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We Morph War into Magic

The Story of the Border Fence Mural, a Community Art Project in Calexico-Mexicali

Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo

But the skin of the earth is seamless.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

I write to remember.

—Cherríe Moraga

I am looking at a picture of my great-great-grandfather. It was taken sometime in the 1880s. He sits on a horse at the US-Mexico border with the expanse of the Sonoran desert landscape all around. A palm tree to his right marks “the line,” *la línea*. When I first came across the photograph, I was struck by the way it seemed to signal the shifting configuration of the landscape along the border. While leading scholars in border studies focus on the borderlands as a constant site of transition, there is a presumed static element in play, the US-Mexico border fence/wall (Lugo 2008). Although the borderline is perceived as static because it mostly has not moved since the end of the US-Mexican War defined it and the US Army Corps of Engineers mapped it, its making persists and its meaning remains in constant flux. The photograph offers insight into sociohistorical shifts in the configuration of the border landscape. It evokes the ways in which the US nation-project, through its b/ordering of “the line,” marks lands and bodies with anchors of meaning. Border making along the US-Mexico border is a geopolitical project that chisels and sutures peoples, communities, and lands through interconnected forms of violence that inscribe the bordered sexual politics of gender racialities (Alba and Guzmán 2010; Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; Guidotti-Hernandez 2011; Lugo 2008; Monárrez Fragoso and Tabuenca Córdoba 2007).

This essay examines the ways communities inhabit the US-Mexico border, the ways we inscribe meaning onto border fences and concurrent processes of marking and fracturing bodies and lands. I wonder: what did this border, this palm tree, this “line,” mean to my great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother, to my ancestors and the many generations since then, and to the countless others whose lives are shaped by the boundary? How do we live with and also contest, morph, and transform the geographies of violence on the US-Mexico border?

I approach these questions through a study of the binational community art project known as Border Metamorphosis, a five-year project in which 1,500 community members painted a 2.3-mile-long mural on the border fence between Calexico, California, and Mexicali, Mexico. I write, imagine, and reach toward the meanings refracted through my participation as a painter and as the daughter of lead organizer María del Carmen “Tiny” Durazo, drawing also on participant interviews and the print and media archive on the project. I ask how bordered subjects and border communities are made and remade through our efforts to metamorphose border walls, and how our practices transform the vestiges of colonial and neocolonial power that structure a sociality of division (Barron, Bernstein, and Fort 2000; Selz and Landauer 2006). How do border communities rearrange the geopolitical site of violent border-making processes, transforming meanings of belonging and community through creative practice and cultural production? What are the implications for how border walls that order socialities of racialized genders, sexualities, and nations might be reimagined and rearranged? Even the tallest, mightiest walls fall short of the flight of imagination.

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Lacerating Life: Border Making

PREP: THE CLEARING

In the deepest summer suns of July and August 1997, 300 National Guard troops descended on the US-Mexico border in Calexico. First they went after the desert ecosystem: they vanquished 2,400 acres of vegetation, triggering soil erosion and killing thousands of eucalyptus, mesquite, and yucca trees, along with cottontails, jackrabbits, and other life forms.

THE CUTTING

After land and life were cleared, they cut incisions eight feet deep into the earth where once trees grew and wildlife roamed. They made a hole and another and another, perforating the skin of the seamless sands, penetrating deep into the desert's flesh with scything steel rods.

ERECTING WALLS

To mark the map, to delineate, to slice nations, bodies, life, sea, and air, they brought six miles of steel to build an edifice to structure the divide. Panel by panel, they assembled 1,800 slabs of rusted, recycled landing mats from the Vietnam War. They soldered the fourteen-foot-high corrugated iron panels imprinted with the memory of war and affixed them to the steel posts infiltrating the depths of the earth's desert (USACE 1997; Hill and Kelada 2010).

The sea cannot be fenced . . .
Yemayá blew that wire fence down.
—Gloria Anzaldúa

It was the season of Operation Gatekeeper, the Clinton administration's project to continuously intensify the militarization of the US-Mexico border. The project deepened the material and symbolic divides between the US and Mexican sides of the border. One of the principal strategies written into law was the replacement of the porous chain-link border fence with a solid wall (Cornelius 2001). The logic of US imperialism and war on the border legitimated the new border fence strategy: according to the Department of Defense, a wall would “secure” the nation from the threat of a criminality constituted as the confounded movements of people and drugs (Nevins 2001; Payan 2006; USACE 1997). The discursive formations of national security, as enunciated through the “war on drugs” and the criminalization of migration, for example, obscure an imperial desire for

migration (of peoples and plants) from the south. It elides US trafficking of racial, sexual, and gendered political economies invested in "securing" difference and dichotomy.¹ The heightened militarization of the border in the era after Operation Gatekeeper is marked by the expansion of border walls that mark particular geographies and bodies as criminal and expendable, making it increasingly difficult and indeed deadly to cross (Cornelius 2001; O'Leary 2009).²

Border walls signal the material, cultural, and social geographies of exclusion; they define territories, they animate the power to exclude. Their purpose is to produce compliant subaltern subjectivities, eliciting incessant participation in the constant remaking of the subject's subalternity. The practice of power over life, domain over life, is implicit in the work of constructing the sovereign (Agamben 1998). Border walls are assembled to disunite, to dissuade, and to disappear resistant subaltern subjectivities. The nation-building project becomes a modality of sanctioned forgetting that makes it possible for borderland communities, many of which live with military occupation, to forego resistance, because when the state kills people on the border, it is doing so under law, making such killing (inhumanely) tolerable. Nation-building projects and the metonymic border walls become a vital tool that produces ways of seeing, or not seeing, categories of criminality that conjure perceptions of territories, languages, and belonging.

Yet in Calexico, a group of community members gathered in fall 1997 to discuss the new wall and its impact on transnational community relations in Calexico-Mexicali, a sprawling border metropolis in California's Imperial Valley. They were angered by the fourteen-foot-tall barrier that was erected without consultation or even any attempt at communication with local communities. Three hundred National Guard troops, deployed by the Department of Defense to install the fence, arrived in the hottest days of the summer, when the thermometer climbs past 120 degrees and most people try to stay indoors. The community felt that they installed the fence covertly, working through the night over a couple of weeks. People were angered by what they experienced as a deceitful maneuver that explicitly disregarded them. The community dialogue was hosted by the Calexico Beautification Committee, which ironically found out about the construction only when Imperial County supervisor Wayne Van De Graaff showed up at a meeting to complain about graffiti on the "new border wall."

My mother, María del Carmen "Tiny" Durazo, was a member of the committee. She said that people expressed the most concern over what they interpreted as a breach in the "sister communities" relationship between

Mexicali and Calexico. Before, people could see and even touch each other through the porous chain-link fence. With the new solid barrier, they could no longer "see each other." It was through the act of seeing that they remained connected, they felt.

Transnational social and kin formations and interdependent political economies shape quotidian life on the border and borderland intersubjectivities. These connections continuously undo the imperialist project of maintaining the US-Mexico divide that didn't quite end in 1848 with the so-called end of the US-Mexican War. The act of seeing each other contests the unrelenting effort to scribe criminality and exclusion onto bordered bodies. People used the chain-link fence in ways that contested the material limitations on the free movement of people across the border. Every time I went home, I could see and almost touch Mexicali. In ways that have grown familiar through such visual virtual practices as Skyping, seeing can evoke the sense of touch. What is perceived visually is experienced as within reach, increasing the realm of the possible while shrinking the sense of material distance and division. Maurice Merleau-Ponty considers the possibility of being and becoming as emergent through the act of seeing and being seen: "my body simultaneously sees and is seen . . . through [vision] we come in contact with the sun and the stars, . . . we are everywhere all at once" (1964, 162, 187). His phenomenological understanding of intersubjectivity considers it as emergent through multisensory and complex embodied and situated experiences that hinge on sight: we come into being by seeing and being seen. This helps explain how seeing each other across the border can carry the possibility of a more collective definition of cross-border self/selves that may counter attempts at individuation and division.

The ability to see each other across the border was not only displaced or blocked by the new border wall; it was replaced by the hypervisibility of the state and its 24/7 gaze on the border subject, who can forever see the central tower from which he or she is watched. In his work on panopticism, Michel Foucault (1995) considers the ways in which hypersurveillance imposes particular knowledges/disciplines onto bodies. New stadium lights, infrared technologies, and ground sensors installed through Operation Gatekeeper intensified the border subjects' understanding of themselves as subject to surveillance. As Nicole Guidotti-Hernández and Evelyn Nakano Glenn document, the state's unceasing gaze fosters gendered, sexualized, and racialized subjects who internalize exclusionary notions of citizenship and belonging (Glenn 2004; Guidotti-Hernández 2011; Spivak 1988). Althusserian interpellation also emerges through the specular practices of

advanced military technologies that produce subjectification (Althusser 1971). The citizen is made through nation-state recognition; when the state sees us, the state constitutes us. The dismay expressed by residents on both sides of the border, when they realized that the new fence and surveillance technologies meant that they could no longer see each other, was a response to the epistemological and ontological attacks that threatened border inter-subjectivities and collective transborder being, belonging, and knowledges.

In the community dialogue, the room was filled with grief, disappointment, disillusionment, anger. The community had experienced a loss and was unsure of the possibilities for redress, or even what redress might look like. They grew angrier when they found out that the new fence was made of materials that had been used in warfare. This added insult to injury, deepening the divide between (transnational) friends as it symbolically and materially represented the violence and destruction of war (fig. 1). The border itself was created through war and has been remade continuously through formal institutionalization, expansion, and militarization of the border zone over the last 150 years (Dunn 1996; Hernández 2010). Even the old border fence was a symbol of war, consisting of recycled chain-link fence from the World War II-era Japanese internment camp in Crystal City, Texas. The new barrier “was a slap in the face to our community,” said Durazo. But the fence was up. What could be done?



Figure 1. The new border fence made of corrugated iron landing mats recycled from an earlier war. Photograph by Armando Rascón.

Border Fence-ing: Morphing Already Under Way

This is my home, this thin edge of barbwire.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

I grew up on both sides of the border, living in Mexicali and crossing, sometimes daily, to visit family, go to school, or work in Calexico. So many of us did the same. When crossing wasn't an option, families and friends in all kinds of formations gathered on both sides of the chain-link fence. Newborns met kin for the first time; loved ones sat in lawn chairs telling stories, sharing food through the wire; friends hung out after school, playing volleyball across the fence, listening to music that seemed to fade the fence; lovers gazed at each other, touching hands and skin in the spaces between the metal mesh. On the border, we learned to love through walls.

The fence, both old and new, is a part of our lives, of the geography of families and of love. Those of us who cross on a regular basis get to know its texture, temperament, and tonality. We come to know the landscape, how to read the map for crossing: today is a good day for crossing, or maybe not so much. Border communities develop a relationship with the ever-present fence. We learn to live with it but we also dream it into something else: we morph it into volleyball nets and bedroom sheets; displays for vendors selling blankets, ceramic suns and *ollas*, Aztec calendars, piñatas; showcases for *nacimientos*, *luminarias* y *lucécitas* at Christmastime. The chain-link fence was first installed in 1951, and for nearly fifty years, border communities pushed the porosity of the fence in search of malleability, turning it into something far from its intended purpose of division and separation. A brief walk or drive along the border fence reveals the many cutouts, dug-ups, decorations, and transformations. Crossers constantly turn the fence into a pathway, cutting through the separation. We live amid the markers of geopolitical separation, and when we symbolically and materially turn them into something else, we undo their capacity to divide. A life lived on the borderlands yields profound insight into the feebleness of a power that strives to separate. In the words of Norma Alarcón, “deterritorialized populations often reconstruct an imaginary . . . to mediate a critique of geopolitical nationalisms, as well as a ‘third space’ through which to situate the critique that alleviates the ‘us vs. them’ syndrome produced by geopolitical nationalisms” (Alarcón 1994).

As borderlands people and border crossers, we practice a kind of transborder *rasquachismo* in our everyday lives, defiantly and creatively bridging divides, inventing paths where there were walls, transforming

the monster objects of war into magic.³ As Gloria Anzaldúa puts it, “The border is the locus of resistance, of rupture, implosion and explosion, and of putting together the fragments and creating a new assemblage” (2009, 177). Border artist Armando Rascón from Calexico collected bits and pieces of discarded or cut-out fence in a box below his bed when he was a child and later used them for art projects and installations (Bonetti 2002). Rosa María Villanueva from Mexicali collects *pedras*, stones near the border, and paints life on them, scenes of women laughing, dancing, sleeping, working; her paintings breathe life and movement into rock. But we are all artists when fences are our everyday reality. We stitch together the wounds of separation through imagination, piecing life together through objects and memories of deaths and wars. We make homes of barbwire.

“Let’s Paint a Mural!”

Pies para qué los quiero si tengo alas para volar.
—Frida Kahlo

Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first
happens in the images in our heads.
—Gloria Anzaldúa

It was unexpected, but not entirely a surprise, when Durazo, who had defied the divide all her life with constant movement across the border, asked, “Why don’t we paint a mural?” She thought of bringing the community on both sides together to paint a mural along the wall. An English teacher at Calexico High School, Durazo had designed the Calexico Unified School District Service Learning Program and was active in statewide and national conversations on emerging service-learning pedagogies in the 1990s. She envisioned the mural as a project that could involve the entire community and especially young people in schools. Durazo was concerned about budget cuts to school art and music programs and community youth groups. The cuts had increased in tandem with the militarization of the US-Mexico border and the intensification of the drug war. Calexico was quickly becoming a drug corridor where young people faced heightened risk of getting caught up in addiction and violence related to the war on drugs.

As a cultural arts activist, Durazo believed that when young people express themselves creatively, they develop the imagination and agency they need to better negotiate and survive and even transform the risk of living on the border in the drug war era. Shortly before the mural art

project, she began serving on the Imperial County Council for the Arts “in order to learn how to build a home for artists in Calexico.” She envisioned Calexico as a place where young people and artists could build community through art, where they could learn, grow, and thrive as artists. She was struck by the potentially transformative ways that art could make a difference. In *Chicana Art*, Laura Pérez contends that art practice leads to a kind of healing: “the arts optimally embody and facilitate the critical, truth-seeking, and daring consciousness that is necessary to both social and spiritual well-being” (2007, 306).

The mural idea caught on, and Durazo began organizing. Members of the Calexico Beautification Committee tracked down Rascón, the artist who had grown up in Calexico and was known for his border art. The committee discussed their ideas about the mural design with Rascón. Durazo noted that an image invoking friendship would assert the transnational community’s sense of connectedness. Rascón pointed to the friendship bracelet on his wrist, and Durazo said, “Even if they put up a fence, we can take away the barrier by affirming our friendship.” As energy for the project grew, Durazo formed the first Calexico Arts Commission to bring the mural to life. Hildy Carrillo secured support from the city council and served as adviser to the commission, and community members Sheila Dolente, Brenda Hinojosa, Steve Wong, and Reynaldo Ayala joined the commission as members. Durazo served as chairperson and mural project director.

In the early stages of the project development, the community began a letter-writing campaign to express their rage and concern about the wall. “The federal government got heat from the community about the fence,” said Durazo. Since the border fence is federal property, “we used this [strategy] as leverage to get the fence art in with DC.” Eventually the federal government approved the mural project, something the community felt they would have previously shut down with no consideration. The combination of the mounting community pressure and an unusually community-oriented border patrol chief in neighboring El Centro, Tom Walker (who did not last long in his post), led to a memorandum of understanding that turned the fence into federally recognized public art and also established joint local and federal control of the fence going forward. US Border Patrol representatives apologized to the community and agreed to consult local residents about all future changes to the fence. A couple of years later, when it came time to replace the chain-link fence on the south side of the city, the community organized a committee that demanded, and received, “a fence you could see through.”

After Rascón was hired as lead artist for the mural, my mother and I met him at his gallery, Terrain, in San Francisco. He proposed a geometric pattern of interlinking circles and diamonds inspired by a 3,400-year-old Olmec jade axe handle said to be a symbol of communication. He felt that connecting to one of the earliest cultures of the Americas would question the legitimacy of the US-Mexico border divide and the border fence. Rascón wanted to connect the border community to Olmec cosmovisions to show that indigenous knowledges in the Americas might offer different ways to interpret, assign meaning to, and rearrange the structures and knowledges of coloniality, in particular the border fence (Mignolo 2005). Durazo felt that expressing a connection to Olmec culture and affirming friendship and communication would honor the lives and histories of indigenous and migrant peoples in the Americas in light of escalating attacks on migrants in the borderlands. The intention to honor migrants and indigenous knowledge predating national borders eventually led to the temporary cessation of migrant arrests at the border fence mural site.

After nearly a year of planning, the painting began in October 1998 with a celebration marking the Olmec harvest festival. Mexicali and Calexico community members came together to inhabit the public space previously inaccessible and guarded by the Border Patrol. Over the next three years, 1,500 multi-generational border community members, from one to ninety years of age, took part in painting a 2.3-mile-long mural along the US side of the border fence.⁴ Through a broad grassroots community outreach campaign, anyone and everyone was invited to paint. Folks arrived from Mexicali with passports or without. They jumped over fences or came in through the *garitas* (border crossing points). They came in school buses and vans filled with members of the Conservation Corps or with elders from the De Anza assisted living center.

Stitching Wounds: We Morph Border Walls into Art

We can transform our world by imagining it differently . . .
willing it into creation.
—Gloria Anzaldúa

Quality, light, color, depth . . . awaken an echo in
our bodies and . . . the body welcomes them.
—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Candis takes the colored *velas* and arranges them in four directions on a napkin on the floor. To mark the beginning. She didn't learn this in the highlands of her Mixé pueblo, Paso de Águila, on the Oaxaca-Veracruz border; the coloniality of Mexican nationalisms penetrated even where few cars reached and tried to take traditions away. But she returned to them and relearned the Maya tradition of burning color candles. Each color a direction. An element. An energy. A welcoming.

The colors brought life to the decaying border fence. Vivid blue melded the fence into sky, bringing a healing water from the direction of the sea to cleanse the fence of all it has seen, to renew and regenerate. Jade green served as conduit for *energía espiritual* to heal the land's wounds, to sing trees into it. Yellow looked to the east to honor the rising sun and usher new life. Bright red in the center formed an omniscient orb, the eye that sees the pulsing of life, the memory of bloodshed and of life birthed, seeing on its way to becoming. Color was everywhere; it flew through the air, filling buckets, streaking clothes, dotting flesh, animating steel. And we came alive with possibility. The border fence became the palm tree in my great-great-grandfather's picture. "The painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas" (Berger 1990, 10). The brilliant interwoven stitch danced across the fence, healing wounds. The stitch forged an unbreakable pattern, a bond invoking what Anzaldúa calls the "refusal-to-be-split themes of the border artist," a chain of unending color (Anzaldúa 2009, 181).

As the painting neared completion, the size, color, and content of the mural seemed to diminish the prominence of the border fence, in effect visually shrinking the fence. The temporality and fiction of the fraction became visible, undoing the divide. As the mural transformed the border fence, a place mired in meanings and histories of violence became a space filled with color, joy, and love (fig. 2).

The painter "takes his body with him."
—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, quoting Paul Valéry

Free the body, and the mind will have a chance to follow.
—Cherríe Moraga

There was a movement in the making, deep below the border fence, where the earth's heart beats strong. I knew this moment, like many others, carried with it the possibility of rearranging the architecture of violence—not just



Figure 2. *We morph border walls into art.* Photograph by Armando Rascón.

in my own body, but on the land's map, in the community, on the border. I took paintbrush to blue paint and turned the fence into a sea.

The new border fence marked one of the many ways the US nation-project aims to subjugate borderlands inhabitants by arranging the spatial configurations of power through the landscape, which is then activated as a weapon against its inhabitants (Guidotti-Hernández 2011). The border mural project, like many Chicana/o mural projects, recognized the symbolic and material implications of reclaiming and recodifying the public art site as part of the sociopolitical and cultural intervention (Latorre 2008; Pérez 2007). In "Border Arte," Anzaldúa speaks to this recurring practice as it manifests in border art: "the border is a historical and metaphorical site, *un sitio ocupado*, an occupied borderland where individual artists and collaborating groups transform space, and the two home territories, Mexico and the United States, become one" (2009, 184). The border mural art project stitched not only the fence, but a community fractured by coloniality.⁵

The mural project had a significant impact on the painters, as revealed in the archive, interviews, and conversations, and as I myself witnessed and experienced through my own participation. It also transformed community relations. The confounding deployments of militarism and border organization conjure a community that is divided between migrants who cross the border and nonmigrants who live on the border. As the nation-project sets

out to elicit participation in producing a community that surveils itself with regard to notions of belonging and citizenship, a culture of policing bodies, gestures, clothing, and language is created to measure belonging (Bejarano 2005). The border mural project narrowed the distance between "migrants" and "citizens," between nations, between men and women, and between migrants and the border patrol. It made visible the way we are made to depend on border-making notions of gender, nation, citizenship, and race.

Through arts . . . we can become more in touch with our full humanity.
—Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, SisterFire tour

Because the border fence extended into the desert landscape, nonmigrant painters shared aspects of the migration experience. On several occasions the painters heard gunshots and thought they were being shot at by border patrol; they collapsed to the ground in fear. More than once, painters were caught in desert sandstorms. My mother recalls a few occasions when painters "huddled together, holding hands through the storms deep in the desert, unable to see anything." My mother recalls that the painters started coming down with eye and respiratory infections as the mural approached the New River, the most polluted waterway in the United States. The border fence ends at the New River; crossing the river is one of the limited options available to migrants because it is the one place the border patrol won't go. The river is a death trap. Many would-be crossers drown, while others are exposed to pesticides, bacteria, and viruses, including the pathogens that cause cholera, hepatitis, typhoid, tuberculosis, encephalitis, and polio. Operation Gatekeeper's slogan, "prevention [of migration] through deterrence," comes to mean that only deadly pathways will be left for migrants (Chacón and Davis 2006; Cornelius 2001; Nevins 2001). Both of these experiences involved the sense of sight: temporary blindness due to weather and to illness offered people the possibility of new ways of seeing themselves—as human beings, as painters, as migrants—and new ways of seeing their relationality.

The border mural project worked as a heuristic device that countered the state's framing of the border wall and as an epistemic intervention in militarization by countering the state's attempts to objectify and fix border communities through hypersurveillance. The community reclaimed "seeing." As Guidotti-Hernández (2011) puts it, "seeing" challenges the fundamental strategy of the nation-state along the border: the elimination of historical memory and of a sense of knowing the other. The mural project's grassroots fundraising strategies fostered collective intersubjectivities

(Incite! 2007) and deepened a sense of community excitement about the mural. Two-thirds of the project budget, \$50,000 of the \$75,000 total, was raised through community activities like special events and raffles. When a community funds a project, there is the possibility for greater accountability to that community, so grassroots fundraising can function as a community-building strategy. In this case it nurtured a collective sense of agency and responsibility for the mural project.

Beyond B/ordering Bodies: Morphing Borders that Racialize Genders and Sexualities

Border making is a gendering process that maps, surveils, conditions, and attacks bodies by marking racialized genders and sexualities in particular ways (Alba and Guzmán 2010; Fregoso 2003; Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; Segura and Zavella 2007). Colonial maps and border walls are drawn not just on the topography of lands but on our bodies, on our relationalities and kinship formations. As the border fence morphed, were narratives and structures of racialized sexualities and genders morphed too? In what ways did the border mural art project contest, decolonize, and rewrite the structural and imagined landscapes of racialized gender subjectivities on the border (Lugones 2007)?

Delving into the historical record of the border mural project as documented in books and print media, I found that the work of Chicanas and Mexicanas—their leadership, labor, and *energía* that made the mural project a possibility—was obscured if not entirely omitted (Barron, Bernstein, and Fort 2000; Bonetti 2002; Selz and Landauer 2006). Beyond assessing their contributions to the mural, I also want to elucidate the contours of the community mural project and the associated community transformations that were made possible by the work and vision that border Chicanas/Mexicanas brought to it.

The etymological and historical roots of the term *sex* signal a cutting, a separation of bodies. According to Ramón Gutiérrez (2010), bodies are marked through racial and colonial mythologies and narratives that highlight the space where science and religion conjoin to calibrate the complex colonial ordering of racialized genders and sexualities. This b/ordering of bodies, communities, and peoples is historically and continually activated in ways that entrench colonial heteropatriarchal social orders through the practice of effacing and abnegating Chicana/Mexicana power (Blackwell 2011). While the colonial racial coding of gendered/sexed hierarchies

instigates, depends on, and promotes violence against gender/sexual queering and subjugated sexualities/genders, it has historically activated a denial of and attack on Chicana/Mexicana and indigenous women's leadership. An instructive historical account is the case of Toypurina, an indigenous Tongva/Gabrieliña medicine woman who led an insurrection at the San Gabriel Mission in what is now Southern California. As documented by Antonia Castañeda (2005), when indigenous men were punished for revolting, they were specifically and menacingly castigated for following the leadership of an indigenous woman. Is the repeated erasure of Chicana leadership on the border mural project a reenactment of colonial gender, racial, and sexual disciplining?

Chicana/Mexicana leadership in the border mural art project, muted out of the historical records, included various official roles. Durazo formed and then chaired the Calxico Arts Commission, and she served as director of the mural project and as its service learning coordinator. Brenda Hinojosa and Carmen Durazo successfully secured the first California Arts Council Challenge Grant ever received by a community in the Imperial Valley. In addition, Chicanas and Mexicanas played a wide range of unofficial roles in initiating, conceptualizing, and leading the project. It is vital to recognize their labor and leadership so as to counter the complicity with colonial racial gendering processes that continuously enact the various violences of heteropatriarchy on the border and in Mexican/Chicana/o communities. The recognition of their leadership also opens space for historicizing, analyzing, and learning from border Chicana feminisms that engender politically transformative projects. These projects unquestionably remap gender relations, whether or not they enunciate gender focality and declare themselves as feminist (Blackwell 2011).

Stories abound of the many ways in which Mexicana artists, including Frida Kahlo and María Izquierdo, were discouraged and prevented from painting murals (Luke 2011). The patriarchal Mexican nationalism of the early twentieth century regulated the size and placement (in public space) of mural projects through a masculinist frame, treating muralism as strictly a male art form "unbecoming" of Mexican women.⁶ The modernist era in Mexico emerged conversant with European patriarchal enunciations of artistic expression of the time (McCaughan 2012).

Both the Mexican muralist movement and the Mexico City student art movement in the late 1960s were highly influential in inspiring a Chicana/o art movement whose key murals, according to Guisela Latorre, "possess a gendered history that historically and discursively relegated women to

the margins and subsequently rendered them completely invisible" (2008, 176). By contrast, the border mural art project put paintbrushes in the hands of Mexicanas and Chicanas of all ages. When they set out to paint the site of a border wall and borderland policed and coded by militarized hypermasculinities and masculinist nationalisms (American, Mexican, and Chicano), the painters and the project contested the racially coded gender borders that prevent women from claiming public space and from reimagining and remaking our worlds through murals (fig. 3). "I don't see myself as different from men," said Durazo. "Start thinking of yourself as an artist who's about to make her mark," read an announcement recruiting painters for the mural in the *Valley Women Magazine* (Clarke 1999).

Gender morphing also emerged with regard to the mural's content. Mexican and Chicana/o modernist mural techniques often enshrine hyperhetero-masculinist figures. On so many of my beloved *panadería* calendars, a limp and dying Ixtacihuatl is draped across the arms of a virile Popocatepetl, his rippling biceps growing bigger each year (Rueda Esquibel 2006). Such images are consistent with Mexican nationalist and Chicana/o nationalist indigenism projects. But they invigorate a colonial, heteropatriarchal sociality that promotes violence against women by representing indigenous women as passive victims while aggrandizing men's physical strength and its



Figure 3. Mi tía Alba García, born and raised in Calexico, who returned from San Diego to paint the mural. Photograph by Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo.

capacity to dominate a gendered passive subject (Contreras 2008; Latorre 2008; Rodríguez 2009). By contrast, the border mural featured a repeating geometric pattern, designed by Rascón in conversation with Durazo's ideas about the accessibility, content, and meaning of the mural (fig. 4). In a context where the measure, mark, and surveillance of feminized bodies by the state and culture is key to nation building, it was refreshing to see a mural design that did not feature bodies marked by inclusion/exclusion and violence (Cantú 2009; Luibheid 2007; Peña 2010).

Durazo wanted youth, elders, and people of all ages and abilities to paint, consistent with Chicana feminist mural practices that have often led to collective community mural painting. The project thus expanded the concept of a mural artist by inviting nonartists to paint, and it stimulated cross-racial solidarity by including non-Chicana/o painters (Latorre 2008). The border mural art project outreach materials advised, "If you think you definitely are not the artsy type, then by all means, there's a project that's going to prove you wrong" (Clarke 1999). The mural project considered anyone who showed up at the site to be an artist, fostering cross-racial, transnational community building through dialogue, consciousness raising, and mural art practice.



Figure 4. María del Carmen "Tiny" Durazo and Armando Rascón. Photograph by Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo.

Chicana leadership shaped the unique contours of the mural project from its transnational character and organization to its content. When I worked with the feminist organization *Alaíde Foppa* in Mexicali on an anti-violence project, I learned that they considered gender-making processes and violence on the border to be shaped by transnational racializing and nation-building discursive formations. According to this approach, the strategies for undoing border violence should therefore be transnationally informed. By fostering transnational relations, the mural project countered the violence of separating communities and Chicanas/Mexicanas north and south of the borderline. It provided a practical and analytic building block to counter the many ways in which this division hinders activism, knowledge production, collective intersubjectivities, and the possibility of reducing border violence.

Chicana/Mexicana leadership opened a space for deeper transformative consideration of the myriad forms of violence deployed on the border. Based on my observation, women's feminist leadership in the project was key in countering and humanizing the militarized hypermasculinities of the border patrol and building community accountability. Statistics show that women and children are at greater risk than men of experiencing sexual violence or being injured or killed while navigating treacherous border crossings. It is possible that the safety of migrant women was enhanced by the mural project's creation of a temporary buffer and friendly no-arrest migrant zone at the mural site (Marrujo 2009; O'Leary 2009).

As the border fence morphed, so too did the militarized hypermasculinities of the border patrol. Sylvanna Falcón (2006) has studied rape and sexual violence as an effect of militarization along the US-Mexico border. The militarization of the border patrol, she contends, leads to the internalization and institutionalization of hypermasculine militarized subjectivities. According to Cynthia Enloe (2000), where there is a military presence, the gendering/sexual ordering of that space is shaped by ideologies that intertwine militarism and sexuality in such a way as to produce masculinities that advance the military's goals. The heteropatriarchal order of the border patrol and the military continually deploys racial-gender constructs that promote violence against Latinas. In her analysis of the heightened violence suffered by the children, partners, and spouses of "a relative in uniform," Enloe posits that militarized training produces a masculinity capable of killing an enemy. She highlights "the potential incompatibility between a social role intended to nurture and sustain another human being and a profession designed to wield violence in the name of the state" (Enloe 2000, 51).

When the leaders of the mural project invited border patrol agents to participate, they created the potential for an intervention in an otherwise highly controlled military training. Structurally, the entrenched masculinized hierarchies of the Border Patrol command were interrupted during their participation in the mural project because in that effort they responded to Chicana civilian and community leadership. When agents took brush in hand and participated, they became painters, and something happened to their bodies. Their faces were rearranged. I saw it with my own eyes. They smiled more. It was as if the weapons they still carried no longer fit. Institutionally, border patrol duties were subverted by the painting; instead of arresting, detaining, and deporting, they painted, carried paint, brought food, and helped with setup, takedown, and cleanup. Their work with the project allowed them to participate in both mural making and community making. This in turn fostered a nurturing humanity that countered the institutional training and mandates of the Border Patrol.

Agents desisted from their duties; they saw migrants cross and did not arrest them. Plenty of people jumped the fence to join the painters on the US side. The painters from Mexicali sometimes lingered all day, sitting on top of the border fence, hanging out, talking with painters and even with agents. In this artistic and social exchange, the migrants and Mexicali folks who had been constructed as enemy subjects and threats to national security by border patrol training were humanized. Migrants became part of the mural project or were able to cross through it; it became a safe buffer zone. They were free, like the birds I love to watch as they fly freely across the fence.⁷

Folks from the Mexicali side brought food and drinks; they broke bread with Border Patrol agents. The mural project suspended and subverted the agents' otherwise potentially violent war subjectivities. Durazo recalled that agents expressed a feeling of shame at the idea of arresting anyone in the vicinity of the mural and within view of the painters. The mural project fostered a strong community sensibility as people spoke with pride and a renewed sense of collective agency that inspired a kind of community accountability to the mural. It reconnected a transnational community that had been divided by the fence. Not a single arrest was made at the border mural site for the three years the painters were there. The mural project was a striking, if temporary, intervention in the border war and the war against migrants.

Speaking of the transformative power of art, Merleau-Ponty (1964) wrote that a painter is born through the act of painting, gaining a new

visibility, "seeing anew." The border mural project offered a new way of seeing that served to undo the ways that violence and war splinter bodies, kinship structures, and communities. The project countered the hypersurveillance of border militarization so that subjects emerged through practices and imaginings that interrupted the epistemologies of the state. When we became painters, we saw the world anew. We saw what was made unseen in ourselves and one another and on the natural landscape deep into the earth that grieves, heals, and renews; we became healers stitching across divisions. As the site(s) and sight(s) of division were transformed by a work of art, we too were transformed. It was a reminder of the ways in which our practices create meanings and magic that we routinely invoke, as generations of communities along the border have done since before the creation of a US-Mexico border.

The border art project recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of the mural's completion. I want to recognize and thank my mother, María del Carmen "Tiny" Durazo, along with Armando Rascón, Brenda Hinojosa, Hildy Carrillo, Steve Wong, Manina, the *tías* and *primas* and all the members of the community who made this mural a possibility. They labored with hearts on their paintbrushes to build the dream that a little art project could, if for an instant, call up the power to stop a war.

Notes

I write with deepest love and gratitude to honor my mother's labor, her vision, and her spirit that teaches me every day how to do the work of brewing justice. I write in awe of the spirit and dedication, the smiles and the tremendous effort it took for an entire community to imagine and paint itself, and the border fence, anew. A note of gratitude to Gloria Anzaldúa for her mentorship and guidance.

1. M. Jacqui Alexander reminds us that "the state has an abiding investment in war, in owning and deploying the means of violence and coercion in the society" (2005, 114). She comments on the importance of thinking about both discursive and material processes because of the ways in which public symbols are used to engender US preeminence in the creation of new social orders and to legitimate war.

2. The synchronicity of Operation Gatekeeper and Proposition 187, both mobilized in California in 1994, worked to expand the borderlands and the logics, practices, captivities, and casualties of the border war. In explaining his concept of "governmentality," Foucault argues that "criminality was constituted as an object of knowledge [through which] a certain 'consciousness' of criminality could be formed (including the image which criminals might have of themselves, and the representation of criminals which the rest of us might entertain)" (1984, 338).

3. On *rasquachismo*, a concept elaborated by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains, see Barnet-Sánchez (2005).

4. While the initial idea was to paint the mural on both sides of the fence, discussions with the community in Mexicali led to the discovery that much of the border fence stood on the private property of Mexicali residents, which made it difficult to get approval. Still, many community members in Mexicali were deeply invested in the vision of the mural, and they participated in mural activities, including painting.

5. Although my tendency is to recognize the multiplicity of border communities participating in the project, the people involved in the project I spoke with, as well as the project documents I analyzed, all spoke of community in the singular, emphasizing their consternation at the attempt to divide with the border fence. Respecting the spirit of the project, I have adhered to their usage of "community" as a singular noun.

6. Rosa-Linda Fregoso's "Toward a Planetary Civil Society" (2003) is an excellent account of the contemporary ordering of Mexican women's gender/sexuality through new (transnational) nationalist public discourses on morality and the continued bifurcation (and gendering) of public/private domains along the US-Mexico border. She cautions, in her analysis of the violence and responses to violence in Juárez, that among the dangerous consequences of this recent iteration of patriarchal transnational nationalism is a kind of violence emerging from social and political institutions that blames women for the violence they experience.

7. Armando Rascón took a beautiful series of photographs of Mexicali painters sitting on the ledge, "as if like birds," he said.

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Place and Perspective in the Shadow of the Wall

Recovering Ndé Knowledge and Self-Determination in Texas

Margo Tamez

In 2013, five years after the United States constructed an eighteen-foot-high, steel and concrete, gulag-style wall along the Texas-Mexico border, colonialist laws and practices work to muffle the violent effects of the wall, militarization, and necropolitics on local Indigenous peoples. Along the border, the wall slices through Indigenous peoples' lands, cutting them off from subsistence lands, sacred sites, and customary places collectively shared. Land loss and ongoing destruction of Indigenous lifeways has increased displacement, further fragmenting Indigenous families and disrupting their connection to ancestral communities.¹

On the Texas border, Ndé (known to anthropologists as "Lipan Apache") have experienced extensive land loss and atrocities over generations as settler colonial violence has targeted Indigenous peoples and lands. Current experiences of violent dispossession are seen through the lens of this collective memory, according to Ndé elders and knowledge experts. Land loss, by destroying Indigenous peoples' existence and continuity, undermines Indigenous peoples who are leading a human rights struggle to revitalize Indigenous languages, food systems, and governance practices.

As physical and psychosocial architecture, the border wall embodies the US government's use of carceral, or prisonlike, structures and systems to enforce its sovereignty. The government's heavy-fisted procedures for exerting domination over Indigenous peoples reassert Americanization as an authoritarian project along the Lower Rio Grande river. Americanization operates to police nonassimilating Indigenous, poor, leftist, nonconforming,