



“Wild tongues can’t be tamed”: Rumor, racialized sexuality, and the 1917 Bath Riots in the US-Mexico borderlands

Tala Khanmalek¹

Accepted: 19 January 2021 / Published online: 18 June 2021
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2021

Abstract

On 28 January 1917, a group of women led by seventeen-year-old Carmelita Torres defied quarantine orders at the US-Mexico border, where Mexican-heritage people were required to undergo delousing. According to local and national coverage of the protest, rumors that United States Public Health Service officials had photographed women in the nude ignited what would come to be known as the Bath Riots. This paper engages archival materials with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* to show how these rumors disrupt the existing historical record. Specifically, I analyze newspaper reports to highlight the racialized and sexualized construction of Mexican women as disease carriers in need of regulation and public health photographs of the El Paso disinfection plant. By employing Anzaldúan concepts of “wild tongues” and *la facultad* as methodological tools for reading state archives, I reveal a counter-discourse to biopolitical subjection in the transmission of rumors among working-class Mexican women.

Keywords La facultad · Archives · Racialized sexuality · Rumor · Public health · Borderlands

“No se pueden domar las malas lenguas”: Los rumores, la sexualidad racializada y los Motines de los Baños de 1917 en la frontera entre EE.UU. y México

Abstract

El 28 de enero de 1917, un grupo de mujeres lideradas por una joven de diecisiete años llamada Carmencita Torres desafió las órdenes de cuarentena en la frontera entre EE.UU. y México, donde las personas de herencia mexicana tenían que someterse a una desinfección de piojos. Según la cobertura local y nacional de la protesta,

✉ Tala Khanmalek
tkhanmalek@Fullerton.edu

¹ California State University, Fullerton, CA, USA



rumores de que los funcionarios del Servicio de Salud Pública de los Estados Unidos habían fotografiado a mujeres desnudas desataron lo que llegó a conocerse como los Motines de los Baños. Este trabajo engrana materiales de archivo con *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* de Gloria Anzaldúa para demostrar cómo estos rumores alteran el registro histórico existente. Específicamente, analizamos los reportajes de los periódicos para resaltar la construcción racializada y sexualizada de las mujeres mexicanas como portadoras de enfermedades sujetas a regulación así como las fotografías de salud pública tomadas en la planta de desinfección de El Paso. Al emplear los conceptos de Anzaldúa de "wild tongues" (malas lenguas) y "la facultad" como herramientas metodológicas para leer los archivos estatales, revelo un contra-discurso al sometimiento biopolítico en la transmisión de rumores entre las mujeres mexicanas de clase trabajadoras.

Palabras clave La facultad · Archivos · Sexualidad racializada · Rumor · Salud pública · Tierras fronterizas

Led by Carmelita Torres, an auburn-haired young woman of 17, they kept up a continuous volley of language aimed at the immigration and health officers, civilians, sentries and any other visible American. Small stones were thrown, but the missiles were little more dangerous than the language. ("Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women," 1917)

Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out. (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 76)

On 28 January 1917, seventeen-year-old Carmelita Torres led a group of women who refused to comply with quarantine orders at the US-Mexico border, igniting what would come to be known as the Bath Riots. The quarantine orders—issued by Senior Surgeon Claude Connor Pierce with the full support of El Paso Mayor Tom Lea—required Mexican-heritage people to undergo a lengthy, highly toxic delousing procedure before crossing the Rio Grande River via the Santa Fe Street International Bridge that connects El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Authorized under the pretense of typhus prevention, compulsory delousing transformed the bridge into a barrier for Mexican migrants.¹ Unlike Chinese and southern and Eastern European migrants, Mexican migrants had previously crossed the border unrestricted and were exempt from restrictions put forth in the 1917 Immigration Act. Mexican women, many of whom lived in Ciudad Juárez and worked in El Paso as domestics and laundresses, were disproportionately affected by public health control over the border.²

¹ The publication of this article during a global pandemic calls attention to continuities with the past. I hope that readers will heed these continuities (e.g., the past and present racialization of contagion) despite significant differences between the current pandemic of COVID-19 and the false construction of typhus as a pandemic to justify public health control over borders and bodies in the early twentieth century. Whether real or not, public health crises have long been leveraged to expand the colonial-carceral state, thereby exacerbating inequities and making the case for abolition more pertinent than ever.

² See John Mckiernan-González (2012) and García (1980).



According to the *El Paso Morning Times*, rioting began when United States Public Health Service (USPHS) officials ordered the women to get off the streetcars that transported them to the bridge every day and enter the newly refitted disinfection plant on the other end.³ A closer look at newspaper coverage of the Bath Riots reveals that Carmelita Torres and her peers were not just protesting Pierce's unprecedented border quarantine. More precisely, the Bath Riots resulted partially due to "rumors among servant girls" that officials had photographed women in the nude while subjecting them to the final stage of delousing: spraying the body with a kerosene-based chemical solution ("Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women" 1917).

Both scholarly and popular literature have frequently cited the Bath Riots as a singular and spectacular moment of resistance to the USPHS.⁴ Yet it is viewed as just that, a moment with no lasting effects on public health control over the border, especially since compulsory delousing continued for years to come, even as part of the Bracero Program (1942–1965). Specifically, little attention has been paid to allegations that officials had photographed women in the disinfection plant when in fact these rumors evidence the buried traces of another story. By engaging archival materials with Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, I show how rumor raises critical questions of knowledge production that fundamentally recast the Bath Riots from a spectacular moment to a repository of unofficial history.

In particular, I analyze popular press articles—national and local newspaper coverage of the Bath Riots—to focus attention on the racialized and sexualized construction of working-class Mexican women as disease carriers in need of regulation. I then trace the presence of archival absence by analyzing four USPHS photographs, one of which depicts the women's baths, included in a published article on the delousing procedure by Senior Surgeon Pierce. I operationalize Anzaldúan concepts of "wild tongues" and *la facultad* to argue that the absence of rumored photographs disrupts the existing historical record and lays bare issues of propriety and perversion central to the material production of racialized sexuality. The USPHS photographs in Pierce's article repeatedly appear as documentary supplements to contemporary writing on the Bath Riots.⁵ I employ Chicana feminist theory as a methodological framework to approach the "archive-as-subject," or site of knowledge production, rather than a source of information about the Bath Riots (Stoler 2002, p. 93). In doing so, I build on the work of Howard Markel, Alexandra Minna Stern, and Natalia Molina, who have drawn attention to the long, intertwined histories of race, medicine, public health, and Mexican immigration—histories that John Mckiernan-González (2012) dates back to the mid-1800s.⁶

³ In 1915, the USPHS restored disinfecting plants along the border where officials previously bathed only those diagnosed with an infectious disease and sterilized their clothing.

⁴ For example, see John Burnett (2006).

⁵ See for example Howard Markel (2004), or David Dorado Romo (2005).

⁶ See Mckiernan-González (2012), Markel (2004), Natalia Molina (2016), Stern (2005a), and Anna Pegler-Gordon (2009).



Published in 1987, *Borderlands La Frontera* had a watershed impact on late twentieth-century feminist of color literature, women's studies, and Latinx studies inside and outside the academy.⁷ The book begins with seven mixed-genre chapters in which Anzaldúa develops a theory of borderlands as not only a specific geographic locale—the US-Mexico border where she was raised—but also an embodied landscape “present wherever two or more cultures edge each other” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 20), producing an open wound. A “third country” nevertheless emerges from this liminal space defined by violence, including a distinctly bordered language, subjectivity, agency, and consciousness that undermine patriarchal nation-centric paradigms (p. 25). In short, Anzaldúan borderlands theory situates the site of wounding squarely within the racialized and sexualized body, which simultaneously conditions alternative ways of being and knowing.

Anzaldúa's recuperation of loose tongues as “wild” in *Borderlands La Frontera*—especially in the chapter, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”—highlights the centrality of gender and sexuality to disciplinary discourses, practices, and policies, including those of the USPHS. In a seemingly routine medical encounter, a dentist attempts to control Anzaldúa's tongue with dental instruments and materials during a root canal treatment. Before delving into the relationship between language, identity, and embodiment, Anzaldúa asserts, “wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out” (1987, p. 76). As a methodological framework, “wild tongues” reveals a counter-discourse to what historian Alexandra Minna Stern calls “eugenic gatekeeping,” or the twofold process of militarization and medicalization at the border.⁸ Together with Anzaldúan borderlands theory, “wild tongues” emphasizes the remapping of “untamed” borders and bodies from an intersectional point of view, which then yields the historiographical revisions demanded by rumor. Through Anzaldúa, I advance another way to read popular press articles and public health photographs, a way that accounts for and addresses the absences constitutive of historical archives.

My study of the Bath Riots contributes to considerations of public health, archival power, and interdisciplinary discourses in Latinx studies scholarship. Taking up Anzaldúa to explore strategies of biomedical containment and subversion at the US-Mexico border makes public health legible as a contested site of Latinx othering. Public health was pivotal to early twentieth-century forms of governance, empire-building, and the making of Latinx difference. However, analytical concepts that privilege race—such as “racialized medicalization”—obscure the ways in which sexuality and other categories of difference emerged in relation to racial formation through policies enacted on the body (Molina 2014).⁹ Practices like delousing, which the USPHS mandated only at the US-Mexico border, shaped and were shaped

⁷ Latinx, as opposed to Latino or Latina, is a gender-neutral term.

⁸ Alexandra Minna Stern (2005a) coined the term “eugenic gatekeeping” to name the intertwined efforts of the United States Public Health Service and Border Patrol to restrict Mexican immigration on the US-Mexico border in the early twentieth century.

⁹ For example, Mary E. Mendoza (2017) argues that a consideration of ableism and how it intersects with racism is necessary for understanding USPHS operations during the Bracero era in “La Tierra Pica/ The Soil Bites.”



by the racialized sexuality of working-class Mexican women and are the historical antecedents of current policies targeting the Latinx population, especially in militarized border zones.¹⁰

Furthermore, this essay shifts the scholarly focus on Anzaldúa's methodological contributions (e.g., "autohistoria-teoría") toward engaging with her concepts as methods themselves (Anzaldúa 2002, p. 578). Similar to "wild tongues," I propose an engagement with Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad*—an embodied mode of perception conditioned by the borderlands—as a method of reading both against and "along the archival grain" to trace and expose issues of archival power (Stoler 2002, p. 100). Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler argues, "We need to read for [the archive's] regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake" to account for the production of imperial state archives as a technology of rule (p. 100). It is precisely by reading into the "rumors among servant girls" that I draw attention to the gendered construction of their claims as rumors and ultimately, false reports. As an archival reading practice, *la facultad* recognizes a different account of the Bath Riots in which those subjected to delousing appear as agential subjects. Excavating oppositional narratives embedded within the archive is important given that all the archival material on the Bath Riots is produced by the state and therefore from the perspective of state agents.¹¹ Rather, *la facultad* opens up new discursive spaces within the archives of public health practices and policies in order to make these contestations visible while also addressing their erasure.

Rumors as counter-discourse

Following historian Luise White's (2000) proposal that rumors tell more precisely because they are essentially uncertain, determining whether these particular rumors are true or indeed false reports is not necessary to appreciate what they reveal about the Bath Riots. Furthermore, I argue that these rumors are evidence of what anthropologist James C. Scott calls a "hidden transcript" or "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation" (1990, p. 4) by those in power. Paradoxically, the newspaper's dismissal of the allegations as rumors points to a dialectics between border surveillance and subversion rather than a solid wall of dominance. Far from idle chatter, rumors refuse a respectable performance of consent with what we might otherwise consider to be a totalizing narrative that only spectacular moments of resistance can rupture. As historian Louise E. Walker (2013a, b) explains in her studies of intelligence archives, rumors pose a methodological challenge and opportunity through which one can "flip the gaze" to reconstruct history from the

¹⁰ In recent news, for example, the Trump administration has been accused of tracking the menstrual cycle of detained migrants.

¹¹ The University of Texas at El Paso's Institute of Oral History includes oral history interviews with people who discuss delousing from a first-person point of view. Some of these interviews date back to the early twentieth century.



perspective of those left out of the extant historical record. As a critical part of everyday political culture, rumors not only express discontent with the public transcript, but they also perform dissent. These particular rumors destabilize the legitimacy of public health and newspaper reporting alike.

As Anzaldúa explains, rumor, like gossip, is a gendered category of speech; its lack of credibility stems not from each rumor's uncertainty but from the association between rumor and women with loose tongues. In contrast to "well-bred girls" who never speak out of turn, "*ser habladora* was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much" (1987, p. 76). Anzaldúa goes on to explain, "*hocicona, repelona, chismosa*, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being *mal criada*" (p. 76). Gossip is therefore an illegitimate source of knowledge—to be a gossip is to be outside the bounds of proper femininity. In the fifth chapter of *Borderlands La Frontera*, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," she maps a complex linguistic terrain fraught with externally imposed and self-perpetuated borders. Language is "twin skin" to ethnic identity, yet always already a "male discourse" (p. 76). For Anzaldúa, overcoming silence involves reclaiming the many languages she speaks—Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, Pachuco—as well as the many voices in which she speaks them—her woman's voice, her sexual voice, and her poet's voice (pp. 77–81). Rumor is thus a multiply transgressive form of speech that poses a threat to patriarchal state authority and authorship. Just as the "outbreak narrative" portrays microbes as being indifferent to boundaries, so too do rumors spread, resisting capture at every turn.¹²

Constructing disease, constructing difference

It was this idea that typhus, a disease transmitted by lice, could spread on border-crossing bodies that Pierce leveraged to justify delousing with noxious chemicals and later (in the 1920s) with Zyklon B, the same fumigation agent used in Nazi Germany (Romo 2005, p. 223). The USPHS legitimized quarantine on the basis of many factors, including but not limited to El Paso's rapidly changing demographics as a result of the ongoing Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and the expanding western and southwestern economies.¹³ By 1920, the Mexican population of El Paso was not only the largest in the United States, but it also surpassed the city's American population.¹⁴ A typhus outbreak in a Los Angeles-based Southern Pacific Railroad

¹² According to Priscilla Wald (2008), an "outbreak narrative" is a paradigmatic story of disease emergence characterized by the conflation between microbes, racialized others, and the spaces through which they move.

¹³ In *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, Camille Guerin-Gonzales traces the northward movement of Mexican immigrant workers to the United States from 1900 to 1930 following the industrialization of California agriculture. See Camille Guerin-Gonzales (1996), pp. 11–51. The city of El Paso was itself a site of more than one major industry, including mining and smelting, as well as a source of exploitable labor for employment agents in the sugar beet and other industries. Simply put, the labor demands of capitalist development played a paradoxical role in entangling discourses of disease and difference already fixated on the US-Mexico border.

¹⁴ See Markel (2004).



work camp greatly contributed to the “racialized medicalization” of Mexican immigrants, who the press continuously portrayed in unsanitary living conditions.¹⁵ At the same time, labor demands created the conditions of possibility for exempting them from the 1917 Immigration Act.¹⁶

However, Mexican immigrants were subjected to restrictive public health policies even though immigration restrictions did not apply to them.¹⁷ The USPHS turned to the Angel Island Immigration Station in the San Francisco Bay as a point of reference to develop regulatory practices in El Paso. In contrast to the “six second exam” at New York City’s Ellis Island Immigration Station, Angel Island medical staff conducted extensive physicals.¹⁸ Under Pierce’s orders, the USPHS conducted nearly 900,000 medical exams between January and June of 1917 in the name of typhus prevention, but officials did not report a single case of typhus (Stern 1999). Yet El Paso differed significantly from its West and East Coast counterparts. Here, the USPHS focused on delousing by way of gasoline “baths” first mandated in the local hospital and jail.¹⁹ Even before the El Paso Health Department selectively approved of these baths in 1916, similar campaigns had been waged against the predominantly Mexican Chihuahuíta neighborhood of El Paso. As historian John Mckiernan-González points out, the USPHS drew a medical boundary line between bodies that were otherwise in immediate and close proximity. Mexican women who worked as domestics and laundresses bore the brunt of racist public health campaigns in El Paso as well as at the border. However, Mckiernan-González explains that newspaper coverage consistently “obscured the circuits that connected public space and private health in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez” (2012, p. 197).

New understandings of disease were readily applied to typhus outbreaks as well as rumors of outbreaks in the United States and Mexico.²⁰ The theory of supernatural origin had long been replaced by nonreligious explanations for the process of disease transmission. Contagionist views of disease had spread widely before the development of germ theory, but these notions became increasingly prominent in epidemiological textbooks of the early twentieth century, such as Surgeon General Victor Clarence Vaughan’s (1922) book *Epidemiology and Public Health*. Replete with military metaphors, this textbook describes contagion as a battle fought by medical men. According to Vaughan’s conception of contagion, foreign migrants—both human and animal—import disease to the United States (imagined as a discrete

¹⁵ See Natalia Molina (2014).

¹⁶ Specifically, Mexican immigrants were exempt from the 1917 Immigration Act’s literacy test and eight-dollar head tax. Efforts to restrict Mexican immigration during the interwar period via the 1924 Immigration Act would once again lead farm employers to sway immigration policies through the development of state and national grower alliances. See Joon K. Kim (2012).

¹⁷ To be clear: the USPHS played a prominent role in regulating the movement of Mexican-heritage people at entry points along the entire southern border and in border cities including but not limited to El Paso.

¹⁸ At the Angel Island Immigration Station, the United States Public Health Service operated a bacteriological laboratory to inspect blood and stool samples from detained immigrants. See Nayan Shah (2001), pp. 189–204.

¹⁹ See Miguel Antonio Levario (2012).

²⁰ For a discussion of outbreak rumors, see Mckiernan-González (2012), p. 6.



ecosystem) from non-Western societies. Vaughan explains that disease is prevalent in places with "relatively large numbers of ignorant people" and especially at borderlands. At the US-Mexico border, moreover, disease has displayed a particularly threatening "virulence" since 1910, which Vaughan claims is directly connected to "race stock" (p. 207). Mexican immigrants not only endanger Americans by refusing vaccination, he warns, they are largely immune to it, making compulsory vaccination laws the only viable solution in this battle against contagion. Couched in the language of scientific objectivity, the words of doctors like Vaughan provided the discursive grounds to justify delousing during a time when public health was gaining more authority as a federal government agency.

Expanding the spatiotemporal boundaries of the US-Mexico border is also necessary for understanding the conditions of possibility for USPHS practices. The US-Mexico border was a "porous" site of mixed communities that shaped and were shaped by racial politics and policies, especially anti-Chinese immigration restriction.²¹ Before moving to El Paso, Pierce had served as a sanitary officer in the Panama Canal and later curated the Public Health Service exhibit at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, including Angel Island in view.²² Similarly, Vaughan was a sanitation consultant at the World's Columbian Exposition—better known as the Chicago World's Fair of 1893—and subsequently studied the epidemiology of disease in army camps during the Spanish-American War.²³ Far from banal bureaucratic assignments, the shifting posts of public health officials across sites of imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century links biopolitical subjection at the border directly to colonial medicine. The Anzaldúan approach I draw from *Borderlands La Frontera* expands the border geographically and chronologically to (1) include these legacies as not-yet-past, and (2) center gender and sexuality within the layered management of racialized bodies. It recognizes the disciplinary entanglements of race, gender, and sexuality across spatiotemporal boundaries and as "co-constituted by settler colonial projects" that played out on the border (Nakano Glenn 2015, p. 55). I now turn to popular press depictions of the Bath Riots in order to foreground the gendered dimensions of medicalized racial formations.

²¹ See Julian Lim (2017). See also Samuel Truett and Elliott Young (2004), Grace Peña Delgado (2012), Julia María Schiavone Camacho (2012), and Jason Oliver Chang (2017).

²² See Alexandra Minna Stern (2005b).

²³ See Richard Adler (2015), p. 40. Vaughan's time in Cuba frames his racialized understanding of how infectious agents spread among peoples and places. He argues, for instance, that the prevalence of smallpox along the border is a result of Mexican immigration, which he compares to outbreaks in northern cities following the migration of Black workers from 1911 to 1917 (Vaughn 1922, pp. 207–208). To further prove the association between racial difference and disease, Vaughan cites the reported absence of smallpox among US soldiers "in the continental area, in the Philippines, in the Sandwich Islands, on the Canal Zone, or on the fighting fields of France" (p. 208). Along with an extensive consideration of cowpox, Vaughan traces the disease throughout history and ultimately, to epidemics "imported by slave ships" in the 1700s (p. 187).



Nationwide coverage of the bath riots

Pierce's quarantine order was issued on 23 January 1917—the very same week that General John Pershing withdrew US troops from Mexico—and went into effect on 27 January. In the days that followed the Bath Riots, newspapers across the country reported on the protest.²⁴ According to the *Atlanta Constitution*, compulsory “shower baths” catalyzed riots at the Santa Fe Street Bridge (“Shower Bath Riots Continue at Juarez” 1917). The report nevertheless asserts the necessity of a border quarantine to prevent typhus from spreading. Echoing epidemiological textbooks of the early twentieth century, which posited a causal relationship between racial difference and disease, the press continuously constructs Mexican women as disease carriers who willfully endanger El Paso. The persistent association of Mexican-heritage people and transborder epidemics promulgated what historian Alan M. Kraut calls “medicalized nativism” (1994, p. 2–3), or the belief that foreign bodies—both human and animal—carry disease from non-Western societies to the United States, making the borders of US empire especially perilous (and precarious) contact zones.²⁵ At 5:30 a.m., “200 women followed their sorrel-topped leader in another attempt to rush the bridge,” passing the boundary line before American troops could stop them, reports the *New-York Tribune* (“Mexican Amazons Injure 2 Soldiers in Bridge Rush” 1917). Both the *New-York Tribune* and the *Atlanta Constitution* state that US guards were “showered with stones” as well as broken bottles, framing them as victims of a brutal attack.

Despite the problem of forged quarantine certificates, “more than 200 Mexicans were given baths,” boasts the *New-York Tribune* (“Mexican Amazons Injure 2 Soldiers in Bridge Rush” 1917). In the *Detroit Free Press*, it was “nearly 300 Mexicans” (“U.S. Troops Win Battle of Baths” 1917). The *Cincinnati Enquirer* declares that, “nine hundred and twenty-nine Mexicans were given baths (“Danger of Repetition” 1917). This sum reappears in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* headline, “Dr. U.S. Bathes 929 Mexicans! And All Survive,” which positions the state as a medical practitioner (read protector of life) on the frontlines of a battle against typhus waged by Mexican women (“Dr. U.S. Bathes 929 Mexicans! And All Survive” 1917). The quantitative accounting of bodies under surveillance, meant to evidence order in spite of the Bath Riots, betrays the dehumanizing effects of USPHS practices. Paternalistic bathing euphemisms likewise expose the imperial rhetoric of benevolence as well as discourses of hygiene, purity, and progress underlying delousing procedures. Most significantly, the *New-York Tribune* adds that officials on both sides of the border instigated protesters by “avowing that the gringos were taking pictures of women who submitted to the bath” (“Mexican Amazons Injure 2 Soldiers in Bridge Rush”

²⁴ The following newspapers outside of Texas reported on the Bath Riots between January and February of 1917: the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *New-York Tribune*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the *Arizona Republic*, the *Courier-Journal*, the *Nashville Tennessean*, and the *Baltimore Sun*.

²⁵ Alan Kraut (1994) coined the term “medicalized nativism” to describe how the justification for excluding immigration groups draws from a fabricated association between their cultural practices, often framed as primitive, and communicable disease.



1917). There's a similar story in the *El Paso Morning Times*, which published a lengthy article on the Bath Riots the very next day.

El Paso Morning Times coverage of the bath riots

The first headline of the *El Paso Morning Times* coverage reads, "Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women: Auburn-Haired Amazon at Santa Fe Street Bridge Leads Feminine Outbreak" (1917). The report repeatedly references the crowd's rate of growth, allegedly reaching several thousand by late morning. Here again, quantitative accounting portrays white El Pasoans as helplessly outnumbered victims of an uncontrollably growing force. "One of the street car motormen, finally making his way back to the American side, emerged from the mob with half a dozen women clinging to him, endeavoring to drag him down," it states ("Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women" 1917). The narrow escape of a single motorman from Juárez depicts El Paso as a safe haven under siege. He manages to cross the border, though not unscathed; the attackers use his body as their host, dragging him down as they enter the United States. Ubiquitous images like this one transform the women from targets of state management to agential embodiments of disease. In short, Mexican women degrade the nation's social and moral values in the process of infecting white male citizens. The details of the report, as well as its headline dubbing the protest a "feminine outbreak," point to the simultaneously racialized and sexualized construction of "superspreaders" in what literary critic Priscilla Wald calls an "outbreak narrative" (2008, pp. 4–5).

The report refers to the protest as an "anti-cleanup demonstration," further linking delousing procedures to the regulation of racialized sexuality ("Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women" 1917). As early as the 1880s, El Paso conducted cleanup campaigns to displace sex workers already confined to certain areas of the city by law.²⁶ Meanwhile, Ciudad Juárez was literally and figuratively developed into an amusement park where social and moral values could be transgressed without consequence. In turn, this rebranded Juárez reinforced hypersexualized representations of Mexican women who, in the report, mercilessly overwhelm American troops while Mexican troops join in their quote "disgusting exhibition" ("Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women" 1917). Disgust expresses a moral judgment directly connected to late nineteenth-century anti-prostitution and social purity movements. In other words, refusing to be cleaned up is a sign of immorality that also undermines Juárez as a site of touristic consumption.²⁷

Even though "crowds of spectators" in El Paso watched the "excitement" of "a seething Latin mob scene" from only a few feet away, the women successfully

²⁶ See Ann R. Gabbert (2003), Robert Fischer (2013), Grace Peña Delgado (2012), and Courtney Q. Shah (2010).

²⁷ This passage can also be read through the lens of Deborah R. Vargas's (2014) Latino queer analytic of "*lo sucio*," which emphasizes the sensorial dimensions and detections of nonnormative sexual subjects deemed surplus and in need of cleansing. As Vargas points out, "*sucia*" subjectivities claim the surplus sensory registers of *lo sucio* in response to cleansing projects.



prevented white tourists from crossing the bridge (“Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women” 1917). In fact, immigration officials barred entry for the day, stating that it was a “bad day for Americans” with “the rack [*sic*] track, gambling houses, and amusement places of Juárez” closed.²⁸ The report not only emphasizes injury to white bodies with objects like stones, but also the destruction of streetcars as well as other automobiles:

As soon as an automobile would cross the line the girls would absolutely cover it. The scene reminded one of bees swarming. The hands of the feminine mob would claw and tear at the tops of the cars. The glass rear windows of the autos were torn out, the tops torn to pieces and parts of the fittings, such as lamps and horns, were torn away. (“Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women” 1917)

This passage points to the pervasive conflation of human, animal, and microbial populations, and simultaneously conveys a challenge to the promise of continental expansion reproduced in automobile travel to Mexico.²⁹ The women take hold of car parts as weapons, reappropriating the vehicles—in some cases, the very vehicles that transport them every day—to block the Santa Fe Street Bridge. Similarly, automobiles made to transport middle-class white families purposefully malfunction at the hands of Torres and her peers. For one day, the scripting of manifest destiny is forestalled in their hometown of Juárez.

The report goes beyond situating disease squarely within the racialized and sexualized body and instead portrays the women as disease vectors, or nonhuman organisms that transmit disease. At the border, USPHS discourse, practices, and policies that had initially treated Mexican-heritage people as disease carriers then targeted these people as disease vectors, or nonhuman organisms that transmit disease. This more complex and multispecies construction of difference and disease goes beyond defining disease in racial terms and reveals another way in which “the dialogical interplay between empire and neocolony played out across the Rio Grande” (Stern 2005a, p. 52). Torres is an “auburn-haired Amazon,” leading “Mexican Amazons” as the *New-York Tribune* likewise describes the women (“Mexican Amazons Injure 2 Soldiers in Bridge Rush” 1917). The racialized and sexualized construction of Indigenous as well as Black femaleness undergird Torres’s discursive othering in the report. As Simone Browne explains, Blackness is central to surveillance as both a discursive and material practice that enforces the boundary line of borders as well as

²⁸ The *New-York Tribune* likewise emphasizes, “The stopping of international travel means loss to Juarez, for there is little money spent in the city except that brought over from the American side.”

²⁹ As Neel Ahuja (2016) makes clear in *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions, Empire, and the Government of Species*, governing human and animal bodies, including microbial species, was central to the biopolitics of US empire during the long twentieth century. My emphasis on the racialized and sexualized construction of working-class Mexican women as nonhuman organisms highlights the implications of this entangled materiality for understanding the medicalization of difference. On the border of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, the USPHS did not mark Mexicans as simply disease-carrying humans but as disease vectors, which calls for a more nuanced consideration of medicalized racial and sexual formations that de-center the human.



bodies (Browne 2015). The ways in which the report conceptualizes the protesting women is part of why their claims cannot be anything but "false." As racialized and sexualized nonhuman organisms in need of regulation, violence against the protesting women becomes impossible to imagine. Rather, the women's "impulse was to injure and insult Americans as much as possible without actually committing murder" ("Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women" 1917).

The women "kept up a continuous volley of language aimed at the immigration and health officers, civilians, sentries and any other visible American," the report proclaims. The report continues, "Small stones were thrown, but the missiles were little more dangerous than the language." Although the report exaggerates the weaponization of language by Mexican women, it also suggests that they had been "insulted" and photographed in the disinfection plant. The second headline of the *El Paso Morning Times* report reads, "Rumors among Servant Girls That Quarantine Officers Photographed Bathers in the Altogether Responsible for Wild Scenes" ("Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women" 1917). How should we read the circulation of rumor in this key moment of resistance? As I explained earlier, Anzaldúa's recuperation of loose tongues as "wild" points to rumor's subversive potential. From an Anzaldúan perspective, the "rumors among servant girls" register a competing narrative to the USPHS, one that alludes to the impossibility of telling a rumored story for which there is no documentary evidence. Indeed, in the case of the Bath Riots, although there are photographs of the disinfection plant in the archives, the photographs mentioned in *El Paso Morning Times* are nowhere to be found. How then might we account for this absence?

La facultad as archival reading practice

Anzaldúa explains that living in the borderlands forces la mestiza to develop new modes of perception for survival. In particular, she gains a sixth sense called "*la facultad*" (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 60). Like the "new mestiza consciousness" she attains by crossing external as well as internal borders, *la facultad* rejects binary oppositions in favor of plurality (p. 99). Most importantly, it allows la mestiza to perceive everything, including herself, through other sensate registers. "*La facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface," explains Anzaldúa, "It is an instant 'sensing,' a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning" (p. 60). As an affective archival reading practice, *la facultad* engages with the limits constitutive of the archives themselves and highlights the presence of archival absence as an ongoing effect of US imperialism.

As historian Julian Lim (2017) states, the archive is "a direct product of the processes of racial differentiation, segregation, and exclusion that occurred in the US-Mexico borderlands a century ago" (p. 8). In other words, the archive perpetuates violence precisely because violence constitutes the process of historical production. Yet state archives regulate what we can know about the Bath Riots and the women who led it. That is a fact. At the same time, *la facultad* activates the "decolonial



imaginary” and, in doing so, reveals a refusal to the terms of biopolitical subjection at the border.³⁰

What’s more, the absence of photographs does not eliminate the possibility of tuning in to sound. A rumor is first and foremost auditory, and something we can still listen to. In the words of Tina Campt (2017), what can a “haptic” engagement with the sonic frequencies of *absent* photographs tell us about the Bath Riots?³¹ How does the story change when we look through the prism of what isn’t there? The “rumors among servant girls” evidence a competing narrative, thereby advancing another interpretation of state archives. In turn, spreading rumors has the capacity to rupture controlling systems of accounting, turning transmission into a kind of protest that registers a challenge to authority and authorship as well as historiographic convention. Even now, we cannot know. Perhaps working-class women who commuted to El Paso on a daily basis exchanged information about delousing procedures through an organized network deemed rumor mill in the aftermath of the Bath Riots. Perhaps they planned to collectively rush the bridge and physically transgress boundaries as their words did despite the constraints of everyday life. Perhaps, if we listen, the rumor of photographs is confirmation enough.

Reading with *la facultad*

Anzaldúa elaborated on *la facultad* before and after the 1987 publication of *Borderlands La Frontera*.³² Tracking the concept’s evolution shows that she eventually and explicitly put forth *la facultad* as a methodology in line with how I bring it to bear on the absences constitutive of historical archives.³³

³⁰ Emma Pérez’s theory of the “decolonial imaginary” is foremost a method to conduct research that breaks from a colonial white heteronormative lens and, instead, remains attentive to how uneven relations of power permeate historical documents. In doing so, it offers an alternative way to interpret archives that upholds the agency of those on the margins. See Emma Pérez (1999, 2003).

³¹ In *Listening to Images*, Tina Campt (2017) develops a “haptic” mode of engaging the lower, sonic frequencies of photographs through which quotidian forms of resistance come to light.

³² It is not entirely accurate to mark a pre- and post-*Borderlands La Frontera* period because Anzaldúa constantly revised her published and unpublished work. Even so, *la facultad* (like many of her concepts) has a clear trajectory that I summarize in this section.

³³ The majority of secondary scholarship that takes up *la facultad* as a methodology focuses on the teaching and learning process. For example, in “Teaching the Teachers: Dismantling Racism and Teaching for Social Change,” Elsa Ruiz Cantú and Norma E. Cantú argue for pedagogical practices that center *la facultad* (and *conocimiento*) to connect teacher preparation courses with social justice, equity, and decolonization. See Elsa Ruiz Cantú and Norma E. Cantú (2013) as well as the recently published anthology *Teaching Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Pedagogy and Practice for Our Classrooms and Communities*, edited by Margaret Cantú-Sánchez, Candace de León-Zepeda, and Norma Elia Cantú (2020). There has also been a study about how Chicana/o/x first-generation students apply *la facultad* to navigate multiple oppressions and oppressive educational contexts. See Gilberto Q. Conchas et al. (2019). Scholars in the field (and subdisciplines) of communication studies have similarly rethought communication theory, methodology, and praxis as well as pedagogy using Anzaldúan concepts. See *This Bridge We Call Communication: Anzaldúan Approaches to Theory, Method, and Praxis*, edited by Leandra Hinojosa Hernández and Robert Gutierrez-Perez (2019).



While Anzaldúa first introduced *la facultad* in *Borderlands La Frontera*, earlier formulations of the concept call attention to its key features. In a 1983 interview, Anzaldúa describes *la facultad* as “an extra sense” acquired by those “caught between worlds” (2000b, p. 122). She emphasizes that marginalized subjects, particularly the multiply marginalized, develop *la facultad* in response to oppression “because it’s a matter of survival” rather than choice (p. 122). As she straightforwardly states, “it’s not because we cultivated it; it’s because the world forced it on us” (p. 122). The necropolitical conditions of living in-between activate *la facultad*, especially to preempt direct violence by knowing “the next person who’s going to slap you or lock you away... the rapist when he’s five blocks down the street” (p. 122). The ability to know the truth even when the truth is not apparent, which Anzaldúa frequently explains as a way of *seeing through*, makes *la facultad* akin to the senses but also to extrasensory perception.³⁴ Anzaldúa thus situates *la facultad* within the body and holds that such faculties simultaneously “belong to the other realm” or “other world” or “creative life force” (pp. 122–123). She claims that “this radar” is fundamentally creative and “connected to creativity,” which sets the stage for linking *la facultad*, *conocimiento*, and spiritual activism in her later work (p. 123).³⁵

In one of her later essays, “Geographies of Selves,” Anzaldúa once again emphasizes that *la facultad* is a survival response (and tactic) for those “forced to negotiate the cracks between realities” (2015, p. 79). However, *la facultad* also plays a central role here in reimagining identity and, more specifically, an alternative *sense* of self beyond binaries. “When we adapt to cambio (change),” explains Anzaldúa, we develop new terms, definitions, “and *la facultad* (the ability) to accommodate mutually exclusive, discontinuous, and inconsistent worlds” (pp. 79–81). The shift in consciousness from an us-versus-them or nos/otras mentality toward what she calls “nosotras” requires *la facultad*, which allows for a hybrid self that encompasses both different selves and others. At the same time, *la facultad* is itself a non-Western form of knowledge that necessarily rejects Enlightenment ideals.³⁶ Anzaldúa expands the concept from an ability that primarily marginalized subjects possess to an

³⁴ Anzaldúa defines *la facultad* as a way of seeing through in *Borderlands La Frontera* and beyond. For example, in a 1991 interview she explains that *conocimiento* is “the awareness of *facultad* that sees through all human acts whether of the individual mind and spirit or of the collective, social body” (Anzaldúa 2000a, p. 178). In a 2002 essay, she states again that *la facultad* is “the ability to shift attention and see through the surface of things and situations” (Anzaldúa 2002, p. 547).

³⁵ In the 1991 interview, Anzaldúa outlines the link between *la facultad*, *conocimiento*, and spiritual activism. Then, Anzaldúa states that *conocimiento* is essentially a kind of awareness, including awareness of *la facultad*: “The work of *conocimiento*—consciousness work—connects the inner life of the mind and spirit to the outer worlds of action. In the struggle for social change I call this particular aspect of *conocimiento* spiritual activism” (2000a, p. 178). Similar to *la facultad*, “*conocimiento* often unfolds within oppressive contexts and entails a deepening of perception” as AnaLouise Keating notes in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Anzaldúa 2009, p. 320). Relatedly, Anzaldúa (2015) maintains that *la Llorona* also possesses *la facultad*.

³⁶ In “Champion of the Spirit,” Amala Levine (2005) details how Anzaldúa rejects Enlightenment ideals by engaging with spirituality.



onto-epistemological reimagination of identity (including selfhood) to, unsurprisingly, a way of reading that further complicates identity.

In “To(o) Queer the Writer,” Anzaldúa proposes the idea of “reading with a queer *facultad*” to challenge deterministic assumptions about identity, reading, and writing (2009, p. 170). She argues that a collaborative process of meaning-making and, consequently, identity formation, unfolds between reader and writer whether or not they share the same identities. To illustrate this point, she provides several examples of feeling more understood by straight white readers than fellow queer people of color. For Anzaldúa, this occurs because recognition is not determined by the reader’s identity (or the writer’s aesthetic) but the “sensibility” with which they read (p. 170). Reading with a queer *facultad* allows non-queer readers to “see into” and “see through” to unconscious falsifying disguises by penetrating the surface and reading underneath the words and between the lines” (p. 171). “As outsiders, they may see through what I’m trying to say better than an insider,” she asserts, “For me then it is a question of whether the individual reader is in possession of a mode of reading that can read the subtext, and can introject her experiences into the gaps ... deciphering a “strange,” that is, different, text” (p. 171). Anzaldúa goes on to say that she herself developed the *facultad* to read against the grain despite having learned to distrust her sensibilities in school (p. 173).

Importantly, Anzaldúa is concerned with reading “as in the act of reading words on a page, but also “reading” reality and reflecting on that process and the process of writing in general” (2009, p. 169). In this way, Anzaldúa’s own reconceptualization of *la facultad*—as a queer reading practice that can decipher what’s underneath and between—is consistent with how I take up *la facultad* to read archives. Both engagements with *la facultad* as a method bring to the fore issues of knowledge production by reading text (in my case, the archive-as-text), subtext, and structure. Herein lies the transformative capacity of an *archival* reading practice based on *la facultad*: it reads for the “unconscious falsifying disguises” that make up state archives. Put differently, it gives prominence to how various types of violence, including colonial dispossession, structure the archives and, in doing so, negotiate the impossibility of archival recovery. By scrutinizing the process of historical documentation, *la facultad* perceives the power-laden construction of text and subtext and, specifically, systematic erasure. To penetrate the archival surface—what is visible—*la facultad* deciphers absence—what is not visible—and challenges the archive’s evidentiary claims.

For me, absence is distinct from subtext, which is precisely why deciphering it calls for a different way of reading. The archive records minoritized subjects as absence. Numbers stand in for those subjected to delousing in newspaper coverage of the Bath Riots. Torres likewise becomes apparent only through the absence of her personhood. As I have shown, an Anzaldúan reading of rumor does not recover Torres’ first-person narrative but makes known its structurally produced absence. What I refer to as the presence of absence indexes a counter-narrative that yields a “strange,” that is, different, text. The presence of absence *is* evidence, albeit alter- or anti-evidence, much like José Esteban Muñoz’s “ephemeral” is proof of queer subjects, histories, and lifeworlds (Muñoz 1996). Muñoz explains that “queerness is often transmitted covertly” (versus as visible evidence) out of necessity and “instead



[exists] as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility” (p. 6). Reading with queer facultad—and *la facultad* itself—accesses the realm of ephemera, which resists, must elude, and is occluded by dominant systems of legibility. Indeed, ephemera is material yet “performatively polyvalent” rather than epistemologically fixed, hence the need for a non-ocular ability to see its traces (p. 6).

This brings me back to Anzaldúa’s definition of *la facultad* in *Borderlands La Frontera* as “an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings ... behind which feelings reside/hide” (1987, p. 60). Anzaldúa associates *la facultad* with feeling because it taps into the affective layers of an object, people, events. She often uses distance and dimension—“depth”—to describe a structure of feeling that only a perceptual shift can access. As opposed to the act of surfacing, enacting *la facultad* involves a vertical “plunge” (p. 61). When applied to reading archives, *la facultad* still relies on the affective as a hermeneutic. Consequently, engaging archives with *la facultad* doesn’t fill in that which has been erased; rather, *la facultad* reanimates that which already exists ephemerally. My analysis of the USPHS photographs plunges further into what is seemingly absent.

Tracing the presence of absence

About two months after the Bath Riots, Pierce published an article in *Public Health Reports* addressing other medical professionals in his field. The article, “Combating Typhus Fever on the Mexican Border,” is a step-by-step account of delousing procedures at the El Paso Immigration Station. According to Pierce, typhus is most prevalent and therefore a “recognized menace” in border towns closest to the United States. Although typhus has spread throughout Mexico, he warns that it “is largely limited to the class of the population which is suffering from extreme poverty and is vermin infested” (Pierce 1917, p. 426). Medical professionals likely to come into contact with Mexican migrants are therefore most at risk. To “properly” control the spread of disease from Mexico to the United States, fully equipped plants were built “on American territory at border ports, so that they might be operated entirely under American control” (p. 426). These plants consisted of expanded bathing facilities as well as multiple rooms for sterilizing people’s belongings, clothing, and bodies. The article includes two photographs of the building’s exterior followed by two photographs of the building’s interior, none of which showcase its design. What does an Anzaldúan approach to these photographs reveal?

The first photograph, Fig. 1, shows the plant from the perspective of someone standing on the bridge facing El Paso. The point of view descends onto a group of “Mexicans waiting to be de-loused” (Pierce 1917, p. 427). The photograph centers the group rather than the building, which is further decentralized by its high-angle shot. In this photograph—and the second one, also of the building’s exterior—the camera is above eye level, creating a frame that looks directly down at those in waiting whose faces are not visible. On the right side of Fig. 1 is a blur, presumably



the photographer's hand holding up the camera to exaggerate height. The closer the figures are to the building, the less distinguishable they become, with those at the entrance completely covered by a shadow. The figures that are distinguishable lean casually against the fence, apparently in conversation with one another. Their quotidian stance depicts a sort of "contented subjection," which the *El Paso Morning Times* report likewise overemphasizes.³⁷ Figure 2 is another high-angle shot that shows a side of the plant as well as yard from the perspective of someone now standing on the adjacent bridge facing Ciudad Juárez. Here, the perspective is from outside of the fence portrayed in Fig. 1. There are no figures in this photograph, which further emphasizes the fence. In fact, the high-angle shot coupled with the multidirectional angles in the photograph foreground the fence around the building rather than the building itself. A long shadow casts another set of lines onto the building that extend past the fence and cover the yard. In the background is a watchtower. The spatial complexity of both the first and second photograph draws the viewer's gaze into the same enclosure, albeit as an external observer overlooking from a "secure" distance closer to that of the watchtower.

Pierce declares that since the plant opened, "a noticeable improvement in the appearance of local passengers from neighboring Mexican towns has been observed as regards cleanliness of person and underclothing," which he attributes to the science of steam chamber sterilization (Pierce 1917, p. 429). Upon entering the plant, people undress in gender-segregated rooms and push their clothing through a large hole in the wall that leads to a disinfecting room. Beneath it is a smaller hole for clothing that cannot be steamed (e.g., shoes, hats, and belts). If deemed necessary, these belongings are exposed to cyanogen (a toxic gas) in another building along with baggage, then marked. Pierce explains how the steam-chambers work in great detail, specifying temperatures guaranteed to kill lice and their eggs. His technical prose emphasizes the scientific regulation of bodies at the border, as well as the precise methods and motions of surveilling "aliens" (Pierce 1917, p. 428).

Figures 3 and 4 show the plant's interior. The former pictures two uniformed men in the disinfecting room. They are both facing and looking at a steam-chamber carriage filled with bundles of clothing. In this detailed portrayal, the man in the foreground has one hand placed on the carriage, which is closed and ready to be pushed in the steam-chamber, while the man in the background has two hands placed on the steam-chamber. Drying people's clothing is unnecessary in the dry climate of El Paso, which shortens the process of steam-chamber sterilization by ten minutes, he adds. Despite the altogether lengthy process, as well as the large group of people

³⁷ In her discussion of the performative under racial slavery and its historical representation, Saidiya Hartman explains that depictions of slave agency link "contented subjection" to the exercise of will, thereby disguising domination in a range of everyday practices that appear self-directed. Although conditions at the border are not conditions of enslavement, Hartman's notion of "contented subjection" is useful for discerning simulated narratives of contentment and consent in Pierce's article as well as the *El Paso Morning Times* report which claims that Mexican heritage people "came out with clothes wrinkled from the steam sterilizer, hair wet and faces shining, generally laughing and in good humor. The immigration men predict that as soon as the Mexicans become familiar with the bathing process they will not only submit to it, but welcome it." See Hartman (1977), pp. 50–54.





Fig. 1 Outside of the USPHS Disinfection Plant in El Paso, Texas. Pierce’s caption reads: “INTERNATIONAL BRIDGE, FRONT END OF EL PASO DISINFESTATION STATION, AND MEXICANS WAITING TO BE DE-LOUSED.”

shown in Fig. 1, the uniformed men appear relaxed. They are paused in a productive posture yet not strained in any way. Figure 3 exemplifies the “quiet efficiency” of the plant cited in the *El Paso Morning Times* report (“Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women” 1917). The machines are more prominent than their operators, emphasizing the science—and scientific management—of delousing and, I would add, immigration at large.

Before entering the baths, “the naked person passes in front of a male or female attendant” who examines their hair for lice (Pierce 1917, p. 427). The hair of men with head lice is clipped, rolled up in a newspaper, and burned. Importantly, the process differs for women with head lice, whose hair is meticulously washed with a toxic chemical solution for half an hour. “Women with head lice have a mixture of equal parts kerosene and vinegar applied to the head and hair for half an hour with a towel covering the head,” explains Pierce. He continues, “The dilute acetic acid loosens the eggs from the hair and the kerosene kills or stupefies the adult lice, which are removed by washing the head and hair with warm water and soap” (p. 427). This process may be repeated, he confirms, to “dislodge” all eggs of lice and other parasitic insects. Pierce’s attention to hair provides another layer of significance to the selective descriptors focusing on Carmelita Torres’s auburn hair in the *El Paso Morning Times*. The underlying assumption is that shortening a woman’s hair would not be gender appropriate. In other words, border policing hinges on





Fig. 2 Outside of the USPHS Disinfecting Plant in El Paso, Texas. Pierce’s caption reads: “SIDE VIEW OF DISINFECTING PLANT AND YARD.”

policing gender simultaneously with other categories of difference through the surveillance of bodies in gendered space. What’s more, delousing procedures literally and figuratively modify bodies under the pretense of protection.

The last photograph, Fig. 4, shows the baths to which women proceed “after being passed by the attendant” again (Pierce 1917, p. 427). In reality, the baths are shower-like fittings that spray what Pierce refers to as “soap”—a liquid solution of soap, water, and kerosene—on the women. He includes directions to make the soap, as well as how an attendant can operate the water system: “The persons bathed do not understand modern plumbing and cannot regulate the flow of hot and cold water through a mixing valve, so one valve at the shower always gives warm water” (p. 428). Once again, Pierce’s technological descriptions serve to situate Mexican-heritage people outside the time of modernity. Doing so likewise justifies the need for delousing as a means of progressing from modernity’s primitive past with the help of a state agent, further framing Mexican-heritage people as an uncivilized child race whom the state must rear into being. “The attendant watches the bathing process” (p. 427), after which the women are permitted to reclaim their clothing in another room. Dressed men and women are “looked over by the foreman” (p. 428), vaccinated, and given a certificate. Only then do they undergo a medical inspection akin to those conducted at the Ellis Island Immigration Station.

At first glance, Fig. 4—a front-angle shot from the attendant’s perspective “looking from undressing room”—seems to emphasize the water system. Pipes on the



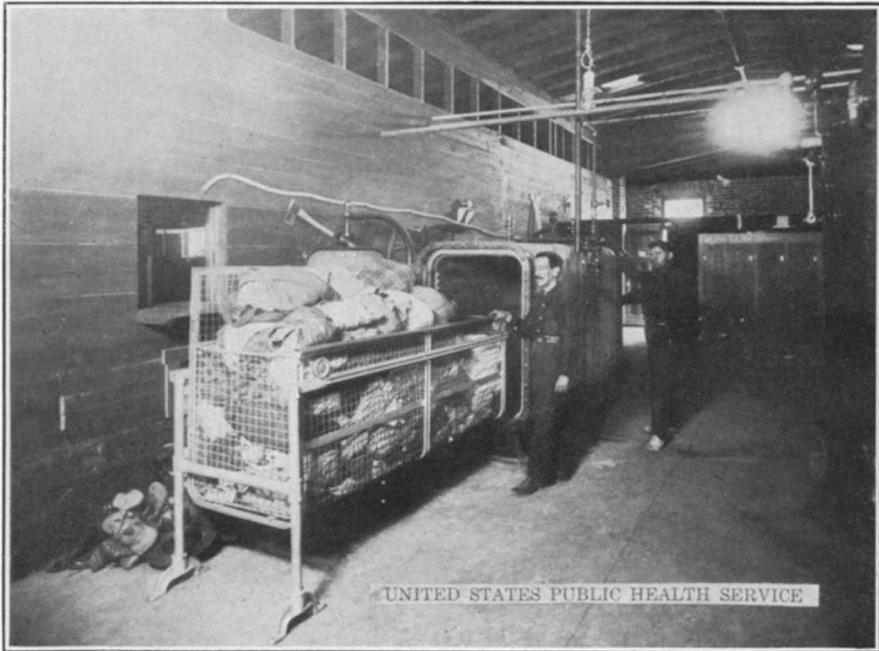


Fig. 3 Inside of the USPHS Disinfection Plant in El Paso, Texas. Pierce's caption reads: "CLOTHING READY FOR DE-LOUSING BY STEAM."

ceiling connect to shower-like fittings in stalls without roofs or doors. In the center of the photograph is a sink. However, the viewer's gaze moves directly past it and into the maze of stalls instead. Although Fig. 4 collapses the division between public and private, it conceals just as much as it reveals. We can see beyond the doorway, but not throughout the maze of stalls. Most importantly, there are no women in the photograph; its voyeuristic view excludes the object of our gaze. The absence of women paradoxically emphasizes the racialized and sexualized violence of scopic regimes at the border.³⁸ Rather than preserving a sense of propriety, removing them from view exposes the perversity in delousing procedures to which the rumors speak. Here, in the baths, public health officials photographed women nude—an allegation that Pierce promptly denied. Yet he included a photograph of the very same space in his publication. The "rumors among servant girls" rupture the representation of baths in Fig. 4 as well as the visual and discursive fields that produce difference as disease. Put differently, the rumors work to uncover the conditions under which this representation of baths was made possible, rather than recover women in its frame.

³⁸ In contrast to the not uncomplicated use of photographs in the 1950s to provide documentary evidence of injustices under the Bracero Program (Toffoli 2018), photography played a major role in the construction of race as a visualizable fact at the border, as Anna Pegler-Gordon (2009) points out.



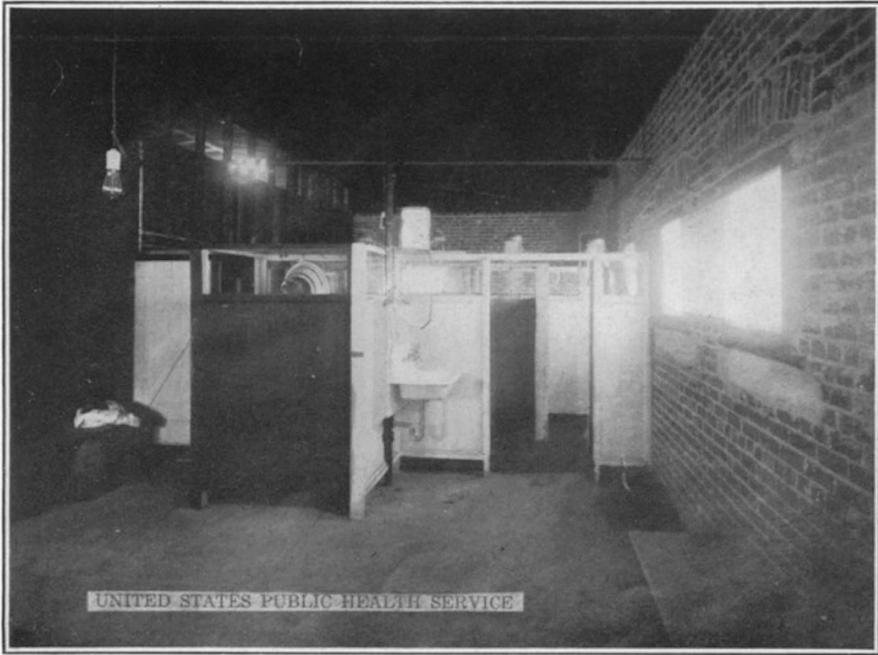


Fig. 4 Inside of the USPHS Disinfestation Plant in El Paso, Texas. Pierce's caption reads: "BATHS ON WOMEN'S SIDE OF PLANT, LOOKING FROM UNDRESSING ROOM."

Reinterpreting archives, re-narrating histories

Indeed, methodologically, *la facultad* moves away from efforts aimed at recovering people who have been disappeared from the archives of history toward more complicated ends. How does absence record history? By emphasizing what's not easily apparent, *la facultad* offers one way to access the archive's "deep structure" and not only to read records differently, but also to engage with absence. Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad* is the kind of "acute awareness" needed to think through unrecoverable holes in historical accounts of the Bath Riots. As an archival reading practice, *la facultad* reveals the disruptive and disorderly telling that is already there, hidden in plain sight.

In other words, Anzaldúa's writing is not a stand-in for voices erased from the dominant narrative, but an alternate reflection of archival loss, incompleteness, and partiality that invites another interpretation of archival materials. To summarize, I have argued that USPHS practices were central to the material production of racialized sexuality. An Anzaldúan approach that draws on her concepts of "wild tongues" and *la facultad* reveals the absences in photographs of the El Paso Immigration Station's disinfestation plant and a counter-discourse to delousing procedures in the circulation of rumors among working-class Mexican women. Anzaldúa's reclamation of "wild tongues" highlights the potential of these rumors to serve as an entry



point for viewing the Bath Riots from the perspective of speaking subjects. And *la facultad* provides a method to narrate history differently, one that "re-members and recodes the borderlands, bearing witness to the living past, the present, and the future, belying officialdom's visible and invisible technologies of power to silence, deny, and obliterate" (Castañeda et al. 2007, p. x).

Acknowledgements Thank you always to Keith Feldman and to the many librarians who helped me throughout the research process. Thank you also to the anonymous reviewers and the *Latino Studies* editorial team, particularly Lourdes Torres. I am grateful for the opportunities to present my research over the years, especially as part of the Newberry Seminar in Borderlands and Latino/a Studies and the Law, Difference, and Healthcare Conference organized by George Aumoithe. Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to Jordan Beltran Gonzales and Andrew Chang.

References

- Adler, R. 2015. *Victor Vaughan: A Biography of the Pioneering Bacteriologist, 1851–1929*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Ahuja, N. 2016. *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions, Empire, and the Government of Species*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, G.E. 1987. *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. 2000a. Quincentennial: Inés Hernández-Ávila y Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1991). In Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews Entrevistas, ed. AnaLouise Keating, 177–195. New York: Routledge.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. 2000b. Within the Crossroads: An Interview with Christine Weiland (1983). In Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews Entrevistas, ed. AnaLouise Keating, 71–129. New York: Routledge.
- Anzaldúa, G.E. 2002. now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts. In *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, 540–578. New York: Routledge.
- Anzaldúa, G.E. 2009. To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritora y chicana. In *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating, 163–179. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, G.E. 2015. Geographies of Selves—Reimagining Identity: Nos/Otras (Us/Other), las Nepantleras, and the New Tribalism. In *Light in the Dark Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating, 65–95. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Browne, S. 2015. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Burnett, J. 2006. The Bath Riots: Indignity along the Mexican Border. National Public Radio, 28 January. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5176177>.
- Campt, T.M. 2017. *Listening to Images*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Cantú, E.R., and N.E. Cantú. 2013. Teaching the Teachers: Dismantling Racism and Teaching for Social Change. *Urban Review* 45: 77–88.
- Cantú-Sánchez, M., C. de León-Zepeda, and N.E. Cantú, eds. 2020. *Teaching Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Pedagogy and Practice for Our Classrooms and Communities*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Castañeda, A., S.H. Armitage, P. Hart, and K. Weathermon, eds. 2007. *Gender on the Borderlands: The Frontiers Reader*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Chang, J.O. 2017. *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880–1940*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Conchas, G.Q., J. Lee, S. Cambero, and N. Acevedo-Gil. 2019. The Chicana/o/x Promise: Testimonios of Educational Empowerment through the Enactment of La Facultad among First-Generation College Students. *Journal of Leadership, Equity, and Research* 5 (1/2): 26–45.
- Danger of Repetition. 1917. Cincinnati Enquirer, 31 January.
- Delgado, G.P. 2012. *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the US-Mexico Borderlands*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Dr. U.S. Bathes 929 Mexicans! And All Survive. 1917. Chicago Daily Tribune, 30 January.
- Fischer, R. 2013. Mobility and Morality: A Lefebvrian Spatio-Temporal Analysis in Early Twentieth-Century Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. *Historical Social Research* 38 (3): 176–196.



- Gabbert, A.R. 2003. Prostitution and Moral Reform in the Borderlands: El Paso, 1890–1920. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12 (4): 575–604.
- García, M.T. 1980. The Chicana in American History: The Mexican Women of El Paso, 1880–1920: A Case Study. *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (2): 315–337.
- Guerin-Gonzales, C. 1996. *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900–1939*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hartman, S. 1977. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hernández, L.H., and R. Gutierrez-Perez, eds. 2019. *This Bridge We Call Communication: Anzaldúa's Approaches to Theory, Method, and Praxis*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. nd. Bracero Oral History Project and General Interviews collections. El Paso, Texas.
- Kim, J.K. 2012. California's Agribusiness and the Farm Labor Question: The Transition from Asian to Mexican Labor, 1919–1939. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 37 (2): 43–72.
- Kraut, A.M. 1994. *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace."* New York: Basic Books.
- Levario, M.A. 2012. *Militarizing the Border: When Mexicans Became the Enemy*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Levine, A. 2005. Champion of the Spirit: Anzaldúa's Critique of Rationalist Epistemology. In *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating, 171–185. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lim, J. 2017. *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Markel, H. 2004. *When Germs Travel: Six Major Epidemics That Have Invaded America since 1900 and the Fears They Have Unleashed*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Mckiernan-González, J. 2012. *Fevered Measures: Public Health and Race at the Texas-Mexico Border, 1848–1942*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mendoza, M.E. 2017. La Tierra Pica/The Soil Bites: Hazardous Environments and the Degeneration of Bracero Health. In *Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, 474–501*, ed. Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory, 1942–1964. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln.
- Mexican Amazons Injure 2 Soldiers in Bridge Rush. 1917. New-York Tribune, 30 January.
- Molina, N. 2014. Borders, Laborers, and Racialized Medicalization: Mexican Immigration and U.S. Public Health Practices in the Twentieth Century. In *Precarious Prescriptions: Contested Histories of Race and Health in North America*, ed. Laurie B. Green, John Mckiernan-González, and Martin Summers, 167–184. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Molina, N. 2016. Fear and Loathing in the US-Mexico Borderlands: The History of Mexicans as Medical Menaces, 1848 to the Present. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 41 (2): 87–112.
- Muñoz, J.E. 1996. Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts. *Woman and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8 (2): 5–16.
- Nakano Glenn, E. 2015. Settler Colonialism as Structure: A Framework for Comparative Studies of U.S. Race and Gender Formation. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1 (1): 54–74.
- Order to Bath Starts Near Riot among Juarez Women: Auburn-Haired Amazon at Santa Fe Street Bridge Leads Feminine Outbreak. 1917. El Paso Morning Times, 29 January.
- Pegler-Gordon, A. 2009. *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S Immigration Policy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Pérez, E. 1999. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pérez, E. 2003. Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 24 (2/3): 122–131.
- Pierce, C.C. 1917. Combating Typhus Fever on the Mexican Border. *Public Health Reports (1896–1970)* 32 (2): 426–429.
- Romo, D.D. 2005. *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez, 1893–1923*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Schiavone Camacho, J.M. 2012. *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910–1960*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Scott, J.C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.



- Shah, C.Q. 2010. "Against Their Own Weakness": Policing Sexuality and Women in San Antonio, Texas During World War I. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 (3): 458–482.
- Shah, N. 2001. *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shower Bath Riots Continue at Juarez. 1917. Atlanta Constitution, 30 January.
- Stern, A.M. 1999. Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910–1930. *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 (1): 41–81.
- Stern, A.M. 2005. *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stern, A.M. 2005. The Public Health Service in the Panama Canal: A Forgotten Chapter of U.S. Public Health. *Public Health Reports* 120 (6): 675–679.
- Stoler, A. 2002. Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance. *Archival Science* 2 (1/2): 87–109.
- Toffoli, Erica. 2018. Capturing Capitalism's Work: Competing Photo-Narratives of the Bracero Program. *Radical History Review* 132: 126–143.
- Truett, S., and E. Young, eds. 2004. *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- U.S. Troops Win Battle of Baths. 1917. Detroit Free Press, 30 January.
- Vargas, D.R. 2014. Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic. *American Quarterly* 66 (3): 715–726.
- Vaughan, V.C. 1922. *Epidemiology and Public Health: A Text and Reference Book for Physicians, Medical Students, and Health Workers*. St. Louis: C.V. Mosby Co.
- Wald, P. 2008. *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Walker, L.E. 2013. Spying at the Drycleaners: Anonymous Gossip in 1973 Mexico City. *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 19 (1): 52–61.
- Walker, L.E. 2013. *Waking from the Dream: Mexico's Middle Class after 1968*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- White, L. 2000. Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History. *History and Theory* 39 (4): 11–22.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Tala Khanmalek is Assistant Professor of women and gender studies at California State University, Fullerton. She earned her PhD in ethnic studies at UC Berkeley with a designated emphasis in women, gender and sexuality and was formerly a postdoctoral research associate in the American Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies Programs at Princeton University. Her research engages archives with feminist of color epistemologies, literatures, and oral histories.

