

Oksana Marafioti

## Borderlands

I am land.

With age, features shift, the soil of me curves and rises and bares new formations. My entire life I belong to every neighborhood I've ever lived in and to no country. I've been called a hybrid, a half-breed, a bastard, a crossbreed—one word echoes with others, and all are true and none are true enough. Writer Gloria Anzaldúa once said, "Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory ... where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy."<sup>1</sup>

I am borderlands.

A patchwork of cultures grows crops inside me, and as most mixed people, I have become a resolute farmer. Most days, when someone asks about my ethnicity, I choose the shrewdest answer; a response that will prompt the other to smile in good humor. I want to read a face that won't punch me in the face or harm or ridicule me for my roots. I want validation, connection. As we are different people occupying a territory of a single body, gauging the safest answer is an artform only we crossbreeds truly know.

If the asker is Azerbaijani, for example, I'll be cautious not to say I'm Armenian. Our bloody history is just that, history to me, but in self-preservation I'll say I'm Ukrainian, instead—a neutral alternative even if my fear is unfounded, even if the asker is empathy-full. But in the company of a Ukrainian, I can never admit to that tiny spark of Russian blood from Anna, the great-grandmother on my father side. At least not now when another war tears lifelines into scraps. That graceful slender lady who gave me a handful of her genes must hide. With a Russian, it's a crashout. If they hear my maiden name, Kopylenko, they'll know immediately that I'm tainted with Ukrainian blood. Never mind that my Ukrainian grandfather and his Romani band entertained Soviet soldiers on the frontline and sometimes carried messages between partisan

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (1942–2004) was an author, intellectual and activist who made a name for herself in her autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), about social and cultural marginalization as a Chicana.

camps. Never mind that the Nazis broke his nose, his ribs, his legs, killed his brother. My Ukrainian last name is a dishonorable discharge.

Rurik, the Varangian prince who sailed down from Scandinavia in 862, colonizing the land between the Baltic and the Black Seas, would have something to say about this aversion. When he established Kievan Rus, he didn't discriminate between the Northern or the Southern S/slaves; all were devoured in equal measure. Unfortunately, he's long dead. Left the rest of us parsing out the land even now. Land that will bury us all one day, turn us into weeds.

Who's more authentic, a Russian or a Ukrainian? Sit them down and let them sing the tales of their grandparents' valiant acts during WWII. But just two generations later, they ask—who deserves to live? Whose children should run down fields without detonating explosives? The two factions will have to fight it out, they think, but in my borderlands, the Russian and the Ukrainian have long accepted they are braided into my DNA, drawn into my identity with atoms.

In Russian and Ukrainian company, mixed or not, friends or strangers, I must decide how to present the Armenian in me, if I must, and I often must—they never accept my presence without questions. They squint aslant, body language in inquiry of my ethnic denomination. What's your value in this company, the bodies demand to know. Between their inquiry and my answer, I divine their response based on countless others: 'Ah, those Armenian men,' they might exclaim. 'Always rutting after our women, never working a decent day. Good for little, stupid, those Armenians with their simple women.' At a party a few years back, after learning of my Armenian ancestry, a friend remarked that I must think the crystal champagne glasses fancy since I most probably drink champagne from paper cups. Never mind that Armenia is one of the oldest countries in the world, and at its height stretched between the Caspian, Black, and Mediterranean Seas. History is irrelevant. Dignity conditional. To leverage my worth, I add that I'm Greek-Armenian (see how I place Greek first?). Well, that produces a collective nod of respect. Plato, Socrates, George Michael. Who doesn't love a good Greek?

In the presence of a real Greek, my Greek self is diluted so much that they will comment only on my features and in passing. Language lands a body an identity, and since I don't speak Greek, I am a disembodied Greek at best. I can only ever be one in a sense, by implication. My features are the only place they see a ghost of belonging.

During World War I, survivors of the ongoing Greek genocide flooded the Armenian Highlands. Soon the land was strewn with Greek villages. That's where my own Greek story begins. In 1917, while fleeing a band of Ottoman soldiers with her family, my great-grandmother Angelee made a heartbreaking decision. They'd been traveling South for days, rickety wagons bumping down unfamiliar country roads, when a word reached from those following miles back that the soldiers were gaining. In desperation, Angelee, who'd been breastfeeding her youngest, jumped off the wagon, rushed to a clump of trees and hid the baby—my grandpa Melenti—in the tall grass, praying that at least he would escape impending death. The next day and miles later, a distant relative caught up with Angelee's wagon and handed her the baby. That deed is why I am alive. The family settled in a village they named *Hankavahn*, where generations of Greeks would become known as Greek—Armenians. The Greek in me belongs to that story and to that family of farmers: my great-grandparents, Yakim and Angeli and their eight children—Grigori, Lavrenti, Konstantin, Michail, Olgha, Anna, Tamara, and Melenti.

In her essay “Corpus Cartography”, Emma Patchett (2013) defines diasporic identity as “the disjunction between the dis/location of identity and the unstable territories of origins.” Neither here nor there and yet in several cultural identities at once, I am constantly adjusting, negotiating how intimate the spaces within me grow. I am sometimes disjointed and at other times fused with the identities I hold. A map of my ancestry is imprinted on my bones. Shapes form in my internal borderlands.

Gloria Anzaldúa says that borderlands produce people she calls *mestiza*—mixed people, suspended between cultures, “fully accepting—and fully accepted by—neither.”

Don't I wish that sentence had a kinder resolution.

“Fully accepting and fully accepted by all.”

What happens when a mixed person wants to accept the languages she speaks? When identity is a kaleidoscope—full of colored glass contained within a tool? There's something in my blood that maps the languages I walk in search of acceptance. In Russian, I know resilience and good people who saved me from death more than once. I know Gogol and how to not get caught in a blizzard. In Ukrainian, I hear my grandma say to my grandpa, ‘I would give anything for a pot of your Borsh right now,’ before they step onto the stage, hand in hand. In Armenian, I am a sister to every stranger in need “*khirik djan*” (*dear sister*), and my bumpy childhood, cradled in the warmth of the Armenian Highlands, is res-

cued. In Romani, my heart is never too far away from my family's music or suffering, and I'm desperate to be understood.

By far, the trickiest part of me to introduce to anyone is that Romani Oksana. Before I outed myself as a mixed Romani woman in my memoir, I seldom revealed that parcel in my borderlands. Every time it felt like getting lost in the woods at night—Chances are you won't make it, chances are the wolves will eat you first. For decades, the Romani in me grew weeds. We all carry secrets inside us like a bag of seeds, picking who's allowed to see one depending on how generous or safe we feel. On occasion, the secret seed buds of its own will. Not everything is in our control, certainly not nature.

Oh, the most conflicted I ever was, when I started writing about my Romani heritage. With my parents' blessing, I wrote about a life I hid for so long that at first it felt alien. Curious things happened in those days. I cried all the time, something I seldom had done before. Once, I was sitting at my desk writing about the death of a Romani boy—my first love—when my body stilled, as if my organs and blood halted like a clock. I turned around and saw myself standing in the doorway. These dissociative episodes ended only after I finished the book. The shell of my Romani identity, protected for years by an outer shell of others, cracked. A delicate stem peeked out. A Romani ghost of me walked the house for a little while after.

Evolution is never easy.

Maybe that's why mine took the form of a book, followed the sentenced landscapes and walked them with a reader.

For the longest time I resented my parents for robbing me of my Roma roots, for refusing to teach me the language, for infusing me with blood shame. There they were, fully clothed in Romani stage costumes, singing and dancing in front of thousands. Here I was, a kid at school packed with peach-skinned Russian kids, fist-fighting my way through the formation of my identity, confused and so angry.

Here I was, in my thirties, writing a memoir, growing new skin of an identity long neglected.

Until then, I didn't understand my family's unwavering belief that admitting to being Romani was a dangerous endeavor. As their stories unfolded under my fingers, I slowly saw the face of terror looming over the life my stage family had to constantly negotiate into being.

In Nazi Germany, the most malevolent and dangerous entity that ever lived was a mixed "Gypsy." At the commencement of WWII, Heinrich

Himmler declared that mixed “Gypsies” were the most likely to have criminal proclivities, and later two Danish sociologists, Gudrun Brun and Eric Bartels, wrote, “The pure gypsies present no great problem, if only we realise that their mentality does not allow of their admittance to the well-ordered general society...the mixed gypsies cause considerably greater difficulty.” (Bartels/Brun 1943, 5)

History shows us that being mixed is a curse. A byproduct of miscegenation, we are a nuisance to those who suckle on the dried teat of purity. By virtue of our birth, we are unlawful and undeserving of acceptance. We are always fighting to establish the one thread in our ancestral tapestry that possesses the truest hew or the desired qualities. We learn early to pick the perfect identity and disregard the rest.

And yet, nature itself wastes nothing. Nature is seeds and genes ordered in infinite combinations to make up every material thing in life’s soil. The things we can’t see, we make up stories about. In that way, even the intangible has use. The very nature of us all in an accurate manner is a hodgepodge, a mixed race, a multi-breed, a fusion. Like nature, the borderlands of me are a host to many selves. I am called many names: a half breed, a hybrid, multiracial, biracial, mixed race as if my races are the only thing that give me value. But I don’t want to be any of those things. I am an *atlas*, a *patchwork*, a *tapestry*, a *land*.

## Bibliography

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