EL OTRO LADO (THE OTHER SIDE)

By

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Abstract

Through my art practice, I have examined my own experience of growing up in a border town in the United States and how it has shaped my identity. This paper focuses on the history of the Mexican-American border, the definition of being a mestiza, the commodification of Mexican cultural objects and how I manifest these topics in my art practice. By focusing on my personal experience of crossing back and forth from the United States to Mexico from childhood to adulthood, I invite the viewer to see the complexities of this shifting of places and how it has created an ambivalence of self. El Otro Lado (The Other Side) is a video installation that allows the viewer to experience my journey crossing the border separating Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico. Through the use of VHS footage of travels of family vacations through Mexico in the mid 1990’s and my documentation of current border crossings, I invite the viewer to explore the temporal space created by the habitual crossings of the U.S. Mexico border through language, visuals and sound.
Introduction: Vamos p’al Otro Lado

When I was a young girl, I regularly walked a path that would become a significant part of my identity, yet at the time I did not know this. My mother would gather my sisters and I in the car to travel from Brownsville, Texas, United States to Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico. We would cross over to visit my grandmother, aunts and uncles, but also to buy cheaper groceries using pesos rather than dollars. Sometimes we would drive across the Gateway International Bridge into Mexico but most frequently, we would park the car in Brownsville and walk across the bridge to Matamoros. During these walks, I was transformed from a Spanglish-speaking kid into a Spanish-speaking huerquita (little girl). Twenty-five cents paid my passage through the turnstile into Mexico where I would indulge in elotes (corn on the cob), raspas (snowcones), jugos naturales (fresh juice) and all the Mexican candy my mother would buy me. The significant disparity between the value of dollars and pesos created abundance. My experience of repeatedly crossing the border and the resulting shifting of language and space fostered a duality within myself that has become more complex with time. With my project, El Otro Lado, I hope to navigate the viewer through the intricate journey of crossing over to a different yet very familiar space.

Mestiza

As a nation, the United States is a place where people from all nationalities come and build their lives. Sewn within the seams of the United States are the experiences of the people who have crossed its borders. However, the history of the Mexican and American border is significant to the people that lived within it. Dating back to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the border of Mexico and the United States shifted north, making the “present- day states of New Mexico, California, Nevada, parts of Arizona, Utah, and the disputed sections of present day Texas” part of the United States (Gonzalez, 2000, p. 44). The people that once lived in Mexico and its territory
now resided in the United States. The shifting of the border has created a permanent liminal zone that exists into the present and has become part of my experience. The border is “a place that is constituted discursively through the representation of two nations” and “at the fringe of two societies” (Biemann, 2002, p. 99). Living in this zone cultivated the importance of this dualistic space and elicited a response in me to make art about it.

Because I was raised in Brownsville and its proximity to Mexico was so close, I became familiar with these two cultures by crossing back and forth. The bridge I walked through was a “liminal space, in-between the designations of identity” and “the connective tissue that constructs the difference between” my Mexican and American self. This passage between Mexico and the US prevented my identity from being fixed and opened up “the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5).” It was this hybridity of my identity that allowed me to better understand my mestiza self.

By examining my own relationship with the border, I came to understand the complexity of my identity more clearly through the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, scholar of Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory. Like myself, Anzaldúa grew up in a border town not too far away from my own. She writes of her experiences of being a mestiza, “a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 100). Mexico helped shape the connection I have with my heritage. Brownsville, Texas helped shaped my gringa self and the fact that I lived in the United States makes me, on paper, an American. My surroundings have shaped who I am, creating this mestiza identity. As a mestiza I “shift out of habitual formations” when going to and from Mexico and as a result I operate “in a pluralistic mode” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.101). In Brownsville I spoke English with a hint of Spanglish and in Matamoros I spoke and mimicked the Spanish I heard.
Anzaldúa argues that there is a cultural clash when one is a mestiza or part of two or more cultures. The belief systems attached to each culture can contradict one another. These contradictions then function as a framework which the mestiza must navigate. “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 101).

I recognized how I juggle cultures when I moved from Brownsville to Atlanta, Georgia. From 1990 to 2000, “large numbers of Mexican immigrants [were] absorbed in Atlanta” even though it was “far from the border” (Card & Lewis, 2007, p. 206). Because of the economic opportunities in Atlanta, this move was necessary for my family. While I was still learning to live and understand Atlanta, my family then relocated to Miami, FL where again I experienced an intense culture shock. We moved into a Nicaraguan neighborhood where I heard Spanish with accents and slang I did not recognize, making this new transition difficult. Slowly, I began to understand this type of Spanish and other Latino groups and became aware that Mexicans were not the only Latinos. I lived in Miami for many years until I started graduate school in Gainesville, FL where the majority of the population is white. Moving to a community with a small Latino population made me realize the importance of my Chicana identity. I began to make work that examined and questioned my Mexican heritage.

**Transnational Exchange**

The first piece I made in relation to my Mexican-American heritage was the installation #FuerzaAutoDefensas (See Figure 1). A visit to a relative serving time in federal prison and a Youtube video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3nlfE0AUys) about a community in Antúnez,
Michoacán, Mexico fighting against local authorities and drug cartels inspired me to create a representation of the effects the War on Drugs has both in Mexico and the United States.

Figure 1. Ana Treviño, #FuerzaAutoDefensas, 2014, paper-mache and sound

The transfer of drugs from Mexico to the United States is an example of a transnational exchange benefiting both nations economically. This exchange occurs in the borderlands, which “should be understood historically as a true transnational cultural region” and seen as “a porous line that has always allowed transnational flows” (Madrid, 2011, p. 4). The flow of drugs has been problematic for both the United States and Mexico due to the violence it has created. In Ursula Biemann’s video essay Performing the Border (1999) set in the Mexican-U.S. border town of Ciudad Juarez, Biemann comments on the transnational exchange that occurred as a result of NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement) in the border region due to the influx of jobs created by US electronics companies and filled by Mexican women. Biemann’s use of interviews, scripted voice overs and text help depict the gender-specific violence in the region. Both the violence in Ciudad Juarez in 1999 and in the present Antúnez are a result of the production of goods for American consumption.
My installation #FuerzaAutoDefensas was made as an effort to show how the exchange of drugs for money and the high rates of drug consumption in the United States were affecting a community in Mexico. The authorities in Antúnez were not helping its citizens because of their own involvement with the drug cartels controlling this region. Taking matters into their own hands, the people of Antúnez purchased illegal arms and formed a militia to defend themselves against the cartels and local authorities. They produced a video telling their story and uploaded it to Youtube in efforts to have their voices heard. Using the hashtag #fuerzaautodefensas was the community’s way of reaching out globally through various social media platforms.

My response to the situation was to create an installation depicting a scene meant “to physically immerse the viewer in a three-dimensional space” and be “psychologically absorptive too” (Bishop, 2005, p. 14). Bringing the viewer closer to a situation from which they are so far removed allowed the audience to identify with the community of Antúnez. Through the use of papier-mâché, a material used to make piñatas in Mexico, I made three life-size figures representing a young girl who was assassinated, a militia fighter and a cartel member in Antúnez. These figures highlighted the different levels of power within the community: a helpless girl, the militia fighter protecting her, and the drug cartel member overpowering them both. The use of papier-mâché is a form of sculptural and traditional craft seen throughout Mexico and a practice I am familiar with, particularly because I made piñatas as a child. Piñatas are built to be broken and their fragility recalled the precariousness of the community in Antúnez. By representing these figures with this material, I alluded to the seemingly endless deterioration of a community fighting to restore their lives. I used newspaper clippings to create the figures to demonstrate the lack of media coverage on the consequences of the drug trade on ordinary people in Mexico, hence the need for the community of Antúnez to make a Youtube video. Sound extracted from the first scene
of the Youtube video was played in the space of my installation as a way to allow the viewer to experience the violence recorded by the community. In this scene, a crowd in a dark room becomes hysterical when suddenly, shots are fired and a man is hit. The crowd begins to run and shots continue. Amplifying this sound with the figures puts the viewer in this situation of frenzy and closer to the everyday occurrences the people of Antúnez are facing.

Examining my Chicana-ness

In my video Traditions for the Mexican Woman, I investigated the traditions that were instilled in me during my youth. I spoke to the women who were most prominent in my life throughout my childhood: my mother and my grandmothers (see Figure 2). I asked them about

Figure 2. Ana Treviño, Traditions for the Mexican Woman, 2014, Video Still

the traditions they learned as young girls that they passed down to me. Tortilla making, folkloric dance and embroidery were part of my education to connect me with my heritage. I asked my mother to make tortillas for me while I filmed the process. The kitchen was her sanctuary and an area, which had its own borders. It functioned as a stand in for Mexico and a liminal space in itself. The kitchen was filled with Mexican ceramic pots, embroideries and a comal (griddle); all symbols of Mexico. Stepping into the kitchen was as if I was walking into Mexico. However, this territory was one I could not enter. My mother did not allow me inside the kitchen to cook, only watch. I felt as if I was in a threshold, somewhere between Mexico and the U.S.
Embroidery was also an important part of my childhood because it was a passion of one of my grandmothers. I learned how to embroider when I was nine years old. After not picking up a needle for thirteen years, I decided to create an embroidery for my mother as a gift. Traditional folk dancing was another tradition I learned as a child by taking classes. I traveled to Georgia with a two folkloric dance dresses that my father recently purchased for me in Mexico, an adult and a child one. I dressed my younger cousin and myself in the dresses and taught her a dance, repeating movements to reflect the transition between my adolescent and adult self as well as a re-enactment of what was taught to me as a child. Wearing and performing with the dress was an intentional way of connecting to my Mexican-ness. When I had it on, I felt a transformation in myself, bringing me closer to my race and culture. Were these traditions ones I could remember well enough to pass down? If so, why was this important? I noticed a sense of pride in these performances and a need for this part of my heritage not to vanish.

Carmen Lomas Garza’s Tamalada painting (1988) depicts the Mexican-American tradition of making tamales — soaking the corn husks, spreading the dough, adding the meat, and placing

*Figure 3. Carmen Lomas Garza, Tamalada, 1988, oil on linen mounted on wood*
the tamales into a large enamel pot is seen (See Figure 3). The tradition of making tamales is prevalent in many Mexican families, including mine. Lomas Garza shows numerous generations in this painting, her mother, father, grandparents, and siblings. The children are learning this custom and actively participating in it. This ritualistic engagement of making tamales relates to *Traditions for the Mexican Woman*, where through repetition and observation, I am re-presenting and recontextualizing these traditions.

Lomas Garza’s use of bright colors and objects such as the enamel pot on the stove and the religious painting on the wall illustrate what a typical Mexican-American home looks like. She shows *mestizaje* of Catholic, Pre-Hispanic and Mexican-American domestic life in the painting and also illustrates the role of women by portraying the gendered labor of making tamales. A father and daughter are seen in the doorway of the painting as they both look at their family members making the tamales; the young girl is learning the tamale making process through observing it. Lomas Garza’s *Tamalada* painting is a representation of folklore in painting and of her *mestizaje*. The medium of paint is important in Lomas Garza’s work because it derives from “the fusion of European and indigenous cultures in Latin America” and is an example of the “hallmark of colonial-era painting.” (Campbell, 2003). The video medium is essential in *Traditions for the Mexican Woman* because it allowed me to create my own historical interpretation of this folklore, documenting each custom. The medium of video allowed me to play with time in a nonlinear manner and to depict the parallel between my child and adult self while also documenting scenes of making tortillas and embroidery.

In this piece I related to the idea of “multiplicitous subjectivity,” a term coined by Mariana Ortega. Multiplicitous subjectivity means “a self that is pulled in different directions by norms practices, beliefs, etc., of different worlds.” In order to identify with a “particular cultural
identity,” I performed these traditional acts as a strategy to feed the subjectivity associated with “being Mexican.” My “noticing and classifying phenotypic characteristics” of my Chicana self served as a metaphoric border crossing — going back and forth yet remaining on one side (Ortega, 2008, p. 71 and 75).

I then created a video installation named Danza Roja that played with folkloric dance themes in a contemporary way (See Figure 4). I performed a traditional folk dance on large heavy weight vinyl and then later made monoprints meant to record the traces of the dance. These traces signify my mestiza self and my hybridity making “the possibility of uniting all that is separate” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 101).

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

*Figure 4. Ana Treviño, Danza Roja, 2014, Video Still*

I used yellow and red pigments to cover my feet, creating a deep orange tone in the traces. Subconsciously, I accidently chose the colors the Spanish flag, the nation that colonized parts of northern Mexico in the 16th century. Guatemalan artist Regina Jose Galindo also used traces of her feet in her performance ¿Quien Puede borrar las huellas? (Who can erase the footprints?) in 2003. As a political act, Galindo dipped her feet in human blood and walked from the Guatemalan Congress to the National Palace in protest of the country’s former dictator (Gallo, 2015). The traces Galindo left represented the genocide and disappearance of indigenous people in Guatemala in the 1980’s. (See Figure 5).
I projecting the video documentation of the dance performance onto the monoprints. The dance moves were matched to the traces left behind on the monoprints. I did not play music while dancing and solely relied on my memory to test if I could remember this dance. These prints were meant to represent the inevitable loss of tradition through the ephemeral nature of the paper. The video, however, worked as a loop which gave the sense of repetition meant to emphasize the timelessness of the dance. As Anzaldúa states, “I seek new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.109). This installation’s goal was to create this new image of identity and relate it to the folkloric dance I still identified with from my youth.

*Danza Roja* was similar to the work of Trisha Brown, a widely acclaimed choreographer and dancer. In her soft ground etching *Compass*, Brown uses her bare feet to make impressions of various movements (See Figure 6). She worked in an improvisational manner similar to mine while dancing, leaving traces behind. The mark making was as meaningful as the dance performance.
By representing this mark making through the digital form of video I was able to manipulate the way I framed the dance. The video made the performance visible as if the dance was happening in the present moment. The legs and feet come in and out of frame, moving along the monoprint and swiftly falling into place with the ink. The video allows the viewer to see the traces being made in real time.

**Figure 6.** Trisha Brown, *Compass*, 2006, Soft ground etching with relief roll

**Commodification of the Mexican**

After making these performative pieces, I began researching how Mexican culture has been commodified in the United States. Cinco de Mayo has become an American staple for drinking tequila and wearing obnoxious sombreros while mistaking the date for the Mexican Independence Day. In a blog entry by Anthony Bourdain on his Mexico episode of *Parts Unknown*, he mentions our connection to Mexico and our love for its food, music, interior design, drugs, etc. We have a connection to the nation next to our southern border (Bourdain, 2015, May 3). We have taken its iconic symbols and turned them into commodities, in particular the tortilla. According to Lind and Barham the tortilla’s social life began during the pre-colonial Mesoamerican era when *maize* (corn)
was the staple crop. However, once the colonial era arrived, wheat production overtook *maize*. It was not until the twentieth century that the tortilla again gained prominence. Industrialization triggered the mass production of the tortilla in the 1960’s, making the tortilla ubiquitous throughout Mexico. This iconic Mexican object was taken across the border into the U.S., becoming a colonized commodity and a symbol of Mexican national identity. With the help of globalization the tortilla then became a fast food staple and an easy go-to meal (Lind & Barham, 2003).

![Figure 7. Ana Treviño, The Transcendence of Masa, 2015, Video Still](image)

With the history of the tortilla and *masa* in mind, I created a video piece called *The Transcendence of Masa* which critiqued the commodification of the tortilla (See Figure 7). When I went grocery shopping, I noticed the abundance of choices when purchasing tortillas, from low-carb to sundried tomato flavor. In Mexico, these choices do not exist. The tortilla, in the American realm, has been taken out of context and yet still is seen as “Mexican.” Fast-food chains use tortillas but *Taco Bell™* is particularly known for its ongoing reinvention. For example, *Taco Bell™* developed a hard shell tortilla and fused it with a *Doritos* chip (another U.S. version of Mexican food), creating a hybrid from a hybrid (del Valle, 2014, para. 3). I decided to work with various *Taco Bell™* menu items that used tortillas as an ingredient. By using a green screen to layer these materials digitally, I appropriated the *Taco Bell™* menu items in order to
recontextualize them. Digitally compositing my dance performance with the video of *Taco Bell™* products was important because it could be read as a type of advertisement, albeit a confusing one. I made masa and danced on top of it with imagery of the *Taco Bell™* menu items and Mexican music in the background. The shots of the feet dancing ranged from wide, medium and close-ups, constantly shifting emphasis from the feet to the *masa* to the food. I wanted to create a false sense of the exotic. By using the tortilla as a case study, I remixed the way the *masa* is prepared. *Masa* is usually handled with the hands, not with the feet. Dancing on the *masa* made it spread with the movement of my feet, sometimes tearing, letting the viewer see burrito or taco underneath. I created my own hybrid with the dance. The conditions in which the tortilla made its way to the United States interested me and I began to reflect on how cultural objects have traveled and taken new roles. Dancing on the *masa* was a way to subvert its function and set a humoristic tone.

Michael Rakowitz’s *The invisible enemy should not exist* from 2007 is an ongoing series of drawings, cardboard and newspaper sculptures, museum labels and sound that narrates the story of “artifacts stolen from the National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad, in the aftermath of the US invasion of April 2003”. Rakowitz used materials such as packaging of Middle Eastern foods and local Arabic newspapers to recreate these artifacts in efforts to recuperate them. These materials were specifically used to demonstrate “moments of cultural visibility found in cities across the United States” (*The invisible enemy should not exist*, 2007, para. 3). The series’ use of traditional Iraqi materials already present in the United States is important because it shows their migration (See Figure 8). In relation to *The Transcendence of Masa*, the use of such cultural objects demonstrates how their materiality taken out of original context can evoke a new meaning. The tortilla became a hybrid in the U.S., an Americanized object taken out of its country of origin.
Rakowitz’s *Enemy Kitchen*, a cooking workshop started in 2003, is another example of using food to create a dialogue. Rakowitz purposely opens “a new route through which Iraq can be discussed” by cooking Iraqi meals for public audiences, “including middle and high school students.” Rakowitz collaborated with his mother and compiled various Baghdadi recipes to teach and feed people. This would allow his audience to learn about Iraqi cultures, which is “virtually invisible in the U.S.” Rakowitz helped Iraq become more “culturally visible to produce an alternative discourse.” When working with students, Rakowitz overheard one student question why they were making this food and blamed Iraq for the fall of the Twin Towers. Another student corrected her and said it was bin Laden who was responsible. *Enemy Kitchen* managed to create a space where “opinions, myths and facts that are perpetuated in the country during wartime” could be discussed. (*Enemy Kitchen, 2003, para.1*).

Working with a pink folkloric dress used for dance performances, I wanted to test how the dress operated outside of its original milieu. I put this dress on and walked around downtown Gainesville, FL for a piece called *Investigation with a Dress* (See Figure 9). While wearing the dress, I approached and interacted with people, rode the bus and sat at bars. I was intrigued with
how people would react towards me and if the dress would bring up conversations of current political issues about Mexico. Many people stared at me and others thought I was practicing for a beauty pageant. While walking in the dress, I felt uncomfortable and that I was objectifying myself. My attempt to walk in the dress and get reactions was a strategy that was not specific enough. In retrospect, I also felt the use of traditional garb was merely exoticizing, turning myself into a commodity for people look at. Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña explicitly use their bodies for their performance piece *Couple in a Cage* to perform “the identity of an Other” (Fusco, 1999, p. 167). The artists lived in a golden cage for days and pretended to be “undiscovered Amerindians from an island in the Gulf of Mexico.” For the artists, this cage was metaphor meant to link “the racism implicit in ethnographic paradigms of discovery” (Fusco, 1999, p. 168). The performance functioned as a way to invite the audience to consider “our heightened anxiety about the collapse between live and mediated, actual and fiction.” (Bishop, 2012, p. 126). In contrast, my performance was a way to experiment with performing an aspect of my “Mexican-ness” and the potential conversations and dialogues that arose from my interactions with the public.

![Figure 9. Ana Trevino, *Investigation with a Dress*, 2014, Video Still](image)

My research led me to think about people that cross the border and what they bring with them. Do parts of their culture come with them and do they then become hybrid cultures when
they touch new land? The writings of Irit Rogoff (2000) helped me better understand the ways in which migration affects the cultures people enter. In the next section I will relate my experience of crossing over to Mexico and how I, as an American, situate myself there.

**Luggage and Memory**

*The suitcase signifies the moment of rupture, the instance in which the subject is torn out of the web of connectedness that contained him or her through an invisible net of belonging.*

–Irit Rogoff

When migrating to a new country, luggage comes with the individuals. Rogoff uses the metaphor of luggage to describe it as a “multiple marker: of memory, nostalgia and access to other histories” (Rogoff, 2000, p. 37). Luggage signifies not only the objects brought by migrating people but also their culture. The body of the migrant enters a new geographic space, but it does not come alone. The baggage comes along as well. Rogoff makes an excellent analysis of what the luggage signifies:

> It is the concrete embodiment of memories that cannot be recounted for they will not be understood, their context having changed in a highly dramatic rupture. As ‘luggage’, memories and cultural symbols are objectified, concretized, virtually museumified in a suitcase (Rogoff, 2000, p. 38).

These memories that enter the United States have created sites of cultural belonging for me. People have the need to establish a place which holds onto these memories in efforts to keep these memories alive. An example would be Little Havana in Miami. This area of the city is a haven for Cubans filled with restaurants, coffee shops and music. Spanish is the dominant language and it is difficult for one to communicate who does not speak Spanish. By using Spanish as a means of communicating. “Cuban Spanish speakers and their bilingual children have seen the importance
of their language steadily increase” (Lynch, 2000, p. 280). Keeping the language is a tactic used in efforts to hold onto a piece of Cuba and its roots. Being bilingual gives individuals the ability to communicate in more than one way and have more than one world view.

Although the U.S. is a country created by immigration, xenophobia is on the rise. In the summer of 2015, Donald Trump began his presidential campaign and started a dialogue about illegal immigration and extending the fence separating Mexico and the U.S. Negative rhetoric towards Mexicans and other immigrants circulated in the media. Soon after, Trump’s image was reproduced by Mexican piñata maker Dalton Ávalos Ramírez who lives in Reynosa, a border town in Mexico. Ávalos Ramírez created the piñata in order to counter Trump’s rhetoric. I was inspired and decided to make a Trump piñata of my own. Using papier-mâché once again, I made my version of a Trump piñata and filled it with Mexican and American lollipops and Trump quotes. The bi-national candy linked the U.S. and Mexico through food and ultimately was the prize for breaking the piñata. The quotes were carefully selected from Trump’s Twitter feed and newspapers. As a symbolic gesture to take action against this rhetoric, I worked with the Civic Media Center in Gainesville and made a public event called Wack Trump inviting locals to whack Trump with me (See Figure 10).

![Ana Trevino, Wack Trump, 2015, Documentation of performance](image)

*Figure 10. Ana Trevino, Wack Trump, 2015, Documentation of performance*
My efforts in whacking Trump with the Gainesville community was to take a stand against the misconstrued beliefs on immigration and Mexicans. This performative gesture fell into the realm of social practice, collaborating with the community and creating a participatory piece. The piñata played the role of “art’s symbolic capital towards constructive social change” (Bishop, 2012, p. 13). It was an “intermediary object” to which the viewers and myself could relate. We did not collaboratively engage with the piñata, everything would remain contained (Bishop, 2012, p. 38). By whacking it together, the symbolic destruction of the Donald Trump figure unfolded and the spilling of candy and quotes flooded the floor. However, Claire Bishop believes that the documentation of a participatory piece “tends to value the invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness” (Bishop, 2012, p. 6). By making this piñata, Ávalos Ramírez’s ideas crossed the border and took a new form by my introducing (thus recontextualizing) his Trump piñata into a new environment. This transnational exchange of art reminded me of my journeys to and from Mexico.

**El Otro Lado**

I began to think of how the frequency of my own border crossing affected my relationship with place. When travelling to Mexico, what did I take with me from the United States and what did I bring back from Mexico? The travel suitcase brings “the concrete location from which one has come” making it evident that when I was in Mexico I was bringing my Americanized self. (Rogoff, 2000, 48). Although I was speaking in Spanish, I never felt as if I completely belonged. When having conversations with people in Mexico, I felt Othered but I was also trying to find a way to connect with Mexicans. Rogoff states,

Geography, like the discourses of space and spatialization, allows for certain conjunctions of objectivities and subjectivities within the framework of argument. It allows for a set of
material conditions and subjects’ lives which co-exist with and both shape and are shaped by psychic subjectivities (Rogoff, 2000, p. 4).

Here, Rogoff implies that our place has subjective connections based on our experiences. A geographic space can become something special, frightful, charming, based on the psychic connection we have towards it. My connection with Mexico is one that stems from the act of crossing over, immersed in its smells, colors, flavors, music, and language. When I filmed in Mexico, I was lured by these characteristics and had the tendency of exoticizing. But even if this was a familiar site, I could not escape the sense of displacement. I became interested in this ambiguity and tension which led me investigate and interview myself and others about the effects of migration.

My investigation for my MFA project began when I traveled to Mexico City in the area named Naucalpan. I conducted fieldwork in Naucalpan, filming throughout the neighborhoods with an ethnographic approach. This approach allowed me understand the internal perspective of this community. I conducted interviews with “open-ended questions to draw more details” from those being interviewed (Visocky O’Grady, 2006, p. 26). In these conversations all the individuals came to the United States in efforts to help their families. Thoughts of their families motivated them through the journey but once they arrived the language barrier made the transition challenging. What resonated with me was the sense of displacement I shared with these people when they were in the U.S. and I was in Mexico. As I spoke to these individuals I noticed that although I was able to communicate with them, the way I spoke Spanish was different. There was a neutrality in my accent, which made my Otherness obvious. Was my spoken Spanish language always “neutral,” never identifying with a particular region or local? I collected and viewed VHS tapes of my travels in Mexico as a child. My family would take road trips from Brownsville to
different areas of central Mexico. As a child, I had access to the camera and was able to film Mexico through my lens. When viewing these tapes, I noticed instances of my mispronouncing Spanish words and speaking in English when I could not translate a word in Spanish. Claude Lefort as quoted by Homi Bhabha describes “the enigma of language-namely that it is both internal and external to the speaking subject, that there is an articulation of the self and which the self does not control” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 210). Although I was speaking Spanish and was reflecting a different sense of myself (Mexican but also not Mexican), I had no control of this self.

Interviewing my parents was my next step in my investigation, specifically asking them about living on the border and their role in fostering a sense of pride towards my Mexican heritage. In these interviews, something interesting began to unfold; my mother was a critical factor as to why my sense of Mexican-ness was significant. She made a conscious effort in nurturing my Mexican identity through travel, language and tradition. Although we both lived on the border, our experiences were different. For my mother, this space was convenient and was “like living in Mexico because we were right between two countries and we had access to everything that we needed” (See Figure 11). For my mother, the only difference in the space was specifically, the language. My experience of living in the border was not out of convenience. The border was the liminal zone where the mixing of languages occurred and where the degree of my Mexican-ness fluctuated.

Figure 11. Ana Treviño, El Otro Lado, 2016, Video Still
Following the traces of my explorations as a child, I revisited the areas I had filmed and filmed them once again, but through my adult lens. My behavior was hyperaware and I recognized my own code switching. Code switching is situationally switching between two languages, which I actively do. However, in Mexico, I found myself code switching as a strategy to navigate the tension of the condition of being mestiza. When filming, I was conscious of my otherness and this awareness created a discomfort. Because I live in more than one culture, “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference” caused a cultural clash (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 100). Although I was always accepted, the notion of unbelonging was evermore present and the ambiguity of my own identity was reinforced. I was a tourist with a camera, filming the bright colors of the mercado (market) and was drawn to its smells. Filming an older woman cutting cacti, people eating during lunchtime, and following a young man playing a flute while wearing a headdress were exotic to me. Through the camera lens I was drawing attention and Othering myself, similar to the way I did with the folkloric dress. Again, I was aware of my multiplicitous subjectivities because I was drawn to these “exotic” characteristics of Mexico.

I decided to juxtapose these current travels with those of my youth to draw parallels among them and deconstruct these two versions of myself. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film Surname Viet Given Name Nam also uses old footage to reference “scenes of Vietnamese ritual, daily life, and events of war.” This footage is then juxtaposed with interviews of women using “the staple of documentary practice, here represented as a self-conscious and artificial construct.” Minh-ha purposely subverts the tropes of documentary filmmaking and use of subtitles to as a strategy “to resist appropriation by dominant Western and male discourses” (Higashi, 1990, p. 1124). In my video El Otro Lado, I juxtapose both old and new footage (not unlike Minh-ha) as a way to create tension and disrupt the narrative of immigration. Trinh T. Minh-ha uses a “variety of visual
materials” such as “still photographs ranging from photojournalism to family snapshots, diverse kinds of archival and original footage, and various printed texts (including subtitles)” to “cut these texts loose from their sources and allow them to circulate freely in the space of the film” (Rosenbaum, 1989). Minh-ha also inserts herself in the film and exposes the artificial construct of documentary filmmaking. I insert my own voice throughout the video, by either creating a metanarrative of self-reflective statements or through conversation with my mother. A rhythmic edit of the found VHS footage from my childhood and footage I shot in the present time (2015) in Mexico show two very different perspectives. One explores the lush countryside and the other focuses on colorful objects and people.

By shifting through temporal spaces and language I drew on the complexities of being mestiza. The use of color coded subtitles emphasized the switching in language. Subtitles are used to translate the dialogue for both English and Spanish speakers in my video, but by using color I pointed to my code-switching (See Figure 12). The addition of vignettes indicates my own reflections on the past.

Figure 12. Ana Treviño, El Otro Lado, 2016, Video Still

and present. I pointed to my otherness through particular camera angles, specifically people breaking through gaze and staring at me filming them (See Figure 13). This created tension, adding
to the degree of my otherness. My vantage point from behind the camera contributed to my status as a tourist and as Other. The strategy of using documentary filmmaking to comment on my mestiza identity suggests an authentic view of my experience. The VHS footage I used from my childhood is unmediated and truthfully tells my own admiration of Mexico. El Otro Lado also shows instances of otherness and critical moments of how the liminal space I lived in shaped the relationship between two cultures and gave birth to my hybridity. For example, I ask my mother why we always traveled south on road trips and not north. She answers, “I found Mexican culture to be richer.” We already lived in the U.S. and it was important for her to expose us to Mexico and to be proud of being from there. This testimony of my own self-reflection and the conversation with my mother provides a narrative that weaves our stories together. I always tell my mother I am more secure when I go with her to Mexico and feel my Otherness more intensely when she is not there.

Another way I created liminality was by using video from two different periods of time. I juxtaposed two distinct temporal spaces; the Mexico of my childhood and the Mexico of the present as evidenced through the technological quality of the images. Shots of Mexico’s countryside through the inside of our family van, guide the viewer through the voyage and places

*Figure 13. Ana Treviño, El Otro Lado, 2016, Video Still*
him/her inside this space. The older footage also has a circular black vignette to emphasize this particular place in time. Although the elements of documentary filmmaking are used, the viewer is meant to look at this work critically. The footage is shot through a subjective lens and brought together to give a personal narrative. Therefore, the truth is my own understanding of it. The work’s form aims to build a metanarrative on the hybridity of self and complexity of existing in a liminal space.

_El Otro Lado_ is a work that will continue to evolve because the exploration of my connection with the border will never be finished. I want to continue developing my art practice working with the theme of the border but would like to extend it by learning about others’ experiences and how they relate to mine. Returning to the border of Brownsville, TX and Matamoros, Mexico and seeing how it functions today is a future endeavor to keep investigating the concept of existing in an in-between space. The border “is in a constant state of transition” and as a mestiza I am also in this state of flux (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25). Through my art practice, I will continue the journey of how the border contributes to my identity as a _mestiza_.

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Author Biography

Ana Trevino was born in Brownsville, Texas. Her identity was shaped through her experience of growing up in border town then relocating to the rich Latino community of Miami, FL. She received her BS in Television Production with a minor in the Visual Arts. She worked in the entertainment industry for five years before returning to the academic setting at the University of Florida. Here is where she has regained her connection to her art practice and developed her research endeavors by investigating her Latina identity. In 2016 she will be graduating from the University of Florida’s graduate program in Art and Technology.