

*Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*



الحدود وأداء النوع الاجتماعي: إعادة التفكير في الهوية عند مغادرة تاباسكو

هدى محمد صالح

[huda.salih@uod.ac](mailto:huda.salih@uod.ac)

أ.د. حسن مؤيد حامد

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية / كلية التربية/جامعة دهوك

[Hassan, Alhyalli@uomosul.edu.iq](mailto:Hassan, Alhyalli@uomosul.edu.iq)



Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies: 2026, Volume: 16, Issue: 5

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** بولوسا، الهوية، نظرية المناطق الحدودية، الأداء، أنزالدوا، بتلر.

**كيفية اقتباس البحث**

صالح ، هدى محمد ، حسن مؤيد حامد، الحدود وأداء النوع الاجتماعي: إعادة التفكير في الهوية عند مغادرة تاباسكو ، مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، آيار ٢٠٢٦، المجلد: ١٦، العدد: ٥.

هذا البحث من نوع الوصول المفتوح مرخص بموجب رخصة المشاع الإبداعي لحقوق التأليف والنشر ( Creative Commons Attribution ) تتيح فقط للآخرين تحميل البحث ومشاركته مع الآخرين بشرط نسب العمل الأصلي للمؤلف، ودون القيام بأي تعديل أو استخدامه لأغراض تجارية.

Registered في مسجلة في  
**ROAD**

Indexed في مفهرسة في  
**IASJ**

Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies :2026 Volume: 16 Issue :5  
(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print) (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)



## *Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*

### **Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco**

Huda Mohammad Salih

[huda.salih@uod.ac](mailto:huda.salih@uod.ac)

Prof. Dr. Hassan Muayad Hamid  
[Hassan, Alhyalli@uomosul.edu.iq](mailto:Hassan,Alhyalli@uomosul.edu.iq)

Department of English /College of Education /University of Duhok

**Keywords** : Boullosa, identity, borderlands theory, performativity, Anzaldúa, Butler.

#### **How To Cite This Article**

Salih , Huda Mohammad , Hassan Muayad Hamid ,Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco , Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, May 2026,Volume:16, Issue 5.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

#### **Abstract**

*Leaving Tabasco*, by Carmen Boullosa, is an example of magical realism; the story unfolds through Delmira's memories of Agustini in Mexico before she leaves for Germany. By blending the real and the magical, the author explores the theme of identity construction. The present qualitative study, based on a close reading of the novel, examines the theme of gender identity according to the theoretical frameworks of Gloria Anzaldúa's borderland theory and Judith Butler's notion of gender and performativity. The analysis shows that identity is not something fixed; rather, it is fluid and fragmented. As portrayed in the novel, feminine identity is shaped by cultural hybridity and performative acts. Based on Anzaldúa's theory, Delmira exemplifies the state of in-betweenness, a painful and productive state where she experiences the

tension between her past and present. Delmira's perception of her identity, as a female, is achieved through the states of *Nepantilism* and *Coatlucue* that imply the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity. Similarly, drawing on Butler's concept of identity, the analysis demonstrates that gender identity is shaped by repetitive performances. In other words, it is constructed through a process of learning and narrative acts, and it is not a stable or fixed essence. *Leaving Tabasco*, as a postcolonial narrative, portrays and redefines identity as constantly reconfigured.

المستخلص

تُعد رواية "مغادرة تاباسكو" للكاتبة كارمن بولوسا نموذجاً جوهرياً لتيار الواقعية السحرية؛ حيث تتكشف أحداث السرد عبر ذكريات البطلة "ديلميرا" عن المكسيك قبيل هجرتها إلى ألمانيا. ومن خلال دمج الواقع الملموس بالعناصر الماورائية، تستنطق بولوسا تعقيدات بناء الهوية. تتبنى هذه الدراسة النوعية منهجية القراءة الفاحصة للنص لتقصي تشكّل الهوية الجندرية، مستندة إلى الأطر النظرية المتمثلة في "نظرية الحدود" لغلوريا أنزالدوا، ومفهوم جوديث بتلر حول أدائية الجندر.

يخلص التحليل إلى أن الهوية ليست كياناً ثابتاً أو جوهرياً، بل هي صيرورة مرنة ومتشظية. وكما تُصورها الرواية، تتشكل الهوية الأنثوية عبر الهجانة الثقافية والأفعال الأدائية الخطابية. وبالاستناد إلى أطروحات أنزالدوا، تجسد "ديلميرا" حالة الـ *nepantla* (ما بين البينين)، وهي حالة مؤلمة ومنتجة في آن واحد، تتجلى فيها التوترات الديالكتيكية بين ماضيها وحاضرها. ويتحقق إدراكها لذاتها كأنثى من خلال حالتها "النيبانتيكية" (*Nepantilism*) و"كوانتيكو" (*Coatlucue*)، اللتين تستلزمان تفكيك الهوية وإعادة بنائها بشكل مستمر. واتساقاً مع نظريات بتلر، يبرهن البحث على أن الهوية الجندرية تُصاغ عبر الأداء التكراري والتمثيل السردية، وليست نتاجاً لجوهر مستقر أو فطري. وفي الختام، تُقدم الرواية، بوصفها سردية ما بعد استعمارية، رؤية للهوية ككيان في حالة دائمة من إعادة التشكيل.

## Introduction

### 1.1 Carmen Boulosa

The Mexican author Carmen Boulosa (1954) is one of the most significant contemporary writers in Latin America. Since her literary debut in 1978 with the poetry collection *La memoria vacía* (Empty Memory), she has created a vast and diverse body of work that includes





## *Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*



novels, theater, poetry, and television. Boullosa attributes her exploration of various genres to her personal experiences; her friendships and collaborative efforts drew her to theater. Her experience as a mother was a source for her novels. Writing served as a means of healing after the death of her mother. She blends fiction and history in her writings. Her works have been translated to different languages. She has also received a number of awards, including the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize (1989) for her novel *Antes* and the LiBeraturpreis in Germany for the translated edition of *La milagrosa* (1993), as well as prestigious fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation (1992) and Mexico's Centro Mexicano de Escritores (1980). (Fick, 2000:1). She has also earned awards such as the XIX Premio Casa de América de Poesía Americana (2019), the IV Premio Jorge Ibargüengoitia de Literatura (2021), and the José Emilio Pacheco Excellence in Literature Award (2023). Regarding the theater, she has written ten plays; seven of these plays were performed on stage. Her first play, *Vacío/Emptiness*, was published in 1980. Her theatrical activity is not limited to writing; it involves directing in addition to acting. (Del Mar, 2024:9-10)

As for her narratives, they encompass more than nineteen novels. Boullosa's inaugural novel, *Mejor desaparece/Better Disappear*, published in 1987, presents a fragmented structure. The brief chapters depict a family fragmented by patriarchy, symbolized by the father figure. The subsequent novel she authored is *Antes/Before* (1989). Following the publication of these two works, Boullosa attained recognition as a novelist. Her career as a novelist continued with the publication of other novels such as *La salvaja/The Wild Woman* (1989) and *Son Vacas, Somos Puercos/They're Cows, We're Pigs* (1991). In the majority of her literary contributions, it is evident that history constitutes a significant area of interest for Boullosa. *Leaving Tabasco* (2001) embodies themes such as the historical representation of Mexico, particularly Tabasco situated within magical realism framework. Moreover, her co-authored book *A Narco History: How Mexico and the USA Jointly Created the "Mexican Drug War"* (2015) with Mike Wallace is also an example of her interest in history. In this book, the authors explore the history of Mexico and the United States and propose solutions to address the twenty-first-century issues stemming from the intertwined histories of both countries. Her novels are noted for their rich complexity in language and the themes they explore. Through the notion of identity, perspectives on gender, and oppression, she questions power structures and societal norms. Boullosa's other contemporary novels include *El libro de Eva/The Book of Eve* (2020) and *El libro de Ana/Ana's Book* (2016) (Del Mar, 2024:11).



## **1.2 Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands Theory**

Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, presented in her influential and seminal book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), provides a useful framework for analyzing Boullosa's *Leaving Tabasco*. This theory can best be applied to examine the development of Delmira's character as a Mexican citizen in terms of identity construction and empowerment. Anzaldúa's work in Chicana and feminist literature focuses on analyzing borderlands that exist between different cultures, identities, and languages. According to Anzaldúa, the borderlands, as physical and metaphorical spaces, reflect the reality experienced by people who live between races, cultures, languages, and genders. Drawn on her experience as a Chicana, a woman born and raised in America, this in-between condition is painful, and it is also a site of resistance. Through her theory, she mirrors the fragmented and fluid nature of identity in the borderlands. In the preface of her book, she introduces herself as a "border woman" living between two cultures. Anzaldúa introduces the notion of mestiza consciousness, a new consciousness for people of mixed heritage, through her theory. The borderlands experience yields a new identity, a hybrid one. In other words, this theory essentially portrays the border not only as a physical space but also as a psychological space where inhabitants live between cultures, languages, and histories, developing a mestiza consciousness that encompasses plural and multiple identities. It is a space of transformation and painful fragmentation. Anzaldúa provides her definition of a borderland as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition." (Anzaldúa, 1987:3). She focuses on portraying identity as fractured, fluid, and hybrid. It is formed by cultural repression and histories of colonization. Love is presented as a force that transforms and sustains identity. The different forms of love are deeply rooted in the land, in myth, in resistance, in self-acceptance, and in solidarity. She rejects the idea that one's personhood is assigned by another; rather, it should be acknowledged by them.

Individually, but also as a racial entity, we need to voice our needs. We need to say to white society: We need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the fact that you looked upon us as less than





## ***Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco***

human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect (Anzaldúa,1987:85).

Anzaldúa blends Mexican Aztec myth and history with her theory; she uses terms taken from her culture and the history of her country to interpret the state of being torn between two cultures. “Nepantilism” is one of the terms Anzaldúa refers to in her theory. This term refers to the state that the theory embodies, as it is a multifaceted process of identity formation. Taken from Aztec, meaning “torn between ways,” Nepantilism means that “la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another.” (78) This state of in-betweenness lacks stability. In the preface of *The Borderlands*, Anzaldúa states that borders are not comfortable places; a border is a territory where “[h]atred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.” This state affects the identity formation of the inhabitants along the borders due to the collision of two different cultures, which primarily involves distrust and fear of the other culture and its traditions. Anzaldúa views this collision as an attack or threat on the beliefs of the border people. This threat is usually faced with resistance. This means that a person’s identity is fluid; an individual experiences multiple identities, constructed realities with the tensions they engender (78).

In addition to “Nepantilism,” Anzaldúa mentions “Coatlicue” in the interpretation of the tension, inner conflict, and paralysis that a person experiences in the struggle between two different cultures. This state is symbolized by the goddess Coatlicue in Aztec culture, the mother goddess of both life and death, as well as fertility, productivity, and destruction. This duality implied in the figure of Coatlicue defines the state of instability and identity deconstruction and construction in borderlands theory. As mentioned in Anzaldúa’s theory, the Azteca-Mexican culture is male-dominated; therefore, the female goddesses or deities were given monstrous features like Coatlicue. “The earliest is Coatlicue, or ‘Serpent Skirt.’ She had a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents, and taloned feet.” (27,32). Anzaldúa uses Coatlicue with positive attributions, making this figure the core of her theory. This combination or duality of life and death embodied in the mother goddess character is used to describe the state of border people, which implies a state of darkness (death) followed by rebirth and rise; this is a state of confrontation and resistance that leads to rebirth and the construction of identity. Although it is painful, the Coatlicue state is essential in the development of identity and the process



of transformation. The paralysis and depression it includes are necessary in man's transformation and growth. This fosters the integration of fragmented identity into a more complex and coherent whole. Basically, the Coatlicue state is a stage of stagnation, depression, and confrontation necessary for the individual's growth (46).

Anzaldúa's theory essentially focuses on the notion of the new consciousness of the mestiza, the revolution for a new identity that results from their lived reality, a reality that embodies psychological as well as physical borders. Having a mixed breed is painful, as described by Anzaldúa, causing insecurity: "The mestiza's dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness." Living between two cultures is interpreted as "a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war." The feeling of insecurity that people who belong to two or more cultures experience stems from the conflicting sets of beliefs and values they receive from these cultures. Since people usually perceive the world and other cultures through the lens of their own culture, a deep internal conflict or a cultural collision arises (78). Instead of choosing one side or one culture over another, mestiza people learn how to develop a "tolerance for ambiguity" to resolve conflicts. A new identity can be constructed by embracing the contradiction of beliefs to form a new plural identity. Blending the aspects of the two cultures becomes the source or the base for strength and creativity (79). As Anzaldúa confirms, it is the Mestiza who will shape the future by inventing a new mythos. A new consciousness is created by a change in the way reality is perceived, identities are viewed, and the ways of our behavior (80).

### **1.3 Judith Butler's Concept of Gender**

The concept of gender performativity, formed by Judith Butler, serves as a useful theoretical framework for examining identity and its connectedness to gender in Boullosa's novel. It highlights the way Delmira performs her gender in relation to love and identity, which ultimately contributes to her empowerment as a woman. This indicates that love and identity are related, as the analysis will demonstrate. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity indicates a pivotal shift in feminist and queer theory, challenging essentialist views on gender identity and disrupting traditional assumptions about the relationship between sex, gender, and desire. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler mainly states that gender is not a fixed, inborn identity but rather a performative series of acts, gestures, and stylizations that produce the perception of a stable, gendered identity. This theory reexamines gender identity and resistance to cultural norms and social





## ***Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco***



expectations. It is not only a redefinition of gender but also offers new ways and possibilities for interpreting identity. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988), Butler rejects the idea of gender as a fixed identity; she suggests, instead, that gender is shaped through repeated social performances. Using phenomenology, especially Merleau-Ponty's work, and feminist theory, Butler argues that the body becomes a gendered body through a series of performative acts that are rooted in history and culture. She references Simone de Beauvoir's view that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman,” emphasizing that identity is built through lived experience and social conditioning rather than an innate nature (Butler, 1988: p. 519). In her famous book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler defines gender as follows:

The repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” (Butler, 1990: 43)

Butler goes on to say that repeated performances over time produce what is seen as essential or natural. Butler also challenges the binary conception of gender and sex. She contends that discursive practices even shape the category of sex (Butler, 1988:522). In the end, Butler allows scope for political resistance by proposing that gender can be reshaped through alternative acts that subvert conventional frameworks because it is performative rather than innate (Butler, 1988:528). Thus, by showing how identities are created and can be altered, her essay lays the groundwork for queer theory and feminist criticism. Delmira's experience and identity development in the book can be analyzed using this gender concept. Compulsive, repetitive social norms create the illusion that identity is fixed.

In “On Judith Butler and Performativity” (2007), Sara Salih offers a clear and accessible interpretation of Judith Butler's complex theory of gender performativity, elucidating its philosophical roots and political implications. She also highlights that gender is not just a theatrical act freely chosen by an individual but rather “the identity it is purported to be.” It is different from the performance that indicates or denotes that there is a pre-existing subject; “performativity contests the very notion of the subject.” Drawing on Nietzsche, Butler states, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (Salih, 2007:56) This supports the idea that gender identity is linked to language.

## ***Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco***



Salih also highlights Butler's reliance on John Langshaw Austin and Derrida as well as their linguistic theories, especially the notion that utterances can shape reality. She uses this to argue that gendered identities are also constructed through performative language and conduct. (p. 57). Accordingly, in Salih's article, there is a reference to the two types of utterances that explain the idea that Butler adopts in her discussion of gender identity. There is a distinction between constative utterances that only describe or report something, as in saying "This is a big house," and performative utterances that refer to performing an action, as in saying "I do" to answer the question that says, "Do you take this woman as your wife?" (Salih, 2007:60)

When a doctor says, "It is a baby girl," it is a performative utterance. According to Butler, this is a performative utterance because it is not only reporting or describing an action; it is "assigning a sex and a gender to a body that can have no existence outside discourse." (60) Butler interprets this as interpellation; it emphasizes the imposed differences between men and women. This elucidates Butler's assertion that there is no pre-discursive self or body, as bodies are always already constructed through regulatory discourses. Butler asserts that gender is constituted through actions rather than inherent qualities; in other words, it is not a matter of choice. This perspective relies on Derrida's concept of citation, which involves quoting, referencing, or mentioning. Interpellation is intricately connected to the notion of citation. According to Butler, femininity is "the forcible citation of a norm." (62)

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler interprets performativity as "the forced reiteration of norms" (Butler, 1993:94). Performativity is not merely constrained or limited by external factors; rather, it is these very constraints that enable performativity to occur initially. It is not solely concerned with free expression or theatrical presentation, nor is it equivalent to performance itself. Instead, the forces that appear to restrict us are fundamentally responsible for driving and maintaining our consistent actions of identity. Performativity should be viewed as a process involving the repeated and regulated enactments of norms. This recurrence is not derived from an inherent subject; rather, it contributes to the development of the subject over time through these acts. Consequently, performativity is not a singular or spontaneous occurrence but a ritualized and repetitive practice influenced by prohibitions, taboos, and fears of social exclusion or violence. Although these constraints shape the performance, they do not definitively determine its form, thereby permitting diversity and the potential for subversion. (95)





## *Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*



Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies: 2026, Volume: 16, Issue: 5



Butler's performativity theory is deeply rooted in Derrida's concept of citationality, which suggests that meaning arises from the repeated use of signs in discursive sequences. Derrida claims that linguistic signs derive their power through citational grafting, meaning they can be repeated in new contexts. Similarly, Butler argues that gender norms are formed through obligatory references to existing social scripts. The repeatability of performative acts—their necessary repetition with variation—indicates that gender is neither entirely voluntary nor an unchanging essence. Instead, it is a citational practice that both restricts and facilitates subjectivity. The "subject" becomes identifiable only through this ritualized reenactment of norms. (Salih, 2007:62-63)

Cynthia Duncan's article, "Mad Love: The Problematization of Gendered Identity and Desire in Recent Mexican Women's Novels" (2000), analyzes how contemporary Mexican female authors contest patriarchal definitions of femininity through narratives that scrutinize female subjectivity, desire, and insanity. In her essay, she commences by asking the question, "How, then, does a female novelist create female characters who can speak in their own voices and function as subjects when women in our culture are perceived as objects who are spoken for and acted upon?" (Duncan, 2000, 37). Duncan advocates that female writers should focus on the portrayal and representation of women in their literary works. Women ought to be depicted as independent agents or "to do" rather than "to be done to." In essence, a transition from viewing women as objects to recognizing them as subjects is necessary. Additionally, she references Freud's concept that "women embody desire but cannot possess it," which continues to influence cultural perceptions of women and gendered identities. Supporting this view, Duncan cites Jessica Benjamin's perspectives on women's sexuality; she posits that it reinforces their status as objects, given that women derive power from their enjoyment of being desired. This delineates the conventional understanding of gender roles, wherein women seek value through their capacity to incite desire in others. (38)

Accordingly, women writers tended to avoid portraying women solely based on their sexuality. Conversely, some employed the concept of desirability as a means to empower female characters. Both approaches—either hypersexualized objectification or desexualized absence—represent extreme positions. Cynthia Duncan discusses Shoshana Felman's feminist critique regarding the depiction of women in literature and discourse. According to Felman, speaking for women or on their behalf risks replicating oppressive structures that have historically silenced them. Felman contends that when women are "spoken for" (as objects rather

than subjects), it reinforces patriarchal dominance, reducing them to passive figures defined by male narratives. Duncan emphasizes Felman's primary concern: the paradox inherent in female representation. If women attempt to assert a collective voice, they may inadvertently impose a singular identity, thereby erasing individual agency. Conversely, remaining silent perpetuates their entrapment within patriarchal frameworks. Felman perceives madness as a symptom of this dilemma—a form of protest by those deprived of legitimate avenues for self-expression. Authors such as Sara Sefchovich in her novel *Demasiado Amor* (1990), Elina Garro in her novel *Inés* (1995), and Susana Pagano in her novel *Y Si Yo Fuera Susana San Juan* (1998) employ madness as a metaphor for resistance and rebellion against patriarchal norms. They demonstrate through their female characters how madness and desire contribute to the construction of a gendered identity in a society where women are positioned as "Other" (pp. 38-39).

### **2.6.2 Borderland Identity and the In-Between Self**

Carmen Boullosa's *Leaving Tabasco* (2001) can be analyzed within the framework of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza Theory*. The concept of the borderland in Anzaldúa's theory is not simply a physical line; more importantly, it is a lived condition that embodies the states that shape an individual's life. Anzaldúa addresses the state of in-betweenness that defines the identity of border people. This condition is characterized by instability and conflict. Here, Anzaldúa's notion of identity is similar to Butler's in that both highlight the fluid nature of identity that is based on the lived experiences of people. In Boullosa's novel, Delmira's identity is not shaped by conforming to the stable norms decided by culture, religious authority, or the patriarchal system. Her identity is shaped by the conflict and pain embodied and caused by the state of in-betweenness. The novel can be considered a literary enactment of Anzaldúa's theory. The story traces Delmira's journey in the construction of her identity, which subsequently ends with the rise of what Anzaldúa terms the new mestiza consciousness after experiencing fragmentation and pain. Reading Boullosa's novel through the borderland theory, Delmira undergoes the state of *Nepantilism*. This state is a state of instability in the space of in-betweenness, the condition of being torn between two worlds. As for Delmira, this state is exemplified by her feeling of insecurity in the early stages of her life. Her life is first governed by the patriarchal norms of her culture and by



## *Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*

the religious authority in Agustini. Every Sunday, the family should join the Mass in the church.

The next day was Sunday and the household followed its regular routine for the day. On the seventh day we dolled ourselves up in our finery and went to the nine o'clock Mass, the last one of the morning, where we mingled with the better sort of people. (ch.4, p. 26)

For her, this practice is a matter of routine, and it is imposed on her as well as the rest of the family. Employing magical realism, the author aligns certain events happening on Sundays, which are mostly disastrous. These events signify the painful experiences that mainly cause the instability that characterizes the state of Neopantism in the borderland theory. For instance, in Chapter 4, Delmira narrates the events of one of the Sundays when she is deeply saddened as she discovers her mother's love affair with the priest. On another Sunday in the seventh chapter, the birds become unable to fly even though they attempt. They start "walking on their feet like defenseless creatures in need of shoes." (p. 44) There is also the electric storm that takes place on a Sunday, as described by the narrator later in Chapter Thirteen. The non-linear narration of the story, which is based on memories, reinforces this space of in-betweenness. It shows a resistance to the dominant mode or narrative techniques characterized by coherence. This also denotes the conventionality and the arbitrariness of the norms that rule the society in Tabasco. This is what Stephen Slemon discusses in "Magic Realism as a Post-Colonial Discourse."

In the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. (Slemon, 1988: p.10)

The state of insecurity and instability intensifies as the story develops. It reaches its most heightened pain with the death of the young woman, Teresita. After this event is a turning point in Delmira's life and her psychic development. She becomes aware that her life as a female is related to violence. Afterwards, Delmira's condition reaches a very critical state. She experiences intense feelings of pain as she witnesses the turmoil that her town goes through, which eventually ends with her being captured. In Anzaldúa's terms, Delmira reaches the state of Coatlicue, which embodies fear, suffering, and pain. These feelings lead to a bodily



## *Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*



awareness marked by silence. It is the phase that makes her realize that danger is attached to femininity. This realization is an enactment of Anzaldúa's concept that the body is the site of knowledge produced by pain. It is the rebirth of a new identity. Delmira's silence and her withdrawal represent her resistance challenging the dominant system of the culture that marginalizes women. What she experiences while being arrested and the death of the telephone operator deeply affects her and makes her unable to forget and continue as before. Her fear mixed with silence is clearly reflected when she is taken by the soldiers in the street. The photographer asks the soldiers to take pictures for them with the prisoners. Here she comes to understand gender oppression with her deep awareness of the danger engraved on her body.

He came running toward us. For the first photo the soldiers did nothing special. The two who had their hands on my buttock and back moved them to my shoulders, clasping them like two hooks.

For the second they lifted up my skirt

For the third one of them hugged me shamelessly.

For the fourth they made me kneel down and lay my face on the ground while one of them put his enormous boot on my back. (Ch. 42, P. 222)

Boulossa's narrative style enhances this process by rejecting a linear narrative technique and presenting the story in the form of fragmented structure. This creates ambiguity, suspends clarity, and makes the revelation of meaning irregular. This aligns with what Anzaldúa's concept "Tolerance of Ambiguity". Delmira as a character embodies this tolerance through her silently expressed resistance rather than immediate rebellion. With her decision to leave Tabasco, Delmira is actually and metaphorically crossing the borders, which indicates or refers to the development of her new mestiza consciousness. As Anzaldúa stated, in this state the mestiza develops a hybrid identity that transforms pain and suffering into sources of knowledge and learns to start a new life refusing to submit to oppressive structures. In other words, this consciousness does not remove or erase her experiences of conflict and confusion rather it signals that she is carrying her past wounds with her and move on. She learns to inhabit the conflicting and contradictory feelings without resolving them. That illustrates Anzaldúa's rejection of fixed identities. Delmira's identity is shaped by her memory and fears, embracing uncertainty as a source of becoming.

Life continues on. But not for me. Here ends the life I lived as a girl, the way the other lives I've invented have





## *Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*

ended. Now it's my turn to invent myself over again. But concluding this account of my doings has left me exhausted. (Ch. 45, P: 240)

### **2.6.1 Gender and Identity: A Butlerian Reading of Carmen Boullosa's *Leaving Tabasco***

Carmen Boullosa's *Leaving Tabasco* can be analyzed according to Butler's notion of gender performativity. This coming-of-age narrative serves as a rich text because it explores and highlights issues such as gender, female subjectivity, and identity. Femininity is portrayed as fluid; it is shaped by the cultural conditions surrounding Delmira as she narrates her childhood accounts, her memories of Agustini, and her departure from Tabasco. Delmira's narration constructs gender as the performance of a set of repeated acts; it is shaped by maternal lineage, social expectations, and Mexican mythology blended with a magical realism context. Gender identity is discursively shaped. The representation of Delmira, her mimicry of her mother and grandmother, her resistance, her bodily awareness, and her self-construction through narration, being the main voice in the novel, clarifies Butler's concept of gender as contingent and fluid.

Through Delmira's development as a woman in Tabasco, the novel distinctly highlights the idea that gender is fluid, not fixed. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept, Butler emphasizes that the body is more than a mere biological being; rather, it is a lived body constructed through experiences and repeated actions that are culturally and historically rooted. The gender norms she witnesses, represented by her mother, her grandmother, Luz, the cook, and Dulce, the nanny, all contribute to shaping her gendered body and identity. This process of observation and imitation illustrates that being a girl is not innate; rather, it is through exposure to emotional experiences, domestic routines, and spiritual practices that characterize femininity in Tabasco's cultural environment. Delmira, as the narrator, states in the beginning of the story, "Ours was a house where only women lived." She describes the members of her family, focusing on the character of the grandmother, presenting her as the ruler of the house. Delmira experiences intense emotions first as she discovers that her mother is involved in a love relationship with the priest, Father Lima.

I felt desperate. What they were doing was shattering something inside me, ripping me apart, plundering me. Maybe it wasn't a sin, but for me it was evil, the ultimate



evil, the very incarnation of evil. I detested them. (Ch. 4, P.30)

Primarily, Delmira's perception of gender is shaped by the domestic environment she inhabits. It is the world ruled by her mother and grandmother. This matrilineal environment is powerful. Delmira absorbs and enacts the sentimentality of her mother; she is influenced by her mother's expressions, sensuality, and performances. It is through her mother's affair with the priest that she comes to know about love and desire. As for the grandmother, her impact is greater on Delmira and her identity formation as a female. We can understand this first through the detailed narration of the stories told by her grandmother. Even though Delmira tells the story thirty years after leaving Tabasco, and it is based on her memory, we can realize that she is narrating all the stories told by the grandmother with all the little details they encompass. The space given to the voice of the grandmother is greater than that of the mother. We can see that, in terms of attitudes concerning a female's behavior, Delmira focuses on her grandmother's opinions. When Uncle Gustavo comes on a visit to introduce his fiancée, China Jack, to the family, Delmira dislikes her. She unconsciously agrees with her grandmother. This clarifies Delmira's imitation of her grandmother as she holds similar attitudes and values. This illustrates that gender is a matter of learned behavior, as Butler states. Delmira enacts Butler's concept that gender is based on the reiteration of norms.

She wasn't particularly smart, and didn't seem to realize that it was to her advantage to win me over too. But she ignored me, as if I didn't matter. A short while later she took out a small mirror to check her face, as though some minor flaw might ruin the whole effect. I thought she was horrible. (ch.18, P:101)

Even though Delmira imitates her grandmother and her mother, she questions their performances as women. She reshapes her identity as a female by adding her own reflections to her learned experiences from the women in her environment. Her involvement in the demonstrations and her resistance to the oppression caused by the political and cultural reality show clearly the fluidity of gender identity. Her eventual refusal of the imposed life in Agustini and her departure to Germany basically illustrate the way she builds on her learned matrilineal experiences. She is revealed as the writer of the story of her life in Agustini, thirty years after leaving for Germany; this shows the strength she earned as a result of her past life



## *Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*



in her town. The voice she is given as the narrator describes the process of constructing Delmira's feminine identity. This self-storytelling is not only a process of remembering or recalling past events, but it is also a reflection and evaluation of the experiences that eventually contribute to Delmira's agency and subjectivity. Through her fragmented, non-linear narration that is blended with magical elements, she proves that she refuses to conform to the norms and traditions of her culture that determined the lives of women in her family for generations. In other words, she leaves her country because she is unable to lead her life according to the existing patterns of the community. Additionally, it asserts the subversion of the patriarchal voice in storytelling, which can be related to Butler's notions of subjectivity through discourse. She performs femininity distinctively because it embodies a deviation from the expected norms of her culture. Her new identity is built on her education first. This is something that her mother and grandmother could not achieve. Her decision to leave Tabasco does not indicate the erasure of her original memories and experiences; it refers to Butler's notion of fluidity of identity and that femininity is a matter of learned experiences. Moreover, Delmira's pursuit of education and her aspirations to be a writer serve as a distinction between Delmira and her maternal lineage, something she acknowledges. She is very passionate about exploring the world outside Agustini because she is deeply convinced that she needs to be exposed to different lifestyles.

But the desire that consumed my heart, more than a passion to travel and a hope of creating a better world, was the desire to become a writer. I was already, I assured myself, something of a writer, because I was different from all those around me at home. And it didn't take me long to see I was also different from those in my school. (ch.33, p.178)

### **Conclusion**

Delmira's journey in the story confirms that *Leaving Tabasco* is a manifestation of Anzaldúa's borderlands theory. She moves through the state of Nepantla, confronting her fears, to reach the Coatlicue state, during which she experiences agony and suffering. The hardships of being exposed to painful and transformative conditions lead to the emergence of her new mestiza consciousness that marks the rebirth of her identity. The border, in this case, is a productive space where new



## *Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco*



identities are born, and new forms of feminine consciousness are shaped. In addition, Delmira's new identity is shaped by her revised performance that deviates from the prescribed norms of her culture. Butler's concept of femininity is exemplified by Delmira in Boullosa's *Leaving Tabasco*. The experiences she goes through enrich her perceptions of her life and enhance her desire to resist the performances imposed by her culture.

### References

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books. [\\*borderlands\\_lafrontera.pdf](#). Retrieved on November 20, 2025.

Boullosa, C. (2001). *Leaving Tabasco* (G. Hargreaves, Trans.). Grove Press.

Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>. Retrieved on January 7, 2025.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* Routledge. <https://monoskop.org>. Retrieved on July 24, 2025.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge. (Original work published 1990). <https://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com>. Retrieved on April 30, 2025.

Del Mar López-Cabrales, M., & Matz, M. R. (2024). *Carmen Boullosa*. Vernon Art and Science Incorporated. <https://storage.vernonpress.com>. Retrieved on June 10, 2025.

Duncan, C. (2000). Mad Love: The Problematization of Gendered Identity and Desire in Recent Mexican Women's Novels. *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 33(1), 37. <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu>. Retrieved on July 24, 2025.

Fick, B. R. (2000). *Narrative transgression and disembodied voices: the reconstruction of identity in the novels of Carmen Boullosa*. The University of Tennessee. <https://trace.tennessee.edu>. Retrieved on December 31, 2024.





## ***Borderlands and Gender Performativity: Rethinking Identity in Leaving Tabasco***

Salih, S. (2007). On Judith Butler and performativity. *Sexualities and communication in everyday life: A reader*, 55-68. <https://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp>. Retrieved on July 2, 2025.

Slemon, S. (1988). Magic realism as post-colonial discourse. *Canadian literature*, (116), 9-24. <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca>. Retrieved on December 31, 2025.



Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies: 2026, Volume: 16, Issue: 5



**Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies :2026 Volume: 16 Issue :5**  
**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print) (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**