

Navigating the Borderlands:

A poetic and visual exploration by a first-generation immigrant

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Abstract

In this written thesis, I address the development of my studio practice and visual art work during my time in the University of the Arts' Book Arts + Printmaking MFA program. My thesis work explores the socio-political issues of immigration in the U.S. by centering Latinx immigrant narratives in its concept. In order to contextualize my thesis work, I begin by discussing immigration policy and social injustice, as well as my upbringing as a first-generation immigrant and identity politics. I explain how my processes bridge the experiences of Latinx immigrants, first-generation Latinx immigrants and the experiences of my own family; and discuss my visual work in reference to contemporary visual and performance artists, as well as contemporary films/documentaries and poetry. I conclude this thesis by proposing the idea that the arduous nature of migration across the U.S./Mexico border is representative of the struggle and discrimination immigrants endure while living in the U.S.; to support this idea, I draw parallels between the borderlands' aggressive terrain and American xenophobia.

Introduction

The concept of Latinidad refers to the cultural, linguistic, socio-political similarities that people within Latinx¹ diaspora share. The study of Latinx identity politics is relatively new and the meaning of the term Latinidad is highly debated. However, being myself part of the Latinx diaspora, it is a well worn word in my own vocabulary. During my first semester at UArts, I created several prints wherein I collaged indigenous motifs with images of crochet forms. My use of indigenous motifs was inspired by Xicano (Chicano)² phenomenology. The Xicano movement of 60's purposefully embraced indigenous imagery, indigenous pagan traditions and the nahuatl language in order to reclaim their indigenous ancestry and de-colonize the inner self. These prints were a good first step in exploring the complexities of my Latinx identity because I was able to channel the spirit of the Xicano movement in my visual work. However, it was a broadside I made to fulfill an assignment for the Letterpress course that became the turning point in my work. The image on the broadside is a crocheted form overlaid onto an abstracted image of the Sonoran desert³. Below the image, I printed the text: *El terreno se ha revelado*. The text is a play on the Spanish word *revelar*, which can mean to reveal or to rebel. Translated, the text can mean “the terrain has revealed itself” or “the terrain has rebelled”, while the crocheted form in the broadside can be interpreted in various ways: as nature, as chicken wire, as a fence. When I entered the Book Arts + Printmaking program, I did not intend to make work about the border.

¹ Latinx: gender neutral alternatives to the plural/masculine “Latinos”

² The term Chicano/a refers to a person of Mexican origin or Mexican-American people. The term Xicano makes a use of the indigenous nahuatl spelling of the word as act of reclaiming Mexican indigeneity.

³ The majority of deaths of crossing migrants in the past decade have occurred in the Sonoran desert. The image was taken from the web and abstracted using Photoshop.

However, I was assigned the broadside at a time when the anti-immigrant rhetoric used by conservative presidential candidates became particularly toxic. The GOP primary election campaigns sparked an urgency within me to make work that offered a POC⁴, Latinx perspective on immigration. In the scope of my work, this piece represents the moment I began to consider the potential role of the controversial U.S./Mexico border wall⁵ in my work.

There are currently approximately 11.4 million undocumented immigrants residing in the States and over 75 percent migrated from a Latin American country; despite the diverse cultures that color Latin America, Latinx immigrants from different nationalities are brought together by their shared experience as immigrants in the United States. In the past year, the contentious U.S./Mexico border wall and mass deportation campaign promises made by Donald Trump⁶ during the 2016 presidential election put immigration at the center of the national conversation. Throughout his campaign, Trump continuously insisted that the wall is essential to keep out “criminals”, “rapists” and “bad hombres” (Ross); his belittling, ignorant rhetoric fueled the already existing, loud anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx sentiment in the U.S. As a result, immigration inevitably became an integral part of the artistic concept for my thesis work. Through my work, I intend to change the narrative on immigration from one founded on stereotypes to a narrative rooted in the experiences of Latinx immigrants; additionally, I intend to recenter the source/voice of the narrative from ill-intentioned public officials to the immigrants, who amid strife, work to survive in hostile environments.

⁴ Person of color

⁵ The wall has lately become controversial because of its place in the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the current election cycle. It has long been controversial for many living in border counties because it is expensive and ineffective.

⁶ I will only refer to Donald Trump by his given name; despite the 2016 election results, he is not my president.

Latinidad and Immigration

My visual work is inevitably influenced by my identity and the environments that I navigate. I am most keenly aware of the parts of my identity in which I am socially and politically a minority, and the environments in which those identities are marginalized. As a queer, first generation immigrant, Miami-born Latina, I am constantly navigating between various intersections in my identity--i.e my sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, culture, language, etc. Critical Race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the word “intersectionality” to speak about the multi-layered form of oppression that people with various marginalized identities experience. Understanding how I am affected by intersectionality allows me to fully understand the lens through which I create my artwork. More specifically, in order to further understand how my ethnicity, race and nationality affect my creative work as a Latina in the U.S., I turn to studies of Latinidad. The term itself is technically defined as the various attributes that are shared by Latinx and their descendants. In reality, it is a vast and complex concept that can hardly be explained with a single definition, as it attempts to encompass the language, history and culture of dozens of Latin American nationalities, as well as the Latin American diaspora. However through the phenomenology of Latinidad, I have learned that the exchange of language, the conflict between cultural influence and loyalty, and the inherent struggle of immigrants of color in a white-dominated country have determined what my experience as a first-generation Latina immigrant in the U.S is. Consequently, my artwork is rooted in the experiences of both Latinx immigrants as well as first-generation Latinx immigrants.

Both my parents crossed the U.S./Mexico border illegally; I was, therefore, raised in a mixed-status⁷ family. I became fully aware of my parent's immigration status during the George W. Bush Jr. presidency, because of the widespread anti-immigrant sentiment that grew after the 9/11 attacks--the political anti-immigrant rhetoric post-9/11 disseminated fear that terrorists were coming into the country through the U.S. borders. As a result of the terrorist attacks, a right-wing political campaign clamoring for stronger border enforcement led to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and a rise in deportation raids. Under President Bush, too many families lived under the constant threat of separation, including my own. Living in Miami, a city predominantly inhabited by Latinx immigrants, I went to school alongside many other students whose families were also at risk for deportation and became hyper aware of socio-political immigration issues in the U.S. at a young age. The unwillingness of right-wing politicians to pass comprehensive immigration reform, the harsh naturalization process and racialized deportation practices are examples of issues that continue to affect mixed-status families. In particularly oppressive states, state legislation is in place that allows state and city police to verify the immigration status of anyone they suspect of living in the US illegally (Morse). The first of its kind is the controversial SB1070 in Arizona. Maricopa county's former Sheriff, Joe Arpaio⁸, championed and enforced SB1070, which led to statewide protests of state-sanctioned racial profiling of Latinx residents by the police. In Arizona and other states that have adopted laws similar to SB1070, Latinx are routinely stopped for minor traffic infractions and

⁷ A mixed status family is one in which there are different citizenship/immigration statuses.

⁸ It should be noted that Joe Arpaio is largely despised by the Latinx community. For the 2016 state elections, a record number of Latinx voter turnout resulted in Arpaio losing his re-election bid. Thank God.

forced to prove their legal status, if such status cannot be proven, immigrants are sent to detaining centers to await deportation.

In a 2015 speech, Donald Trump famously kicked off an election campaign brimming with racially charged rhetoric with the following statement:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

--Donald Trump, announcement speech, June 2015 (Ross)

As the daughter of immigrants, it is difficult to witness public figures normalize a narrative in which immigrants are labeled as either rapists or cartel members. Public officials and mainstream media sources in the U.S. too often dehumanize immigrants by labeling them as dangerous. The anti-immigrant sentiment fostered by public officials' toxic rhetoric and propagated by the media creates an extremely oppressive environment in which immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, struggle to survive. Trump's statement creates a false narrative that leads its audience to believe that most, if not all, of the immigrants crossing the border are criminals. This narrative becomes more damaging when it is internalized by its audience and reflected in draconian legislation such as SB1070. Additionally, Trump's misleading campaign promise-- to build a wall along the U.S./Mexico border and increase enforcement along the border-- gives his audiences the false impression that the southern border is completely unprotected and that migrants are able to cross the border easily. In reality, there is already wall built on the 600 miles of the border that are not privately owned or indigenous nation lands, and the amount of

enforcement officials hired has doubled since 9/11 (*The Real Deal about the U.S.-Mexico Border*). Moreover, Trump's campaign promise ignores the alarming increase in deaths (mostly caused by hypothermia and dehydration) along the border in the past decade.

I ground my artwork on the experiences of Latinx immigrants and first-generation immigrants because it is important for me to create a platform with my work through which I can center the voice of my community, and neutralize the vilification of immigrants by white supremacist public officials. Additionally, existing Latinx immigrant narratives are filtered through the lens of a white-dominated mainstream media, and many immigrants are too frightened and disempowered to challenge existing narratives. From my personal experience, I've learned that first-generation children typically occupy the role of the spokespeople in their families, especially if the adults in those families struggle with language barriers. At the age of 24, I still occupy that role in my immediate family and it translates onto my work.

Poetry: the bedrock of my creative work

The majority of the literature to which I was introduced as a public school student was written by white writers, and occasionally, a groundbreaking piece by a black writer. Since American public school system curricula are centered in White American history, I wasn't exposed to diverse writers of color until I got to college. As a budding poet, I am every day seeking out poetry written by Latinx poets so that I may learn from the unique experiences written down by people whom I can relate to. The first poet, and scholar, to transform my work is Gloria Anzaldúa. Her groundbreaking book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, proposes the idea that the borderland isn't just geographically and physically experienced, that

Chicanx live with internalized borders. It was through Anzáldua that I began to understand that without having lived in a border state, first-generation immigrants are forced to navigate between two--or more-- cultures and languages. From a young age, I learned to move between various stratified and conflicting identities. Anzaldúa's work resonates with me because it is rooted in second wave, queer, intersectional feminism--Anzaldúa was a trailblazer for the Xicanisma⁹ movement. *Borderlands/La Frontera* shaped the landscape of queer Latinx poetry. For instance, Eduardo Corral, a queer first-generation Chicanx poet, really engages Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* by exploring the negative space between his sexuality and his Chicanx identity. In his first book, *Slow Lightning*, Corral gives his audience heart-breaking insight into the myriad experiences of migrants crossing the border illegally, as well as the immigrants who struggle to survive in the U.S. everyday. *Slow Lightning* is often set on the border desert and is conveyed so vividly that it has allowed me to taste a landscape that is foreign to me, having lived in the East Coast my whole life. Corral's fearlessly raw borderlife imagery pushed me to reflect more deeply and write more thoughtfully about my own relationship with internalized borders. Before reading *Slow Lightning*, I felt that I didn't have a right to insert my voice into my visual work because it was founded on experiences of immigration that were not my own; in some way, I feel that Corral's poetry gave me permission to allow my own pain, as the daughter of immigrants, to bleed into my visual work.

My own poetry is rooted in the feelings I live with that are evidence of an experience or memory. In my written work, I seek to envelope my readers within the folds of those feelings which I've both experienced and observed as a first-generation Latina. Most of my poetry is

⁹ Also, known as Chicana feminism.

written bilingually, drawing from both English and Spanish, because it's an honest representation of my experience living in flux between two languages and cultures. Writing poetry allows me to fully process thoughts, emotion and frustration by forcing me to translate them linguistically. In some instances, my poetry anchors my visual work, dictates its development and is incorporated in the work. During my first year, for example, I wrote a three-part reactionary poem in collaboration with the Writing + Collaboration class at UArts, in response to Glenn Weyant's sound/performance piece titled *Performance for Surveillance*, which is set beside the border wall that already exists in Arizona. Weyant brilliantly works in collaboration with the environment by connecting a low-tech handmade microphone to an amplifier and centering the sounds of the borderland in the music; he accompanies the environment with his cello in order to create haunting compositions. In my opinion, the eerie melodies in *Performance for Surveillance* speak of the solitude, desperation and fear experienced by the migrants who have traveled across those lands. My poem, *Zumbido Perpetuo*, is a representation of both my considered interpretation of Weyant's performance and my visceral reactions to the musical composition. *Zumbido Perpetuo* became the foundation for a series of prints that represent the sensory elements of the border created by Weyant's music and the vast, daunting landscape where the music is created. I wrote the poem in three parts, each one reflecting different reactions and thoughts triggered throughout Weyant's performance. The part that most resonates in my work is:

the grass is a siren crying
 song captivated the land, fué pura seducción
 la quise consolar, le extendí la mano
 and I was interrupted by

dark iron bars

sol, calor, hypnotic, surreal

fragmented zumbido, deafening, forewarning doom

historia ciclica, ancient prophecy, grumbling earth

numbing soledad, compañía espiritual, fuerza

fragmented zumbido, deafening, forewarning doom

endless limbo

Zumbido Perpetuo also reflects my interest to learn more about the landscape that my parents traversed, the landscape that I imagine and dream of, and the wall that currently divides my homeland from my mother's. In the series of prints, I continue to use the abstracted border wall imagery that has become a recurring element in my work. Drawing and redrawing the wall is my way of demystifying that which has become the symbol of separation of families and immigrant prejudice in many Latinx communities. In my opinion, the damaging discourse that stems from the border wall has made its presence in my work necessary.

My poetry also serves as a vehicle for ideas that inform my visual work. When the 2016 federal election became particularly triggering, its influence in the development of my thesis work was manifested in my writing long before it was in my visual work. I wrote my most recent body of written work as a direct result of the election's toxicity. *Collision* witnesses moments of aggression, fear and anger experienced by immigrants and first generation immigrants in the U.S. In the piece "11.4 million", for instance, I expose damaging dog-whistle rhetoric such as the term

“illegal” by juxtaposing the idea that 11.4 million undocumented people are emotionally confined by the word illegal, with the bitter irony that undocumented people are also physically imprisoned within the confines of a country self-promoted as the Land of the Free. Like “11.4 Million”, the other pieces in *Collision* are more explicitly political than my visual pieces were during my first year at UArts. Writing politically relevant poetry led me to ask myself: how I can make visual work more relevant to the political climate now? How do current issues of immigration affect immigrants and their children like my family and myself? How can these issues be represented in visual creative work? While none of the poems in *Collision* were incorporated into my studio thesis work, they were critical in helping me determine what I wanted my audience to take away from my thesis work.

En el camino de Dios

My parent’s have told and re-told their migration stories since I was a young girl. Whenever they did, my sisters and I would usually sit quietly and listen. We would never ask questions out of fear that we would ask something too personal. However, this past year I decided to proactively learn more about my parent’s journeys across the border in order to understand the different ways their lives were affected by their experience migrating across the border. My intention was to allow those stories to form the foundation for my thesis work just as they have shaped me and my own experiences. Those stories became the lens through which I deeply analyze my upbringing in a mixed-status family and translate the fear that I, and others like me, experience from thought to the written to the visual. In order to learn more about my mother’s migration, I sat with her and asked her to describe everything she remembered-- the

climate, the sounds, the smells, the light quality of the environment, thoughts and instances that still resonate with her. Starting an open conversation with my mother was important because I had the opportunity to ask the questions I'd been holding back for years. Additionally, I am now better able to visualize a landscape and an experience that I've internalized but have not experienced myself.

While speaking to my mother, I learned that she crossed the border seven times by way of the Rio Grande, between the towns of Tamaulipas, Mexico and La Paloma, Texas, not knowing how to swim. During each of those journeys, she was only able to carry a small backpack with a change of clothing, some money and her bible. This bit of information turned into a series of seven backpacks in honor of each journey my mother made across the U.S./Mexico border, titled *En el camino de Dios (On God's Path)*. Each of the backpacks was constructed using the drawstring backpack that most closely resembled the one my mother used. Rather than using fabric, I made a tough, fabric-like handmade paper called joomchi to make the backpacks. The process of joomchi was introduced to the United States by Korean artist Jiyoung Chung; in essence, joomchi is a korean papermaking technique used to adhere multiple layers of hanji (korean paper), or other east asian paper, using only water and friction in order to create a stronger sheet of paper. This process is so effective because when wet, mulberry paper fibers open up and become receptive to more layers of wet mulberry paper; when they are dry, the fibers seize up and adhere to each other. Joomchi is a labor-intensive process that requires constant attention and care in order to make it successfully; the distressing process requires the maker to constantly pleat and wring the paper. The act of pleating and wringing in many ways mirrors the menial, backbreaking jobs that are so often done by immigrants, including my

mother. When the joomchi dries, the surface is left feeling weathered, lived and worn in places, but the sheet itself remains incredibly strong. I was able to embed loose, abstracted imagery that alluded to the landscape of the borderland within the joomchi sheets by layering pigmented hanji, and drew abstracted border/river imagery on some of the pigmented sheets that speak to the natural and manmade barriers between Mexico and the U.S.--i.e. the Rio Grande and the wall. After making the joomchi and sewing the backpacks, I dyed them with diluted acrylic inks. I allowed each backpack to sit in various brown and umber ink for different periods of time. The dying process served to further weather the backpack and imitate the muddiness of the Rio Grande river banks.

While making *En el camino de Dios*, I contended with questions about: the representation of journeys and time through static artwork; about weathered objects and their relationship to time; about how to represent lived moments through objects; and about light's relationship to experience. In his artist book *Sanctus Sonorensis*, Phillip Zimmerman uses imagery of the Sonoran sky to represent an immigrant's full day's passage through the Sonoran Desert. Zimmerman very simply and profoundly gives the reader a moment under the same sky as an immigrant crossing the desert. At every turn of the page time is passing and landscape is being traversed. In the backpacks, I insinuate the passage of time and shift in landscape by using different color palettes that relate to sunlight and daylight. Each image of the sky in *Sanctus Sonorensis* is paired with a beatitude that speaks of the lives immigrants hope to make for themselves in the U.S. and the spaces they occupy if they are able to cross successfully; Zimmerman's use of beatitudes successfully refers to the importance of prayer and faith in Latinx culture. In *Where is Dayani Cristal?*, a documentary directed by Marc Silver that retraces

the journey of a migrant whose body was found in the Sonoran Desert, Silver overlay shots of the border landscape with audio of the Migrant's Prayer. Watching the documentary, I realized that *En el camino de Dios* was missing the element of faith that was central to my mother's experience--like my mother, many Latinx migrants have relied on prayer and faith to harness strength and resilience for their arduous journeys. The Migrant's Prayer, which was written in the early 20th century by an Argentine monseigneur, has brought solace to hundreds of migrants and their families since its creation. As a result, I decided to incorporate the Migrant's Prayer into my work by printing keepsake prayer cards to be hung beside the backpacks. The prayer cards have the original Spanish version of the prayer on one side and an English translation on the other, over a printed faint canary yellow cross. Prayer cards, along with rosaries and other such religious paraphernalia, play a significant role in migration because they are portable objects of faith; for instance, when I left Miami to go to college, and again to go to grad school, my mother gifted me a prayer card for protection. I want to give my audience the experience of holding a prayer card in their hands while observing objects that represent an arduous, life-altering journey. When they were exhibited in the fall of 2016, the backpacks were each hung across a wall and the prayer cards were housed in a small handmade, periwinkle blue book cloth covered case left of the backpacks. The piece was hung in this way so that the audience could take a prayer card and have it in their hands as they viewed the backpacks. During the exhibition's opening reception, I was able to see that the prayer cards fulfilled their intended effect. Most of the folks at the reception took and read a prayer card before making their way around the gallery.

When I learned that my mother crossed the U.S./Mexico border seven times during her time in Texas, before moving to Miami, I could not help but imagine the little ways in which

each journey across the Rio Grande was different and similar to the rest. Much like *Sanctus Sonorensis*, each backpack represents a unique moment in landscape, in light, in weather, in experience that made each journey different, but is ultimately a part of a greater story. A lot of the feedback I received about the backpacks in the fall were related to how beautifully constructed they were. While I appreciated the compliments at the time, I realized that the backpacks needed to be activated in a way that would make them more powerful. I struggled for months to figure how I could transform the piece. Right before a trip home to Miami, I had the strongest impulse to pack them in my luggage, knowing that allowing the backpacks to exist in the place my immigrant parents called home would spark an idea. The day before I left I was driving along Miami's Deering Chanel beach, the sun was making the drive unrelentingly difficult, as it usually does around 4 PM, when I looked out into the glittering ocean and found the answer I'd been searching for. The following morning, I drove to the same beach, backpacks in tow. I filled the backpacks with sand and put them in the ocean. I allowed the waves to rock each backpack back and forth, and eventually push them towards the sand. Some backpacks ripped in the water and the sand washed out, while others survived, worse for the wear. I let the backpack dry in the sand as long as possible but had to eventually hang them in my backyard.

The decision to take the backpacks to the beach was impulsive. I instinctively knew that they had to be exposed to the ocean because my mother's journey did not end in Harlingen, TX; she eventually found her way to Miami. Moreover, the body of water that hugs South Florida is connected to the mouth of the Rio Grande. *En el camino de Dios* now also draws parallels between the river my parents crossed to get to the U.S. and the body of water that continues to confine them in the U.S. I recorded the outing with my Nikon and looking through the images I

saw a picture where all the backpacks are resting on the sand, looking worn and tired, as they would if someone were to stumble upon them naturally. Through this picture, I realized that the backpacks should be installed on the floor, not on the wall--like they had been originally. I was also motivated to make this installation decision after looking at the work of Michael Wells, a photographer who spent years living close to Arizona's southern border. During his time there, Wells photographed the Sonoran Desert, migrants on both sides of the border and objects left behind in the desert. In a particularly moving picture, Wells captures a landscape of backpacks left behind by migrants. The sheer density in backpacks that seems to consume the landscape is stunning. In the installation of *En Camino de Dios*, the backpacks are laid down close together or overlapping one another to create a sense of the density of objects left behind by migrants along the border.

Recuerdos Heredados and [Confluence]

Around the time I wrote *Collision*, I came across the work of Chicano poet Benjamin Alire Sáenz. In his collection of poetry, *The Book of What Remains*, Sáenz witnesses the dichotomous struggles that exist between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez¹⁰: the extreme violence in Juárez, the hardships experienced by immigrants in El Paso, border tensions, etc. Throughout the poem "To the Desert", Sáenz infuses his readers with a feeling of intense thirst and longing; Sáenz personifies the desert and creates a sense of co-dependence between himself and the landscape that confines the breath of the reader; "To the Desert" is a manifestation of Saenz's intoxicating and complicated relationship to the desert. It is clear in his writing that Saenz deeply

¹⁰ El Paso is one of the safest cities in the U.S. while Ciudad Juárez is one of the most dangerous in the world, due to the growing cartel drug wars.

admires the beauty of the southwestern desert while being astonished by its volatile, voracious nature. Sáenz's honest, thought provoking observations of the borderlands in *The Book of What Remains* were the inspiration for my diptych *Recuerdos Heredados (Inherited memories)*.

In the diptych, I draw parallels between the physical landscape my mother traversed while migrating to the U.S. and the imagined landscapes that I have internalized through her retelling of her journeys. After listening to my parent's migration stories, I have often imagined the landscape and the environment that they experienced; I internalize their stories and they are later manifested in my nightmares and fears. In *Recuerdos Heredados* my mother's stories and my imaginations visually converge to create a union between landscape, memory and feeling that is inspired by Sáenz. For the visual composition of the prints, I layered abstracted drawings of the border wall with moody renderings of the landscape between Matamoros and Harlingen, TX, where my Mother crossed the border¹¹--these layers were printed using photolithography. Over photolitho layers, I printed abstracted landscape images using intaglio, and added some spot color to the intaglio layer by chine collé-ing dyed nepalese lokta. I choose to print the first layers lithographically because it is a technique through which I can print multiples of soft hand drawn elements. Litho often results in flat prints therefore I added intaglio to achieve deep tones that result in dark, visceral imagery. The prints are framed to emphasize the dynamic between the outer frame, the matte frame, the abstracted border imagery and the embossed rectangular intaglio prints that underlines the importance of memory as a theme. Memories are dynamic; they can be clear and vivid or fuzzy and abstracted. At times, it is hard to recall parts of some memories because they are concealed by other memories, or fear. By layering my imaginations

¹¹ I obtained the images of the border between Matamoros and Harlingen, TX thanks to my aunt, Ana, who crossed with my Mom and still lives there.

with images of border landscape through different print techniques I create the sense that the prints relate back to memories of the artist, while alluding to my internalization of my mother's experiences and conveying the complexity of the physical and imaginary borderlands.

Recuerdos Heredados represents the first time in my artwork that I allowed my mother's experience to interact with my own fears, as the daughter of immigrants. While creating this piece, I learned that I've inherited a lot of my mother's fears: fear of the border, fear of the police, fear of ICE and deportation. *Recuerdos Heredados* helped me understand that I've been so intent on learning about the borderlands because I was raised with internalized borders. As a kid, my parent's limitations were my own limitations. Miami was, for all intents and purposes, our sanctuary. We never traveled too far from home and this caused my sisters and I a lot of grief as children. I begin to express these ideas in a poem I wrote titled [*Confluence*]. The word itself means coming together, convergence. The title is a succinct representation of the convergence of grief and struggle that I've experienced with my parents. In the poem, I weave together parts of my mother's stories with moments in which I've learned that being the daughter of undocumented immigrants has fundamentally determined how I am perceived in society--and how I perceive borders. [*Confluence*] is a response to my experience of printing *Recuerdos Heredados* and questions I've been asked during critiques that have pushed me to think about why my immigrant identity is the anchor point of my work. The two stanzas of the poem, in particular, that poignantly answer some of those questions are:

crossed the river
to a promised existence
of non-existence
mochila llena

de emoción y fé
 sudor luchando contra el sol
 temor contra la corriente del Bravo

I, brown born threat
 to American intent,
 was proclaimed anchor
 long before my first breath
 the watermark that
 runs down my back
 is everlasting evidence
 of my inherited resilience

At the completion of *Recuerdos Heredados* and after writing the poem [*Confluence*] I began an artist book--also titled [*Confluence*]. The book marries the imagined and representational border landscape imagery with my poetry about immigrant and first-generation struggle. In the artist book, I draw parallels between the U.S./Mexico border my parents crossed with the geographic border I grew up beside--the Atlantic Ocean. I rely on the use of photolitho printed images drawn by my hand overlaid on pictures of Miami's beaches. While photographing the beach, I was most focused on capturing the glimmering ocean, the frothy ocean tide rolling onto the sand and the nature that is reminiscent of the photos my aunt sent me from Texas' southeastern border. The book is bound by a postcard binding, in which a folded paper structure creates pockets to insert postcards--or in my case, book spreads; the folded structure is cased into hard covers. The act of putting different memories into the pockets of the book is intended to juxtapose inherited/internalized memory with the experienced memory that courses through my thesis work.

[*Confluence*] is the product of two years of emotional and visual exploration of my strong

connection to the concept of borderlands. I ultimately realize that my life changed along with my parents' the moment they crossed the border.

Buried Sun

For the past couple of decades, the media has been focused on migration across Arizona's southern border due to the dramatic increase in migrant deaths in that state. Before the 1990's, migration across the border along border cities--e.g. El Paso, TX-- was common, which often resulted in Border Patrol agents chasing after migrants throughout residential neighborhoods. The visibility of migration in border cities was a source of strife for Border Patrol Enforcement. As a result of the pressure from politicians and locals to address the aforementioned issues, the U.S. Border Patrol created Prevention through Deterrence (PTD), a strategic plan intended to deter migration through border cities by drastically increasing security in urban or residential border areas and consequently redirecting migrant routes to isolated, inhospitable terrain. Since its inception in 1994, PTD has effectively funneled migrants through Arizona's Sonoran Desert, leading to the increase in migrant deaths. By 2014, 2,721 migrants remains had been found along Arizona's southern border and nearly a third remain unidentified. However, these numbers reflect only the remains that were found. (De León 29)

I've known about migrant deaths due to PTD since they first spiked when I was 9 years old. I often looked the other way when I would hear conversations about migrant deaths. First off, it is not easily digestible news, even for a teen. However, I looked away because I knew that my parents could have easily been one of the thousands deceased in the desert had they migrated a couple of decades later. This, I could not bear. When I got to Mount Holyoke College for my undergraduate students, being surrounded by a group of strong, radical women, nourished my

courage to confront the information that had been haunting me for years. I don't look away anymore. On the contrary, I seek out more information hoping to uncover that which they hide.

I recently stumbled upon Jason de León's¹² *The Land of Open Graves*. In his book, De León digs up early versions of the PTD strategic plan which in their original language indicates that the agency knew the plan could have fatal consequences. De León effectively calls out the U.S. Border Patrol for being complicit in the deaths of migrants. In his book, De León unpacks PTD, critiques its effectiveness and offers migrant testimonies in order to expose the deeply troubling issues that exist along Arizona's southern border. After reading De León's book, I felt a strong urge to see the names of the deceased. Through different humanitarian groups in Arizona, I found Humane Borders, one of a handful of groups that organize water drops in the desert and assist migrants in distress. Additionally, they make the information of found migrant remains accessible--this is particularly useful for friends and families of the victims who are looking for their loved ones from abroad.

As I scrolled through the list, I was floored by the seemingly endless list of names. *Buried Sun* is the result of an intense need to share the names of the deceased migrants, to make others acknowledge their humanity and to mourn them. For this piece, I decided to bind all of the names--along with their cause of death-- in a book. The names are printed on handmade paper using an inkjet printer and are prefaced with a page describing PTD--and its effect on migration. The names are listed by year, beginning with 1992 and ending with 2017. The book is arranged by year because from 2000 to 2001, the number of found remains jumps from one to over one hundred. Seeing the instantaneous, dramatic increase in found remains is undeniable and can't be

¹² Jason De León is an ethnographer that lived along the border for years, doing research on migration and migration issues. In his book, he offers a raw, unfiltered perspective of the strife that persists along the border.

justified by sanitized political rhetoric. In *Buried Sun*, I ask my audience not to turn away, like I did when I was younger. I will scatter black ash on the floor leading to the pedestal to draw the viewer into a space of mourning--black palm ash symbolizes mourning in Catholicism. Behind the pedestal hangs a handmade paper installation with abstracted texture and imagery that alludes to the landscape where the migrants' remains were found. Additionally, there are black circles burned into the paper for each migrant where their remains were found. The exact placement of the circles is based on the Humane Border's Map of Migrant Mortality, an interactive map created in google maps that indicates where each set of remains was found. In *Buried Sun*, the paper installation loosely stands in as the altar piece. Through *Buried Sun*, I hope to reach viewers, whose communities are not affected by PTD and who did not previously know about it. On the other hand, I hope that Latinx immigrants and first-generation immigrants, like me, who have felt fear because of PTD, get a chance to mourn a group that goes so largely unrecognized.

Conclusion

When I first started talking to my parents about their experiences crossing the U.S./ Mexico border, I was constantly astonished by their courage and perseverance. I initially felt that crossing the border was the toughest moment in their lives as immigrants. I don't feel that way anymore because being an immigrant in the U.S.--a Latinx, working class immigrant-- is extremely difficult. We are racialized into a monolithic brown blob, stamped with a long list of stereotypes, welcomed by employers when cheap labor is needed and cast aside when we are no longer useful. Undocumented immigrants live with an even lengthier list of oppressions and are relegated to living as half-citizens--working hard for the benefit of the country, never reaping

benefits. It has been proven that Latinx immigrants in the U.S. fill the low-paying, back-breaking jobs that Americans do not want, but are persistently accused of stealing their jobs. I no longer believe that crossing the border has been the most difficult experience in my parent's lives when they have been immigrants in the U.S. for almost 30 years. It is fitting that the borderlands, with heavily patrolled border towns, a river nicknamed "Bravo"¹³ and unforgiving deserts, are hostile and unwelcoming because it blatantly alludes to widespread xenophobia and racism in the U.S.

I often wonder what my life would have been like if I were born in Mexico or Honduras. I most likely wouldn't have been born because my parents would have never met. I ask myself this because for a long time, I felt really out of place, really uncomfortable calling myself an American. As a high school student sitting in an American History class, I was taught to be proud of our accomplishments as a nation, as Americans, but how can I find pride in the expansionist campaigns that stripped Mexico of its northwestern territories? How can I find a sense of belonging in my nationality when brown folks like me, born and raised in the U.S. are persistently told to "go back home"? When will my community and family live in peace, without fear of deportation, without out fear of being separated? After my first semester in the Book Arts + Print program, I realized I had an opportunity to share my parent's stories, to share my story and to talk about the issues that many people turn a blind eye to because it is easier than to confront them. Borders are a social construct. They're arbitrarily configured and policed. The borderlands are a battleground of struggle, tension and pain. This thesis is a small contribution to expand the national conversation about the border and immigrant rights issues beyond the border states.

¹³ Angry

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