. Pizaña & some of his friends
Shot & killed one of the men & wounded
Three others in the process then escaped.
Pizaña later claimed the raid drove him
To join the Plan of San Diego, though
He’d been the Anglos’ nightmare long before.

Lots of people don't talk about the Plan
Of San Diego. Take back Texas, New
Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming
& California; annex six more states
For an independent republic of
Black people; return to the Apaches
Their land; kill all white American males
Over the age of 16. That's the Plan.
To some people it just doesn't sound real
But I agree with the historian
Gerald Horne: even "if the 'Plan' was a
Fiction, massacres of various sorts
Were not," neither was the temporary
Halt of economic development.

1915-1917

The Valley was “a virtual war zone.”

Whether that was the Plan or only looked

Like part of the Plan, the effects reached well

Beyond the Valley, in part, because some

Feared Germany & Japan were behind

It. But Black militancy, on the rise

At the time, “gave the Plan resonance &

Terrified Washington.” It wasn’t just

That Afro-Mexicans & African-

Americans living in the U.S.

Might join the movement. They feared mutiny.

They feared Black soldiers, who were typically

Stationed in the borderlands around that time.

No one remembers the Alamo or
Vicente Guerrero or the ban on
Communication between Mexicans
& slaves in parts of Texas. I don't know
How much it matters, but I imagine
A Valley where you learn about the Plan
Growing up & the "Buffalo Soldiers"
Of the 24th infantry, who marched
On Jim Crow Houston's predominantly
Black San Felipe district & opened
Fire on the police—I imagine
Life in that Valley & how it would be
Harder to not hear these stories in that
Place. It's hard to imagine but I try.

Vasconcelos opened a law office
To support himself in San Diego
California, the same year Black soldiers
Killed cops in Houston. He'd spent quite a bit
Of time in the U.S. by then— even
Before exile. Didier Jaén says
“He lived the Chicano experience”
When his dad was a Customs Inspector
In Piedras Negras & he was going
To school in Eagle Pass. Jaén believes this
Explains, at least in part, why Chicanos
Saw “La Raza” in his “Cosmic race” when
The concept had already fallen out
Of favor in Latin America.

Since I started writing this poem less than
A year ago, Mexico recognized
The African ancestry of more than
1 million Mexicans for the first time
In a census survey. “Black” will debut
As an official category in
The 2020 national census.
This is decades after the much discussed
“Multicultural turn” of the 90s
In Latin America, when people
Of African descent went from being
“Invisible” to becoming part of
The state’s apparatus, “communities”
Lawyers could find a legal way around.

In the U.S., the 2000 census
Allowed respondents to check all races
That applied. It was either that or add
A “multiracial” category. It
Was the choice that split the Multiracial
Movement. The middle class white women who
Started the Movement were on the same side
Of the debate as Newt Gingrich, wanting
A standalone category that would
Have affected the numbers of other
Minority racial categories
& funding for race-based initiatives
& civil rights programs. Their primary
Concern was their children’s “racial safety.”

When I say the middle class white women
Who started the Multiracial Movement
Were concerned about their children's "racial
Safety," I mean they could see their children
Weren't white, but they wanted everyone else
To see how they weren't Black either—cuz "safety."
Groups like the NAACP did
Not like them. The white women didn't get
It. They thought these groups must be for the "one-
Drop rule." In his book *Amalgamation
Schemes*, Jared Sexton attacks the Movement
& celebrations of "impurity"
In general—Anzaldúa's included.
"Impurity's" a given. Race is not.

What gets me: the Multiracial Movement
Started in San Francisco in 19-
78, when “urban renewal”
Was displacing thousands of Black people.
The white women who started it had to
Have known. '78 was the same year
Many of the Fillmore District's former
Black residents committed suicide
Or were murdered in Jonestown, Guyana.
That had to have been all over the news.
But there's no indication these women
Wanted to fight that kind of racism.
Vasconcelos's case is more complex
Not cuz he was mestizo. He was not.

I keep thinking of this woman I met
At a “POC only” meeting years
Ago. She wasn’t just light-skinned. She looked
White. It’s hard to explain, but I wasn’t
Alone in thinking this. When it was her
Turn, she introduced herself & explained
Her father was white & her mother was
From Guatemala. She offered to leave
If anyone was uncomfortable
With her there. Everyone said it was fine.
Only later did I learn from a friend
Who’d dated her & met her mother, her
Mother’s family owned a plantation in
Guatemala. Otherwise they were Basques.

The Magón brothers founded the Eden-
Dale commune with family & friends in Los
Angeles, surrounded by silent film
Studios in Silver Lake. There has to
Be room for that. That & everything else
That was un-American at that time
In the broadest, anti-capitalist
Sense. A friend once said race is what is done
To us; ethnicity is what we do
To ourselves. Growing up in the Valley
That didn't feel true, but that doesn't mean
It isn't. Even in 1915
Trains travelling through Brownsville segregated
Black people from white. Mexican or not.

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*A border, like race, is a cruel fiction
Maintained by constant policing, violence
Always threatening a new map.*