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'For every border, there is also a bridge': overturning borders in young Aboriginal peoples' lives

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In this paper, I offer thoughts and insights on young people, border spaces and revolutions. Following Anzaldúa, I explore how different types of borders – the borderlands of the mind – have disrupted young people's lives, particularly the lives of indigenous youth. While global in context, my emphasis is upon Canada where the magnitude of Aboriginal poverty is astounding given that the nation is often ranked as one of the best places to live in the world. Yet, despite a dismal outlook, I point toward optimistic futures as young people use their revolutionary imaginations to overturn internal borders and work for positive change. I suggest that youth are playfully reworking borders to build bridges between communities.

Keywords: indigenous; youth; Canada; borders; inequality; revolution

Una lucha de fronteras/A Struggle of Borders

Because I, a *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio
Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan
simultáneamente.

[*Porque yo, una mestiza,*
continúamente camino de una cultura
en otra,
porque estoy en todas las culturas al mismo tiempo,
soul between two worlds, three, four,

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my head spins with contradictions.
I am disoriented by all the voices that speak to me
simultaneously.]
(Anzaldúa 1999, p. 99)

Residents of the borderlands exist in a liminal space fraught with contradictions. In North America, Mexicans who cross over to *el otro lado* – the other side – in search of better opportunities witness their identities shift to become part of the much maligned 'Brown Tide' in the United States (Monsiváis 2003, Pulido 2009). They become constructed as 'the other', both geographically, metaphorically and literally. For young Mexicans, this process becomes more complex as they not only represent the threatening 'other' ethnically, racially and nationally, but they also occupy the borderlands of the adult/child world. Caught within *los intersticios* – the spaces between the different worlds they inhabit (Anzaldúa 1999, p. 42) – young people must struggle to navigate tenuous identity paths.

As Aitken and Plows have outlined in the introduction, we take the border with us everywhere, and at all times. It is a *frontera portátil* that moves with us in our minds, along with our cultures, experiences, and memories (Monsiváis 2003). Or as stated by Anzaldúa (1999, p. 43), 'I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry "home" on my back'. Around the world, these internal borders are particularly difficult for indigenous youth. Often treated as perpetual outsiders by dominant culture, even within their homelands, indigenous youth must regularly navigate multiple cultural, social, linguistic and political borders. In some parts of the world, indigenous youth traverse vast boundaries to migrate from rural to urban areas, only to find their values, beliefs, traditions and language at odds with mainstream urban culture (Hollos 2002, Colloredo-Mansfeld 2003, Van Vleet 2003, Swanson 2010). Other indigenous young people cross multiple international frontiers in search of better opportunities abroad (Meisch 2002, Delugan 2010); yet, the worlds they encounter beyond these frontiers are vastly different than their own. As they move across these borderlands and *intersticios*, boundaries become re-situated and identities reworked while they make sense of and adjust to new cultural terrains (see Aitken, this volume).

In this final and concluding essay of this volume, I do not intend to explore literal border crossings, as others in this volume have already done; rather, I focus on the borderlands that exist in our minds. By focusing on the situation of indigenous youth, I tease out how the internal borders that permeate our inner thoughts, particularly in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity, have very real impacts on young people's lives. I emphasize the situation of indigenous youth in Canada in an effort to shift my own research focus back 'home'. Having grown up next to the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve in Southern Ontario (Canada's largest Aboriginal[1] reserve), I regularly witnessed vast racialized inequalities suffered and perpetrated by my peers, family members, and community members. I push this concluding paper in this direction in order to consider how different types of borders – the borderlands of the mind – shape young people's lives. As Anzaldúa (1999, p. 109) notes, 'The struggle is inner: Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado, mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian – our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people'. Even though we may be working toward a postborder world (Dear and LeClerc 2003), where new cultural hybridities co-exist and mutate to form new possibilities, it is these internal borders that continue to disrupt and wreak havoc on young people's lives, particularly among indigenous youth.

Earlier in this volume, Bejarano quotes Arturo Escobar who states, 'while borders do not exist in a "real" sense, their construction is an important aspect of the active material and cultural production of place by groups of people' (2001, p. 152). Or put another way, while physical borders may be merely 'an imaginary line', as stated by Ricardo in Ongay's piece (this volume), constructions of these spaces result in sharp divisions between people and places. For indigenous peoples, these divisions have an additional layer of complexity; between the United

States and Canada, the physical border does not exist – at least in a symbolic sense. In 1794, the Jay Treaty granted Native Americans 'free passage' across the US/Canada border. To this day, this means that indigenous Canadians and Americans may live and work in either country providing they can prove their indigenous ancestry. Thus, in theory (looking beyond the lengthy queues and invasive questioning – see Bejarano, this volume), the border does not exist for a large section of indigenous North Americans, as they can pass freely across these territorial boundaries at will.

While the physical border between the United States and Canada may be imaginary or purely symbolic, indigenous peoples lives are demarcated by sharp boundaries pertaining to their personal identities. Under colonialism indigenous peoples were relegated to a child-like status under state law (Wade 1997, Martínez Novo 2006, de Leeuw 2009). The goal was to civilize 'savage', childlike Indians by helping them 'grow up' into proper Eurocolonial subjects (de Leeuw 2009). Viewed as incapable of governing their own lives, paternalistic federal bodies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs in Canada were established to oversee the activities of Aboriginal peoples. As such, indigenous peoples have long had to wade through paternalistic discourses pertaining to their identities as adult or child. For young people, there is a double articulation here (Deleuze and Guttari 1987); they encounter paternalism as not only indigenous peoples but also as children. In popular discourse, they might be viewed as the 'über child', doubly stigmatized as both indigenous and young.

Sadly, this double stigmatization has resulted in some of the highest poverty rates in the world. As stated by the ILO (2001): 'The world's highest infant mortality rates, lowest income levels, most widespread illiteracy and slimmest access to health and social services are to be found among the world's 300 million indigenous people . . . Wherever they may be, the 5,000 indigenous and tribal groups spread among some 70 countries around the globe tend to have one thing in common: they are the poorest of the poor'. In the United States, Canada and Mexico, indigenous poverty rates are twice those of non-indigenous people. In Canada 22% of indigenous peoples live in poverty; in the United States 26% live in poverty; and in Mexico an astounding 90% live in poverty (Hall and Patrinos 2005, Statistics Canada 2006, U.S. Census Bureau 2008). While the lowest North American rates of indigenous poverty can be found in Canada, the magnitude of this poverty is astounding in a country often ranked as one of the best nations in the world to live. In fact, if Canada were judged solely on the economic and social well-being of Aboriginal people, its world ranking would drop to number 48.

Aboriginals in Canada have the lowest education rates, the highest fertility rates, the highest suicide rates, the highest unemployment rates, the highest incarceration rates, the highest hunger rates, and the shortest life expectancies in the nation (Anderson *et al*. 2000, Statistics Canada 2006, MacNeil 2008, Heritz 2009, Noël and Larocque 2009). For Aboriginal children, the situation is even worse, considering that many of these issues have disproportionately negative impacts upon young people. Measured by income, 57% of urban Aboriginal children under the age of six are living below the poverty line (Statistics Canada 2008). To be clear, these children do not represent the minority of indigenous children since almost 50% of Canada's indigenous peoples now live in cities (Peters 2005).

Until recently, the majority of Canada's Aboriginal population lived on reserves – a political and geographic territory reserved for indigenous people by the federal government. According to Brian Maracle, a Mohawk from Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, the reserve means many things: 'On one level, these postage-remnants of our original territories are nagging reminders of the echoing vastness of what we have lost. On another, they are the legacy and bastion of our being. They are, at once, a refuge, a prison, a haven, a madhouse, a fortress, a birthplace, a mecca, a resting place, Home-Sweet-Home, Fatherland and Motherland all rolled into one' (Maracle 1996, p. 3). This complicated terrain has multiple meanings for young people, on top of which is their physical segregation from non-indigenous society. In order to improve

children's opportunities and live closer to urban amenities, families are moving off reserves in greater numbers; as of 2006, almost 74% of all Aboriginal peoples live off reserve (Statistics Canada 2006). However, due to higher costs of living, poverty rates climb in cities. In Regina, Saskatchewan urban poverty has pushed many into virtual slums. The so-called worst neighborhood in Canada (measured by crime and poverty rates) is a community in Regina with a disproportionate number of Aboriginals, many of who live in desperate conditions of poverty. Education gaps between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals are widening in Saskatchewan and infant mortality rates are four times higher than in the rest of Canada (Gatehouse 2007). This poverty has led to a disturbingly high number of Aboriginal children being placed under the care of the child welfare system: 72% of children under Saskatchewan's care are Aboriginal (FSIN 2007).

Young people's troubles are further compounded by a generational loss of identity. Beginning in the mid-1800s, thousands of Aboriginal youth were taken from their families and placed into residential schools. In the 1950s, my father recalls referring to a nearby residential school as 'The Orphanage'; yet, it was no orphanage.[2] Rather, these children were forcibly removed from their families, often from hundreds of miles away. The intention was to normalize and integrate these youth into mainstream Canadian culture by, in some cases, literally beating their language and culture out of them. School leaders believed they were doing what was best for Aboriginal children. Sarah de Leeuw (2009, p. 131) describes how Father Renaud, the former Vice President of the Indian Eskimo Association, set out his agenda for 'Indian acculturation' in the late 1950s: '...isolate the child as much as possible from his native background, ideally twenty four hours a day and twelve months of the year, to prevent "exposure" to Indian culture; upon graduation, integrate the young trans-cultured Indian in a non-Indian community, following him through till he or she is permanently settled away from his community of origin'. By doing so, the Indian child would grow up to become fully integrated into Canadian society. In fact, it was often said that the goal of the residential school system was to 'kill the Indian in the child'. The last residential school in Canada closed in 1996. This government-sponsored system has caused generations of Aboriginal youth to have a complete crisis of identity. While there has been a resurgence of indigenous pride and a reaffirmation of indigenous identity in some regions, many languages and cultures are perched on the brink of extinction.

This identity crisis has contributed to alarmingly high rates of suicide in Aboriginal communities, rates that are higher than in any other identified culture in the world (MacNeil 2008). On average, Canadian Aboriginals have suicide rates that are five times that of non-Aboriginals; however, in some Northern communities the rate is a shocking 36 times higher (MacNeil 2008). While young women attempt suicide more often than men, male youth between the ages of 15 and 24 have by far the highest success rates. Earlier in this volume, Aitken speaks to the troubled condition of masculinity and inter-generational change for Mexican migrants in the US. In Canada, this is a process intensified and complicated by generations of parents and grandparents who were raised in residential schools. Canada's colonial history has led to high levels of anger, low self-esteem, depression, alcoholism, destructive parenting practices, and failed relationships (Tester and McNicoll 2004). Some Aboriginal youth are transforming adult/child spaces in order to care for their parents and help them through their emotional, physical and mental traumas (see Curti and Moreno, this volume). Others are dealing with these harsh realities by ending their lives.

Young Aboriginal women face another very tangible border: a risk of death by violence that is five-fold that of non-Aboriginal women (Amnesty International 2004). The Highway of Tears is a highway in Northern British Columbia where Aboriginal women continue to disappear. The majority of cases remain unsolved. The Native Women's Association of Canada holds a database of 520 cases of missing or murdered indigenous women and girls; 40% of the cases have opened since 2000. Over 50% involve young women under the age of 30. Considering

that Aboriginal peoples represent 2% of the Canadian population, the NWAC claims that when compared to the rest of Canada, these cases would be the equivalent of 18,000 female murders or disappearances in the last 30 years (NWAC, 2009). Aboriginal women are also disproportionately represented in the sex trade, thus making them frequent targets for sexual predators, a fact that became chillingly obvious in the 2007 serial murder trial for Robert Pickton in Vancouver.[3] Perceived as a disposable population, there is almost an indifference to Aboriginal female lives. Parallels can be drawn from Vancouver to Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, where poor, young women are disappearing at an alarming rate (see Fregoso and Bejarano 2010). As stated by Melissa Wright (2006, p. 161), by virtue of their perceived contamination and disposability, these are women whose lives are not 'worth worrying over, investigating, or even protecting'.

Without question, these internal borders pertaining to gender, race and ethnicity are difficult to overturn. And yet, there may still be hope. For beyond the violence, the suicides, the racism, and the poverty, young people have the capacity to engage with their revolutionary imaginations to overturn internal borders and work for positive change. Children's roles as 'imaginative difference-makers' (Curti and Moreno, this volume) must be taken seriously, along with their strength and resilience as so well demonstrated by the story of Sharise. As Bosco (this volume) notes young people's engagements with political activism may be subtle but, over time, can contribute to real change. Burridge (this volume) further suggests that for some youth, the 'goal is not to participate within existing frameworks, but to dismantle and start anew, creating their own futures'.

Aboriginal youth are working to create their own optimistic futures, despite the overwhelming inequalities that surround them. In urban centers, Aboriginal youth are building links with recent immigrants who face similar identity crises, including the young Filipino youth Pratt (this volume) describes in Vancouver (who are also perceived as perpetual outsiders in Canada). Beyond this, young people in isolated Aboriginal communities are using new technologies to reach out to one another and build broader communities and networks of support. Using their revolutionary imaginations, they are overturning geographical boundaries to help one another break down the borders enveloping their lives. Witness the following Facebook group page:

this group was made because i feel that
we are slowly losing our young generation
to alcohol, drugs, anger, and depression
i want to let them know that
there is hope and there is a chance to get better
instead of the boring, frusterating [sic] way
i want to come up with a new way to make a difference
youth for youth.
the group is slowly really slowly making progress...
hopefully we get the news out there
i would really like to make a difference in the young generation even though i am a youth myself
only
16 but thats ok lol i want this to happen!!!!!
(First Nations Aboriginal Youth Facebook Group 2009)

As of November 2009, over 360 groups for Aboriginal youth exist on Facebook, including groups focused on activism, suicide prevention, LGTQ support, religion, and HIV/AIDS. Of course, not all Aboriginal youth have access to these technologies (61% of Aboriginal youth report using the computer more than two hours a day, as compared to a national average of 75% (Mendelson 2009)), but for those who do, these types of social networking sites can help youth build connections across communities and combat feelings of isolation. In perhaps a new twist on the penpal programs that Perez discusses earlier in this collection, 45% of

on-reserve teens said they had met a close friend online – more than double the Canadian average (Mendelson 2009). By reaching out to peers regardless of geographical boundaries, youth in remote areas are better able to strengthen cultural identity and empower one another to work for change (Singleton *et al*. 2009). In this increasingly globalized world, internet technologies are allowing youth to defy borders both geographically and metaphysically. As the first almost entire generation of Aboriginal youth raised outside of the residential school system, today's young people are optimistic about their futures: 84% of on-reserve youth expect to get the job they want, and 79% predict they will be better off financially than their parents (Mendelson 2009). By playfully and imaginatively transforming aspects of their lives, young people can begin dismantling the borders and boundaries that surround them.

Pratt (this volume) stresses the importance of listening to youth differently. By slowing down and paying close attention to subtle narratives, emotions and silences within the 'spaces of ordinariness', she suggests that we will gain greater depth of understanding concerning young people's lives. In addition, I suggest that we must also listen to these spaces of ordinariness within different genres of communication, including online forums, texting, and social networking sites, as these can be deeply meaningful venues for social interaction. Within these spaces of ordinariness, young people can playfully engage with their peers to create both subtle and transformative possibilities. In doing so, they can create new revolutionary futures and rework the *intersticios* caused by having 'one foot in two different cultures' (Mendoza Inzunza and Fernandez Huerta, this volume).

Like Mexican youth navigating the US/Mexico border, Aboriginal youth in Canada are caught in the *intersticios* or in the interstitial spaces linking their indigenous, Canadian, transbordered, gendered, racialized and youthful identities. Even though they symbolically represent a group that can traverse the geopolitical boundary between the United States and Canada at will, in reality they must overcome numerous seemingly less tangible – but also very real – borders in their every day lives. Yet, through their revolutionary imaginings, young people are beginning to break down these borders and build bridges between communities. Like the young people described in this volume, whose imaginings and interactions with border spaces suggest hopes, aspirations, struggles and resistance, they are reconfiguring their physical, imaginative and virtual spaces to work toward a world *sin fronteras* – without borders.

Somos una gente/We are one people
Hay tantísimas fronteras
que dividen la gente,
pero por cada frontera
existe también una puente.

[There are so many borders
that divide people,
but for every border
there is also a bridge.]

– Gina Valdés (in Anzaldúa 1999, p. 107)

Notes

1. In this paper, I use the term 'indigenous' to refer to the First Peoples or the original inhabitants of pre-colonial societies. I use the term 'Aboriginal' to refer to the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada.
2. This was the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario, in operation from 1828 to 1970 and run by the Anglican Church.

3. In 2007, Pickton was convicted of murdering six female sex workers in Vancouver, British Columbia. He is charged of murdering an additional 20 women and claims to have murdered 49, which is entirely plausible given the number of unsolved sex worker disappearances in the city. A disproportionate number of his victims were Aboriginal women.

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