



# BRAZILIAN IS NOT A RACE

*Wendy Trevino*

COMUNE

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EDITIONS

**BRAZILIAN IS  
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*1*

& I'm not sure how important that is  
When you're from Ukraine. I don't give a fuck  
What Elizabeth Bishop said. Never  
Did. You can like her I'm just saying I  
Don't care what she had to say about race.  
I will not center some racist settler  
Woman's mistaken ideas about  
The world in order to make love & hate  
Less complicated. Why destroying what  
Destroys you is more difficult than you  
Expect every time: that complication.  
Which is to say I'm not sorry: Clarice  
Lispector was white, that passage sounded  
Anti-black & that's not "fucked up" to say.

When I said race is relational what  
I meant is people are racialized in  
Relation to other people who have  
Power. It isn't enough to not like  
Mexicans. Where I'm from, many of us  
Mexican-Americans resented  
The Mexicans who came to South Texas  
To shop for designer clothes. They were rude  
& treated at least the working class &  
Poor & undocumented Mexican-  
Americans as bad as the "Anglos,"  
Which is what we called the white people, who  
May or may not have hated Mexicans  
Who worked with a few of them anyway.

I took dance classes with two Mexican  
Girls. They went to private school in Brownsville.  
I remember thinking one of them was  
Very pretty. I remember seeing  
Them shopping in the mall once & my mom  
Pointing out how they were shopping alone  
With their parents' credit card & she watched  
With what seemed like awe as the pretty one  
Paid for an expensive GUESS jean jacket  
& complimented her taste. My cousins—  
Some of them—were Mexican too. I thought  
I was whatever they were. Those teenage  
Girls shopping with their parents' credit card  
Were definitely from Mexico though.

A childhood friend was visiting while  
I wrote this poem. I tried to explain what  
I'm talking about here to him & said  
"Like Beth Singerman & Ruth Kohn [kids  
From middle school] were Argentinian."  
"They were?" he asked. "Yeah & they were also  
White, which is why they hung out with the white  
People & why you thought they were just your  
Run-of-the-mill white people," I said. It  
Might have been the case that some of their white  
Friends didn't think they were white enough, since  
They were Jewish or not U.S. born. Can't  
Say for sure. We weren't close for very long.  
They split us up in high school, like they do.

My childhood friend who was visiting  
While I wrote this poem, had visited our  
Hometown by the time he met up with me  
In San Francisco. He said it had changed.  
He said that since Hurricane Katrina  
Harlingen's Black population had grown.  
He said, "Thank God." I told him that only  
Recently had I realized that some of  
Us were Afro-Latino. Actually  
I said I had realized some of us were  
Afro-Mexican & mentioned our friend  
Marco as an example. He said, "That's  
Right. He was Puerto Rican." Actually  
He said he was Cuban. We were both wrong.

Our friend Becky has blocked out her memories  
Of our elementary where, according  
To my childhood friend, she never  
Felt welcome. “Because Becky was Black,” he  
Said. I asked him if she thought of herself  
As Black, if he had asked her about it.  
He said he had & that she had thought to  
Herself for a second before saying  
“Yeah.” Mexican is not a race either.  
Even when Rob Wilson would get angry  
& call my childhood friend Messcan  
Even when he told me he liked me but  
Couldn’t date Mexicans, Mexican was  
Not a race—not even in the 80s.

Where am I going with this? I thought  
I knew. It makes sense that whenever race  
Comes up, I think about the Rio Grande  
Valley—“the Valley” as anyone  
Who knows the place calls it. That’s where I learned  
I’m not white & what that means & how what  
That means changes & doesn’t & to who.  
Harlingen (where I was born & raised) is  
The whitest town in the Valley. Anglos  
Made up about 10% of the town  
When I lived there. My extended family  
Lived in Brownsville & La Joya. Anglos  
Made & make up less than 7%  
Of both of those towns. Where is this going?

Gloria Anzaldúa was also  
From the Valley. Her Wikipedia  
Page says she was born in Harlingen like  
Me. I read *Borderlands/La Frontera:  
The New Mestiza* in college, after  
One of my Philosophy professors  
Recommended it to me. At the time  
I was more than anything excited  
To be from the same place as this published  
Writer, but to be honest, I didn't  
Understand how "living between cultures"  
Made us special. I didn't even see  
How the "cultures" were distinct. I still don't.  
Her approach didn't resonate with me.

Anzaldúa died from complications  
Associated with diabetes  
In 2004. She was 61.  
Around the same age as my Aunt Licha  
Who also died from complications  
Associated with diabetes  
Around that time. Imagining these two  
Women—one in Santa Cruz, the other  
In Harlingen—dying, it's hard not to  
Reflect on what I know about their lives.  
How different they were. My aunt loved reading  
Too, but the Bible. Her approach didn't  
Resonate with me either, but my love  
Of reading was always compared to hers.

My dad would always say we were people  
Of the mud—Native, Spanish, mud. My mom  
Would say, “No seas Malinche,” sometimes.  
I always thought that was a thing, rather  
Than a person you could be, then later  
After reading Anzaldúa, I thought  
One day I would write about Malinche.  
After Anzaldúa, who insisted  
The demise of the Aztec Empire  
Wasn’t one woman’s fault, who understood  
That the Aztec’s treatment of other tribes  
Contributed to their own destruction  
As it subverted solidarity  
Among Natives against the Spanish. Yeah.

*II*

Looking at the story of Malinche  
Only got me so far. *Genesis* by  
Eduardo Galeano, the first book  
In his *Memory of Fire*, got me  
Farther. *Black in Latin America*  
With Henry Louis Gates, Jr. did, too.  
How do enslaved Africans fit into  
The story of Malinche? Where were they?  
That story became more interesting  
More important to me than Malinche's.  
In the Americas, only Brazil  
Had more African slaves than New Spain. From  
The time of Cortés to the election  
Of Guerrero, there were African slaves.

*Mestizaje* refers to the general  
Process of mixing ancestries. Some say  
As an ideology it's kind of  
“An alibi for the nation” — tied to  
Nationalist interests, it celebrates  
Racial diversity even as it  
Denies social realities that are  
As real as they are divisive. It has  
Circulated in the Caribbean  
& in Hispanic America — “most  
Notoriously in Brazil” — though now  
In decline. In Mexico, the goal under  
This ideology was the homo-  
Genization of all ethnicities.

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When I say “the homogenization  
Of all ethnicities” I mean the goal  
Was to erase Black Mexicans. José  
Vasconcelos’s essay “La Raza  
Cósmica” begins with him explaining  
How he thinks the human races evolved  
& it only gets worse as he goes on.  
He sounds like a Nazi as he lays out  
A hierarchy of races with Black  
At the bottom & white at the top, though  
He imagines a mixed race, a new shade  
Of white, that will trump them all. He sounds like  
A Nazi who believes “the Indian’s  
A good bridge” between the Black race & white.

Vasconcelos believed “the Indians”  
Did or would eventually see themselves  
As Mexican first—even after he  
Laid out that hierarchy of races  
He believed that. You can share a country  
Like you can share a culture—with people  
Who want you to disappear, who would take  
Everything from you & still want you gone  
Who would ask that you stand by silently  
Or actively help as they make others  
Disappear & all involved might enjoy  
Dancing to “La Bamba” & not even  
Know it was originally a song  
Sung by African slaves in Veracruz.

The story of Malinche always seemed  
Sexist to me so its anti-blackness  
Isn't that surprising, but beyond that  
Story, there are others I share with those  
Of Mexican &/or Latin descent  
The mere mention of which will remind me  
Of how I felt when I found out César  
Chávez was no friend to people  
He called "wetbacks," will remind me of all  
The Latinos working for the Border  
Patrol & Immigration & Customs  
Enforcement (ICE), will remind me of how  
Vasconcelos describes the white race as  
One split into Anglos & Latinos.

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction  
Maintained by constant policing, violence  
Always threatening a new map. It takes  
Time, lots of people's time, to organize  
The world this way. & violence. It takes more  
Violence. Violence no one can confuse for  
Anything but violence. So much violence  
Changes relationships, births a people  
They can reason with. These people are not  
Us. They underestimate the violence.  
It's been awhile. We are who we are  
To them, even when we don't know who we  
Are to each other & culture is a  
Record of us figuring that out.

Why didn't Anzaldúa write about  
The Plan of San Diego? She mentions  
"Mexican-American resisters"  
robbed a train in Brownsville in October  
1915 & the brutality  
Of white vigilante groups & Texas  
Rangers that followed, but she says nothing  
Of the Plan, its appeal to all factions  
Of the Mexican Revolution to  
Cooperate in a struggle against  
The United States, the way it echoed  
Writings in Ricardo Flores Magón's  
Newspaper *Regeneración*, which had  
Its share of subscribers in the Valley.

One of those subscribers—Aniceto  
Pizaña wrote a 21-verse poem  
About leaving San Benito after  
Suffering anti-Mexican abuse.  
He says, “With suffering and pain that grows  
Greater / I say that there are Mexicans  
Who hate and despise their own race...to lick  
The feet of the Americans.” It’s hard  
To say who precisely Pizaña is  
Referring to when he says “Mexicans”  
& there’s the familiar conflation of  
Nationality & race, but the lack  
Of solidarity among people  
Of Mexican descent against Anglos...

It's still like that. Pizaña moved away  
from San Benito, in any case  
& settled in Brownsville, where he did find  
Like-minded people, who also subscribed  
To *Regeneración*—like Emilia  
Rodriguez, a widow who supported  
Herself as a seamstress & took part in  
A women's discussion group. She might have  
Especially appreciated the September  
3rd issue in 1910, its front page  
Coverage of both “ethnic exclusion  
Of Mexicans by whites” in Texas &  
*Mujer Moderna's* editor living  
In exile in San Antonio.

According to passengers who survived  
The attack & robbery of the train  
Anzaldúa mentions in *Borderlands*  
The “resisters” chants included “Viva  
Aniceto Pizaña!” It makes sense.  
A posse of Anglos that included  
Texas Rangers & other officials  
Had raided his ranch just two months  
Before. Pizaña & some of his friends  
Shot & killed one of the men & wounded  
Three others in the process then escaped.  
Pizaña later claimed the raid drove him  
To join the Plan of San Diego, though  
He’d been the Anglos’ nightmare long before.

Lots of people don't talk about the Plan  
Of San Diego. Take back Texas, New  
Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming  
& California; annex six more states  
For an independent republic of  
Black people; return to the Apaches  
Their land; kill all white American males  
Over the age of 16. That's the Plan.  
To some people it just doesn't sound real  
But I agree with the historian  
Gerald Horne: even "if the 'Plan' was a  
Fiction, massacres of various sorts  
Were not," neither was the temporary  
Halt of economic development.

1915-1917

The Valley was “a virtual war zone.”  
Whether that was the Plan or only looked  
Like part of the Plan, the effects reached well  
Beyond the Valley, in part, because some  
Feared Germany & Japan were behind  
It. But Black militancy, on the rise  
At the time, “gave the Plan resonance &  
Terrified Washington.” It wasn’t just  
That Afro-Mexicans & African-  
Americans living in the U.S.  
Might join the movement. They feared mutiny.  
They feared Black soldiers, who were typically  
Stationed in the borderlands around that time.

No one remembers the Alamo or  
Vicente Guerrero or the ban on  
Communication between Mexicans  
& slaves in parts of Texas. I don't know  
How much it matters, but I imagine  
A Valley where you learn about the Plan  
Growing up & the "Buffalo Soldiers"  
Of the 24th infantry, who marched  
On Jim Crow Houston's predominantly  
Black San Felipe district & opened  
Fire on the police—I imagine  
Life in that Valley & how it would be  
Harder to not hear these stories in that  
Place. It's hard to imagine but I try.

Vasconcelos opened a law office  
To support himself in San Diego  
California, the same year Black soldiers  
Killed cops in Houston. He'd spent quite a bit  
Of time in the U.S. by then— even  
Before exile. Didier Jaén says  
“He lived the Chicano experience”  
When his dad was a Customs Inspector  
In Piedras Negras & he was going  
To school in Eagle Pass. Jaén believes this  
Explains, at least in part, why Chicanos  
Saw “La Raza” in his “Cosmic race” when  
The concept had already fallen out  
Of favor in Latin America.

Since I started writing this poem less than  
A year ago, Mexico recognized  
The African ancestry of more than  
1 million Mexicans for the first time  
In a census survey. “Black” will debut  
As an official category in  
The 2020 national census.  
This is decades after the much discussed  
“Multicultural turn” of the 90s  
In Latin America, when people  
Of African descent went from being  
“Invisible” to becoming part of  
The state’s apparatus, “communities”  
Lawyers could find a legal way around.

In the U.S., the 2000 census  
Allowed respondents to check all races  
That applied. It was either that or add  
A “multiracial” category. It  
Was the choice that split the Multiracial  
Movement. The middle class white women who  
Started the Movement were on the same side  
Of the debate as Newt Gingrich, wanting  
A standalone category that would  
Have affected the numbers of other  
Minority racial categories  
& funding for race-based initiatives  
& civil rights programs. Their primary  
Concern was their children’s “racial safety.”

When I say the middle class white women  
Who started the Multiracial Movement  
Were concerned about their children's "racial  
Safety," I mean they could see their children  
Weren't white, but they wanted everyone else  
To see how they weren't Black either—cuz "safety."  
Groups like the NAACP did  
Not like them. The white women didn't get  
It. They thought these groups must be for the "one-  
Drop rule." In his book *Amalgamation  
Schemes*, Jared Sexton attacks the Movement  
& celebrations of "impurity"  
In general—Anzaldúa's included.  
"Impurity's" a given. Race is not.

What gets me: the Multiracial Movement  
Started in San Francisco in 19-  
78, when “urban renewal”  
Was displacing thousands of Black people.  
The white women who started it had to  
Have known. '78 was the same year  
Many of the Fillmore District's former  
Black residents committed suicide  
Or were murdered in Jonestown, Guyana.  
That had to have been all over the news.  
But there's no indication these women  
Wanted to fight that kind of racism.  
Vasconcelos's case is more complex  
Not cuz he was mestizo. He was not.

I keep thinking of this woman I met  
At a “POC only” meeting years  
Ago. She wasn’t just light-skinned. She looked  
White. It’s hard to explain, but I wasn’t  
Alone in thinking this. When it was her  
Turn, she introduced herself & explained  
Her father was white & her mother was  
From Guatemala. She offered to leave  
If anyone was uncomfortable  
With her there. Everyone said it was fine.  
Only later did I learn from a friend  
Who’d dated her & met her mother, her  
Mother’s family owned a plantation in  
Guatemala. Otherwise they were Basques.

The Magón brothers founded the Eden-  
Dale commune with family & friends in Los  
Angeles, surrounded by silent film  
Studios in Silver Lake. There has to  
Be room for that. That & everything else  
That was un-American at that time  
In the broadest, anti-capitalist  
Sense. A friend once said race is what is done  
To us; ethnicity is what we do  
To ourselves. Growing up in the Valley  
That didn't feel true, but that doesn't mean  
It isn't. Even in 1915  
Trains travelling through Brownsville segregated  
Black people from white. Mexican or not.

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*A border, like race, is a cruel fiction  
Maintained by constant policing, violence  
Always threatening a new map.*