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# A Post-September 11, 2001, Decade And U.S. Anti-Immigration Imaginaries

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What has come to be known as the post-September 11, 2001,<sup>1</sup> era could well be considered a decade later a new historic border emerging at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Chicano academic Fran-

cisco Lomelí describes it as “the moment when U.S. history parted as did the Red Sea in the Bible,”<sup>2</sup> and renowned Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco summarizes it this way:

One millennium began with Crusades.

The other with two numbers:

9/11.<sup>3</sup>

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Different authors have observed that in this decade, racism and xenophobia against migrants and immigrants have notably increased, particularly against those who happen to have darker skins. Thanks to racial profiling as a norm, this has contributed to the construction of the terrorist as a character that now populates the U.S. imaginary.

According to French philosopher Alain Badiou, the term “terrorist” should not be used outside a specific historical context, such as when it was first hurled at the Jacobins and later at those who resisted the Nazi invasion of France.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, the term “terrorist” is used to designate someone who commits mass murder, such as whoever attacked the Twin Towers in New York, although it is also applied to whoever bombed the Atocha train station in Madrid on March 11, 2004. That is, there is no *one* terrorism, but rather concrete situations. As Badiou would have it, the term “terrorist” is today a polyvalent, propagandistic term used jointly by governments and media.

In the language of the “war against terrorism,” the subject labeled as “terrorist” is chameleonically transmuted according to the political agendas of the moment. In that sense, the figure of the “terrorist” takes on a multiple performative role in accordance with the context in which he/she is identified with and named *vis-à-vis* the U.S. racist imaginary.

Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis refer to this very clearly in *No One Is Illegal*, in the chapter titled “Inventing an Invisible Enemy: September 11 and the War on Immigrants.” To paraphrase them: In a single flash, the tragedy of September 11 allowed the extreme-right to take back the initiative against the immigrants’ rights agenda. Immigrant containment policy meshed with the domestic component of the zigzagging “war against terrorism,” which shamefully singled out, restricted, and/or incriminated the presence of Arabs, Arab-Americans, Muslims, and others, profiling them as “possible terrorists.” The omnipresent phantom of domestic terrorism seen through the imaginary of those “invading hordes” crossing the Mexico-U.S. border in fact spawned an opportunistic marriage between hawks and anti-immigrant restrictionists.<sup>5</sup>

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is under on-going construction. Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who calls himself the “transgenic ‘glow in the dark’ mexitizo in process of chicanoization,” alludes to the racist U.S. imaginary using narrative strategies such as deliberate dislocation and hyperbolization in a xenophobic, everyday context, even as he counterpoints a humoristic image—a “comic relief” of sorts—by referring to a situation that is in fact devastating:

In a CNN town meeting on border issues conducted by anti-immigrant pundit Lou Dobbs, Republican Michael Macaul explained: “You know, after 9/11 the border is really a national security issue. We simply do not know who is coming into this country.” The implication of his warning was clear: how can we tell the difference between a migrant worker and an Arab terrorist? Watch out *locos*! Godzilla in a mariachi hat could be an al-Qaeda operative.<sup>6</sup>

This is how Gómez-Peña underlines this media-propagated imaginary with racist tendencies, which reinforces the

idea of the Mexico-United States border as a space through which pain, fear, death, insecurity, chaos, and a threatening “otherness” filters in. On the other hand, this same imaginary disrupts the border as a *locus* that visibilizes solely the transgressive illegality of these characters, naming them all contiguously, thereby blurring other fundamental factors of differentiation. This is exemplified with great clarity in *We Are All Suspects Now*, a compendium of multi-ethnic-cultural post-September 11, 2001, *testimonios*, in which U.S.-Vietnamese author Tram Nguyen recalls the legal terminology that contributes to establishing the terrorist-transgressor-(im)migrant persona in the U.S. imaginary:

In national security-speak, there’s a catchall term for undocumented migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, drug and human smugglers, potential terrorists, all those who cross borders and transgress national boundaries without state authorization. The term is *clandestine transnational actors*.<sup>7</sup>

Branded as transgressors, (im)migrants are forced to share the very same stigma of “potential terrorist.” So, in this imaginary, the real, the legal, and the imagined become performatized. This is how a stereotyped protagonist emerges, visibilized by ethnic and racial traits, the object of the systemic, institutionalized racial profiling that also targets other traits like nationality, country of origin, given name and surname, language, and social class.

Gómez-Peña renders his perspective of this reality without losing his characteristic sense of humorous irony:

Since 9/11, the semiotic territory encompassed by the word “terrorist” has expanded considerably. First it referred strictly to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, then to Muslim “fundamentalists”; eventually it engulfed all Muslims, and then finally all Arabs and Arab-looking people. In 2003, when a Palestinian friend told me, “We (Arabs) are the new Mexicans, and by extension, you are all Arabs,” I realized how easily the demon mythologies of the brown body transfer from race to race, from country to country....Color, like disease, is contagious.<sup>8</sup>

Famed Chicana-Latina writer Sandra Cisneros gives us another perspective when she writes,

And I thought about how we look just like the Arabs, that in fact we are the Arabs, and we are the Jews, since we are Mexicans, or Mix-icans. A mix of this and that, of some any races.

The term “terrorist” is linked by default to an imaginary that includes Arabs, Muslims, and anyone crossing the border, a stigma easily propagated in an imaginary that is under on-going construction.

And I’ve been pondering this a lot, since when I look in the mirror I look more like Osama Bin Laden than I do Bush. Osama looks like my tío Nacho. The Afghans look like my brothers. They are my brothers, my brothers with their 1001 Arabian Nights eyebrows and noses. MyfatherwithhisfaceofaMoor.<sup>9</sup>

It goes without saying that Chicanos and Latinos suffered from rampant racism long before September 11, 2001. For many decades and generations, intense polemics and continual anti-racist struggles linked to (im)migration have been decanted into a narrative that has sparked a response in cultural, political, social action, linguistic, and literary milieus, not only in the United States, but also in Europe and Latin America. It is these same Chicano and Latino communities and cultures (*chicanidades* and *latinidades*), when confronted with the racist, xenophobic post-September 11, 2001, ripple effect, that put forth in highly intelligent, perceptive, and sensitive ways a gamut of perspectives and visions that are indicators of the fact that the U.S. anti-(im)migrant imaginary of this last decade continues to mutate.

“Racialization,” writes Demian Pritchard, is a historical process that utilizes “a rhetoric of division.” And she adds,

I am sad that while I saw (and see) people coming together as “Americans,” I did not (and still do not) see enough discussion on race in America...one of the powerful lessons that we can learn from 9/11. The lesson of whiteness, whiteness—that is—as an historical structure of oppression and category of privilege, is that hierarchies are developed and privilege gained by defining what is “American” against what is “other”...foreign, wild, not to be trusted, above all to be feared.<sup>10</sup>

Gómez-Peña takes this up again from the perspective of racialized language, challenging attitudes that have emerged during this recent decade *vis-à-vis* the anti-(im)migrant imaginary. He thereby returns the debate to what nowadays takes backseat and touches on a very sore spot:

Gómez-Peña underlines the media-propagated imaginary with racist tendencies, which reinforces the idea of the Mexico-U. S. border as a space through which pain, fear, death, insecurity, chaos, and a threatening “otherness” filters in.

Pay attention to the tone and language of the immigration debate and one cannot help but ask: Has America lost its compassion (or rather the mythology of American compassion) for the underdog and its tolerance for cultural otherness? At what point did white people stop calling themselves immigrants? And weren't they initially illegal too?<sup>11</sup>

Gómez-Peña deals with this head on, situating the axis of migration as a major global issue today:

To me, the “problem” is not immigration, but immigration hysteria. Immigration is a byproduct of globalization and as such it is irreversible. One-third of mankind now lives outside their homeland and away from their original culture and language.<sup>12</sup>

The anti-(im)migrant imaginary has increased its sway among certain sectors of the U.S. public readily influenced by the mass media. As Gómez-Peña puts it,

Immigration hysteria has always resurfaced in times of crises. It's an integral part of America's racist history. But this time it's different. What characterizes this immigration debate is an absolute lack of compassion when referring to migrants without documents.<sup>13</sup>

And he concludes forcefully,

To me immigration is not a legal issue but a humanitarian and humanistic one. No human being is “illegal,” period. All human beings, with or without documents, belong to human kind, our kind, and if they require our help, we are obliged to provide it. It's called being human. Period. In this context, nationality becomes secondary. Their pain is ours, and so is their fate.<sup>14</sup>

By evoking pain as a reference point for a form of solidarity in humanness and linking it to fate, Gómez-Peña crosses multiple semantic, psychological, and emotional borders that

appeal to the future that is rapidly becoming the present. In this sense, renowned Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza recalls Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, and refers to pain as political: “Pain shatters the world and, along with it, the idea of the world. Pain, therefore, is political.”<sup>15</sup> That is how one names, Rivera Garza maintains, what loses essence and force once it is named; she alludes to pain as rupture, be it individual or collective, private or political. This is, in fact, an axiomatic issue that is perhaps footnoted, at best, lost among the surfeit of numbers in so many studies on migration.

Pain is recovered—at least to a certain degree—in narrations that convey their perspectives feelingly as well as intelligently, emphasizing the compassionate within the consciously politicized. What would remain a sob, a cry, or silence takes on a life of its own in the testimonial narratives mentioned above, such as in the Chicano and Latino Narrative. Perhaps even more so in this post-September 11, 2001, era.

As a response to the U.S. mass-media-influenced anti-(im)migrant racist imaginary fostered by “The Master Narrative of U.S. National Security (as written by the neo-cons in collaboration with the mainstream media),”<sup>16</sup> constructed with biased political intentions, this Chicano and Latino Narrative emerges in a variety of forms. Catherine Herrera, for example, opens up in her written *testimonio* the complexities of her own identity:

As a U.S. Latina I have had to also see within me “the enemy,” the racist, the hatred, and I believe that is eventually what the U.S. and its people must confront....

As a U.S. Latina I have seen both sides of the coin, felt both sides of the pain, and perhaps from that, hope will arise from the ashes.<sup>17</sup>

Her vision deals head on with, accepts, and expresses her own dualities—or even multiplicities—as a subject and accepts pain as part of her personal/political and enriching experiences.

Ariel Dorfman, a recognized U.S.-Latino writer, visualizes a more humane, globalized imaginary:

I would like to think that a global tragedy such as [this] might also guide us towards a new global compassion and identification between peoples that has been sadly lacking in these [times] of terror, I hope...that in the years to come we can find ways of globalizing mercy and understanding with as much efficiency and energy as we have put into the globalization of war and violence.<sup>18</sup>

Chicana writer, poet, philosopher, and cultural theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa has baptized this post-September 11, 2001, decade, this pained, fragmented era, as “*tiempos nepantla*” (times of the land in-between) and “Coyolxauhqui times.”<sup>19</sup> Anzaldúa uses an image that enables her to “semanticize” and symbolize the complexities and traumas held in the body itself *vis-à-vis* post-September 11, 2001, pain.<sup>20</sup> She thereby resorts to an icon from ancient imagery that bodily bears and physically portrays the pain of dismemberment and rupture: the mythical Nahua goddess figure of Coyolxauhqui who becomes

my symbol for the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation... for reconstruction and reframing, one that allows for putting the pieces together in a new way.<sup>21</sup>

In reconstructing this figure, which we might well call a performative character, Anzaldúa makes her plea to recall, reconfigure, resituate, and recreate both individually and collectively a Narrative that is more inclusive than exclusionary: “Like Coyolxauhqui, let’s put our dismembered psyches and patrias (homelands) together in new constructions,”<sup>22</sup>

Polemics and anti-racist struggles linked to (im)migration have been decanted into a narrative that has sparked a response in cultural, political, social action, linguistic, and literary milieus beyond the U.S.

in what she sees as “an ongoing process of making and un-making,” since, she concludes, “there is never any resolution, just the process of healing.”<sup>23</sup>

The racist U.S. anti-(im)migrant imaginary that has taken center stage in this post-September 11, 2001, decade, has been responded to by many different communities, among them Chicanos and Latinos. Inherent to their complex genealogies, their narrative is constantly recreating itself, without any hegemonic, easy, predictable—and much less happy—ending. They have a great deal left to contribute as mediators of myriad realities and fictions, and they are still bound to surprise us with further insightful clarities. ■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This lengthier term is deliberately used as reminder that other September 11s are historically significant.

<sup>2</sup> Francisco Lomelí, “Cibertestimonio sobre asuntos transnacionales: un ensayo autocrítico,” Claire Joysmith, ed., *Speaking desde las heridas* (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM, and Toluca and Monterrey: ITESM, 2008), p. 385.

<sup>3</sup> José Emilio Pacheco, “Milenios,” Joysmith, ed., op. cit., p. 477.

<sup>4</sup> Phrases like “Homeland Security” and “Patriot Act” are fascist terminology closely resembling Nazi jargon. “Homeland Security” in German literally translates to the original name of the Nazi SS.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis, *No One Is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Chicago and Canada: Haymarket Books, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “Border Hysteria and the War against Difference,” Joysmith, ed., op. cit., p. 302.

<sup>7</sup> Tram Nguyen, *We Are All Suspects Now. Untold Stories from Immigrant Communities after 9/11* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), p. XIV.

<sup>8</sup> Gómez-Peña, op. cit., p. 302.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Cisneros, untitled testimonio, Claire Joysmith, ed., *One Wound for Another/Una herida por otra. Testimonios de Latin@s in the U.S. through Cyberspace (11 de septiembre de 2001-11 de marzo de 2002)* (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM/The Colorado College/Whittier College, 2005), p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Demian Pritchard, untitled testimonio, Joysmith, ed., *One Wound...*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>11</sup> Gómez-Peña, op. cit., p. 305.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>15</sup> Cristina Rivera Garza, “What I Couldn’t Do,” prologue to Joysmith, ed., *Speaking...*, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Gómez-Peña, op. cit., p. 301.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Herrera, untitled testimonio, Joysmith, ed., *One Wound...*, pp. 190-191.

<sup>18</sup> Ariel Dorfman, “Communicating across the Divide,” Joysmith, ed., *Speaking...*, pp. 251-252.

<sup>19</sup> “*Nepantla*” is a word derived from the Náhuatl *panotla* (‘bridge’). It translates into Spanish as “*tierra de en-medio*,” and into English as “land in-between.” According to the nomenclature Anzaldúa uses, it is “a psychological, liminal space...the *locus* and sign of transition.” See Gloria Anzaldúa, “Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound: The Coyolxauhqui Imperative—La sombra y el sueño,” Joysmith, ed., *One Wound...*, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Anzaldúa’s seminal book *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (1987) received the honor of being included as one of the books with the greatest impact in the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, by the renowned *Utne Reader* and *Hungry Mind Review*.

<sup>21</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.