



PROJECT MUSE®

Fabric Frontiers: Thread, Cloth, Body, Self in Latina
Literature and Film

Mihaela P. Harper

Hispanic Review, Volume 81, Number 2, Spring 2013, pp. 165-180 (Article)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hir.2013.0015>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/504863>



FABRIC FRONTIERS: THREAD, CLOTH, BODY, SELF IN LATINA LITERATURE AND FILM

Mihaela P. Harper

Bilkent University

ABSTRACT This article examines the relationship between self-formation and clothing as a contact zone in Sandra Cisneros's "Eleven," Achy Obejas's "We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?" and Alicia Partnoy's "The Denim Jacket" as well as in the film *El Norte* and the documentary *Señorita extraviada*. Exploring the cultural conflicts that unfold on the surface of clothing, I contend that these literary and cinematic texts offer richly nuanced moments in which a character interacts with a garment to illuminate the complex relations between biological bodies and social contexts. In these texts, cloth operates both as a limen and as the creased and occasionally threadbare map of a life; whether to take a garment off, put it on, throw it away, or hold on to it becomes a matter of ethical significance, of practicing a particular kind of relationship to oneself.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) constitutes a particularly well-known instance of critical work that interrogates the function of the frontier vis-à-vis the life and self-fashioning of Latina and Chicana immigrants in the United States over the past twenty years. Despite the substantial amount of writing on the subject since then, however, interest

I would like to express my gratitude to Démian Pritchard and Matthew Fike who inspired and critiqued early drafts of this article. I am also thankful to the anonymous reader, whose suggestions pointed out productive affinities between my work and critical endeavors in the fields of fashion and dress studies that I enjoyed exploring. Many thanks are due to Linda Grabner Travis as well for her constructive attention to my work.

in the concept of the border has not subsided. On the contrary, considering the turn to transnationalism in academia since the turn of the century, the notion appears to have gained even more prominence globally, sustaining the core of cultural, social, and political debates within and across ethnic communities and nations. Monika Kaup's *Rewriting North American Borders in Chicano and Chicana Narrative* (2001), Mary Pat Brady's *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002), and Leo Chavez's *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (2008) are some of the texts that emerged in the last decade to offer compelling theorizations of the correspondence between borders, territories, and rhetorics of the body. Their work, too, speaks to the considerable critical potential of the concept of the frontier—the frontier as a fluid space, continually recomposed by fears and aspirations, violence and lawlessness, histories and languages; the frontier as an ethos immanent to the formation of subjectivities that governs the relationships among them. Boundaries endure, in this sense, as inescapable components of a self—and perhaps its most violently vital ones.

As if equipped with techniques for resisting even deliberate eradications, aggressive excisions, and subtle slippages into oblivion, in literature and in film frontiers are not unlike missing limbs: they insist on recognition with a frequently maddening perseverance. It seems as if the more characters endeavor to leave frontiers behind, the more they must confront borders that haunt both palpably and imperceptibly, at once hostile and hospitable, circumscriptive and intensive, paralyzing and stimulating. But the intransigent and even torturous insistence of frontiers is entwined with the soothing enfolding of the familiar. To inhabit a frontier thus becomes tantamount to encountering the necessity to confront its violence and to make it bearable by crafting a self upon its line. In this sense, frontiers endure as ontological contours, vital impulses, and epistemological parameters of a life. Akin to scars, the seams of frontiers refuse to dissipate, to be either removed or concealed. Etching a living upon the jagged lifeline of a frontier, however, is complicated both by the divisions that boundaries invoke and by the fusions they elicit. This article examines the violent and haunting subsistence of these fusions as *contact zones* (Mary Louise Pratt's term), fundamentally significant to self-formation. It analyzes the "wear and tear" of frontiers, or rather, the ways in which Latinas and Chicanas in five momentous literary texts and films navigate the fusions that frontiers galvanize. As characters dress and undress or refuse to do one or the other, fold, unfold, and conceal pieces of

clothing, I argue, bodies and cloth transpose, contact zones become legible, and the violent dynamism of frontiers is made livable.

I turn to the frontier that fabric constitutes, precisely because “clothing marks an unclear boundary ambiguously, and unclear boundaries disturb us” (2), as Elizabeth Wilson appositely points out. The degrees of this disturbance range from barely perceptible to forceful in the extreme, degrees that this article endeavors to palpate in the Latina literature and films that it brings together. A prominent contributor to fashion theory, Wilson articulates the pivotal symbolic place of clothing in everyday cultural practices as a zone of critical interaction between the biological body and the social being. Moreover, she writes that dress is simultaneously “defense and attack, both shield and sword” (8), indicating the problematic doubling of cloth as armor that invites combat, as a barrier that incites transgression. This article seeks to articulate the combats and transgressions that unfold on the surface of clothing, and especially their significance to the formation of the self. It participates, then, in another critical discourse as well, an interdisciplinary exchange that queries the relationship between identity and dress, corporate fashion (as a capitalist industry) and self-fashioning (as an art, a Foucauldian “technology of the self”).¹ As Wilson notes, “dress is the frontier between the self and the non-self” (3), and it expresses the ethos of navigating the “triple ambiguity” of capitalism and art as well as of identity, “of the relation of self to body and self to the world” (15). Literature and film capture the complex plurality of the ambiguity, of the relations and confrontations sustained by fabric. They tap into the disturbance that the ambiguity of the fabric frontier produces, perhaps not to make sense of it but to preserve its volatility and capacity to unsettle practices of dressing and undressing so deeply habitual that they often remain unexamined.

The texts and films that this article puts into conversation are significant not only because they engage the disturbances of the frontier but also because they interrupt and redefine dominant literary canons by problematizing an array of cultural concerns, including immigration, homosexuality, racism, transgression, violence, and identity. Each of them is also remarkable in the ways in which it opens different venues of experience and experimentation,

1. For a more thorough introduction to this conversation, see the volumes in the *Dress, Body, Culture* series by Berg Publishers; for instance, Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson’s *Body Dressing*, and Regina A. Root’s *Latin American Fashion Reader*.

drawing new affinities, creating new relations within and between cultures, within and between modes of living. Not merely invested in representation, the writing of Sandra Cisneros, Achy Obejas, and Alicia Partnoy troubles common conceptions of subjectivity, exposing hemmed-in differences in thinking and living. Their writing refuses to reduce the complex correspondence between biological bodies and social contexts, offering instead richly nuanced moments in which a character interacts with a garment to bespeak that very complexity. Their work constitutes a critical and turbulent endeavor that Laura Redón articulates eloquently: regarding Latinas as agents of community and as bridge-builders, she asserts that “even as we disrupt, we also need to connect, and that is our paradoxical challenge” (online). Precisely due to this paradox, to the impasse of a divisive cultural fusion that does not lend itself to easy or universal solutions, the range and complexity, creativity and intensity of the literary and cinematic approaches to the problem of the frontier have been profoundly compelling and illuminating. Most significantly, each of the texts and films to which this article turns—Cisneros’s “Eleven,” Obejas’s “We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?,” and Partnoy’s “The Denim Jacket,” as well as the film *El Norte* and, briefly, the documentary *Señorita extraviada*—engages the haunting and violent frontier as a problem of composing livable contact zones. The literal folding of and enfolding in fabric that the characters in these texts and films practice reveals self-fashioning in the singular moments of its taking place. The characters’ relations with the violent, divisive fusions of frontiers become legible in their engagement with and disengagement from a garment. Whether to take it off, put it on, throw it away, or hold on to it becomes a matter of ethical significance, of practicing a particular kind of relation to oneself; cloth operates both as a limen and as the creased and occasionally threadbare map of a life.

In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Pratt famously defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (34). Extending Pratt’s definition further, my suggestion is that contact zones also constitute the vital and critical relation of oneself to oneself. This relation takes the form of an activity, of a practice through which one’s impossible/impassable frontiers become inhabitable. In the literary and cinematic texts that I analyze, articles of clothing are what Pratt calls *autoethnographic* texts,

[texts] in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those texts. (35)

On the frontier surfaces that garments constitute, relationships between social forces emerge, collide, overlap, and often violate each other, that is, come into contact and coexist. As a notable figure in the writing of Cisneros, Obejas, and Partnoy, as well as in the films *El Norte* and *Señorita extraviada*, clothing constitutes a response. It embodies the correspondences between cultural forces and their paradoxically destructive and generative dynamism. Moreover, a prominent component of national and cultural consciousness, clothing becomes the seam that sutures what is conventionally considered to be distinct inner and outer experiences, complicating their differentiation. Each piece of clothing enacts ways in which social experience transforms into a singular “inside,” its threads and folds performing the very composition of a contact zone, a singular frontier. Thus, clothing is significant not only as a critical commentary on deeply rooted practices of immigrant individuation as well as on the interaction among and within cultures, but also, and more significantly, as a surface upon which the practice of self-fashioning becomes legible.

In *The Dress of Women: A Critical Introduction to the Symbolism and Sociology of Clothing* (2002), Charlotte Perkins Gilman conceptualizes clothing as “social tissue” (3). The very position of clothing as possibly the first contact zone, composed of the collision between one’s own perception and that of another, supports her conception and speaks to the significance of clothing as a zone that is also the condition of possibility for experiencing—in the sense of mobilizing—frontiers. Notions, such as identity struggle, social pressure, and cultural mores and regulations are indicative precisely of this mobility.² In this sense, a cloth’s threads are stretched between immigrants

2. Related to this point is Joanne Entwistle’s argument for fashion as a space for “discourses on the body and identity produced across various sites and practices” (235). Although in this article I do not turn directly to fashion as a conceptual component, my theorization of clothing intersects with fashion theories in multiple ways. While Entwistle works on the more global level of fashion—suggesting that, in an uncertain postmodernity, “fashion opens up possibilities for framing the self, at least momentarily, since fashion is always moving never stable” (74)—I focus on the space of a singular piece of fabric, on clothing as a distinct practice for a Latina immigrant.

and “natives” in a “tug-of-war,” reversible and in perpetual flux, for control over identity, over self. Thus, in a paradoxical turn, in order to “go native” one must acquire cultural currency, become “civilized,” and dress up (in both senses of formal attire and of disguise). Occluded by the macroscale of a garment’s visible totality, on the microscale—and often imperceptibly—threads break, wear thin, or absorb myriad elements, from dust and dirt to tears, transforming continually. As each thread folds the outside in and the inside out, and constitutes these volatile fusions, pieces of clothing become mobile spaces, contact zones where subjects emerge, caught in a double movement. They relate to themselves by confronting frontiers that haunt them—gender, ethnicity, and class—while the frontiers transform them into singular social and cultural agents.

Thus, for the Latina and Chicana characters to which I turn next, donning a layer of clothing is often not a quotidian or a “mindless” physical act; it is instead an occasion to think, to compose, to inhabit a frontier, and, significantly, to make an ethical decision. In the famous and still decidedly relevant film *El Norte* (1985), the care with which a young indigenous Mayan, Rosa, folds her ethnic attire and stores it away safely before her departure for *el Norte* (the United States) is indicative of the transposition of self and cloth. As if relinquishing a part of her self, Rosa engages in self-redefinition and recognition, since the change of clothing is not necessarily a travel requirement—Rosa has been studying female fashion advertisements in US magazines—but rather a response related to decontextualization. She is “going native” by both acknowledging her “nonnativeness” and protecting it from the wear and tear of trespassing.

Speaking to the significance of clothing and its connection to context, Rob Schorman points out that since “meaning is not inherent in the objects but is derived from the objects’ participation in symbolic systems,” clothing, a boundary often constituted through pressure or in resistance “because of its intimate association with the wearer and its literal location on the boundary between self and society, figures prominently in this process” (121). For Rosa, dress is a frontier that she has to make livable by folding her ethnic clothes; through this act, she attempts to eliminate the assigned position of her belonging, the dualisms of us/them and inside/outside. To fold away her native attire is a decision that not only invokes paradoxical affective intensities—pain, empowerment, instability, pleasure—but also opens the possibility for a critical engagement with questions of identity: what does it mean to be

Mayan or American?³ Such questions are no longer matters of *being* but of *becoming*, of moving between cultures and within shifting social contexts. Rosa's is an infinite critical engagement precisely because the attire is held at a distance, kept safe, as a frontier to be rethought, reconstituted, and perhaps returned to. In distancing her body from the garments, she complicates her relationship with her self. She may not articulate it thus, but she is not unaware that, as Christoph Heyl indicates, "by means of deliberately obscuring one's own identity, relatively unrestrained and even new forms of social interaction could become possible" (121).

Although, with regard to immigration and identity, the clothing that Rosa takes off can be interpreted as a giving up of her Mayan self, perhaps even a desire to replace her self with a new identity (that of an American), the contrast between her tense relationship with the new culture and her brother Enrique's attempt to embrace what he perceives as *the* American way of life suggests a different possibility. As the film unfolds, it becomes evident that the distancing from, the relinquishing of, her ethnic garments is vital to Rosa's self-formation, to her reconceptualization of both Guatemala and of *el Norte*, as well as of the conflicting forces of the two that she must navigate. As *autoethnographic* text, her American clothes turn the discriminating social forces that pressure for conformity against themselves, undermining their very premise that practical sameness is necessary or sufficient for equality.

A variety of situations in *El Norte* make legible the constitution of contact zones through cultural conflicts, but one in particular exposes the transposition of bodies and clothes, and clothing as a frontier that fuses self and other. Rosa's implicit abandonment of ways of knowing in setting aside her ethnic clothes is reinforced by a washing machine incident that takes place once she is in the US. Unable to get a washing machine to work, Rosa washes her affluent employer's clothes by hand and attempts to dry them in the way that is familiar to her—by spreading them on the lawn outside—only to be chas-

3. Fred Davis offers an interesting examination of identification via clothing between the members of minority and majority groups. In *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, he writes that "[f]or the former the problem hinges on the issue of whether the identity sustained by some distinctive dress style will at the same time result in others 'keeping their distance,' thus denying minority group members the equality of access, recognition, and recompense . . . For some majority group members the problem is the obverse: overcoming the social distance and 'strangeness' implied by the other's distinctive dress and interacting with him or her 'as an equal'" (182). Davis's comment points to the conflict that takes place upon the surface of a fabric, arguing that clothing communicates social identity in the process of its production by cultural values.

tised and rejected. The failure here lies not so much in Rosa's inability to adapt, but rather both in her (mis)recognizing her employer's clothes as ethnic artifacts of a similar kind to her own by handling them as she would hers and, at the same time, in unknowingly violating the privacy and containment that a drier affords them. Though "social tissue," the dress is not to be socially exposed without a body that occupies them. The dichotomy between the ground outside, where Rosa spreads her employer's clothes, and the confined space of the laundry room is exhibited through Rosa's emotions: happiness outside and confusion inside. The happiness outside is elicited by the application of her "way of knowing," until that very knowledge renders her an outsider to the culture and social setting into which she has migrated. But precisely as the stranger who does not know how to wash a piece of clothing using a washing machine, Rosa bears the capacity to construct a contact zone, to illuminate the relations of a culture to itself and others, its fears, demands, necessities, the threads that compose the surface of and the care for its "social tissue."

Through the figure of clothing, *El Norte* exposes an immigrant's combat with the frontier that haunts her and her effort to make the frontier livable. It also offers a commentary on the complexities of assimilation as a way of inhabiting it. A connection between *el Norte* and the "American dream" can be easily drawn, and, in important ways, the film interrogates precisely the divergent pursuits of this dream by Rosa and Enrique, their shifts and turns bespoken by their relations with clothing. Enrique's adopted American clothes, and especially his high-end restaurant waitstaff uniform, enact a different relation from Rosa's. In shedding his old clothes, he also seems to abandon a value system that dictates caring for family members. While his uniform actively contributes to his self-consciousness, he nevertheless and inevitably interacts with a frontier, seeking ways to eradicate, to forget, to escape it by enfolding himself in a different fabric, by making his self of a different cloth. In the end, he remains with Rosa, who is dying from typhus in a hospital and asking whether there is a home for them, persecuted in Guatemala and rejected in the US. Paradoxically, it is their rapid acceptance into the work force, enacted particularly by Enrique's uniform, that constitutes also the rejection that precludes them from entering the kind of home or "American dream" that they desire.

Although considered common and shared, to which the definite article attests, *the* "American dream" is not one-size-fits-all. Coco Fusco offers a

detailed perspective of the frontier relations that immigrants must navigate in order to become eligible to attain “the dream”:

We welcome you, but first we must fingerprint you, interrogate you, probe you, scope you . . . We exempt you, we absolve you, we exonerate you, but only if you qualify for our benevolence . . . We forgive you, but first we must certify you, standardize you, normalize you, merge you, melt you, validate you, authenticate you, assimilate you . . . We want your blood, we'll give you trickle down theories . . . We want your sweat, we'll give you annual yields . . . We want your dreams, we'll give you the American Dream. (53)

For the immigrant, this border dynamic is always a matter of life and, as *El Norte* exhibits, of death. Eligibility with regard to attaining “the dream” is, in this sense, necessarily entwined with life/death and the imperative to make a frontier livable.

The failing of the dream, of the promise, is arguably evident in the clothing trends of immigrants, since, according to Schorman, “the adoption of American clothing by the immigrant was not just an act of conformity, it was a statement of membership in American society with implications for citizenship itself” (133). In other words, the anticipation that acceptance may not be granted prompts drawing on the relation between clothing and identity as an attempt to claim belonging through mainstream dressing; it triggers seeking to diminish difference, the magnitude of contrast perceived through re-dressing. While these possibilities underscore again the place of fabric as a primary contact zone where identity struggle takes place, the borrowing of clothing trends or items from the dominant culture invokes *transculturation*, a concept referenced by Pratt. She explains, “Ethnographers have used the term *transculturation* to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (36). As if palpating the pulse of a culture, an immigrant intuits the mainstream and embodies its dress in an effort to open communication, to which Schorman’s claim alludes: “citizenship exists in the relationships between and among people rather than as a status or attribute within an individual” (132–33). While such relationships often marginalize an immigrant even further, new trends and new identities are also frequently born from the critical distance. In this sense, “gang wear” serves as a way to distinguish, further diversify, and possibly bring to the

forefront contact zones between ethnic, social, as well as personal centers and margins. The oppression experienced transforms into a practice of expression that literary texts and films capture in the characters' interactions with clothing.

Achy Obejas's short story "We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?" problematizes the complexities of composing and navigating identities that are ready-made, imposed, and even sterile. The story begins with a green sweater and, in a critically significant sense, ends with it as well—a complex, multidimensional loop, replete with singular moments, from literal border crossing to the memory of crossing as an aspect of self-formation. At first, the narrator of the story has been "wearing the sweater for two days straight" and has "no plans to take it off" (113). Having just arrived in the United States, the narrator, who is ten years old, equates the material of the sweater with belonging, with an emphasis on the facticity that "it's mine" (113). She is willing neither to relinquish her only possession nor to replace it, to trade its enfolding familiarity for another. Instead she holds on to the sweater in an interesting reversal: the sweater does not shelter her body, as armor would; despite its acknowledged syntheticity (113), it is a living frontier that her body sustains, preserving the life of the fabric. An urge to protect, to compose this frontier expresses itself violently, as an ethos.

By shifting the contact zone from the wearer to that which is worn, the text not only gives the transculturation of the immigrant a more ostensibly physical capacity but also presents a third dimension to her existence, generally thought of as dichotomized. The contact zone embodiment of the immigrant is visibly "trichotomized," refracted into observer, who epitomizes the dominant culture; transculturating wearer, who constructs a contact zone; and former/native self. All of them are grappling on the surface of the fabric. Thus, the green sweater in Obejas's story simultaneously constitutes the narrator's indigenous identity and witnesses her transculturation, which I read as irreducible forces the relation of which fashions a frontier. The sweater is traversed both by the narrator's heartbeat and by the literal border crossing, as well as by "the smell of salt and Cuban dirt and my grandmother's house" (114). Its threads unfold the affect and the validation of a perpetually mobile border, subversions, and decisions of fidelity in between a grandmother's house and the promise of America. Sitting with "arms folded in front of my chest and across the green sweater" (113), the narrator's pose invokes a position of combat and defense, but raises again the question of whether it is the body in the sweater being protected or the sweater itself, or both simultane-

ously, having become an indissoluble amalgam. Toward the end of the story, like a green light to the multidirectional traffic of bodies, memories, and selves, the sweater resurfaces in a closet, bearing the narrator's past identity, boxed fragments of which are wrapped in it. The box only emits "a muffled sound" (128), as if it were the sound of the sweater itself, simultaneously distant and distinct, owned and disowned, when encountered years later.

A compelling episode takes place at the processing center, where a Catholic volunteer "insists" that the narrator's mother select second-hand clothing for the family, as if the selection—almost a coerced transculturation—is an interlude to an act of inhabiting the "second-hand" (117). While the narrator recalls the stamp of an American flag logo on a shirt that the volunteer selects, she also reminisces about the sameness of the blue color of the dress that the narrator's "cold and hard" blond doll, a gift, is wearing, and about the dress that her mother "fishes" out of the second-hand boxes, which the narrator "will never wear" (117). The parallels that emerge suggest a fusion of the blue fabric and the cold, hard plastic skin of the doll as well as of the blue coldness of an oceanic distance that is hard to assess or to remember fully. Precisely because of this difficulty (even impossibility/impassability), however, the story turns and returns to memory. Out of the decisions that the narrator begins to make, decisions that may appear simple or quotidian—what to wear and what not to wear—between the green and the blue fabric emerges a contact zone, a frontier that the narrator has to negotiate and redefine continually.

While the sweater is kept safe in a closet at the house of the narrator's parents—as if it were a tradition, a secret, or an inheritance that must be chosen and not assumed—when the narrator returns, her mother exclaims that she "almost didn't recognize" her daughter and her father rejects her attire by asking: "we came all the way from Cuba so you could dress like this?" (120). The reactions of the parents, who step into the part of observers—the latter claiming that the clothes have the feel of an un-US manner of dressing, and the former unable to recognize the person attired in Cuban clothing who has entered her house—propose an interesting inversion of identity perception in terms of clothing. There is a sense in which an immigrant is recognizable as such only as long as they are not attired in their ethnic clothing or, rather, as long as they bear the dominant culture's mainstream dress. As if constituting a distinct kind of space, somewhere between the familiar and the other, the narrator's dress reinforces the "trichotomy" of an immigrant's existence in the contact zone, but also indicates the shifting

ceaselessness of her cultural traversals. Martha, the narrator's girlfriend, adds further dimensions to the constitution of that zone by ripping "tee-shirts [*sic*] off my shoulders brutally and honestly" (114), an action that opens for interrogation the relationship between sexuality and fabric—another aspect of a frontier that reinforces its violent dynamism. Responding to the persistence and brutal intensity of the contact zone, Martha tries to remove it and reach beyond it as if there were a "beyond" to access, as if the contact zone were not the narrator's self. Although the eventual abandonment of the green sweater, despite the narrator's plans, and its storage in a closet seem to suggest an inevitable replacement of a former identity, the sweater's finding its way back to the narrator, still protecting fragments of her past, is indicative of a different way of conceptualizing the constitution of a self. Rather than shedding identities like skins, the narrator fosters distances, first from the second-hand fabrics and then from the green sweater itself, distances that allow her to live, to move in-between selves without being paralyzed into one position or another. Each comes to constitute a contact zone through which she composes her self, ceaselessly choosing, sorting, coiling, and unfolding different threads.

Self-fashioning, inscribed in fabric and in the narrator's relationship to it, is also at the heart of Cisneros's short story "Eleven," from her collection *Woman Hollering Creek* (1992). The red sweater, which the narrator Rachel defines as "not mine" (Cisneros 7), suggests a distinctly different relationship to the item from the one that the narrator in Obejas's story expresses toward the green sweater through her claim that "it's mine" (Obejas 113). Ironically, the red sweater invokes the second-hand shirt with the American logo that Obejas's narrator encounters—or rather, the way she might have felt had she been made to wear it. Both the green and the red sweaters—and does green still mean "go" and red mean "stop"?—indicate the violent dynamic of the transposition between body and cloth, exposing the relationship between a self and the frontier upon which it is composed. In Rachel's words, it is as if "the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren't even mine" (8). Both sweaters—the green that belongs and the red that does not (as it turns out, its owner is a classmate)—constitute zones of cross-contamination. The former bears familiar "dirt," the kind to which one has inevitably built antibodies, while the latter is suffused with unfamiliar "germs," the kind that can hurt and require (but also inevitably provoke) the development of new resiliences, that is to say, making frontiers livable. Like breathing skin, the sweaters become surfaces upon which vital relations

come into play, where “inner” and “outer” collapse, where familiar and foreign grapple and blur to form new, singular ethical modes of living.

The narrator’s description of the red sweater as clown-like (9) further underscores the melding of skin and cloth. As if painted on, the sweater simultaneously conceals and exposes a vulnerable skin, despite the paradoxical thickness of its knit. In this sense, too, the conclusion of Rachel’s teacher, Mrs. Price, that the red sweater is undeniably Rachel’s—based on a suggestion by classmate Sylvia Salvidar and her own memory of seeing the sweater on Rachel—becomes an incontestable verdict that both fuses interiority and exteriority, and renders inconsequential the narrator’s sense of belonging, recognition, and order of knowing. The moment also makes visible a certain line of communication that fails between dominant culture and immigrant. Yet, paradoxically, the red sweater also constitutes the surface where vying forces interpenetrate; in a sense, it occasions a contact zone and literally initiates communication. Significantly, the surface of the red sweater reveals the affective force of the contact zone, as if, like the grid of a knitted fabric, the contact zone, too, is riddled with voids that hold it together and allow the skin to breathe. Though ironic, the narrator’s faith that in a distant future, when she is 102 years old, “I’d have known what to say” (7) to Mrs. Price’s contention, points to the possibility of a communication that translates, of a communication that the red sweater can elicit, and of an exchange of knowledge that, in time, the sweater can sustain between subordinate and dominant, margin and center, between subalternity and hegemony. It is a faith in the possibility of a response (or that the subaltern can speak).

Similarly to Cisneros’s “Eleven,” but complicating and pushing self-constitution further still, Partnoy’s “The Denim Jacket,” a fictionalized *testimonio* from *The Little School* (1998), exposes a contact zone not between “native” and immigrant as conventionally understood, but within the social and cultural context of the narrator. As the fabric at the core of the narrative, the denim jacket maintains not only the coming into contact of contending forces but also the very significance of their contention and their radical difference. Resistant, the jacket endures, resurges, and embodies ethical relations. At the very instant the narrator, who is held as a political prisoner, receives the jacket as a declaration of her friend Vasca’s death, the garment transforms into another kind of statement as well, an expression akin to that of a national flag. When Vasca is taken away and presumably killed, the narrator grows the skin of Vasca’s jacket on which her ethos and memory are inscribed. The fabric offers comfort and protection that even the presence

of the narrator's husband cannot provide. Unlike the narrators of Obejas and Cisneros, Partnoy's speaker eliminates the distance between her body and the garment, which enables her to inhabit an ethical fusion, to make a frontier livable by claiming a self that the jacket symbolically renders available. It is interesting that the narrator uses the word "infuse" to speak of the power of the jacket—"the jacket had infused me with some of Vasca's courage" (111)—as if it indeed fuses inside and outside, material and self, life and death. An infusion and a transfusion take place at the same time. "The thick fabric" (110) transforms into a skin so thick that the jacket's metal buttons recall flattened bullets, arrested permanently by the sheer imperviousness of the fabric. As a catalyst to transformation, the jacket constitutes an element momentous to the narrator's self-fashioning. Similarly to the way the green sweater affects Obejas's narrator, the jacket brings a different, in some ways clearer and more powerful, transformation and self-consciousness to Partnoy's captive speaker. The jacket's apparent radical emptiness, when it is first brought to the narrator, proves false. She does not put it on in order to fill a void, but rather to partake of its ethos of resistance through a decision that is not morbid, but affirmative. Through the jacket, she inhabits the violent dynamism of the frontier. According to Nina Felshin, "clothing more than any other object or possession, is closely identified with the body of the absent wearer. It acts as a surrogate by suggesting his or her presence" (20). The narrator, however, does not necessarily appear interested in maintaining Vasca's "presence." The very inability of her husband's physical presence to comfort and her disinterest in merely holding the jacket close as if it were Vasca herself, indicate that to her, presence is activity or, rather, the active fusing of fabric and faith, thread and decision. The jacket occasions this activity.

The problem of the empty garment emerges powerfully, too, in Lourdes Portillo's documentary, *Señorita extraviada* (2001), in which images of empty clothes and shoes that belonged to the women missing in Ciudad Juárez emerge repeatedly without losing their affective intensities. As Elizabeth Wayland Barber suggests, "clothing, right from our first direct evidence twenty thousand years ago, has been the handiest solution to conveying social messages visually, silently, continuously" (148). In the documentary, however, the empty garment is not the medium through which a message is delivered; it is the contact zone that makes visible the asymmetrical relations

of forces. Similarly to Vasca's jacket, the fabric preserves the questions of how to make frontiers livable and how to compose an ethical self.

The question of the frontier as an ethos is central to each of the works analyzed in this article; in each, garments provoke and unsettle violently. Through the ways in which they compose and inhabit multiplicitous fabric frontiers, characters partake of the turbulence and danger of contact zones. Each probes the complexities of self-formation and cultural dynamics from different angles, offering a richer engagement with the life of contact zones. While *El Norte* traces an individual's crossing into a contact zone between cultures, Obejas's and Cisneros's texts explore transculturation within it, Partnoy's delves into its dangers and transformative potential, and *Señorita extraviada* investigates further fabrics that are profoundly unsettling both in their frequent unrecognizability and in their unequivocal familiarity. Morphing into breathing skin, each fabric comes to constitute a living frontier that, ceaselessly traversed, contracts, expands, and unfolds the limina of a self.

Film as well as literature that engage with issues related to border crossing, immigration, the collapse of the "American dream," and the physical and intellectual practices of living carried out by Latinas and Chicanas on both sides of the border rupture conventional modes of comprehending the relationship between outside and inside, familiar and other. Problematizing psychosocial paradigms, the texts brought together in this article contemplate expression as a way to open communication, present new perspectives, and break away from established patterns of apprehending the relationship between self and context. In the same vein, Frederick Luis Aldama suggests that "scholars of Chicano/a and Latino/a culture have hit a steady stride, publishing books that question and destabilize how we understand how race, gender, class, and sexuality inform ethnic identity and experience in the U.S." (242). Through the use of a common figure, such as an item of clothing, Latina and Chicana authors, whether writing fiction or a *testimonio*, are able to articulate complex relations and offer a discourse with broad and compelling theoretical implications on the female as identity, gender, immigrant, political activist, prisoner, whether heterosexual or homosexual, mother, daughter, wife, or lover. Enfolding their characters in realities of violent dimensions, literally dressing and undressing them, they point to the subsistence of contact zones and the possibility, or rather, the need to make frontiers livable.

Works Cited

- Aldama, Frederick Luis. "Gang Nation: Delinquent Citizens in Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Chicana Narratives." *MELUS* 28.4 (2003): 242–45. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 15 Dec. 2010.
- Barber, Elizabeth Wayland. "Elements of the Code: Symbolism in Cloth and Clothing." In *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*. By Barber. New York: Norton, 1994. 47–63.
- Cisneros, Sandra. "Eleven." In *Woman Hollering Creek*. New York: Vintage, 1992. 6–9.
- Davis, Fred. *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- El Norte*. Dir. Gregory Nava. Prod. Anna Thomas. Independent Productions, 1983. Film.
- Entwistle, Joanne. *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2000.
- Entwistle, Joanne, and Elizabeth Wilson, eds. *Body Dressing*. New York: Berg, 2001.
- Felshin, Nina. "Clothing as Subject." *Art Journal* 54.1 (1995): 20–29. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 27 Nov. 2010.
- Fusco, Coco. "Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo: Interview with Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Emily Hicks." *Third Text* 7 (Summer 1989): 53–76.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Dress of Women: A Critical Introduction to the Symbolism and Sociology of Clothing*. Ed. Michael R. Hill and Mary Jo Deegan. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002.
- Heyl, Christoph. "When They Are Veyl'd on Purpose to be Seene: The Metamorphosis of the Mask in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century London." In Entwistle and Wilson. 121–42.
- Obejas, Achy. "We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?" In *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1994. 113–29.
- Partnoy, Alicia. "The Denim Jacket." In *The Little School*. San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 1998. 109–12.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* (1991): 33–40.
- Redón, Laura. "Centered on the Edge: The New Latina Intellectual Leader." National Initiative. *Association of American Colleges and Universities* 33.1 (2003). Web. 10 Jan. 2011.
- Root, Regina A., ed. *Latin American Fashion Reader*. New York: Berg, 2005.
- Schorman, Rob. "'Remember the Maine, Boys, and the Price of This Suit.'" *Historian* 61.1 (1998): 119–35. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 06 Dec. 2010.
- Señorita extraviada*. Dir. Lourdes Portillo. Xochitl Productions, 2001. Documentary film.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003.