

## *Introduction*

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### *Canto Primero*

Arrival

First, the island.  
 The cross of truth.  
 Another island.  
 A continent.  
 A line, half water, half metal.

An island of birds, “Ccollanan.”  
 An island of birds,  
 “Ccollanan Pachacutec!”  
 Sounds above an island, in  
 the air, trees, “Ccollanan Pachacutec!”  
 Female sounds. “Ricuy  
 anceacunac yahuarniy richacaucuta!”  
 An island of female birds, imagine  
 the sounds, the air, the trees, at times  
 the silence, the slither in thorns.

So perfect a shape, right  
 angles, the globe yields to so  
 straight a line, look. One  
 line, zenith to nadir, heaven,  
 precipitation. The only other,  
 straighter still than that horizon  
 we see at sea, perfect: paradise.  
 That horizontal line, from

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old to new, he knew would yield,  
 yes, so perfect a move, he  
 knew, yes, so perfect a shape  
 yes.

Trees caught his thoughts.  
 Birds and onshores brought them  
 from the boats. She knew those  
 thoughts, heard those songs.  
 Could there be one more island?  
 Birds, sounds, perhaps pearls,  
 gold? Eden-Guanahaní, perhaps  
 another? "O my Marina, my new  
 found island. License my roaving  
 hands, and let them go, before,  
 behind, between, above, below."  
 West.

América, América. Feminine  
 first name, continent named  
 for him. América.  
 Here, Santa Fe. Here, the true  
 faith. I claim, in the name of  
 the father. Land of thorns,  
 in the name of the son.

The edge of this world  
 and the other, is marked  
 in water: ocean, river, wave to  
 her, she waits on the other  
 side. Aquí, se llama la Juana,  
 de apellido Juárez, india,  
 prieta y chaparra, la que le encanta  
 al gringo, al gachupín.

Island of cactus, genus  
 Cuauhtémoc. Island of rose,  
 land of thorns. Pedro de

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CANTO PRIMERO

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Alvarado, an eagle, la  
 región transparente, a  
 night of smoke. Marina  
 Nightear, an ocean contained  
 in one woman, as it was in  
 the beginning, world  
 without end, fallen  
 eagle.

So feminine a shape. So female  
 a bay. Another shape: gliding  
 birds. Another: touching trees.  
 True name of woman, Vera Cruz,  
 body of woman. "He named me  
 Xochitepec, yes so we are all flowers  
 of the mountain, all a woman's body,  
 that was one true thing he said in  
 his life." Above, birds,  
 leaves, above so woman a form.  
 Las quince letras: not the seven words:  
 Contestó Malintzin, "yes  
 I said yes I will Yes."

En el nombre  
 de la Virgen de las Espinas,  
 ella que en buen ora nasco,  
 this archeology is born: here  
 tibia, here ball courts, codices,  
 teeth. Inside, the caves are  
 painted. Here is an architecture,  
 see, toco, toco,  
 tocotín:

Tla ya timohuica,  
 totlazo Zuapilli,  
 maca ammo, Tonantzin,  
 titechemoilcahuiliz.

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Mati itlatol ihoyo  
Huel ni machicáhuac  
no teco qui mati.

En la sangre, en las espinas  
de la Virgen de Santa Fe,  
these names are written:  
América Estados-Unidos, née  
México. I name her  
Flower of the Mountain,  
Coatepec-Cihuatepec-Cuicatepec  
Amor Silvestre,  
Terra Nova,  
Cuerpo de Mujer.

The edge of this world  
and the other, is marked  
in metal: on this side America,  
on this side América.  
Nights they spill from  
San Diego and Los Angeles  
threading the steel mesh  
como nada, los verdaderos  
alambristas, buscando el cuerpo  
de mujer, buscando,  
Xochitepec.

## *Mestizaje / Difrasis*

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### *How the Poem Means*

Poets, I imagine, set themselves tasks when they undertake a book of poetry. These tasks must be bound up inextricably with authorial intention, aesthetic concerns, with the fact of poetry. And the poems themselves must be at least as varied as the poets, as the creators who write poems for reasons of ego, love, art, and perhaps even religion or politics. In some way the poem manifests the poet's task and yokes together the personal and the public of the craft, there where the voice of one touches others and multiplies.

I can speak for myself. When I wrote *Cantos*, I set to the task of working out poetically some sense of how one is Chicano. It was a personal matter and remains so, and the impulse to begin poetry there at the personal, at some point of me, makes sense. And yet it is just as truly a social matter, and the writing for other people makes just as much sense. I do not claim an exemplary life for anyone, do not claim possession of a purer piece of truth than anyone, but neither do I seek to erase the factors of time and place that coalesce as they do only in me. A poem is set into motion by my act, in all the particulars of my social and personal contexts, and it is set off outward to sing, to dance, to break bones, in the world beyond me.

But let me talk of the specific, of the point of departure for *Cantos*. I open the book with a point of particular significance to me, one that points to a larger issue for Chicanos and for Americans in general.<sup>1</sup> The first canto begins with the following stanza:

First, the island.  
 The cross of truth.

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Another island.  
 A continent.  
 A line, half water, half metal.

The last line, “A line, half water, half metal,” seems to me, on the one hand, to point to the intersection of the personal and the social and, on the other, to point to something else.

Simply, that *line* signifies the border and a border not only in metaphor, but the actual physical and political borderline between the United States and Mexico, which is, after all, Rio Grande *water* from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso and *metal* fence from there to the Pacific. The real borderline impinges upon me in real ways, figuring as a wedge in my family history and as a limit of Anglo tolerance for my kind. It is a line that crosses the personal and the social in me in profound ways.

It is the poetry of the expression that concerns me here. For one of the tasks I set for myself is to make poetry, to make something in language that does something. To evoke the border as “a line, half water, half metal” is not only to state a truth that bears at least some of the demands of logic, but to state a “truth” by means of a trope. *Cantos* can make a sense according to logic, but it also does the stuff of poetry, and in the first stanza, the troping of the borderline says something not only about the international demarcation, but something also about how language undertakes the act of being Chicano.

What I intended with that poetic line was to employ a poetic device of the preconquest Mexican Indian poets who wrote in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. My attempt to evoke the border in a union of two elements, water and metal, was an attempt to employ a trope that was very characteristic of Nahuatl poetry and a general feature of Nahuatl language and thought. In *Llave del Náhuatl*, Angel María Garibay calls this trope *difrasismo*.<sup>2</sup> Difrasismo is the means of representing something in the coupling of two elements. In this way, city is *in atl in tepetl*, water and hill; body is *noma nocxi*, hand and feet. And perhaps the most well known difrasismo is that for poetry, *in xóchitl in cuicatl*, flower and song.

This coupling of elements, two to suggest another, reveals some-

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## MESTIZAJE/DIFRASISMO

thing of how poetry comes to mean in Nahuatl. Poets, such as Nezahualcoyotl, relied on this general tropic feature of Nahuatl, which, as Garibay observes, often conceives in binarisms.<sup>3</sup> To call body “hand and feet” is to conceive body by its parts, in effect, by synecdoche, the trope of the relation of part to whole. *Noma nocxi* does call to mind the single concept of the whole “body” from the parts “hand” and “feet,” and as it does, it comes to mean according to the particular arrangement of the difrasismo, the Mexican two for one. In a slightly different figuration, *in atl in tepetl* signifies “city” as “water and hill.” It is a difrasismo, as is *noma nocxi*, but water and hill are not related to city in the same manner as are hand and feet to body. Rather than parts for whole, perhaps the relationship is one of contiguity: water and hill signify city because they are near the city. This difrasismo is therefore one of metonymy. The term for poetry is more difficult. Flower and song is a difrasismo in which the two elements work differently. Song functions as a synonym, for Nahuatl poems were sung, that is, poems were songs. Flower, however, is a metaphor, for clearly flowers are not poems. *In xóchitl in cuicatl* is similar to the difrasismos for body and city in its significant coupling but different in the elements joined. Difrasismo pervades the Nahuatl language, so that the world is conceived by this common and multifaceted trope.<sup>4</sup>

I opened *Cantos* with a line that figured the border “half water, half metal,” so as to locate my work in a relation to a Nahuatl world view. In one way, I employ the figure of thought merely to make reference to the Aztec perspective, to allude to an ancestral root of chicanismo. But in a more significant way, I put difrasismo to the task of signaling from the onset the character of thought in *Cantos*, in Chicano poetry, and in Chicano thought in general. Difrasismo seems to me a characteristic feature of how my poetry comes to meaning and of how one comes to being Chicano.

So while a poem seems to me a connection from the private to the public, *Cantos*, and Chicano poetry in general, seems to be able to make another sort of link. My attempt in “a line, half water, half metal” is to take an important concept for Chicanos, the border, and to articulate it in light of a mode of Mexican-Indian thought. To the degree that it

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calls to mind a sense of Indianness, it is similar in effect to what other Chicano poets do when they articulate Indianness. Examples range from Francisco Alarcón's translation and reworking of Nahuatl spells, to José Montoya's parody of identity politics, to Lorna Dee Cervantes's encounter with the god Mescalito and Gloria Anzaldúa's with the goddess Coatlicue.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is common for Chicano poetry to mention something Indian. And in this way, allusion serves as a simple means of linking Chicano with the Indian element.

But the linking is more complex. The examples I chose, Alarcón, Montoya, Cervantes, and Anzaldúa, do much more than merely point to Indians. Each, in various ways, makes a statement about how the Indian presence affects the act of being Chicano. When Lorna Cervantes, in "Meeting Mescalito at Oak Hill Cemetery," and Gloria Anzaldúa, in "The *Coatlicue* State," cite Mexican deities, they introduce matters of alternate consciousness. Mescalito is the god of the hallucinogen peyote, and Coatlicue is the goddess of a feminine subjectivity. Their evocation serves to illustrate alternate possibilities for apprehending the world. Francisco Alarcón begins with a colonial translation of Nahuatl spells and makes *Snake Poems*, a collection of Chicano poetry. As he does, he weaves Aztec, as well as criollo, consciousness into contemporary Chicano thought. José Montoya parodies the politics of racial identity in "Hispanic Nightlife at Luna's Cafe When th' Mexicans Came to Visit th' Chicanos in Califas," dividing la raza into the Casindio, on the one hand, and Casispano, "also pronounced Cathipano," on the other. The work of these poets, in ways as disparate as the poets are themselves, asserts some link between Indian thought and Chicano identity, be it by parody or difrasismo.

This working out of Indianness as a factor in being Chicano is significant in the first instance because of historical fact. The border that is instanced in my poem or in Anzaldúa's book begins in Chicano consciousness as a real political fact, yet the factual border can be treated poetically, described as "capricious borders on the red continent," as "una herida abierta," or as the place where Chicanos wage *Undocumented Love*.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the border can be symbol and rendered poetic, but it is always a site of real world politics. It is not simply a metaphor.

## MESTIZAJE/DIFRASISMO

The “reality” of the border for Chicanos is similar to the “reality” of the Indian. Consider for a moment the identity “Chicano” and the homeland “Aztlán.” Chicano derives from Mexicano, which derives from Mexica, the name the Aztecs called themselves. “Chicano” recalls an older, original pronunciation. When Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztecs, the Spanish language still possessed the sound like the English “sh,” represented in Spanish by the letter “x,” so that the conquistador could approximate Meshica as Mexica. Eventually Spanish changed phonemically so that Meshico came to be pronounced Mehico (Méjico), and Don Quihote (Quijote), for another example, ceased to be Don Quishote (Quixote). The soft “ch” in Mexican Spanish approaches the “sh” of older Spanish and of Nahuatl, so that meshicano leads to mechicano and to chicano. In this manner, phonemically at least, Chicano signifies descent from the Aztecs. There is logic to this, for while Chicanos descend racially from many different Indians from Yucatán to California, the presence of the Aztec has been the most prominent in Mexican/Chicano culture.<sup>7</sup> The Chicano homeland, Aztlán, refers to the territories presently occupied by the United States but formerly part of Mexico, roughly, Texas to California. Aztlán is the mythical home of the Aztecs, from where they migrated south to central Mexico in 1168. To be a Chicano and to live in Aztlán is to have historical precedence over Anglos in the Southwest; it is to declare a historical fact of descent. The exact details of the fact are lost in the construction of a “national” identity, in the way national history is mythologized in the conception of any nation, but the general trajectory remains true: Chicanos descend historically from Indians.

But then after the facts of the border and of Indianness, there is the matter of how they are dealt with in the poetry. After the historical-political and historical-racial facts, the border and Indianness figure into the matter of Chicano subjectivity, into chicanismo, as sites and occasions of cultural interaction. The border is, after all, the line of national differentiation that gives birth to Chicanos, not just for having crossed it or having been crossed by it, but for living in the border zone between nations that the line engenders. Mexicans can transform into Chicanos on either side of the border, in Tijuana or Los Angeles, in Juárez or El Paso, and the border patrol hounds us as far as Chicago.

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The border means that Chicano identity is constructed in defiance of the simple and absolute discretion of the state. To be Chicano in the borderlands is to make oneself from among the competing definitions of nation, culture, language, race, ethnicity, and so on.

As the border figures the Chicano in cultural difference, so Indianness figures the Chicano in racial difference. For while Chicano subjectivity comes about because of Anglo-American conquest of Northern Mexico, the Chicano body comes about because of *mestizaje*. And the original birth of that body comes about in the Spanish conquest of the Indians and in the raping of Indian women. From that violent colonial encounter, Mexican-Indians mixed with Spaniards to produce the hybrid race, the mestizo. The Indian is thus for the Chicano, the indigenous, the antecedent, the maternal half of our racial double helix. And like the border, Indianness is at once a site of origin and of cultural interaction. At each reproduction of the Chicano body, the racial characteristics of European and indigenous American compete for presence.

This use of the border and the Indian in Chicano poetry does something similar to that done by another feature. Linguistically, Chicano poetry often manifests some degree of interlingualism, employing English, Spanish, *caló* (Chicano slang), and perhaps Nahuatl.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the poems work out linguistically with thought what the border does culturally with the nation and what *mestizaje* does racially with the body. For good or for bad, this is the stuff of Chicano poetry: elements of difference interact in play and in competition within the parameters of *chicanismo*. This is as much as to say that the poetics of *chicanismo* are such that they locate the work of the poem in the working out of the individual, that an interlingual poem about border crossing or about Quetzalcoatl is a poem about hybridity, and that hybridity is the mode of both Chicano poem and Chicano subject.

*Body, Place, Language*

Let me continue by grounding my discussion of the poetics of Aztlán in the body, specifically in the racial body. The Mexican and Chicano