

## A Dystopia in the Service of Fluctuating Frontiers:

### Sansal Boualem's *2084 the End of the World*

*Ouafaa Deleger*

“What is the border, dammit, what is on the other side?”

For Sansal Boualem, to understand a border it seems essential to know something about its history and its evolution. Also the frontier refers not only to an imaginary line separating two territories, but also to an abstract idea of the relation between inside and outside. In that sense, Anzaldúa describes the border, in *Borderlands: La Frontera*, as “physically present” wherever several cultures are contiguous. She distinguishes metaphorically different kinds of borders and crossings such as geopolitical, economic, sexual, social and multicultural. She helps us bridge the gap between collective and individual identity. Her writing against all oppressions leads to new explorations of her theory. Let’s not forget that the border continues to be an open wound, “*una herida abierta*”(Anzaldúa 25). This paper will focus on using the border as a metaphor for multicultural crossings and self-assertiveness. While asking the questions: “*What is the border? What is on the other side?*,” the narrator in *2084* understands the border as a passage to the unknown, to a certain openness. Far from materializing the unity, the frontier is therefore a place of transition which encounters diversity, an in-between or as Anzaldúa likes to say a “third place.” This notion reflects on what unites and separates us by establishing a metaphor for identity. Indeed, in Boualem’s model, the state perimeter provides a national identity to the people that live inside and share the same sociocultural references. This border expresses exclusion by positioning the resemblance as the archetype. Because Anzaldúa’s Borderlands theory expresses the multiplicity of oppressions, it is possible to draw a parallel with Boualem’s depiction of the border as a fluid space. Norma Élia Cantú mentions in the introduction of *Borderlands* that Anzaldúa’s theory “*applies to any kind of social, economic, sexual, and political dislocation. Her insights help us understand and theorize the experiences of individuals who are exposed to contradictory social systems*” (Anzaldúa 7).

Boualem defines the border as a place of hybridity where people, languages and even odors mix and combine uniquely. In doing so, he highlights the ambiguity of the frontier and

its porosity. To emphasize this idea of a frontier in flux, he sets his novel in a political and religious dystopia governed by a strict practice of religion with the use of a single and simple language. Despite these difficulties, the main character goes on a quest to understand what is this frontier and what exists beyond it. The novel describes a border that is paradoxically restrictive and liberating. We will never know what is geographically on the other side, but we understand that this line is in flux and has an effect on identities. One can wonder to what extent the narration is able to talk about a border that is not just a limit.

This paper will analyze the idea that Boualem not only considers the concrete aspects of the border, but also reflects on what it means to be human. First of all, the frontier influences the collective identity as people living within the limits of the border share the same social, political and cultural values, but it also has an impact on individual identities that arise from the search for the self through introspection. Hence, the complexity of this novel relies on the correlation between the inside and the outside, which I will situate at the center of my analysis. I aim to examine the fluidity of the frontier through three different aspects: first, the title as the paratext to define the border, then the materiality of the frontier and its allegory, and finally the importance of a rich and complex language that explores the nuances of the self.

### **The paratext**

Starting with the paratext<sup>1</sup> of the subtitle *The end of the world*, the author seems to set the framework for a complex understanding of the border. The narration expresses a beginning and an end in the sense that it refers to both life and death. It is said “*that the end of the world began at birth, the first cry of life was also the first death rattle.*”(Boualem 197-98). On the one hand, it implies that the world no longer exists and that the narrator is experiencing this; on the other hand, it extends the limits of this world. By asking the question: “*What is on the other side?*,” he expresses the desire to move toward the unknown, toward something that intrigues him. He actually be-

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<sup>1</sup>“The paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or - a word Borges used apropos of a preface - a ‘vestibule’ that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (Genette 1-2).

comes aware of the frontier when he is sent to the sanatorium which is at the top of the mountain at the edge of the country. The narrator is at the end of the world while he is nearly at the end of his life. Like Thomas Mann's character in *The Magic Mountain*, the experience in this place transforms him profoundly. Indeed Castorp, Mann's character, stays extensively in a sanatorium located high up in the Swiss Alps. There, he meets a variety of protagonists who represent a microcosm of pre-war Europe and it leads him to reflect on the experience of time, nationalism, sociological issues and changes in the natural world. This novel, like Boualem's, describes the impact of the experience of serious sickness and death. Both protagonists arrive at a better understanding of their political and social surroundings. The sanatoriums, located at the top of the mountain, are geographically and figuratively part of a separate world while the mountains per se represent the opposite of their home, predictable and regulated. Also, in the perspective of his near death, the narrator in *2084* discovers a world of diversity in a sanatorium that symbolizes then a point of equilibrium, a passage between life and death, and the essence of being human. The reader is invited to navigate through various contradictions with the narrator who ends up understanding that "*death is life, lying is truth, logic is absurdity*" (Boualem 208). The rigidity of the border and the established rules are in themselves a definition of death. By leaving the border, he leaves behind a more complex world where identities, cultures and languages mix and abound side by side. Boualem's choice of the title's paratext *2084* is undoubtedly a reference to G. Orwell's *1984*. A random date picked to start this new world with no past and no future, frozen in time. We know that Anzaldúa's border theory is embedded in a specific historical moment where multiculturalism and diversity were not prevalent in the public discourse. This dystopia in Boualem's novel, out of time and space, ruled by a unique religion, underlines that, despite the official ideology, Abistan (the only country) itself exists in a specific historical moment. The border is born out of conquest and underlines the differential between the strong and the weak. It actually reflects on the illusion of a protective border and that of a universal identity. It insists on the absurdity of the different borders imposed on the citizens.

### **The materiality of the frontier and its allegory**

The narrator asks: *What is the border?* In an anthropological and geographical point of view, the border symbolizes the need of a familiar safe space. Conversely, it is also a source of

withdrawal which favors division. Boualem's model instils a fear of strangers and a need to maintain the integrity of the territory. From the outset, the narrator describes a world where people are under constant surveillance and subject to strict religious rules. Far from presenting a new concept, the ability of the central government to control the whole state is presented as increasing. Indeed, in this dystopia, the Apparatus can be summarized with this adage: "*for he who believes is afraid, and he who is afraid believes blindly*" (Boualem 18). Kept in fear of the regime and of God, the citizens will not question the illusion of a national unity and unicuity.

In this perspective, the border materializes the oppression all the more, since the Other (that has no name) has been eliminated during the war, but the narrator cannot shake the feeling that "*the internal enemy had replaced the external enemy*" (Boualem 10). The frontier does not protect against the outside enemy, but rather becomes metaphorically the enemy of its own citizens linking the outside and the inside by one idea: fear. The regime sustains a system where the population is scared of what may come from outside, but also of what may arise from inside. The totalitarian power governs this dystopian society by retaining its population in a perpetual state of fear of war, by forcing upon its citizens a total religious devotion to one God and the use of one single language: abilang.

However, the limits of this universal world seem in flux. There are two groups living on the fringe of the society: the people sent to the sanatorium and those living in the ghetto. In the preface of *Borderlands*, it is explained that El Valle "*is a unique blend of U.S. and Mexican culture, history and language*" (Anzaldúa 4). It is a space located between the U.S and Mexico that influenced Anzaldúa in her thinking and her writing. She explores the contradictions and challenges of being considered neither in as belonging nor out as the other. She develops the idea that this Otherness is socially, politically and culturally constructed. Culture encompasses a set of variables that can help define borders, especially when taken over by the political apparatus. It involves elements such as language and religion that allow exchanges at borders where differences meet. As previously discussed, the multiculturalism presented by Anzaldúa is similarly apparent at the sanatorium in *2084*. In this place, at the limit of the land, the sick and the elderly are sent to die, and people are not supposed to come back. Accordingly, the rules are more flexible within that space. The sanatorium materializes an awakening by drawing a parallel between the

place and suffering. It turns the border into a richer area by exposing social and cultural contradictions. Boualem, like Anzaldúa, is committed to “hybridity” by creating an area that is outside of the system.

The other group living on the fringe of society is the one from the ghetto. The ghetto encompasses people that resist the government by refusing to submit themselves to the religion, and by speaking openly their own language. The narrator realizes by traveling secretly to the ghetto that *“the border is a heresy invented by the believers. Man can live without religion and die without the help of the priest,”* which does not undermine them as human beings. In the ghetto, people are proud of their resistance and they are also conscious of their political and economical utility for the government who needs an enemy. The ghetto is an enclave isolated and, despite the restriction, it is a *“relentless little beehive of activity that found a way to survive and to hope”*(83). Like in the sanatorium, the ghetto is a “mestizaje” area, split into different cultural identities. These places situated at the edge are subordinated to the Apparatus, and in the meantime they symbolize the contradictions within the “border culture.” Anzaldúa explains in *The homeland, Aztlán / El Toro México*, that *“borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them.(...) It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants”* (25). By discovering these two areas, the narrator inserts those populations in a crossroads characterized by hybrid cultures and languages. They do have a political and economical role and they make the border’s machine function. They are presented as the figure of national insecurities which allow increasing regulation of the movement of human beings, increasing physical and social division, and therefore creating the tensest moments and conflicts at the borders. For Anzaldúa, *“the struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society”* (109). However, how is it possible to develop that awareness when communication is controlled and limited?

### **The language as a frontier**

The goal of a language is to communicate the self, and to do so it should be able to express nuances and contradictions. In this novel, “abilang” is the sacred language of the land and no other is permitted (or believed to exist). This language is created as a way to isolate and to transform the citizens into believers disconnected from their own identity and history. It is

said: *“the sacred language (...) did not speak to the mind: rather it disintegrated it, and out of what remained (...) it fashioned good passive believers”* (72-73). The individual loses his ability to think, create, feel and question. He exists only as a being of devotion. Nevertheless, the narrator slowly opens his eyes and throughout his quest discovers a multiplicity of languages that nobody is aware of, since traveling is limited. Those languages are murmured for they are deemed to be “vulgar” by the Apparatus, but they reveal a past and a possibility to think differently. Since cultural identity is known to be intertwined with language, it seems imperative to use it to keep existing as an individual. Hence, the sacred language metaphorically establishes a disintegrated liberty. “Abilang,” by its simplistic form, denies any emotional expression and thus denies the individual of his own self. Its goal is to institute a homogeneous core. It is possible to draw another parallel with Anzaldúa’s *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*. She explains that the attacks on other languages diminish the self and the sense of belonging. Moreover, being seen negatively by others impacts the self-esteem: *“until I take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself”* (81). To illustrate her pride, she mixes different forms of Spanish and English to reflect who she is and where she comes from. Boualem also uses this duality to move the frontier out of language. While the author uses a poetic language with a rich vocabulary to narrate this dystopia, he invents a very simplistic language for his world. He emphasizes the necessity of maintaining a multilingual country by contrasting his sophisticated stylistic writing and the imaginary language. As a matter of fact, “Abilang” is an empty and static language with no past and no future. Nevertheless, in Abistan, the narrator goes from one city to another and while people are living at the same ritualistic pace, differences persist in their use of a uniform language: *“here [people] spoke in a sing-song way, there the language was gutter and jerky (...) it all revealed a great secret: behind the apparent uniformity of people and things, the people were in fact very different, and when they were at home, among their family and friends, they spoke other languages besides Abilang”* (111-113). In this novel “language is [also] a homeland.” (Anzaldúa 77)

The narrator becomes even more aware of the importance of the language when he meets Toz, the secret collector of objects from the past. The narrator discovers new objects and unknown words such as “shirt,” “books,” “catalogues” and so on... Although the meaning of those words is lost, those objects open the door of a new way to think and a new way to see the surroundings. In Abistan, not only is the language and the pace of everyday life desired to be

uniform by the government, but outfits, housing, and food should also be identical in any corner of the country. It is with this last encounter that the narrator realizes that rich vocabulary helps to build connections and a better understanding of who people are. He actually infers that “*the question who are we? had suddenly become who were we?*” (199). The language in this aspect is central in keeping memory and in transferring knowledge. Indeed, before unity, Anzaldúa underlines the “*need to know the history of [the others] struggles and they need to know ours*” (Anzaldúa 108). Language and vocabulary express not only the self, but also Otherness, which clearly presents Abilang as a “failed” frontier.

Boualem creates a world fluctuating between different spaces. The narrator presents a frontier as being a hybrid place. He does not reject his identity as an Abistianian, however, he understands the contradictions and the ambiguity of multiculturalism. We can almost hear Anzaldúa’s need for a new consciousness in Boualem’s novel. They both write that one value should not dominate a culture but that a people should embrace several set of values. In essence, the border culture should be the model to follow. The open wound needs to heal by accepting multiplicity. At the end of *2084*, the narrator decides to cross the border and to open himself to the realm of possibilities. The different frontiers grant the narrator with a renewed sense of self and with an interconnection between inside and outside. He creates a frontier in flux by ceasing to limit himself to the collective conscience and by becoming the subject of his life. To do so, he has to deconstruct his way of thinking by reconfiguring his knowledge. He embraces the border culture. Anzaldúa writes “*like corn, the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions*” (103). Corn can be transformed into tortillas and in rural America corn is the hybrid used as food and as a source of energy. Boualem and Anzaldúa master hybridity through a work that mixes poetry and prose, metaphors that employ visual images to enforce ideas, and different languages in the same sentence. To cross to “the other side” is to recognize the border as a representation of the past and the future. It is essential to know where we come from to know where we are going.

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