

# TRADUIRE LES FRONTIÈRES/ TRANSLATING BORDERS

By Norma Cantú

On May 16-18, 2019 over 200 scholars, activists, artists, and writers gathered for an intense conference titled “*Gloria Anzaldúa: Traduire les Frontières/Translating Borders.*” The international conference on the Chicana queer writer’s work sponsored by over a dozen academic centers and departments including Laboratoire Etudes de Genre et de Sexualité (LEGS), was held at three different Université Sorbonne campuses in Paris, France. Because I had attended conferences on Chicana Literature at the Sorbonne before, I had an idea of what to expect in terms of the culture of conferences in Europe—more like the *Congresos* in Spain or in Mexico—where you don’t pay a registration fee and things are less structured, rarely starting on time. Had I not had these experiences before, I would’ve panicked when the first cab refused to take us to the Paris 8 campus because it was so far.

The idea to host such a conference on Anzaldúa had been percolating for a while with Professors Nadia Setti, Jules Falquet, and others who teach at the Sorbonne. They had great interest in *El Mundo Zurdo* (EMZ), and in May 2018 doctoral student, Camille Back, attended the EMZ conference in San Antonio. That summer, Prof. Paola Bacchetta from the Dept. of Gender & Women’s Studies at UC-Berkeley approached the *Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa* (SSGA) with the idea of a gathering in Paris. She and French faculty members began the arduous task of shaping the conference. After several conference calls requiring that we negotiate time differences and expectations for the gathering, we ironed out a theme and a general view of the content. Because several of the interested parties belong to feminist groups in Paris, the French members of the Scientific Committee—aka Program Committee—form a network of like-minded feminists, queer, and lesbian activists in Paris; Paola, who spends time in Paris and has taught at the Sorbonne, served as liaison between the French scholars and SSGA. They finalized the theme for the conference and keynote speakers over the next few months. At the same time, the Organizing Committee took on the monumental task of securing the facilities at the three

campuses and insuring that the program took shape. Nadia Setti and Akila Kissi coordinated an exhibit of Anzaldúa’s drawings that was set up at the library of Université de Paris 8 with permission from the Nettie Lee Benson at UT-Austin. I was asked to contribute the images of flyers from *El Mundo Zurdo*.

Members of the Program Committee culled through an assigned number of submissions and ranked proposals. The result was a robust and exciting program that included six Plenary Sessions and concurrent breakout sessions with scholarly presentations, round tables, workshops, and performances—mostly literary readings along with film screenings and a dance performance. Each day began and ended with a Plenary Session around a particular theme. In this reflection, I’ll try to summarize the content of the Plenaries and offer my impressions of the conference in general. While I realized it would be a historic and memorable gathering, I didn’t understand the deep implications for knowledge and for the sharing of ideas that occurred.

**Day 1:** After an iffy start, we arrived at Université Paris 8, Saint Denis Cedex. Chicana scholar and spiritual maestra, Sandra Pacheco had set up a small ofrenda and was about to begin the blessing. After a welcome by Maria Segarra and Nadia Setti, Sandra delivered a moving and eloquent blessing, calling on all our spiritual guides and acknowledging our indigenous ancestors.

The first Plenary, titled “*Gloria Anzaldúa, Feministe Decoloniale, Theoricienne Queer of Color*” (*Gloria Anzaldúa: Decolonial Feminist Queer of Color Theorist*), was to set the stage for the next three days with an assessment of current Anzaldúan scholarship. Paola Bacchetta and I delivered our talks. Providing a context for the historical material conditions that Anzaldúa so aptly captured in her work, I read a braided essay that included poetry, history, and an assessment of contemporary border realities; time, and again, I reminded the audience that Anzaldúa’s knowledge base was not Eurocentric, that it reached back to our indigenous roots for sustenance and for wisdom, that she used the figures of Aztec deities as metaphors for her ideas, and that the essence of her thinking was itself a decolonial maneuver that upended the



Official poster of the Paris Conference.

**NOTE:** This conference honored both the thirty year anniversary of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and its translation into French. The main unifying thematic was the question of B/borders as conceptualized by Anzaldúa, and its multiple situated potential interpretations and elaborations. For Anzaldúa, borderlands with a small “b” signaled the geographical space of national division, such as the space of her birth at the U.S./Mexico border. When she wrote *Borderlands* with a capital “B” the concept-term signified many other dimensions including psychic, sexual, spiritual, and energetic divided spatialities, as well. In sum, together the notions of borderlands and *Borderlands up a world* of possibilities for feminist and queer theory, literatures, historiographies, arts, which were invited to converge in this conference.

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hierarchical and established power relations in the U.S., especially in South Texas. Prof. Bacchetta spoke of the Anzaldúan theories as they impacted the queers of color in the U.S. during her life drawing parallels with the French situation today where queers of color remain in the periphery. The concurrent sessions followed with familiar names, who are frequent presenters at EMZ conferences like Anita Revilla, Amelia Montes and various European scholars. Jules Flaquet, Jao Gabriell, and Nawo Crawford closed the day with an inspiring plenary that further presented contemporary French issues from an Anzaldúan perspective. The day ended with two performances: María Helena Fernández presented her one-woman show, *“The Latinx Survival Guide in the Age of Trump”* and Andrea Guajardo and her dance troupe, *Ballet Napanla*, based in New York City, presented *Valentina*, an extraordinary fusion of traditional folklórico dance with modern dance technique. The choreography, the costumes, and the professional quality of the performers made for an enjoyable and educational experience that wove together Anzaldúan concepts and the artistry of dance.



Professor Nadia Setti, one of the organizers and Anel Flores, Artist with Lilliana P. Saldaña behind them.

Day 2: The second venue, Université Paris 3 Centre Censier was easier to get to, but nevertheless, the Plenary *“Wild Tongues: Translating Anzaldúa”* started very late. The participants included Romana Radlwimmer from Germany, Alejandra Soto Chacón and Suzanne Dufour. Two others were not able to attend so I was asked to talk about my translation of *Borderlands* into Spanish. Prof. Radlwimmer’s insights on the process of translation set the stage for my talk. Nino Dufour and Alejandra Soto Chacón are in the process of translating—and gave an overview of their work.

The concurrent sessions brought familiar names and new scholars together. Among the first to speak were Marilyn M. White, a folklorist who attended EMZ-2018 and Lilliana Patricia Saldaña—our *Esperanza* Conjunto Co-chair. Emmy Pérez, Francisco Guajardo, and Stephanie Álvarez spoke about decolonizing the university. An exciting panel on philosophy included Maria Alessandrini who had presented her work at EMZ. A panel on *Latinx Spiritual Expressions* featured Lara Medina, María Helena Fernández and Aida Salazar. Other familiar names included Inmaculada Lara Bonilla



Profesora María Herrera Sobek & Santa Barraza, artist

and María del Socorro Gutiérrez-Magallanes; both of whom spoke about the archives. The afternoon included a Poetry Reading with Jessica Helen López from New Mexico and Estefanía Paola Tizón Fonseca from UTSA. The closing Plenary included AnaLouise Keating, Amina Mama, Elsa Dorlin, and Miriam Grossi focusing on feminist and queer decolonial archives. The evening closed with three films: Tarek Lakshrissi’s *Out of the Blue*, Celine Drouim Laroche & Camille Back’s *Something to do with the Dark: A Tribute to Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, and Dolissa Medina’s *Texas Trilogy*.

Day 3: We began day 3 with a slight delay although Diderot University was the most accessible. After a welcome by Cécile Roudeau from LARCA—Anel Flores, Paola Zaccaria, and Santa Barraza participated in the day’s opening plenary titled *“Artivismes.”* Santa spoke about working with Gloria in the 90s at a Napanla workshop that produced outstanding work; Anel offered an overview of her own trajectory as an artist and writer; both showed stunning artwork that truly showed their activist’s passion. Paola spoke about her work with Anzaldúa at the University of Bari in Italy. During the concurrent sessions, Wanda Alarcón presented *“Towards a Decolonial Feminist Poetics”* and Magda García, an undergraduate intern during the first SSGA gathering, presented her research on the *b/Borderlands*. She is now finishing her dissertation at Uni-



Moderator, Nadia Yala Kusikidi, Paola Bacchetta and Norma Cantú in the opening plenary. Photo by: Inmaculada Lara Bonilla.

versity of California-Santa Barbara and remains a member of the Program Committee for EMZ.

The closing Plenary for Day 3, *“Decolonize the Present,”* included a video of Norma Alarcón, a long-time member of our EMZ organizing and program committees. The two French scholars Seloua Luste Bublina and Nadcira

Guénif presented on their work and spoke of decolonizing the academy. One from a sociological perspective did refer to the work of *This Bridge Called My Back* as groundbreaking. I am sorry that I cannot summarize their presentations fully for they were in French. How, indeed, do we decolonize the present?

I offer that one way is to have gatherings such as the one in Paris where we came together to share ideas and engage with each other over the ideas rooted in Anzaldúan thought. As we bid farewell to new friends and old, the question was where will the next gathering be held? Guadajajara, Cristina Castellano piped up. She and I had already discussed the possibility over a break. Why not? It is time that we have a presence in Mexico and engage with scholars from all over the Americas as well as Europe who want to continue working with Anzaldúan thought. It would be doing something that Anzaldúa herself urged that we do, *work that matters*. Vale la pena, ¿qué no?

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