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Documenting Gender's Signs: Site, Performance, and the US-Mexico Border in Contemporary Art

Margaret Allen Crocker

On the beach between San Diego and Tijuana, vertical steel slats stand close enough together that the spaces between them are impenetrable to human bodies, creating a physical demarcation of the border between the United States and Mexico. The weathered brown metal apparatus cuts sharply against the shades of blue from sea and sky that peek through the slats. In 2011, Ana Teresa Fernández (b. Tamaulipas, 1980) skillfully matched these natural shades of powder blue in Martha Stewart brand exterior paint, applied with a spray gun, for her installation and documented performance, *Borrando la Frontera* (Erasing the Border). In this performance, Fernández climbed a ladder in a black cocktail dress, painting a portion of the fence so that it appeared to disappear against the expansive sky (fig. 1). Her performance is part of a longer history of artists whose work depends on both site and documentation, yet *Borrando la Frontera* intervenes in a way that makes gender an integral part of conversations about the border. Fernández draws on the overtly masculine narratives of border art that are underpinned by women's labor. The artist documented *Borrando la Frontera* in both photography and video, media commonly used to document performance art, and through her own oil paintings of the event. Documentation plays a key role in this piece, which deals with ephemerality and erasure. Therefore, some trace of action and presence must remain for the work to be shared beyond its initial site in order to reach a larger and more diverse audience.



Figure 1 Ana Teresa Fernández, *Borrando La Frontera*, 2011. Image: Ana Teresa Fernández, <https://anateresafernandez.com/borrando-la-barda-tijuana-mexico/borrando10/>. Image courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

A year before Fernández's performance and farther east along the border in the city of Agua Prieta, the artist M. Jenea Sanchez (b. Arizona, 1985) produced the film *Historias en la Camioneta* (fig. 2). Employing her family's *camioneta*, or small van service in Agua Prieta, Sanchez joins passengers as they cross the border into the United States. During the journey she interviews and films them. By using two cameras, she simultaneously captures the interviewees and the desert landscape they travel through. Sanchez's subject position as a bilingual woman who works as an artist, or what she refers to as a "nomadic sensibility [achieved] by inserting [herself] between, among, and outside of the status quo of American and Mexican culture," gives her the ability to make *Historias en la Camioneta*.¹ This refusal to identify as one or the other, even as her physical position changes when she crosses the border, allows her to work in the space of the *camioneta*. The artist's role in the family unit allows her access to an intimate knowledge of the *camioneta* and the families who use it to cross the border. Through engaging emotionally with border crossers and forging connections with them, a position that itself depends on women being categorized as approachable and nonthreatening in this scenario, she is able to accurately document and share their stories. Documentation, labor, and gender connect these two works, which can be compared with each other only because they have been documented.



Figure 2 M. Jenea Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*, still, 2011. Image: M. Jenea Sanchez, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGOSBLbqnOM2010>. Image courtesy of the artist.

This essay centers the difficult and sometimes inconclusive work of documentation to highlight the labor of asking questions about the relationship between location and identity. I put Fernández's work in conversation with Sanchez's to address issues of gender and documentation, by which I mean recording or otherwise preserving traces of artistic performances and personal identity. Documenting its presence allows for artwork be transported beyond its initial site. While scholars in performance studies debate the value of documentation, the theorist Rebecca Schneider sees documenting performance as part of the artwork itself, writing that performance "becomes itself through messy and eruptive reappearance."² Schneider suggests that live performance is part, but not the entirety, of a work of performance art. The work is completed through the uneasy process of documentation and being revisited beyond the artist's initial scope, inherently opening the work up to misinterpretation while expanding its reach.

I also draw on Ila N. Sheren's concept of "portable borders" to further complicate the ways in which performances deployed in border zones can reappear elsewhere.³ Sheren suggests that the circumstances of the borderlands, and with them border semiotics—an approach to signs and interpretations specific to the US-Mexico border—are not just created or deployed in one border region but draw on transporting larger sociocultural references made both visible and invisible.⁴ I augment Sheren's understanding of portability by investigating the ways documentation packages artworks. Documenting these artworks-in-

production allows for them to be exported to other physical spaces, implying that they may also ground themselves in alternate theoretical landscapes in order to reach a broader audience. Furthermore, they suggest border theories are not only for national borders but also for other intersections of identity.

Both physical position, the literal site where an artist or viewer is located, and subject position, their racial, cultural, gender, and sexuality-informed identity brought to viewership, dictate the transporting and reading of signs. These two interwoven positions are both mutable. In terms of physical position, I engage Miwon Kwon's argument about site-specificity, in which she states that even while identity is socially constructed, "the ability to deploy multiple, fluid identities in and of itself is a privilege of mobilization that has a specific relationship to power."⁵ While the privilege of mobilization has an element of power, that is not the only way to read it. Code-switching, the early twenty-first century practice of deploying multiple identities as a way of life, originated in linguistics and is increasingly present in popular culture. Code-switching is not a choice of the privileged, but a survival mode of the marginalized.⁶ It is about fitting in, but doing so successfully can mean life-or-death, especially in circumstances like crossing the US-Mexico border. These two artworks underscore how code-switching, especially that which involves language or dress, often involves the reinterpretation of signs as a mode of survival. Code-switching operates alongside the difficult but crucial work of intersectionality through gender's omnipresence in conversation with multiple different identifiers.⁷

The US-Mexico borderlands are fertile grounds for code-switching as a form of cross-cultural exchange that goes beyond differences in language to define symbols and images. It is not enough to simply name an image that serves as a symbol in both English and Spanish, since each side carries different inferences, histories, and connotations. Furthermore, what happens at the border has implications for other zones of cultural contact both literal and figurative. I propose revisiting the idea of "border semiotics," a term used by the border artist and writer D. Emily Hicks to synthesize the semiotic methods present across the borderlands and employed by Mexican and Chicana artists, poets, and theorists to form and perform identity.⁸ In her assessment of border semiotics, Hicks acknowledges semiotics' origins as a mode of thinking that began in Europe and traces its roots to the Enlightenment, adding that in the context of the border, codes are deterritorialized, meaning they have no official grounding.⁹ Some of these signs and interpretations that make up border semiotics include language and bilingualism, cultural codes, and a sense of *el otro lado*, or "the other side."

As legal and state impositions heighten the importance of identity, Hicks writes that, regarding the border, any given signifier "hovers between two

signifieds, seeking refuge in a battle between desire and nostalgia.”¹⁰ Here she notes the ways that semiotics is not a one-to-one relationship between sign and interpretation. This same complexity can be read onto other examples of border semiotics, like language and cultural norms. Hicks gives the example of cultural codes of bribery such as the *mordida*, a bribe to a police officer, which though accepted in Mexico could result in a violent arrest in the United States.¹¹ Individuals must understand this cultural code to maintain safety. In terms of symbols charged with meaning, the figure of the mother, a trope I revisit below, is a good example of border semiotics at work.

Scholars including Hicks and the poet Gloria Anzaldúa have engaged border semiotics and gender with US-Mexico border issues both on location and exhibited elsewhere. I argue that gender is inalienably at the core of border thinking, as a methodology for contemporary art at the US-Mexico border in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Deploying the border as an oversimplified metaphor can lose sight of these realities. Fernández and Sanchez abandon this oversimplification by grounding their interpretations in site, lived experience, and the prevalence of gender dynamics. They document gender dynamics and transport these documentations beyond the particularity of their initial sites.

Fernández's and Sanchez's artworks are products of these women's own labor. Through performance, documentation, and circulation, viewers read and reread the artists' actions. This repetition builds a collective, multifaceted, cross-border consciousness while highlighting the numerous types of work women do in this region. Reading these artworks is labor of a different kind; looking at these works draws attention not only to the artists' labor that went into them but to the women's work that goes on around them and in the audience. Furthermore, although these forms of gendered work (including housework, personal reflection, and navigating social and emotional interactions) often remain undervalued and therefore undercompensated or even uncompensated, articulating them in performance grants them value both culturally and historically. When documented, as Fernández and Sanchez do, women's work becomes a category for scholarly debate and cross-border conversation, suggesting a system wherein this labor, and the women who perform it, cannot be forgotten or ignored.

The (Un)Documentation of Gender

Much of interpreting border art relies on an established and known iconographic set and its varying meanings across space and time. This set relies on overly masculine narratives of border art and the border region that were supported by women's labor. Fernández and Sanchez disrupt these histories through their

gendered work of documentation. The Border Art Workshop / Taller de Arte Fronterizo's (BAW/TAF) *End of the Line* (1986) best exemplifies the necessity of drawing on border iconography to interpret meaning. In the performance, the performers dress as various signs that take the form of symbols or characters, including *la migra*, *el nopal* (the Border Patrol, the Prickly Pear), and the sexualized, hyperfeminized forms of *la criada* and *la facil* (the Housekeeper and the Easy).¹² In boxy, homemade costumes depicting these various characters, the performers share a meal of *elotes* (grilled Mexican street corn) as they rotate a table over the border itself, a line that was easier to cross in the 1980s than in the 2010s. The same images from the BAW/TAF's performance are also depicted on Victor Ochoa's *Lotería Cards: Border Bingo / Lotería Frontera* (1986), both a mural and a project that re-creates the mural as cards for easy distribution. The BAW/TAF's performance and Ochoa's cards and mural are legible to multiple audiences—Mexican, Chicano/a, US. They inherently require a semiotic reading, relying on an audience, specifically one with the foreknowledge of that region. But even within a single region, the readings shift across cultures.

The mode of relying on established knowledge walks the “fine line between archetype and stereotype,” according to the scholar and artist Amy Sara Carroll, who defines this semiotic practice as “allegorical figuration” that is both a positive and negative aspect of the BAW/TAF's work.¹³ While the work creates an insider language, it also creates boundaries that rely on gendered tropes. This is because knowledge becomes held only by certain actors, and more likely than not, those actors are male given the history of art at the border. Carroll writes that in the performance *The End of the Line*, “at the end of every line they relinedated, BAW/TAF's aesthetic depended on undocumentation. The collective deployed a logic that reMexed mediums and metaphors, genres and goods.”¹⁴ In this process of relinedation, meaning a redefinition of the border line as well as various binaries at work within that space, the BAW/TAF helped cement an already existing insider language of border metaphors that appears repeatedly in border art and life.

Carroll defines “remex,” both the book's title and key theme, as an “allegorical performative,” a combination of remix culture and *Mexicanidad* (Mexicanness).¹⁵ The section of her book titled “Woman” disrupts the text's binary juxtaposition of “City” and “Border” and “enjoins us to read literally and thus ontologically allegory's etymology, to empathize with global spectacles of the ef/feminized nation as commodity.”¹⁶ She questions the new meaning that comes from the remixing of Mexicanidad and the language of tropes that marks the woman's body as an allegorical landscape. This very image makes its way into historical iterations of Mexicanidad through evocations of the woman as colonized, including the story of *La Malinche*, the indigenous woman who guided

Hernán Cortés during his time in Mexico, and the proverbial mother of Spanish-and-Indigenous Mexico.¹⁷ This language is present at the border, but Carroll is careful to note that it does little to destroy the borderization of that zone and instead “de-allegorizes to re-allegorize” this gendered divide.¹⁸ Gender is a critical element of border semiotics, but it cannot be accepted as it has previously been depicted without questioning how it has been formed in relation to signs and their interpretations. Deployed as both attack and survival strategy, gender-inflected border semiotics create both a common understanding grounded in patriarchal and at times misogynistic understandings for women making art at the border and a common—albeit complicated—enemy.

Fernández highlights the complexities of critique and survival first put forth by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands / La Frontera* as well as many of Anzaldúa's poems.¹⁹ Fernández sees these themes in her own work, writing, “For contemporary women, it is often difficult to reconcile the ubiquitous images of virgin and whore in our culture: clean vs. dirty. It is a fine line that becomes the point of demarcation for women to dance around,” adding that her work explores “territories that encompass these different types of boundaries and stereotypes: the physical, the emotional, and the psychological.”²⁰ She sees these various types and stereotypes (the distinction lies in recognizing realities and oversimplifications) into which women, especially women navigating various literal and metaphorical borders, are categorized. Her position as an artist allows her to engage these types on the emotional and theoretical levels required to understand and dissect them. Fernández calls out the troubling stereotypes within semiotic systems by encompassing them rather than using them as dividing lines.

Similarly, Jo-Anne Berelowitz, writing about Las Comadres, a collective of women engaged with border art in the late 1980s into 1990, recognizes in their work “cultural root paradigms” for Mexican womanhood.²¹ These cultural root paradigms include the Virgin of Guadalupe, the historical figure La Malinche, the ghostly La Llorona, the historical nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695), and the artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). Berelowitz describes the ways Mexican and border cultures situate each figure as a paradigm, sometimes stereotypically, sometimes productively. Las Comadres was a group of women with multiple, intersecting identities. Their artistic and activist work was sometimes productive; at other times their intersections caused tensions often found within collective approaches that strive to be intersectional. Regardless, through their references to the five cultural root paradigms, Las Comadres serves as a key antecedent for the ways that Fernández and Sanchez each conceive of femininity and women's work at the border.

Berelowitz offers the possibility of hybrid characters as one solution to the intersectionality trouble, including Hicks's "wrestler bride," who embodies both the ferocity and humor of a Lucha Libre fighter as well as the purity and Americanness of a traditional American bride. The figure also breaks the cultural root paradigms, depicting the new mestiza otherwise. Berelowitz argues that art has "the capacity to create new myths and new paradigms and thereby transcend demeaning subalternity," seeing Kahlo especially as "a type of the new mestiza, for she also traversed many borders."²² But these two examples still rely on the combination rather than the erasure of earlier tropes, such as the combined figure of virgin and whore. Berelowitz, while critical of individual attributes each cultural paradigm details, does not challenge the very notion of women relying on the historical figures for cultural connection and self-definition. The need to suffer like Sor Juana or Kahlo to be a "great woman" is toxic to identity formation, much like having to reconcile with the images of virgin and whore that Fernández describes. This bind is particularly relevant for artists, since they are making images that rely on a border semiotics in which these paradigms and tropes factor heavily.

However, these paradigms are not wholly negative. In fact, artists deploy them to both comment on their own circumstances and redefine imagined futures. Often through their work, artists who engage with their own gendered viewpoint utilize components of these figures while casting off others. This process of selective sampling shows such artists engaging in the process that the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz refers to as "disidentification," which he defines as a response to dominant modes of thought that "neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against the dominant ideology."²³ He adds that the process of disidentification also includes holding on to what the subject lost to redefine it. By recognizing a trope and then deconstructing it, feminist artists disidentify with the types that outside forces categorize them into, as Fernández illustrates by wearing the cocktail dress and heels. She rejects this trope as a way to identify herself but nonetheless employs it to criticize patriarchal systems of oppression. But this process is work. It is difficult mental labor, often invisible, almost always unpaid, and tacked onto the everyday labor of survival.

In their projects, Fernández and Sanchez make visible the work of navigating metaphorically gendered landscapes through depicting, documenting, and doing physical work. By climbing a ladder while wearing a cocktail dress and taking on the physical labor of painting, Fernández uses the imagery of gender roles to point out the labor of living between two cultures. Sanchez literalizes this in-between position through her documentation of her crossing, a task she is able to do only because of her role as a woman. Furthermore, the family unit plays a

key role in Sanchez's actions; her work as an artist is hers alone, while the *camioneta*, and circumstances that allow her to make this artwork, is her family's business. Both artists turn the limitations afforded to them by their gender into a means of making artwork and sharing stories of the borderlands.

Presence, Paint, and Documentation

Fernández's engagement with the border in *Borrando la Frontera* is a site-specific installation, performance, and video artwork.²⁴ This breakdown of genre and medium sets off an amalgamation of tropes, signs, and components, as Fernández employs a range of styles and references within the piece. While *Borrando la Frontera* engages the border wall, land art, and their respective histories, in this section I shift focus to Fernández's sexualized, hyperfeminized costume on her laboring body. While the black cocktail dress and heels may seem like an impractical choice for the artist to wear while scaling a ladder to paint the fence, they speak to a larger theme when put in conversation with Fernández's other works that explore these topics. The costume highlights gender roles and the sexualized labor of women in the border region.

In her series of performance-based paintings, *Pressing Matters* (2013), the artist depicts herself both at the border and in the domestic space with an iron and ironing board, conflating this action of feminized labor with the artist's site-specific performance at the border. *Pressing Matters: Untitled* (fig. 3) depicts the artist bent over an ironing board folded out of the wall within the domestic space. The image comes directly from a performance where Fernández danced a tango with an ironing board. She irons a white sheet that covers her head while she wears a short, strapless, black cocktail dress made from a tight, synthetic material that accentuates the contours of her body, along with black, pointy-toed pumps. The brushwork highlights her curves and sensualizes the domestic space. Overt references to Mexico or the United States do not exist; this home, this labor, and this sexualization could occur anywhere that emphasizes heteronormativity, gender roles, and their concurrent division of labor. Furthermore, it could also be an art historical reference to flirtatious laundresses painted by the impressionists of the nineteenth century. The painting suggests that the trope of *la criada* (the housekeeper) from Ochoa's *Lotería Cards* has come to life as a human woman, or perhaps this painting is the more realistic version of the crafted costume in the BAW/TAF's *End of the Line*. Both *Pressing Matters* and Ochoa's combination cards-and-performance employ elements of performance and documentation, as well as the sexualized female figure of *la criada*. Ochoa's *criada* irons while wearing a large bleach-bottle costume (perhaps suggesting cleanliness but also whiteness), dirty



Figure 3 Ana Teresa Fernández, *Untitled (Performance Documentation)*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 6 × 8 in. Image: Ana Teresa Fernández, <https://anateresafernandez.com/pressing-matters/>. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

sneakers, and exaggerated makeup. Even when she is rendered undesirable through her labor, the figure is still hyperfeminized through makeup and the bulky but nonetheless curvy form of the bleach bottle. By comparing the BAW/TAF's performance and Ochoa's cards as a form of documentation with Fernández's work involving the literal body at the literal border (images in this painted series show her sweeping around the border wall, not painting it), she progresses through types of labor while maintaining the hypersexualization of her own body. Thus Fernández carries out her performance to an unbalanced end, where costume and labor in their idiosyncrasy work together to illustrate the multifaceted qualities of women's work.

Through the absurdity of the balancing act of wearing high heels on a ladder, Fernández's performance exemplifies *relajo*, a mode of performance that highlights while rejecting various stereotypes or tropes to a playfully subversive, and often failing, end. The performance theorist Diana Taylor identifies *relajo* as "an act of disidentification insofar as it rejects any given categorization without producing or owning another," adding that *relajo* disrupts conventionality, manifesting "both the challenge to and the tacit acknowledgement of a system's

limits,” creating a “different, joyously rebellious solidarity.”²⁵ This differs from other performance models, including satire, in its ability to produce something else through the process of rejection; the disruption itself is *relajo*. However, *relajo*'s joyful elements are also a contested space in Fernández's work. Of her signature “little black dress,” she writes:

I also subvert the typical overtly folkloric representations of Mexican women in paintings by changing my protagonist's uniform to the quintessential little black dress. Wearing this symbol of American prosperity and femininity, the protagonist tangoes through this intangible dilemma with her performances at the San Diego/Tijuana Border—a place I myself had to cross to study and live in the US. In these performances, I portrayed this multiplication of self and the Sisyphean task of cleaning the environment to accentuate the idea of disposable labor resources. Moreover, the black dress is transformed into a funerary symbol of *luto*, the Mexican tradition of wearing black for a year after a death.²⁶

As Fernández explains through her multiple references, the black dress does not act as one neatly decoded sign, index, or symbol, suggesting *relajo*'s acceptance of failure. The dress is both sexual and somber, about her oppression and her freedom based on nationality and gender. The white sheet in the painting suggests purity in its color and its similarity to religious head coverings such as nuns' habits or the Virgin Mary's veil. Yet it also suggests the more violent image of a specter or shrouded corpse. As with the feminine dress and masculine labor in *Borrando la Frontera*, the tension between two divergent meanings can exist where neither interpretation is wholly correct or wholly wrong.

While the painting-and-performance itself is dark in color and subject matter, a *relajo* rebellion comes through in the action of dancing a tango, a dance usually associated with romance and desire, with an inanimate household object. The painting depicts a performance that does not actually re-create the intimate dance. The same is true for *Borrando la Frontera*; despite the turmoil often associated with the borderlands, through the light blue paint erasing the border, Fernández's performance suggests a joyfully rebellious imagined future, one that uses the state's own mechanism of the border fence to obscure itself. But once she leaves the site, any allusions to her gender identity leave with her body.

Fernández's work as performance artist and documenter of her performances is comparable to the late-1970s Chicano collective Asco's early

work. Much of Asco's early photography depicted the group not in the garish homemade costumes that made them famous but instead emulating the *pachuco*, a 1930s Mexican American or Chicano gangster, usually clad in a zoot suit. The group's single woman member, Patssi Valdez, dressed instead as the feminized version, the *pachuca*, for Asco's *Spray Paint LACMA* (1972). Harry Gamboa Jr. photographs Valdez with the group's graffiti tags at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). The image shows where the three male members of Asco have signed the bridge at LACMA in response to a museum curator's declaration that "Chicanos make graffiti not art."²⁷ Instead of signing the bridge herself, Valdez signs the space with her presence. She wears a pink shirt and tight jeans and has styled her hair and makeup. Like Fernández, she wears hyperfeminized clothing in a contested and perhaps dangerous space, made treacherous by unsanctioned painting (in the case of Asco, the tagging, and Fernández, the border erasure) and the clothing's restrictive nature preventing a quick escape. While tight jeans, body-conscious dresses, and high-heeled shoes are impractical attire for covert or even illegal activity in that they draw attention to the wearer while also being physically restraining, these artists wear them to underscore the importance of performed gender to their artworks. Through directly performing hypersexuality, these women become hypervisual. Both bring a highly feminized body to the historically masculine spaces of the art museum and the border zone. Although both artists are women, it is important to note the heightened elements of femininity they use in both of these encounters. Costume plays a key role here: while the male Asco members sign LACMA with their names, the BAW/TAF performs and documents their presence at the "end of the line" through their larger-than-life costumes.

Valdez and Fernández mark these sites with their bodies, creating documented traces of their presence. By employing presence, they mark the site with their bodies-as-themselves, not only their names or performances as border tropes. Their performance-as-feminine is documented through photography. As these women identify themselves in relation to site, they disidentify with gendered expectations put on them. While the expectation might be that they lean into the roles, both national and gendered, put forth by this contested space, the artists instead lean into femininity through dress while rejecting gender roles in their actions. This illustrates the complexity of feminist work, suggesting it is always intersectional. Here, the performance of femininity is weaponized; the artists use feminine signs in spaces where they are historically unwelcome to engage each site and to advocate for change. By weaponizing feminine signs, these women take up space, not only with their work but also with the very presences that contest an already contested space.

As part of a lineage of art that contests borders—in Asco's case, the border of what is inside and outside the museum in the 1970s—Fernández is signing the US-Mexico border space both with her presence and her art materials. The gesture of painting suggests an artist's hand or signature, an action that inherently requires presence. Not just Valdez but all four members of Asco marked the space with their presence. Yet the only body in the image is Valdez's, further complicating the gender binary. Photos not of just the painted walls but of the action of painting, including the artist's body, thus circulate for both artworks. Fernández's costume responds to the multiple ways transgressive work excludes the feminized figure. Both Fernández and Valdez are aware of the ephemerality of their presence at the site. The trace of their presence through the signature is equally fleeting, hence the documentation of the work. Fernández comments on this history and then moves beyond it, signing the border wall herself in three media: her presence, the trace of her presence in paint, and the video documentation of the event. In doing so, she illustrates that because of, not despite, her hypersexualization, the figure of the feminized woman is uniquely able to mark, contest, and erase the border, so long as she documents her work.

Through the bold act of painting and her consideration of the implications of her work beyond site, Fernández challenges any single notion of femininity's role at the border. Instead, she uses a *relajo* sensibility to perform an imagined future where national borders are rendered invisible, thus centering other identities. Fernández uses her costume to draw attention to women's invisible labor, highlighting the critical, but often unnoticed, role it plays in these contested sites. Her signature in blue paint remains at the border, and in the documentation of her performance long after the slatted wall reappears against the sky.

From Agua Prieta to Phoenix and Back Again

Sanchez's documentary film project *Historias en la Camioneta* (2010) focuses on the transitory aspects of the border, contrasting the apparent immobility of the international boundary with its conceptual portability.²⁸ Mobile borders, portable borders, and the common assertion that "the border crossed us" permeate responses to the US-Mexico border.²⁹ Sanchez's work illuminates how tension between subject positions and physical positions at a given point in time define the border's crossers. Sanchez's project engages the border beyond the San Diego–Tijuana region, yet gender's inflection remains a key aspect of her approach, as she would be unable to make the work were it not for her identity as a woman and her familial access to the space of the *camioneta*. Her gender, her knowledge of both English and Spanish, and her lived experience allow her to step outside theoretical

space of the in-between and into a documentary mode of art making. In the film, which chronicles the journey of her family's *camioneta* from Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, to Phoenix, Arizona, United States, Sanchez sees the van as a public space and therefore a repository of knowledge that she can access because of specifics of her identity as a brown woman who speaks Spanish living in the borderlands. Furthermore, travelers often use the *camioneta* to stay connected to their families and friends across the US-Mexico border. Many of the interviewees mention traveling in both directions to visit family members. This also evokes the domestic space, which is often under the care and control of women. By documenting this portable, ephemeral, and domestic space, Sanchez presents the familial and the feminine as a key component of the borderlands.

Sanchez highlights labor's performative component and, more specifically, the mobile qualities of women's work, which is often unpaid and in the home. Even when Sanchez's physical position changes, she maintains an inherently gendered viewpoint, informed by how she sees herself and how those around her interpret her. As a woman, Sanchez moves subtly and comfortably within the space. Furthermore, her gender affords her the trust of the other women in the van, if only based on gender. Put another way, the passengers would give a different response to a male artist bringing a video camera into the *camioneta* and asking questions. The work of her project is to cross the border while documenting her crossing. In doing so, Sanchez engages the other travelers she meets within the *camioneta* space as well as the film's viewers once the project is complete.

The *camioneta*, like gender or the borderlands, is a malleable space, defined by and in relation to its occupants.³⁰ In the first clip, Sanchez fixes the camera on a young girl as a United States Border Patrol agent, *la migra*, asks other passengers in Spanish where they are coming from, where they are going, if they live or have family in these locations, and what they are carrying with them. His rigidity is in sharp contrast to the fluidity of language, identity, and subject position within the *camioneta*. His demeanor is a contrast to the list of items a woman in the van tells him she is carrying: prepared food for her family across the border. The film's viewers, much like the child, are aware of some, but not all, of what is going on (fig. 4). By placing *la migra* in the periphery (viewers never fully see his face), Sanchez decenters those in power to focus on human connections and human stories.

The little girl at the center of the frame early in the video appears doubtful, caught between a multitude of binaries including languages, national identities, governments, and cultures. Sanchez, through her documentary mode, gives her viewers just as many cues as she does ambiguities. For example, like Sanchez's interviews, the video alternates between Spanish and English, always subtitled in



Figure 4 M. Jenea Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*, still, 2010. Image: M. Jenea Sanchez, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGOSBLbqOM2010>. Image courtesy of the artist.

the other language. This implies audiences that speak only Spanish or only English, but it still privileges a knowledge of both languages. This is especially true when some riders speak in a hybrid of Spanish and English particular to the borderlands, illustrating another linguistic, if not always visible, semiotic mixing in this space. Sanchez also makes the confusion and mixing of languages visible, as opposed to solely auditory, through her capturing the fares written in both English and Spanish on the van's windows. The inclusion of this information and its centrality in the frame mirrors how, while the information is printed and legible to passengers in some places, it is not always visible or perfectly clear to them. At one angle, the van's destinations and fares are clearest from inside the van. From the outside, it is as if viewers were seeing it in a mirror, therefore obscuring the certainty of where the van is going until the passenger is inside. Sanchez's fixation on this mundane detail intentionally suggests to her viewer that border semiotics are only truly legible to those within that space.³¹ Outsider perspectives always have the potential to read a sign or language in reverse.

Sanchez's editing obscures other central elements from the viewer's direct line of sight. She allows her viewers to glimpse more context through the simultaneous depiction of what the camera sees (the passenger being interviewed) and what the passenger sees (the landscape outside the *camioneta*), but never granting the viewer a straightforward understanding of a physical position. Often Sanchez splits the screen between the face of the person speaking and the exterior of the van. In his essay on landscape and representation at the border, John-

Michael H. Warner observes of Sanchez's work that "viewers always know where we are inside the bus, but the precise location in Arizona and Sonora remains uncertain," mirroring the ability for viewers to know some, but not all, of the visual language of the border at any given point, and heightening the sense of knowledge as tied to insider status.³² What is more certain than location is the increased nervousness of the young girl as she looks around the *camioneta*, watching both what goes on outside it and how the adults inside with her react. Her gender situates us in the feminine as well, presenting a generational lineage from her to the artist to the artist's mother who runs the business. The child's reaction reflects the changeable nature and guaranteed uncertainty of the journey and of the borderlands itself.

As with languages, viewers might be familiar with the semiotic system but are never quite sure how it will be deployed and how, in doing so, their physical position will change, incorporating, even altering, their subject positions within that shift. As Warner writes, "Within the space of *La Camioneta*, the notions of foreigner, tourist, immigrant, and refugee reconstitute as passengers and historians," as the work "strategically negotiates boundaries and creatively emphasizes the specificity of borders in thoughtful and abstract ways."³³ The spatial changes outside the *camioneta* redefine the positions of the people inside of it to one another and to their surroundings. This affects the viewer's interpretations and ability to understand the artwork. Flexibility complicates the relationships of the people inside the *camioneta*—including Sanchez. Through her documentary mode, she transports that uncertain flexibility outside the space of the *camioneta*, further troubling the subject-viewer relationship.

Much of the conversation in *Historias en la Camioneta* involves cross-border familial relationships. Families, individuals, and groups travel north or south to visit relatives who are separated from them by the border. In her study of abjection in performance art, Leticia Alvarado discusses the various ways that different systems of border semiotics interpret motherhood and the abject, when applied outside performance art and in real-world situations, might help dismantle tropes and gendered expectations.³⁴ The figure of the mother has multiple interpretations in border semiotics, including the Virgin, *La Llorona*, the state-valued bearer of children, and the crossing migrant, pregnant with her "anchor baby." Alvarado wonders what it might mean to adjust cultural understandings of motherhood, making space for abjection.³⁵ Alvarado's reading in the introduction of *Abject Performances* removes the moralized nature of maternity in relation to the nation and instead presents "an abject figure grappling with and deciding on separation within a mixed-status family of loved ones across the expanse of the border."³⁶ Here Alvarado invites the abjection and discomfort of these situations. The abject

mother is represented as a sexually available foil, “impure yet desirable,” against which to create white womanhood.³⁷ She invites the Latina mother to perform and exist against respectability politics and asks that her audience pay close attention to moments of nonassimilation that the mother might use in abject performances of her gendered position. Alvarado inserts abjection into motherhood, allowing for the messiness of emotion to make its way into each iteration of interpreting signs. Sanchez’s work might hint at these less-than-idealized understandings of motherhood and femininity, but she is grounded in the reality not even of extreme circumstances but of everyday life and movement across the border. In her artwork, Sanchez makes room for the abject insofar as it is part of the reality of life as a woman, a mother, and a human being.

Like all semiotic approaches, the interpretation relies on the interpreter. Sanchez intends her film for an outside audience yet shows her biases in her closeness to the situation. Her connection to the *camioneta* is that it is her family’s business, so she is documenting both their labor as well as her own work as an artist. Her family’s business and role in the community gives her access to do her artistic labor in this project. At one point she discusses her own mother with the driver (fig. 4).³⁸ He explains to Sanchez that he met her mother when he was working at a gas station. They became acquainted, and she hired him to work for the family’s *camioneta* service. As the driver raises a sunshade to block the setting sun coming in from his left, a clear indication that the van is heading north, he says (as translated into English in the subtitles), “when I encounter someone I know, it feels . . . you start to remember, make memory, remember things from the past, beautiful memories.”³⁹ Their conversation, born of Sanchez’s prompting, later edited out of the video, invites viewers not only into the space of the van but also into the intimate interpersonal and familial relationships that occur in these spaces. These relationships are quintessential to dismantling tropes in favor of realism, tearing down stereotypical female figures and replacing them with real women living intersectional lives. Sanchez’s work implies that this method is portable: relationships are central to engage border semiotics, and border stories, in the spaces beyond the US-Mexico border.

Envisioning the Border beyond the Borderlands

Historias en la Camioneta does not fully erase the border but documents, engages, and redefines it. Fernández does the same; even with the title *Borrando la Frontera*, the erasure of the border is only one element of her work. Documentation, through video and her painting, is critical to the work’s continued reception. The border’s literal absence or presence is ultimately inconsequential to an artist’s

ability to engage with that space. Through the labor of engaging with the border's presence, these works illustrate how national and social boundaries as well as rhetorical tactics construct the border.

While the history of feminist perspectives often leans toward the exclusionary as in the case of *Las Comadres*, the roots of that movement and of feminist and collective desires are initially inclusionary, far-reaching, and intersectional. There is neither a singular feminism/femininity nor a singular border or border semiotics. Instead, there is a mutable series of signs whose interpretations are always underscored by physical and subject positions, specifically as they relate to gender. The US-Mexico border is made up of multiple points, cities, and social and ecological climates, reaching beyond a single line. It is precisely these multitudes that allow for a more comprehensive and portable understanding of the border. Fernández and Sanchez engage the physical border space as well as a more fluid comprehension of gender and borderlands that makes space for not only multiple interpretations but their respective interpreters. The documentation process also opens up even further meanings and interpretations among different audiences as the work circulates outside its original sphere. This gives it special as well as temporal reach, as it documents not only a place but also a time.

These works illustrate that site and gender are inextricable, intersecting in a myriad of ways that lead to identity formation. For Fernández, it is to highlight gendered stereotypes while imagining a borderless future. For Sanchez, it is a means of traveling and comprehension that matches the fluidity of gendered constructs and the borderlands to make space for human experiences. Identity plays a key role in these works in that the artists contend with not only geographic and cultural borders but also the intersections of gendered boundaries as well. This means that through their work, they are constantly performing the labor of intersectionality and further documenting that labor to export it. While this could become an exclusionary exercise, both artists invite participation and reception through the act and work of performance and documentation, allowing outsider access rather than drawing yet another boundary.

* * *

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Notes

¹ M. Jenea Sanchez, "About," M. Jenea Sanchez website, accessed July 3, 2021, <http://mjeneasanchez.com/en/about-1>.

² Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792>.

³ Ila N. Sheren, *Portable Borders: Performance Art and Politics on the U.S. Frontera since 1984* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

⁴ Much of my understanding of these issues comes from the seminar Contemporary Art of the US/Mexico Border and Beyond, Ila N. Sheren, Washington University in St. Louis, Spring 2020.

⁵ Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 87.

⁶ For code-switching's origins as a linguistic element of Black culture in the United States, see Taryn Kiana Myers, "Can You Hear Me Now? An Autoethnographic Analysis of Code-Switching," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 20, no. 2 (2020): 113–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708619879208>.

⁷ I define *intersectionality* by drawing on the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007).

⁹ D. Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹² Translations from Sheren, *Portable Borders*, 146n61.

- ¹³ Amy Sara Carroll, *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 230.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ¹⁷ Famously Octavio Paz discusses the figure of the *Chingada* in “The Sons of *La Malinche*,” in *The Mexico Reader*, edited by Gilbert Joseph and Timothy Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 20–27.
- ¹⁸ Carroll, *REMEX*, 200.
- ¹⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*.
- ²⁰ Ana Teresa Fernández, “Borrando La Frontera” (2011), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://anateresafernandez.com/borrando-la-barda-tijuana-mexico/>.
- ²¹ Berelowitz borrows this term from Victor Turner. See Jo-Anne Berelowitz, “Las Comadres: A Feminist Collective Negotiates a New Paradigm for Women at the U.S./Mexico Border,” *Genders* 28 (September 1, 1998). <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/1998/09/01/las-comadres-feminist-collective-negotiates-new-paradigm-women-usmexico-border>.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 21.
- ²³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), 11. Muñoz is also drawing on the linguist Michel Pêcheux’s reading of Louis Althusser.
- ²⁴ Fernández also erases the border in a 2016 project in Baja California, Sonora, and Ciudad Juarez titled *The Borrando la Frontera Project*. This work’s continued resonance, community engagement, and expansion beyond the San Diego–Tijuana region suggests its importance not just with a specific site but with the border region more broadly. In this essay I focus on the 2011 performance and video in which the artist painted the wall alone in San Diego–Tijuana.
- ²⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 129.
- ²⁶ Ana Teresa Fernández, “Pressing Matters,” <https://anateresafernandez.com/pressing-matters/>, accessed April 27, 2020.
- ²⁷ Chon Noriega, “Your Art Disgusts Me: Early Asco (1971–75),” *Afterall* 19 (Autumn–Winter 2008) 1–8.
- ²⁸ In *Portable Borders*, Sheren asserts that during the time these artists were working, “borders came to represent a space of performance rather than a geographical boundary” (3).
- ²⁹ See Sheren, *Portable Borders*.
- ³⁰ John-Michael Warner, Zoom call with author, April 24, 2020.

³¹ While the text goes both ways depending on the location within the van, an example of the text as legible to the passenger but not someone outside the van appears at 4:53 in M. Jenea Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*, October 12, 2011, YouTube video, 20:37,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGOSBLhqwOM&ab_channel=mjeneaSanchez.

³² John-Michael H. Warner, "A Border Art History of the Vanishing Present: Land Use and Representation," in *Border Spaces: Visualizing the U.S.-Mexico Frontera*, edited by Katherine G. Morrissey and John-Michael H. Warner (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018), 209.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

³⁵ Ibid., 7.

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ This conversation begins around 15:50 in Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*.

³⁹ Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*, 16:42.