

OTHER-THAN-HUMAN MOVEMENT ACROSS BORDERS IN LORNA DEE CERVANTES'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the work of American poet Lorna Dee Cervantes (1954-), who is concerned with Chicana and Native American experiences in her poetry and is a transnationally oriented poet who is interested in “the treatment of borders and border zones in all of their various forms,” an aspect that Paul Jay names as important for transnational literature (*Transnational* 94). In her first collection, *Emplumada* (1981), Cervantes writes frequently about crossing borders, a notion that is evident in frequent references to the movement of other-than-human beings and elements that cross or delineate borders. Her most recent collection, *Sueño* (2013), is thematically broader but similarly evokes the other-than-human. Metaphors related to other-than-human beings, movement, and border crossing can be connected to posthumanism in ways similar to those Thomas Nail employs when he argues that borders are in motion. I examine the experiences of crossing and living on various kinds of borders as they are evident in *Emplumada* and *Sueño*, and suggest that Cervantes's other-than-human animals display an expanded vision for transnational situations where movement is freer and more choices are available than for the poems' humans.

Keywords: transnational literature, borderlands, other-than-humans, nonhumans, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Chicana poetry

Lorna Dee Cervantes defines herself in an essay as follows: "I am a Chicana poet, I'm an indigenous American, I'm a California native from Santa Barbara, from the Chumash nation, and the Californios" ("Lorna Dee Cervantes"), and these multiple starting points are visible in her poems. As a writer who is concerned with "border zones in all of their various forms," which Paul Jay describes as a feature of transnational literature (*Transnational* 94), Cervantes considers how transnational literature can play itself out on American soil. Her work can be said to explore how "transnational forces . . . interact within the borders of a nation" and how "identities and cultural practices within nations are always forming and reforming across the differences we associate with race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and nation" (Jay, *Transnational* 10). Her poems comment on living in multifaceted, intersecting situations. This is particularly evident in the ways in which Cervantes explores crossing borders through metaphors and images that relate to the movement of other-than-human beings and elements. Already the title of Cervantes's first poetry collection, *Emplumada*, published in 1981, evokes a duality where the human and the other-than-human meet: "emplumada" refers both to the flourish of a pen and to something that is feathered, as the preface of the book explains (Cervantes, *Emplumada*). The pen, in other words, is in motion, which in the pen's case would be instigated by a human, but simultaneously something other-than-human is involved.

When Shelley Fisher Fishkin called for a transnational turn in American Studies in 2004, she mentioned that this should mean "increasingly interrogat[ing] the 'naturalness' of some of the borders, boundaries, and binaries that we may not have questioned very much in the past, and . . . prob[ing] the way in which they may have been contingent and constructed" (22). Transnational concerns have long been relevant for the US-Mexican border as it has been viewed

"dialogically, in terms of multifaceted migrations across borders," as José David Saldívar wrote in 1997 when he examined cultural products that engage with the border (1). Historically, the US-Mexican borderlands have been a site of "contradictory divisions and unities" where transnationalism affects people's lives (R. Saldívar 27). This can mean adopting what Ramón Saldívar calls, in a discussion of Américo Paredes's work, "the transnational imaginary," which crosses national borders in defining identity (59). A similar view of the border is relevant to Cervantes's work. With that in mind, I discuss how the other-than-human moves in *Emplumada* and in Cervantes's most recent collection, *Sueño* (2013), and what its movement means for thinking about transnational narratives. In these collections, humans are often described as being restricted by their positions, which are defined across a variety of factors, such as gender, class and ethnicity. These factors are contrasted by the focus on other-than-human beings and elements, which present a world where borders are on the one hand revealed to be moving, and on the other hand there is space for choosing between movement and immobility or even remaining indecisive. I argue that other-than-human elements and beings reflect different approaches and tensions associated with borders and offer an expanded vision of an agency that is freer than that which the humans living in the borderlands can imagine in these poems. In Cervantes's work, these considerations are also linked to her well-known feminist focus.

A focus on the other-than-human can broaden the transnational field of inquiry, which has often taken the human as its focus, not least because the root of the concept *transnational* is the human concept of the nation state, giving it the potential to reckon with a vaster network of agencies beyond the human (see Jay, *Transnational* 10).¹ Already in 2008, Ursula K. Heise suggested that "environmental literature and eco-criticism need to engage more fully with the

insights of recent theories of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism," but in this inquiry the focus is mostly on environmental problems (387). The use of other-than-human elements to broaden and contrast understandings of transnational situations has received less attention. One exception is Thomas Nail, who writes that the contemporary world is "increasingly defined by patterns of motion that precede and exceed human agency" (183). Nail forms a theory of kinopolitics, with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblage (184-88), and argues "that borders are in constant motion" (194). He thus discusses the role of other-than-human agency and movement in shaping borders, which I take as a starting point for reading Cervantes's work. For Nail, the notion of assemblage "offers us a truly posthuman theory of collective agency," which runs counter to the common idea that other-than-human beings have no free agency (187). The other-than-human should here be understood as a wide category. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann define the "nonhuman" as "not only sentient animals or other biological organisms, but also impersonal agents" including phenomena such as electricity (3-4). In Cervantes's work, the other-than-human includes not only animals and plants, but also other elements such as the freeway, which appears in some poems.

Considering how the other-than-human moves and how this movement relates to borders also offers a counternarrative to the many negative contexts in which other-than-human beings are often evoked in public discussions of borders, as when forced migrants are likened to animals in racist and dehumanizing ways (Khazaal 9-10). Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson likewise discuss how comparing migrants to animals or discussing them in terms of "being treated like animals" emphasizes the othering of migrants (116). In Cervantes's poems, instead of being presented as others, other-than-human beings and elements have their own agency as a part of

a larger system of agencies (Nail 187), which also provides further nuance to the poems' narratives on borders. Nail's argument about borders does not pertain to literature specifically, since it is instead presented as a more general contribution to posthumanist theory, but I propose that it can be applied to Cervantes's poetry.

Cervantes is invested in examining border crossing and living in a border culture on many levels, not merely through human experiencers, whose experience of the borderlands is often determined by multiple factors, including different cultures and aspects such as gender or the *barrio* as an environment (see Seator 23). As a Chicana poet, Cervantes is concerned with borders, not least because Chicana people can be described in terms of "mestizaje, . . . hybridization and crossbreeding on a cultural level" (Pérez-Torres 8). Her work can be read, as Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson notes, in the context of "an expanding frame of reference for Chicana poetry, which includes: African American feminism, an urban Chicana consciousness which relates to a Pan-American indigenous one, as well as a global sense of struggle against multiple and overlapping oppressions" (136). As Raúl Homero Villa writes, Cervantes is often simultaneously critical of how Chicana people have been wronged and of how Chicanas in particular have been wronged within the male-focused Chicano movement (206). Rodríguez y Gibson notes that Cervantes's topics and sources of intertextuality are globally inclined because she includes elements "from traditional Chicana tropes of Mexico imagery to Hispanophone modernist poetry, to Celtic folklore" (138) and engages with "Greek, Celtic, and Chumash myths, as well as American, Latin American, and European literary figures" (137). Cervantes's work has also been read in the context of bilingualism, as Nerys Williams (185) does in pointing out that Cervantes, who grew up in San José, CA, was not raised to speak Spanish, which is reflected in the way she uses Spanish words as kinds of interruptions, creating "a

disjunctive and warring texture in the poem" (193). Sheila Marie Contreras goes as far as to suggest that *Emplumada* "is self-consciously about language, about claiming it, crafting it, and yet remaining alienated from it" (145).

However, expanding beyond human experience, *Emplumada* is riddled with the presence of the other-than-human, such as crows, seagulls, and mockingbirds. The later work *Sueño* is a large poetry collection and thematically more multifaceted as such, but it also comments on Chicanx² issues, immigration, and other-than-human movement and agency, along with other themes such as love. I am not suggesting that birds, snakes, trees, and other other-than-human beings and elements in Cervantes's poems have the same meaning throughout, but rather that reading Cervantes's poetry with a focus on the movement and agency of other-than-human beings and elements presents expanded visions for life in the borderlands. Nail's idea of how borders are in motion and how they "circulate movement" as part of a larger system helps us see human and other-than-human agencies on a continuum (194). In Cervantes's *Emplumada* and *Sueño*, the physical borderlands between Mexico and the United States are contrasted with less tangible borders such as those within multicultural cities, where the barrio is separated from the rest of the city by the freeway, as well as enforced gender distinctions between men and women, class distinctions, ethnic divisions, or situations where, for example, immigrants are seen as others. These situations restrict humans while other-than-human beings and elements are shown as being free of such limitations. Thus, in making this argument, I first consider Cervantes's position as a Chicana writer and her resistance to patriarchal systems. Next, I elaborate on the theoretical background for understanding the movement of the border through the other-than-human, connecting it to the transnational, after which I move on to an analysis of specific poems.

The Borderlands as an Intersection

To shed light on what kinds of approaches to the transnational are visible in Cervantes's poems from a human perspective, next I consider the context of her writing further. This will provide some background to help us understand how Cervantes contrasts human experiences with other-than-human beings and elements to nuance the experiences of borders and transnational situations her poems present. For Cervantes, a Chicana feminist writer with a transnational orientation, an obvious frame of reference is Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "the borderlands," discussed in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa writes that "[a] borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (3). The people who live on the border are considered "transgressors, aliens" by "those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites" (Anzaldúa 3-4). As Allison E. Fagan notes, Anzaldúa's concept of the borderlands is often used to mean any situation that is broadly concerned with the intersections of different cultures (5). Anzaldúa's work on the notion of the borderlands also has a prominent role in Fishkin's argument on the transnational turn in American studies (17-18). The notion of the borderlands, as a marker of "rupture," is also central to "Chicana cultural discourse," more so than the older Chicano movement's notion of "homeland" (Pérez-Torres 34-35).

Both *Emplumada* and *Sueño* are concerned with how the categories of ethnicity and gender are shaped by intersecting cultures in the borderlands, which, as I will show below, is connected to other-than-human movement. *Emplumada* has been described as "a fundamental text in Chicana/Latino studies" (González 164). Many poems detail the life of a speaker who appears to live in a Chicanx neighborhood in a US city and additionally seems to have Native American

origins like Cervantes herself, which, as a multi-ethnic situation, offers possibilities for exploring how borders and intersections of cultures can affect an individual's life and construction of identity. Transnational situations and their effects on identity have been addressed in research on Chicana literature previously, for example by Juan Velasco, who, in an article on Chicano writer Francisco Jiménez's autobiographical works, discusses how people whose lives are shaped by the US-Mexico border are simultaneously "beyond borders" and "situated within different lines of oppression—mainly class and racial formation" (219). In this situation, there is space in Jiménez's work for "individual self-empowerment and communal agency" (219). In Cervantes's work more specifically, the transnational has been discussed in previous research with a focus on issues such as space (Ambroży) and global aspects (Rodríguez y Gibson). Cervantes's work also addresses the effect of racial formation and class on agency and empowerment and adds the role of gender. As a feminist writer of indigenous and Chicana origin, she considers both local identities and more global, transnational concerns.

Rodríguez y Gibson affirms Cervantes as a feminist, transnationally oriented author who is fundamentally concerned with resistance to oppression within patriarchal and colonial systems, as well as with how the struggles of indigenous people are globally linked to each other (136-37). Cervantes is critical of, for example, the limiting gender roles that Chicano culture assigns to men and women, the kinds of assumptions that, for example, Sonia Saldívar-Hull has commented on in her discussion of Chicana feminism (9-11). Chicano culture has a history of chauvinism and relegating women to subordinate status, but while Chicanas felt the need to fight for feminist causes, they also faced discrimination or ignorance of their concerns among white feminists, a situation that vexed many Chicana writers in the 1970s (Sánchez 4-5). Marta

Ester Sánchez verifies that grappling with these forms of exclusion is common for Chicana poets, and describes their work "as a poetry of conflict and struggle" with regard to "issues of ethnicity and gender" (6). In her discussion of Cervantes's poetry, Paulina Ambroży adds to the considerations of Anzaldúa's borderlands the broader notion of space "as a site of cultural interactions and identity formation" (129-30). Ambroży postulates that Cervantes uses metaphors connected to space to portray situations where the poems' selves can thrive in all their multiplicity, experiencing not only "separation, longing, alienation, displacement, and dispossession," but also "the possibility of contact and interaction" (132). In Cervantes's poetry, this multiplicity is seen in other-than-human beings and elements, for whom borders are more malleable than they are for humans, for whom transnational situations are often complicated by intersecting factors such as gender and ethnicity. Before analyzing the poems in more detail, elaborating on the theoretical starting points of borders that move through other-than-human movement and their connection to the transnational is in order.

The Divisive Moving Border

Fagan has argued that the Mexican-American border invites a "desire and inability to fix [it] in place" (4). There is a certain willingness to stabilize the border through the use of metaphors when stability is not achievable through geography (4), not least because the border moves, for example, with the movement of the river. This idea of the movement of the border aligns with Nail's perspective, in which, contrary to the common anthropocentric notion that "animals, plants and minerals," unlike humans, have no agency, "political borders . . . are in motion and circulation" through other-than-human movement (187-88). Nail writes that "animals, insects, water, weather, wind, dirt, trash and rivers are

constantly crossing the border, circulating back again, often transforming the border each time" (197). From this perspective, the border "circulate[s]" movement instead of halting it (194). Thus, while from a human perspective the border might seem fixed, a focus on the other-than-human can reveal it to be in movement. The idea that borders are in motion is also in alignment with the "transnational perspective," where, according to Jay, "borders are understood as historically and existentially porous" (*Transnational* 10). For Nail, "[h]umans and nonhuman beings are two dimensions or regions of the same systems of collective interactional agency or patterns of motion" (183), so that other-than-human and human agencies are not separate and human agency is also not automatically primary. Animals can move freely across borders and shape them, which is evident not just regarding physical borders, but also in a metaphorical sense in imaginary borders between cultures, as we see in *Emplumada* and *Sueño*, for example in the movement of birds, which I discuss below. Birds are often presented as freer to operate in a transnational situation than humans, who may be restricted by their positions as people living in particular places and cultures.

The transnational perspective in which borders are porous, it appears, has something in common with material ecocriticism, which considers the agency of other-than-human beings, and in which "material phenomena" are understood to form "a vast network of agencies," which then form stories (Iovino and Oppermann 1). Iovino and Oppermann hold that "the borders between meaning and matter are constitutionally porous" (4), much like borders in the transnational perspective. Nail's work is, as he notes, a participant in discussions of "the entangled continuity of human and nonhuman agencies" (184), so the larger framework of new materialism is relevant for considering the movement of other-than-human beings and elements across borders. Fagan rightly points out that an interest in "the mobility

and metaphors of the border" is not meant to erase the lived reality of those situations where the border is fixed and authority wielded over it (6). In my reading of Cervantes's work, the idea that border crossing is connected to metaphors of the movement of other-than-human beings and elements is not meant to obliterate or downplay this reality either. Instead, for Cervantes, the idea that the border is not fixed appears to be a projected wish or an ideal to strive for, as is evident when she writes in "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races" that "In my land there are no distinctions," while she affirms, later in the same poem, that distinctions very much exist in reality (*Emplumada* 35, 37). In the world of humans, the distinctions are all too evident, but looking toward the other-than-human offers a vision beyond the human view.

Both *Emplumada* and *Sueño* comment on the notion of the borderlands as a site that is divided by "an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa 3), which is reflected in relations between people. In *Emplumada*, "Poem for the Young White Man" spells out the different positions of white and Chicanx people. Cervantes maps her own position, where she is, in Sánchez's words, torn between "desiring a peaceful harmonious world and . . . recognizing a violent polarized world" (86). Cervantes uses the word "land" to describe her own position:

Every day I am deluged with reminders
that this is not
my land
and this is my land. (*Emplumada* 36-37)

The speaker is divided between feeling that she is where she belongs and feeling that she is viewed as foreign, or as someone who does not belong. The notion of "land" is an important one in Chicanx culture in general, as seen in the notion of the mythical homeland Aztlán,³

discussed, for example, by Anzaldúa (1-2, 4) and Monika Kaup (363). Pérez-Torres reads the land in Cervantes's poem as a divided Aztlán, "a region between violence and peace, a site of tension and dispossession" (87). In the poem, "Aztlán ceases to be the reclaimed territory of a homeland" and instead signifies the tensions evident on that land (Pérez-Torres 87). Saldívar-Hull notes that for Anzaldúa, "the patriarchal nation-state Aztlán" is "transformed by a mestiza feminist sensibility" (64-65). As I have noted, a feminist perspective is visible in Cervantes's poetry too. The importance of the notion of land is detailed already in the first stanza, which refers to "a slight / rutting in the fertile fields" (*Emplumada* 35). This then serves to remind the speaker that many "past battles" have been fought on her land, even though she does not wish to consider the "distinctions" there (35). Villa points out that coding the land with references to femininity can even be connected to nationalist discourse (209), but Cervantes's use of femininity in this context is more complex. The reference to fertility serves to remind readers of battles that are internal to the Chicanx movement. The land, it seems, has inscribed in itself these differences, and the "slight / rutting" can be read as movement across the (re)productive land, possibly originating from an unidentified other-than-human source that moves. For the speaker, this movement reads as a negative aspect because it reminds her "of past battles" (*Emplumada* 35), while her wish is that there should be no boundaries. However, the notion of fertility leaves open the possibility that something new might be born on the land on which the border is drawn.

In *Sueño*, many poems explicitly comment on immigration and the situation on the US border in more forceful ways than in *Emplumada*, which focuses more on defining the individual's place in a transnational situation. For example, the poem "Night Travelers" comments on immigration and violence that immigrants experience

from border officials, ultimately affirming that "This is my country, a country between us, a hard / wired pride in history" (*Sueño* 12). "Night Travelers" presents, again, the notion of the homeland that is contested by the majority culture, which polices the borderlands through wires and views those who cross borders as others. The poem's images are jarring and violent, as when "black fascism rides" (*Sueño* 12). "Night Travelers" also recalls Anzaldúa's discussion of migration on the US-Mexico border in her essay "The Homeland, Aztlán / El otro México," which she ends with a snippet of a poem:

This is her home
this thin edge of
barbwire. (Anzaldúa 13)

For both Cervantes and Anzaldúa, the borderlands that has been divided by white Americans is home. In *Sueño*, Cervantes reflects further on the notion of the land in poems such as "A Chicano Poem," where she takes a direct, accusatory stand against violence and injustice done to Chicanx people by white Americans, who have appropriated their land and cultural customs or tried to erase them. The poem also has a feminist orientation through references to grandmothers and goddesses. It culminates in a declaration on how Chicanx people are nevertheless still here "[a]nd speaking" (*Sueño* 93).

In *Sueño*, open grounds like fields appear, as in *Emplumada*, as places where something divisive is happening. In the second poem of the collection, "The End of the World As We Know It," the end is inscribed in other-than-human beings and elements which are conceived as particularly small, or which easily pass by unnoticed. The poem suggests that the end of the world

happens on the dot of an "I", in each
patter of a millipede's feet, in every beat
of a hummingbird's heart. I see the field
frozen to steel, feel the frost split

the single blade, favor the awakening
of a fern frond, feel for the hungry tongue
awaiting the forever ripening. (*Sueño* 4)

[desert
landscapes. An empty field waits for the
[wake. (*Sueño* 13)

The field freezes and the frost moves to split a leaf and “a fern frond.” Small other-than-human beings, like a millipede and a hummingbird, move and are affected by the environment or the world that is ending. Thus the poem also draws attention to violence against these small creatures, which are affected by the end of the world, which will presumably be brought on by human action, although the poem does not comment on who is responsible. This poem does not explicitly mention borders or migration, but there is a focus on divisions, as “the frost split[s] / the single blade” (4) and the fern leaf is by nature divided into segments (called pinnae). These divisions might initially appear to end the movement as the end is near and “the field / [is] frozen to steel” (4). The field is a space in which bordering can happen. We might thus presume that the poem reflects the fixedness of borders. Nevertheless, the movement toward divisions is active, as “the frost split[s] / the single blade” and “awakening” and “awaiting” take place. The other-than-human is capable of very subtle movement, and arguably the poem’s title points precisely to this: the world may end “as we know it,” but the movement of the other-than-human points to survival.

A reading that connects the divisions presented in “The End of the World As We Know It” to borders is reinforced when we read it against other poems in *Sueño*, for example “Blind Desert Snakes,”⁴ which, too, refers to ice, a field, and movement of the other-than-human, which moves where immigrants travel:

Across the immigrant road, wisps of ice
knot and unknot sinews of light and water,
water the parched mouths crave. The
[voiceless
snakes of a voiceless race wage across the

The injustices experienced on the border that the immigrants cross are registered in the other-than-human elements, which knot, wage, and wait, moving or sometimes halting the movement. The internal rhyming and the way the words like “wage,” “wake,” and “race” sound as read against each other emphasize the affective effect of the poem. In “The End of the World” and “Blind Desert Snakes,” both movement and divisions are registered in spatial elements, as in the “empty field [which] waits for the wake,” a statement that can be taken to indicate that movement can take place even across a seemingly fixed border (or “the immigrant road”). The spatial element of the field thus registers not only the affects experienced in the borderlands, but also the subtle possibilities of movement that exist even when humans might police the border heavily, which is indicated in “Blind Desert Snakes.” In a review, Candice Amich reads the “blind desert snakes” as immigrants who have died while attempting to cross the border. The snakes might, however, also be conceived of as literal snakes, which register the “voiceless” affect experienced on the border, moving but, in their blindness, unable to see the full extent of their movement.

Other-than-human elements that can be connected to the border in *Emplumada* and *Sueño* also include the freeway, which is associated with other-than-human beings like worms. In an early poem in *Emplumada*, the speaker lives “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway” in a Mexican barrio in San José, CA (*Emplumada* 11). Villa discusses how the city of San José grew rapidly and became segregated in the mid twentieth century (204-5). He comments on the poem “Freeway 280,” which he says shows “the freeway’s disruptive effects upon the central San José barrio it dissects” (215), while also detailing how older

women in the community are able to live with its effects by tending to the land (219-20), an image that Villa notes is one “of adaptation and survival in the present” rather than a glorification of the past (223). “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,” for its part, tells the story of the speaker’s family, focusing on female figures like her mother and grandmother while criticizing men who have mistreated women (*Emplumada* 11-12). The poem describes the freeway as a “blind worm” that “wrap[s] the valley up / from Los Altos to Sal Si Puedes” (*Emplumada* 11). For Villa, the “blind worm” condenses social inequalities and “[t]he history of Anglo-American land appropriations” into one image that contrasts the white Los Altos with the Chicanx Sal Si Puedes (227). The poem thus focuses on two divisions: that between white people and Chicanx people and that between Chicanx men and women, or their “intracultural gender conflict” (Villa 226). The inanimate freeway is, through its association with the animate worms, something other-than-human that has enough agency to control and delimit the valley, but it is also simultaneously blind and presumably unable to see or to acknowledge the effects of controlling the border. This is contrasted with the speaker of the poem, who “watched it from [her] porch” (*Emplumada* 11). As in “Blind Desert Snakes,” blindness is a quality that can be taken to refer to limited agency and an inability to see the effects of borders clearly. References to snakes, along with those to birds, which I discuss below, also have a connection to Aztec and Mesoamerican mythology, which is proliferated by serpents, eagles, and other birds (see e.g., Anzaldúa 5, 27; Taylor).

The freeway also appears in *Sueño*, when a voice speaks up in “Burial”:

Under the open freeway
lanes, a voice in the rush of rush, a bare
[tunnel
asking the question: *What is buried here?*

[Who thrusts
out among the living chalk? Who answers an
[unasked
question: *All of America is an Indian burial*
[mound.
Anew. (*Sueño* 47)

In this poem Cervantes adds to her “commitment to justice by denouncing political violence . . . and genocide—particularly that of her Chumash ancestors, whose bones are still entombed in the adobe walls of the Santa Barbara Mission,” as Sonia V. González writes about Cervantes’s earlier book *Drive: The First Quartet* (2006) (164). Here a voice asks the “unasked / question.” The inanimate space offers an echoing ground for the questions or possibly hosts something or someone that has agency to register the burials of Native Americans, remembering the injustices fought on its soil. This makes sense especially because it aligns with other poems in which inanimate elements have an active role. The freeway arguably functions as a metaphorical liminal space that registers not only movement, but also memory.

Indecisive and Free Birds

As I mentioned, other-than-human elements frequently appear alongside other-than-human beings, and a particularly prominent role is given to birds. In *Emplumada*, birds appear in many poems, as in “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,” where seagulls “walk in flocks, / cautious across lawns: splayed toes, / indecisive beaks” and mockingbirds sing constantly: “Grandma says they are singing for their nesting wives. / ‘They don’t leave their families / borrachando,’” which refers to being on a drinking binge (*Emplumada* 11-12). The birds share a consistency and an uncontroversial commitment to their families and flocks, experiences that are not easily available to the grandmother, who is revealed later in the poem to have been a victim

of domestic violence. The agency of the birds, who are committed yet indecisive and cautious, seems distant, too, to the poem's speaker, whose life is limited by the freeway, which is presented like a border that is difficult to cross. It can only be observed from a distance: "I watched it from my porch / unwinding" (11). The indecisive birds are able to fly, even if they choose not to, and thus they appear to be freer to choose and to move than the humans in the poem. Lynette Seator writes that Cervantes's poems about birds are "poems of place-centeredness," meaning that staying in the place where your identity was formed is important, instead of a simple focus on "flight and freeing," which is what one might expect of bird imagery (23).

I propose, however, that birds, along with other flying beings, can mark the fluidity of border experiences in Cervantes's work. Their ability to move freely is often acknowledged, but at the same time, they are often consistent in their ways, as in "Integrity": "Yours / is the integrity of birds flocking" (*Sueño* 55). "Integrity," which is primarily a poem addressed to a loved one, presents images of both movement and stability, as in the comment on birds. The implication here, similarly to "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," seems to be that staying in place and moving, or even remaining indecisive, are possible options in a transnational situation. For the human speakers of the poems, this situation is again more a projected wish than an existing reality because their situation is restricted by human-constructed borders. As Taylor notes, in Western literary traditions, flying birds usually connect the human soul to its spiritual roots, but in the novels of Chicano writer Rudolfo A. Anaya that Taylor discusses, flying takes on more complicated meanings when it is circled through Western and Chicanx cultures, and it "mediates between the landscape, an idea of self, the story, and reader-listener" (131-32). Cervantes's birds are an integral part of the landscape and something against which speakers of poems can

project their own feelings. Nevertheless, the birds have their own agencies through which they can transcend limitations that exist for humans. In *Sueño*, a poem called "Movement" contrasts flying with the limitations set by the surrounding world. Cervantes writes that "There was always someone trying / to stop us" and acknowledges "the crass class lines we / dared not cross" (43), contrasting these limitations with flying: "Colored butterflies, pin-struck and perishing, we flexed / our wings and, winging it, we fled" (43). Like the pinned down butterflies, the speaker and her peers feel restricted or nailed down, but they are allowed freedom in flight. Perhaps this requires becoming, in some way, an other-than-human animal with wings, because from the human perspective described by Cervantes, borders are not as easily crossed.

In the poem "Caribou Girl" from *Emplumada*, borders between humans and other-than-human beings are similarly blurred. Dressed in the feathers of a blue jay, but ultimately unable to fly or to walk on water as the poem indicates (*Emplumada* 23), the Caribou Girl figures as someone who exists between two worlds, one where she might be able to fly and one where she cannot. In Ojibwe stories, the caribou are able to walk on water (see MacDonald), but in the poem, Caribou Girl merely attempts but fails. The poem features crows as mythical animals who can speak and send the titular caribou girl poems (*Emplumada* 21). Later in the poem, Caribou Girl gets her own chance to speak and to "dream four great hawks and a speckled bird" and "*Quetzalcoátl, Ometeótl, the Great Manitou*" (*Emplumada* 22, italics in the original). The reference here is to god figures like the feathered serpent Quetzalcoátl that could give her strength and lift her up from a mundane existence, "to birds" (22). Quetzalcoátl is a founding god who guides the Aztecs on the migration to a new home (Taylor 134). Manitou, on the other hand, is the omnipresent life force among the Native American Algonquian groups, and is present in

animals and plants, for example. The poem thus weaves together references from multiple traditions, highlighting the intersections of these in the borderlands.

Caribou Girl also calls on

... the serenity
of a mockingbird, the justice
of a crow, blue jay's strength
(*Emplumada* 22, italics in the original)

Strength, serenity, and justice are qualities that Caribou Girl appears not to have on her own. She looks to other-than-human life, to birds and to transformative figures and life forces, who do have the power to cross between various worlds. The mythical god figures and omnipresent life forces are the visions that would allow for Caribou Girl's transformation "*from a mere / cat girl*" to something else (*Emplumada* 22). Again, humans are presented as restricted in their abilities to cross borders in transnational situations. Flying in poems like "Caribou Girl," "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," and "Movement" can be viewed as an activity that allows access to something beyond the everyday world. Other-than-human flying beings transcend the limitations that exist for humans.

In *Emplumada*, a poem called "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington" comments on living in the borderlands in two sections, one of which is set in Mexico and the other in the state of Washington. This is an oft-studied poem, and fuller readings of it are offered by Sánchez, Ambroży, and Contreras. Ambroży writes that the two places represent Cervantes's "intermediary and destabilized position between the cultures and languages of Mexico and the US" (135), and Sánchez's (96-97) and Contreras's (147-51) overall readings start from a similar premise. I do not disagree with these readings, but propose instead that shifting the emphasis to the other-

than-human can change some of the nuances and result in new figurations. In the Mexico section, the speaker observes migrating birds, which, in Sánchez's view, are "always in transit between one home and another," like Chicana people (96). People observe the birds from a distance:

We work
and watch seabirds elbow their wings
in migratory ways, those mispronouncing
[gulls
coming south
to refuge or gameland. (*Emplumada* 45)

Ambroży takes this part of the poem to be saying that the speaker "allies herself with those critical of the migrant 'tourist birds' which come to her land" (136), and Sánchez's reading is similar (101). Contreras's reading is closest to my own as she emphasizes that the poem is titled "Visions of Mexico," so that the "homeland" is observed from a distance and the poem's speaker feels a sense of difference with regard to it (147-48). If we focus on the language and the sea birds, one possible interpretation is that those who live in transnational situations and between cultures, like the poem's speaker, are associated with the "mispronouncing gulls," as Contreras also argues (149). The birds move between situations, taking "refuge" in Mexico to feel at home, but nevertheless come to be seen as partly different due to a lack of full command of the language or familiarity with the way of life, which the speaker also admits to in the poem. This reading is supported by the next stanza, which reveals the speaker's partial lack of command of the language, which Ambroży also briefly acknowledges (136). "I don't want to pretend I know more / and can speak all the names. I can't," writes Cervantes (45), commenting on the complex position occupied by someone in a liminal position between cultures (see Williams 194). On a wider level, as Anzaldúa writes, people who live in the US-Mexican borderlands have

often been punished for speaking Spanish in English-dominant schools, and Chicano Spanish has been viewed as “deficient” by Latinx people (54-55; see also Contreras 137). These facts mean that language is a complex issue for Chicano people, and Anzaldúa reminds her readers that they speak not one but several different languages (55-56).

Many previous readings have discussed the relations between Washington and Mexico in the poem in ways that associate negative qualities with these places (see Ambroży 135-36; Seator 31; Sánchez 96-97, Contreras 150-51). In a reading that focuses on the other-than-human, it can be noted that the many negative images offered in “Visions” culminate in birds who have agency to cross borders and to ignore limitations which exist for humans. In the Washington section, the birds talk back to the speaker and openly mock Mexico:

I don't belong this far north.
The uncomfortable birds gawk at me.
They hem and haw from their borders in
[the sky.
I heard them say: México is a stumbling
[comedy. (*Emplumada* 46)

The speaker of the Washington section resists the clichéd narrative that the birds offer, eventually proclaiming that

there are songs in my head I could sing you
songs that could drone away
all the Mariachi bands you thought you
[ever heard
...
but for that I need words
simple black nymphs between white
[sheets of paper (*Emplumada* 47)

The birds in this poem can cross borders freely and are able to talk back, although the message they deliver is one that does not sit right with the

speaker, as they speak in the voice of the white culture that ridicules Mexico. In any case, they have an agency of their own, one that is separate from the poem's speaker and is apparently greater than hers, because she has songs in her head but affirms that she lacks words.

One possible reading is that the “uncomfortable birds” who have their own words occupy a negatively charged cosmopolitan position. Jay associates cosmopolitanism with transnationalism, noting that “cosmopolitanism embraces worldliness and a sense of global belonging” (*Transnational* 16). He adds that the term has often been viewed critically and “associated with empire, colonialism, and the negative effects of economic globalization” (*Transnational* 17). The speaker's own position between cultures is complicated and she is not fully able to assimilate into either the north or the south, while the birds slip comfortably into the “sense of global belonging” (*Transnational* 16). As “mispronouncing gulls,” they ignore limitations such as not being able to fully speak the language (*Emplumada* 45), and they are free to move and speak regardless of this. Cervantes's collection also features another poem, “From Where We Sit: Corpus Christi,” in which seabirds are associated with a negative attitude as tourists feed them and “We who have learned the language / . . . / understand what they really say” (*Emplumada* 33). Birds, it seems, are not simply metaphorical devices for the poem's speaker's feelings, but they have their own voices.

In “Visions,” the birds' vision is contrasted with the speaker's eventual affirmation, at the end of the poem, that in Washington she can find the words to counteract this vision (see Contreras 150):

I come north
to gather my feathers
for quills (*Emplumada* 47)

In other words, Cervantes focuses on what Jay views as central to the transnational study of literature: it is imperative that “cultural production is analyzed within a context that assumes its connection to economic flows, material conditions, and inequities related to class relations” (*Global Matters* 72). Cervantes’s poetry is cognizant of these conditions, and the other-than-human presences offer a vision where these conditions can be reckoned with. As Contreras writes, “[t]he tensions that reside in Cervantes’ work are neither solved nor resolved” (151). Nevertheless, the final statement indicates that the human speaker intends to find a position where she comes closer to birds (by “gather[ing her] feathers / for quills”) without, however, becoming a fully cosmopolitan bird who has relinquished all cultural particularities and her own position between cultures for global belonging.

In Cervantes’s poems, birds are often depicted as having an authoritative position, an agency and a voice of their own, although the position that they occupy varies. In yet another poem in *Emplumada*, entitled “This Morning,” we find “a hundred robins / . . . / telling it their way,” “throwing their heads / behind them,” and the speaker notes that “They had the ultimate authority / to do things” (*Emplumada* 51). Birds assume a wider perspective than humans: “It was as if they were laughing, as if / the whole soaking world was something to laugh” (51). This larger perspective is something that the speaker merely desires and dreams about as she says later in “This Morning”: “I dream all I could ever be” (51). Birds, again, have more freedom than the human who looks at the birds “through the greased window,” which evidently limits her perspective and confines her to dreaming of what is not available to her (51). A further instance of a situation where birds are freer than humans to assume a wider perspective can be found in the title poem “Emplumada,” where the speaker observes “two hummingbirds,” noting that “These are warriors / distancing themselves from

history” (66). In *Sueño*, for its part, wild horses are the ones that traverse between past, present and future, as well as between the borders of species, as is implied in a dream narrated in the poem “Honoring Past, Present, Future” (26). Cervantes’s other-than-human animals can not only mock or laugh, but also distance themselves from history, unlike humans, who do not have the privilege to distance or to remove themselves from limitations, for example ones related to class, ethnicity, or gender. In “Emplumada,” also “the leaves of snapdragons [which] withered / taking their shrill-colored mouths with them” (*Emplumada* 66) can be interpreted as having a similarly freer position. The plants “were still, so quiet” (66). They have stability and a way out, which the speaker is left observing. For other-than-humans, borders are clearly more porous than for humans, and a variety of options are available.

As the final poem of Cervantes’s first collection, “Emplumada” in a sense completes the considerations that begin in the first poem, “Uncle’s First Rabbit,” which describes a world where domestic violence is perpetuated across generations and the uncle that the poem describes is unable to avoid it, despite his willingness to take the train and leave (*Emplumada* 3). In “Uncle’s First Rabbit,” pine trees “shadow the bleak hills / to his home” (4), arguably remaining steady, which is contrasted with the turmoil experienced by the man and his family. Seator writes of *Emplumada* that the speaker’s life in the barrio is described as something that must be accepted as it is, with a focus on understanding “social context” (24). This life involves violence, and it is particularly difficult for a Chicana, as discussed by Seator (35), who identifies unequal power structures between men and women as one of the entire collection’s focuses (27). The pine trees, as other-than-human elements, represent a more stable situation. In *Sueño*, a poem called “Radiation” presents a similar sentiment: “The tree holds, ever after” (54). Other-than-human

elements and beings are given a freer agency across borders and limitations set by intersecting factors, through which they are able to remain steady, distanced from history, or to leave, as seen on the final lines of "Emplumada": "They [the hummingbirds] find peace / . . . / and are gone" (*Emplumada* 66).

In the contemporary world, Cervantes's images of other-than-human movement in the borderlands are more relevant than ever for considering how borders are "contingent and constructed" in transnational situations (Fishkin 22). For Cervantes, a focus on the other-than-human sometimes allows for imagining a greater sense of authority than human individuals, who are restricted by factors such as ethnicity, gender, or command of a particular language, are permitted in these poems. Other-than-human elements, beings, and spaces serve various functions. Some, such as the land and fields, along with animals like snakes, are marked by division, but borders are in any case shaped on and through them, and their movement reflects the porousness of borders. Some other-than-human beings serve to mark stability and constancy. Birds variously have the "ultimate authority / to do things" (*Emplumada* 51), a freedom to speak their truth, to speak up or to remain indecisive, or to assume a wider, cosmopolitan and more negatively critical perspective. Nevertheless, as "Visions of Mexico" implies, living in the borderlands is sometimes arguably better than becoming fully cosmopolitan. Birds and bird-like mythological creatures are also used to refer to liminality between the ordinary world and something beyond it. In *Emplumada* and *Sueño*, other-than-human beings and elements have agency and the ability to affect their experience in ways that are not always easily available to humans who live in transnational situations. Ultimately, the freedom to choose between moving, remaining steady, or being indecisive, along with speaking one's truth, as some of Cervantes's birds do, are the qualities that

best point to an expanded vision for living in the borderlands.

Notes

1. Given the focus on a vaster network of agencies than the human, I use the term *other-than-human* rather than the more common *nonhuman* to avoid creating an oppositional hierarchy (see e.g., Chao 182, in Price & Chao).

2. I use *Chicanx* as a general term when it is not necessary to differentiate between genders, but quotations from others may also include the terms *Chicana* or *Chicano*. Cervantes herself has used the term "Chicanao poet" ("Lorna Dee Cervantes").

3. Aztlán refers to the "mythical homeland of the prequest Aztecs located in what we now know as the U.S. Southwest," which is often referred to in Chicano discourse (Saldívar-Hull 64).

4. Western blind snakes are a species of nonvenomous snakes that are common in the US Southwest and Northern Mexico.

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