



## Permeable Boundaries



David Peña - Terminal Project Report 2023

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## Look to the past

*"It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten."<sup>1</sup>*

We were on our way back to Guanajuato, the region where my family is from on my mother's side. I wouldn't have gone on the trip if my younger brother Daniel hadn't insisted. When you're experiencing grief, it's hard to know what to prioritize and what needs care. I had been making work related to loss. Loss of connection, loss of elders, loss of culture, loss of relationships, lost parts of me. We talked about visiting our distant family and set time aside for the trip months in advance. If he hadn't been annoyingly persistent as younger siblings can be (upon reflection it may have just been me sulking), I might have stayed isolated in my graduate studio far from home. I watched the changing terrain leaning against the window of the bus. Views of sparse trees, cactus, sprawling mountains, dried maize fields, clustering crows, lone altars on empty plains all along the road heading north from Mexico City. I felt the warm December landscape in contrast to the wet winter I was experiencing in Eugene, Oregon just days before. We were going to visit relatives we had never met before but had been told about many times throughout our lives by our mother. She would talk about the cobblestone streets and how beautiful it was. The thought of European influence and colonization always sent my mind wandering. My mom would tell us about trips with her parents and familial stories growing up in Mexico as children. My abuelos married in their teens, both being born in the late 1930s. My abuela Lourdes met my abuelo Chonito (Encarnación) as juvenes through a courting ritual, circling the town's central kiosco in Irapuato where they grew up. The girls would circle clockwise while the boys would walk counterclockwise in an outer circle holding gardenias. In the custom, the boys were expected to take a hopeful risk and offer the flowers to a sweetheart with the possibility of rejection. My abuela said my abuelo was cute and accepted his gesture. Everyone did it this way back then she would say and laugh, always ending sentences with "Ay no". They cared for each other until my abuelos passing in 2014.

I reflect on their love.

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<sup>1</sup> Akan proverb  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20110420131901/http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/literature/sankofa.cfm>

We would sit at the round glass dinner table as a ritual to share meals together. The table was like a portal. I felt as if I was with them, asking my abuelos to share stories from when they were younger. My abuela Lourdes would say “coman bien” as a demand with loving concern. My abuelos often bickered in Spanish but they always ended up passing the salt and serving each other despite petty grievances accumulated over a lifetime. When my abuela was sick, my abuelo would heat the tortillas, place the table settings, and serve the meal. I think about love that persists with age over decades. My abuela eventually passed in 2020, the year I began graduate school. The thought of connecting with distant family had been forming since before my abuelos passing. Going back I didn’t know what to expect but what I found were welcoming elders and a new perspective to the places where my family is from.

When we finally made it to Guanajuato, we went searching for my abuelos prima, Guadalupe (Lupita). My mother messaged “Go to Plazuela de Agua, called Plazuela de Mexiamora, above it is El Teatro Juárez, ask anyone living there for la casa de la familia Martinez. They will direct you to el callejón. Or ask where la Profesora Lupita/Guadalupe lives. My uncle says it is a lovely house with a balcony”. Danny and I walked up the steep cobblestone streets and finally made it to the plazuela my mother described and I went asking around skeptically. No one had any idea until we came across a group of señoras sitting on a bench praying together. It was late afternoon when the sun was lowering with the sound of birds chirping and couples leisurely conversing in the square. I waited for the right moment to ask and they knew right away who I was looking for. “Ah, Profesora Lupita”, just like my mother had said. One of the ladies led me to the house with the beautiful balcony and I knocked. It turned out that she had just returned from a vacation visiting family in Acapulco with a younger relative and was still unpacking her maletas. They had no idea we would arrive so I was met with questions before entering past the fenced entryway. I told them about our abuelo and mother in my Spanglish translation. I called my mother and passed the phone over before we were embraced. It was surreal to meet elder family members you have heard about but never thought you would talk to in your lifetime. It felt like a gift. The pictures of past relatives and decorations in the house made me feel nostalgic, sharing a

similar comfort to my abuelos home. Most of our time was spent getting to know each other before asking about stories of my abuelo. Lupita’s memories of him were so distinct and encapsulated within a period of time. It turned out Lupita was an artist herself, and she shared with us the many paintings that she had stored away. She never married and had stayed around Guanajuato, never visiting the United States. She wanted us to stay as it was getting late but we had already booked a hotel. Lupita invited us back to share dinner together the next day. When we arrived the next evening, Danny and I brought flowers and chocolates to the dinner which Lupita was elated to receive. She made picadillo y arroz for us, getting ingredients from the closest tiendita because her mobility was limited. It meant so much to us. We talked about our abuelo, her life as a teacher, and our visit so far in Guanajuato. It was bittersweet sharing time together. We ended the meal with a promise to return.

Since my abuelos passing I have been contemplating what I intentionally carry with me into the future. Those parts that were in my abuelos and carried forward in myself and my family. The trip back to Guanajuato made clear to me that the past is living in the present.

## **Care for cells**

generations repeat, now care for cells  
semillas, inside bodies, invisible longing  
the past screams for change  
sprout tangled weeds  
flourishing, containing cures  
concealing ancestral pathways  
overgrown temples  
hidden under decayed tree leaves, roots, earth  
hope in fertile soil, knowledge here all along  
left forgotten through inherited shame  
amnesia, searching for our missing parts  
permeable boundaries, codes embedded in rejas  
look to the past to transform the present  
we can remember, reflect  
change cycles  
pray words into water  
drink from rivers, overflowing  
flooding in abundance

## Permeable Boundaries



Encarnación Montes, NASSCO, Barrio Logan, CA, 1970's

My abuelo Encarnación was a welder. He welded ships for NASSCO (National Steel and Shipbuilding Company) in Barrio Logan, San Diego. He eventually worked up to become the jefe of an entire crew. When I was a child, I would hang out in my abuelos garage and be fascinated by all of the heavy machinery. It was in this magical space where he would perform alchemy, always welding together some project to take care of the house. My abuelo welded the front yard fence. I have been thinking about the design of that welded fence and the same shapes I see repeated in Tijuana, MX, and Chula Vista, CA where I grew up. The design elements are made up of spirals and fractals leading to moments where they would come together forming heart motifs, holding embedded histories. These same patterns exist on both sides of the border wall that separates us. We are always creating borders whether physically or emotionally, yet the fence is a physical signifier not to enter. Fences are put up as a gesture to protect what's on the other side yet they can be jumped over. They are not always tall. They have openings. Some fences are decoratively made to not be eyesores but are also not so beautiful to call attention to themselves. They have become a domestic foreground and background

demarcating space around us in such a way that we forget about them, but they are always present. The fence can be a symbol of care and also a means of protection. In contemplating the differences, I see distinctions between fences and borders. Fences are markers, expressing a request for protection while mostly serving as an impediment to moving freely in space. Borders, in a similar yet different way, are declarations, seemingly permanent, intended to be a statement expressing something immovable, fixed. In thinking about fences, borders, boundaries, Gloria Anzaldúa writes;

*“Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition.”<sup>2</sup>*

A border is meant to establish extremes, leaving little space for understanding or empathy for the other. A borderland is a liminal space in-between two countries and two cultures, particularly the United States-Mexico border, where coexistence is necessary, and empathy is vital because it is a space in flux and continual change. A place where one might depend on another and potentially become immersed in this perspective enough to see political polarization at play. To witness the extreme conditions of the border, where some bodies have mobility to cross and others do not, where militarization is visible and normalized, suffering expected, the other cannot imagine themselves existing in this space of precarity. In imagining a different future for borderlands, I see borders as permeable boundaries to move through. In-between spaces to be understood, a permeable fence/boundary space, where one learns to communally distinguish what is safe and unsafe, a space one could potentially open up their heart. The fence of my abuelos house was a permeable boundary for my family, a permeable borderland where I witnessed empathy and care.

<sup>2</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands =: La Frontera*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1999.



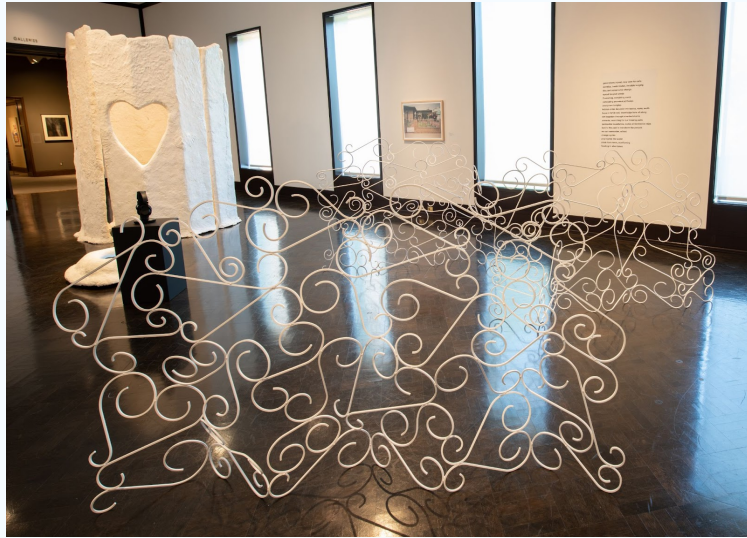
Permeable Boundaries, Steel sculpture progress, 2023

*Whenever we heal family wounds, we strengthen community. Doing this, we engage in loving practice. That love lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go. With this knowledge as our guide, we make any place we go a place where we return to love.*<sup>3</sup> - bell hooks

Coming from a geographical borderland between the westernmost frontera of Mexico and the United States, I have always hated the idea of borders, walls, and impenetrable monoliths. These structures are so firmly established that there is no space for change or variation. In place of this hardness that distinguishes how one can live from one side to the other, I want to instead ask — how do we make any place we go a space of love that allows for openings? Openings to understand one another? Openings that make room for healing and listening? Perhaps we can begin to heal wounds within the space of home, however we define it, with elders and parents, children and siblings, chosen family, and immediate relationships. These places that we initially experience borders become our first wounds. Creating permeable boundaries from entrenched borders requires a continual state of attentiveness and vulnerability, allowing support to enter as needed and filtering out what does not serve families/communities while working towards communal healing. When boundaries are permeable, mending can begin, leading to territories of love, empathy, and understanding.

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<sup>3</sup> hooks, bell, 1952-2021. All about Love : New Visions. New York :William Morrow, 2000.



Permeable Boundaries, 3 x steel sculptures, Jordan Schnitzer Art Museum, 2023

*“The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta [open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.”<sup>4</sup>*

- Gloria Anzaldúa

What wounds are we not tending to, concerning family, and border communities, that echo outward into our present? What would it be to begin healing these wounds while shifting and reconfiguring our boundaries into new formations?

When I think of wounds, I imagine deep cuts, a soaking bandage, a scalding burn, something painful, sometimes throbbing, far from scabbing. I know the sensation and how it feels when I have a wound on my body, patiently waiting for cells to thicken and build density; the texture of dry blood accumulating to create a scab on my skin. Wounds can feel large and permanent. When I consider wounds, I imagine gaps and there is always time in the process of healing. I think of hospital trips and urgent attention. I think about what happens when we don’t cover a wound right away, that it continues to bleed with no chance to stop the pain. That we might accept pain as an ever-present state if we can’t imagine a wound getting better. That pain becomes an ever-present state we can’t imagine living without.

*“We see a place where there’s a wound and we’re gonna bring love to that. We’re gonna work collectively to transform this wound into a place of freedom and liberation, which means loving at the collective level.”<sup>5</sup>* - adrienne maree brown

A central question in my thesis work is, what is it to bring love to a wound? What is it to care, collectively lessening the sense of isolation and present hope for communal healing?

<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands =: La Frontera*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1999.

<sup>5</sup><https://forthewild.world/podcast-transcripts/episode-swap-how-to-survive-the-end-of-the-world>



## Sankofa



Histories are actively living inside bodies, passed generationally through storytelling, hidden in plain sight within symbols, and sometimes, histories are recalled through a mixture of spoken testimony and visual representation, which offer multiple ways of remembering. In researching the motif embedded on the gate of my abuelos fence, I was led to the symbol of Sankofa. Sankofa is one of many West African Adinkra symbols created by the Akan people of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. These symbols are preserved in many formats including textiles, pottery, and as I discovered, in fences. Research shows that Sankofa “symbols made their way into the designs found on wrought iron fences created by enslaved people from West Africa”<sup>6</sup> which have become a recognized decorative element repeated on fences across continents. The embedded Sankofa motif is associated with a meaning which is woven into domestic fences and has origins in a system of Adinkra symbols, each having an association with a proverb or aphorism. Because each symbol represents a proverb that is told through oral traditions, there are many interpretations of each symbol's living definition. In researching Sankofa, I found multiple meanings and connotations; go back to fetch it, go back and fetch what was left behind, it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot, the future is built upon the past, look to the past to understand the present, it is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten. All of these definitions have the underlying sentiment that looking to the past is a way to understand the

present and our current selves. There are variations in the visual symbol of Sankofa as well. One version is a profile silhouette of a bird looking to its back, reaching for an egg. I interpret the bird to be a visual representation of ancestors or perhaps our current self reaching out to the next generation in an infinite loop of remembering. There are poetic and speculative possibilities in ways Sankofa can be interpreted simply based on the bird and egg motif, without any understanding of its significance and deeply embedded history. Alternate interpretations of Sankofa are depicted with a heart-shaped motif which is a simplified version of the bird and egg using only lines, illustrating symmetrically reflected spirals, sometimes designed with lines at the bottom to imply a bird's feathers.



Montes home, Chula Vista, CA, 1990s

<sup>6</sup> <https://educators.aiga.org/beyond-the-bauhaus-west-african-adinkra-symbols/>

## Ecotone



Border fence, Playas, Tijuana, MX, 2021

By definition ecotone is “a transition area between two adjacent ecological communities.” This project uses audio as a way to explore my border community, examining ways to transform interviews into layered sound art pieces, including environmental field recordings from the region, interviewing cross-border populations, activists, organizers, and artists. Each interview is formatted into an hour-long episode which is then aired on the Tijuana-based *Nett Nett Radio*<sup>7</sup> which is streamed online and made accessible through monthly programming and internet archive. Ecotone works as an ongoing documentation of the thoughts expressed by fronterizo folks as a way to better understand the complex region of Tijuana-San Diego that I call home. This particular border area has overlapping communities with differences in economic class, culture, race, influence, and language. While these differences are significant, each community experiences a similar tension because of the nature of this territory, and the necessity of having to coexist in the same space. I look to this particular borderland to not only better

<sup>7</sup> <https://nettnetradio.com/>

understand myself and my community but to continually ask questions and document the changes that occur over time. This project and the process of asking questions have become an important way for me to reflect. Asking questions is a strategy of including voices that may not have the opportunity to be heard or recorded and I look to artists like Tania Bruguera who states in her seminal work *The Manifesto on Artists' Rights*;

*“Art is an invitation to questioning; it is the social place of doubt, of wanting to understand and wanting to change reality.”<sup>8</sup>*

The text goes on to further describe the role of the artist to question and dissent for societal change. I look to questioning in my practice to create openings and make space for empathy, listening, and understanding each other.

Ecotone prompt questions:

### **Where are you from?**

*Dónde estás?*

### **How long have you been here?**

*Cuánto tiempo llevas aquí?*

### **What is your relationship to the US and Mexico?**

*Cuál es su relación con Estados Unidos y México?*

### **How does living in a border city affect your personal life?**

*Cómo afecta su vida personal vivir en una ciudad fronteriza?*

### **Do you feel connected to both places at once?**

*Te sientes conectada a ambos lugares a la vez?*

<sup>8</sup>

[https://taniabruquera.com/wp-content/uploads/manifesto\\_on\\_artists\\_rights\\_-\\_eng.pdf](https://taniabruquera.com/wp-content/uploads/manifesto_on_artists_rights_-_eng.pdf)

**What is it to inhabit two or multiple cultures?**

*Qué es habitar dos o múltiples culturas?*

**Do you feel you code-switch with different groups of people?**

*Sientes que cambias de código con diferentes grupos de personas?*

**Are you identified differently in different spaces?**

*Te identificas de manera diferente en diferentes espacios?*

**What borders do you experience in your personal life?**

*Qué fronteras experiencias en tu vida personal?*

**What do human rights mean in relation to borders? Do you see people who are treated differently at the border? Treated differently by who?**

*Qué significan los derechos humanos en relación con las fronteras? Ve personas que son tratadas de manera diferente en la frontera?  
Tratadas de manera diferente por quién?*

**What do you think about the militarized US-Mexico border?**

*Qué opinas de la frontera militarizada entre Estados Unidos y México?*

**What experiences, lessons, do you feel people should know about the border?**

*Qué experiencias, lecciones, cree que la gente debería saber sobre la frontera?*

**What must people know about borders?**

*Qué debe saber la gente sobre las fronteras?*

A selection of interview answers:

**¿Qué fronteras experiencias en tu vida personal?**

*“Pues para empezar y creo que tengo está bien marcada, tal vez es la lenguaje... I kind of refuse to talk in English maybe because I was forced to lose my language.*

*- Inés Solano Acevedo*

**How does living in a border city affect your personal life?**

*“It’s sometimes what makes you feel insane or at least depressed, you know? In the pain there’s room for generativeness. Whatever qualities I have, caring, resourceful, problem solving, ingenio, poder transformar algo de la nada, that all comes from being in a border city. Also, at least to me, this eternal sense of hopelessness also comes from being in a border city.” - Luisa Martínez*

**What is it to inhabit two or multiple cultures?**

*“Me and my partner met within a month of me being here [Tijuana] and then moved in together within a month after that. So much of my time here has been us together creating and starting new traditions so that’s been really interesting because in our home this mix of cultures happens and has been happening.” - Jeff Valenzuela*

**¿Qué debe saber la gente sobre las fronteras?**

*“...que sepan que estas cosas que pasa aquí, que sienten tan locales, este borderlands Tijuanaense no son tan locales como parecen. Tienen que ver con modelos de control, de relaciones económicas, culturales, que extienden al resto del mundo.”*

*- Alfredo González Reynoso*

## Border Art



Left: Border wall mural w/ PANCA, Tijuana MX, 2015, Right: Tijuana Zine Fest, 2018

*“Border artists inhabit the transitional space of nepantla. The border is the locus of resistance, of rupture, and of putting together the fragments.”<sup>9</sup> - Gloria Anzaldúa*

Contextualizing my artwork within a contemporary art context has always been a tenuous point of reflection. Who am I to have such opinions about my work? This also comes from a place of doubt as I am constantly questioning, rethinking, and speculating about the art I’m making. Coming from a borderland with a DIY background, co-organizing a zine festival, hosting artist-led shows and workshops in community spaces, and making visual works from a place of personal investigation, I often feel out of place within most formal art institutions. I question; who is archived? Who decides what artists make the art history books? What is my role as an artist to place myself within an art historical context?

Here is an attempt;

I consider my art to be in an active space of experimenting, learning, play, and flexibility which leads me to create works in many different mediums and formats; organizing, drawing, painting, mural, installation, sculpture, printmaking, zine, poetry, and audio. To answer where my work sits in relation to contemporary art, it

has to do with where I’m from and the kinds of questions that I ask in the work itself. A recurring question I ask other artists working within the geographical border region I come from is; what is a border artist? In asking this question, different answers arise and change from artist to artist, making for fluid and flexible definitions. Gloria Anzaldúa wrote a chapter on Border Arte, providing a description that resonates;

*“The Mexico-U.S. border is a site where many different cultures “touch” each other, and the permeable, flexible, ambiguous shifting grounds lend themselves to hybrid images. Border artistas cambian el punto de referencia. By disrupting the neat separations between cultures, they create a culture mix, una mestizada in their artwork. Each artist locates her/himself in this border lugar, tearing apart and then rebuilding the place itself.”<sup>10</sup>*

The idea that *border artistas cambian el punto de referencia* makes sense to me and perhaps answers this question of where my work sits in relation to contemporary art, changing points of reference, and working in flexible and permeable ways. The border region of Tijuana-San Diego has been a central influence for me. My familial connections, the communities I participate in, and my orientations to art formed within this territory. I’m inspired by the regions overlapping languages, cultures, textures, and vibrancy. Typical of many, particularly artists, there is a tendency to avoid labels as they can feel limiting, creating a genre or definition to be held within. With this said, I think using the framework of border art can be a starting point in defining a place that I work from as I am actively thinking about different kinds of borders we are confronted with constantly. I consider my work to float between the overlap and entanglement of being aquí y allá. How much time do we spend on one side or another? Liminality, transitioning across boundaries, has been a central focus within my practice. I investigate the many ways we enter into and through in-between spaces and the ways we are confronted with borders that are geographical and internal, tangible and abstract.

<sup>9</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rethinking Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Durham and London: Duke, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rethinking Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Durham and London: Duke, 2015.

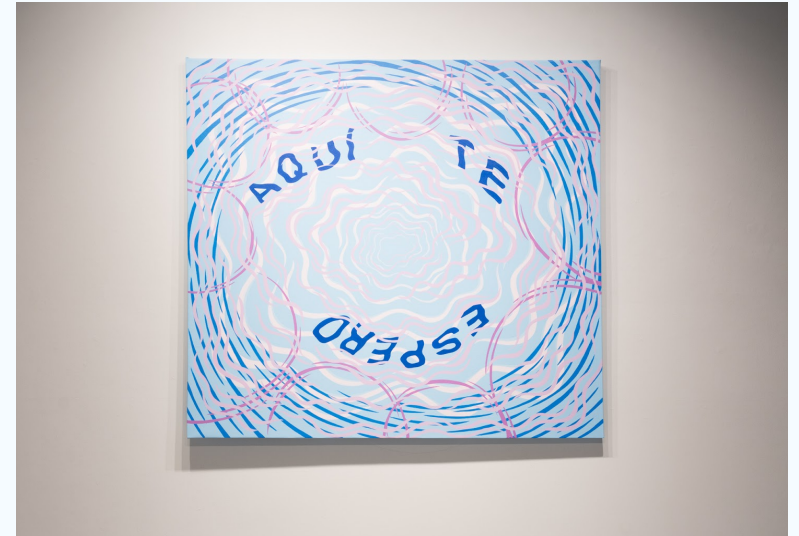
## Aquí te Espero



Aquí te Espero, Installation w/ audio, LaVerne Krause Gallery, 2021

*“All of these politics of the United States and Mexico have the intention that people will get tired and get fed up. Every time they make it so that the people have to wait longer, and they make it more complicated to ask for asylum. A lot of people have to return to their home country. This is what the governments want. In exchange, we say “Oh there’s no problem, I’ll wait here (aquí te espero) dancing.” It’s a way to say fuck you. We have the right to resist and be happy in different ways. I think that it’s a way to resist, and it has importance to a lot of things. To create community. So people can express themselves.”<sup>11</sup>*

- Paulina Olvera Cádiz - Founder, Director of Espacio Migrante



<sup>11</sup> Translated to English from Spanish, Ecotone Episode 1  
[https://soundcloud.com/david\\_verduras/ecotone-episode-1-derechos-humanos](https://soundcloud.com/david_verduras/ecotone-episode-1-derechos-humanos)

*I press my hand to the steel curtain—  
chainlink fence crowned with rolled barbed wire—  
rippling from the sea where Tijuana touches San Diego  
unrolling over mountains  
and plains  
and deserts*

- Gloria Anzaldúa<sup>12</sup>

### **Contemplation on Power**

Walking through rubble, I peer between the gaps  
I think of the past and the people  
that have stood in this liminal space  
I hold my hand to the rust, peeling, chipping away at texture  
Salty moisture in the air breaks it down slowly  
every passing moment  
but the monolith stands  
There is life in the splits that is unstoppable  
Power dynamics are visible  
Birds flock overhead and green growth roots through the cracks  
The tendrils of past attempts leave traces  
crawling, climbing  
slowly and patiently  
Where does the power lie?  
Cactus tower over me, past our perception  
I feel small in my own restrictions  
Sprouts are evident all along the path  
How many years until they flourish?  
Nature has me looking upward as branches almost cross over  
In this place there is surprising quiet  
The sound of birds and children in the distance  
Un espacio para contemplar  
I think about how these moments can occur as I gently follow  
the line that divides from the sea to the interior  
I think about my interior and other insides  
¿Cómo te sientes?  
The boundaries are felt visually and mentally  
Felt in my body  
There is a tension that manifests, a pressure felt, a longing lingering

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<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands =: La Frontera*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1999.

## Sobremesa



Sobremesa zine, risograph, 2022

*“To reflect together on the violence that strikes us every day. To [eat] together may already be a way of opening borders. Of crossing the boundaries of what is imposed by productivist capitalist knowledge, which seeks to capitalize on our difference, to put a price on it. Here, to breathe, think, and [eat] together always already from affect, as a kind of heterogeneous relationship, exposes us vulnerably to that other who is behind the screen. To [eat] together because we are overwhelmed by so much affect it breaks us, we feel each other’s vulnerabilities relating with one another.” - David Gutiérrez and Paulina E. Varas<sup>13</sup>*

Sharing food is a way to bring people together. Living away from home, what I miss most is my mother’s cooking. The lovingly prepared homemade caldos, carne, enchiladas, enfrijoladas, chile rellenos, tortillas, arroz and delicious salsas, full with flavor. This past September, I planned a dinner with my neighbors Nikki, Melvin, and Penny to make our recipes from home. They are from distinct Latin

<sup>13</sup> <https://field-journal.com/editorial/revolving-care-in-research-on-colonial-violences>

“Write” substituted for [eat]

American countries. Nikki’s family is from Cuba and Melvin’s family is from Nicaragua, both lived in Miami, Florida for many years and relocated to Eugene, Oregon around the same time I started graduate school. Their daughter Penny was also raised in Florida and now calls Eugene home. We went back and forth in a long group chat, before meeting for dinner, planning and joyfully discussing our interactions with our families and asking our families for detailed instructions to remake our cultural recipes. My mother typed out each step through text messages, followed by a few phone calls, while Nikki’s mother sent over expressive videos, discussing the recipes step by step. It was enjoyable planning for the meal and sharing ingredients.

Since moving to Eugene, I have felt a sense of isolation, not only because we were living through stages of a global pandemic with minimal social connections, but also because I missed the foods from home and my cultural surroundings. Getting to know my neighbors was important. We helped each other through this challenging time of transition and communal grief. In many ways, my neighbors became my family. I think about how knowing your neighbors has become uncommon in the United States, even as it relates to knowing colleagues, coworkers, those folks that are a part of our everyday lives. When I think of what it is to know someone, it’s to be seen and show who you are beyond transactional interactions. To be yourself and present with others. In many ways, I believe knowing your neighbors, knowing your community is a political act. This meal was a small gesture towards that kind of knowing. In this case, knowing my neighbor had the potential to shift my culture of isolation that many have come to anticipate and expect. adrienne maree brown writes;

*“Do you already know that your existence--who and how you are--is in and of itself a contribution to the people and place around you? Not after or because you do some particular thing, but simply the miracle of your life. And that the people around you, and the place(s), have contributions as well? Do you understand that your quality of life and your survival are tied to how authentic and generous the connections are between you and the people and place you live with and in?”<sup>14</sup>*

<sup>14</sup> Brown, Adrienne. Emergent Strategy. AK Press, 2017.

What barriers are we putting up to keep others at a distance, and why? Are they self-imposed or are we living by constructed social norms? Has isolation become a common language because of the environments we find ourselves in? If so, why do we tolerate such conditions?

This gathering was a way to come together and convene over familial foods, conversation, and memories. Nikki made a delicious ropa vieja, spending hours marinating the meat and preparing the sofrito. She also made delicious sides to eat along with the meal. Melvin made his grandmother's tortillas, substituting available ingredients, and I made my mother's arroz and caldo de res, similarly substituting preparation time with the expedited use of a pressure cooker rather than simmering for many hours throughout the day. I also brought pan dulce and the juego loteria. It was joyful reading the loteria words in Spanish while placing dried pinto beans across the game board as markers when each card was called out. Playing loteria with my neighbors reminded me of why we played the game so often as children with our elders. It's a spirited way to bring generations together and reflect on culture. During our meal, I casually asked questions related to memories of home. I archived the recipes, conversations, and photos from the evening into a zine and made cyanotype prints with the scrap ingredients from our meal together as a memento or gift. I was thinking of a name for the zine and Nikki suggested sobremesa, which essentially means to talk and digest after having a meal together. Here are questions I asked in preparation for our dinner;

**Where is home?**

**Why do we relocate ourselves?**

**How does home change?**

**What reminds you of home?**

**What are the objects you bring into your new home?**

**How does language change?**

**When did you stop thinking in your first language?**

An excerpt from a conversation with Melvin Bravo:

**David:**

*And that's the thing too, even with the ingredients. I find myself making shifts with what's trending, or like Himalayan salt, making those little variations to recipes because "I hear this is better for you."*

**Melvin:**

*I mean, I think food is that way though right? We make it as nostalgic as we can but it changes because we have to use the ingredients that we have. I feel that it just happens all the time. Even me making these tortillas. I'll try and make them as close as I can to how my mom made them or how my grandma made them, but it probably wouldn't be the same just because I'm in a different location and I have to use whatever it is that I have to use, you know? And that becomes a shift not only in food, but in your culture. Your culture is already shifting into a different direction. It's becoming a different thing.*

**David:**

*I guess I start wondering... How much are we aware of the shift? Should we be aware? You know what I mean?*



Sobremesa zine layout, 2021





Left: Caldo de res, Right: Ropa vieja preparation



Sobremesa, cyanotype print, 2021

## Rosalva's arroz recipe

### Ingredients

3 tablespoons oil approximately to sauté rice

1 1/2 cups Jasmine rice

1 large garlic clove (I use garlic press)

1/4 onion cut diagonally

3 1/2 cups chicken stock or

Water and chicken bouillon if stock unavailable

1 can tomato sauce or 1 1/2 cups fresh purée, tomatoes if in season

Sea Salt to taste

4 sprigs of cilantro

Sprinkle of celery seeds

### Instructions

Add oil, turn stove to low medium heat. Add rice.

Now pay close attention to these first steps or rice will have a bad taste. Sauté rice till it gets a light golden brown color. Add onion and sauté till translucent it will emit a delicious aroma. Stirring till all rice is evenly toasted. Lastly, add crushed garlic. Stir quickly to not let it burn.

Immediately add tomato sauce and stir quickly. Now add your stock. Stir well till everything is well mixed. Taste, if it needs a little salt add it. Sprinkle celery seeds and add cilantro.

Now cover and let it come to a boil. Once it's reached a boil you may stir once more quickly and cover quickly. Lower the heat to low and set your timer to fifteen minutes. Enjoy!

**Código****Switch**

In-between spaces follow me, liminal. where flexibility and fluidity	o a lo mejor siempre estoy en un espacio En un espacio de cultura es esencial.
as I have crossed the My thoughts are constantly practicing to because I always feel like	Tengo que pensar en dos idiomas frontera para estar aquí. hablar en múltiple idiomas
I may lose a part of me sanctuary. How much time do I spend speaking in one language	lo más tiempo que estoy aquí, lejos de mi hasta que pierdo el otro?
Being in-between is I can be here to switch into another to do such maneuvers	mi lugar de comodidad. y tambien adaptarme sistema. Siento que hay un privilegio y hay una conciencia en el cambio.
Who understands me? Does everyone need to understand every word?	Importa? Es frustrante perderse en la traducción?
We all adapt to our environments. Whether its academic speak	en la institución o hablado con tus amigos en las calles.
What's important is adapting. Spanglish	es hogar.

## Florecer



Florecer series, graphite drawing, 2021



Florecer series, graphite drawings, LaVerne Krause Gallery, 2021

Drawing is a somatic action, a state where I find healing and solace. I use drawing to contemplate an interconnectedness I feel towards the world around me. I allow the mark-making to be free-flowing, following the intuition of my hand, and embracing a meditative state. I began the Florecer series while traveling between Eugene, OR, Tijuana, MX, and San Diego, CA. I used transportable sizes of paper and pencils as I was crossing back and forth across the U.S.-Mexico border. These drawings coalesced as a mesh of plants, organic forms, patterns, and repetition. I referenced nature in my immediate environment such as houseplants at home, plants in my parent's garden, flowers on my daily walks, succulents growing in neighbor's front yards, and weeds growing out of sidewalks, all while observing detailed fragments and connecting them intuitively. There is movement expressed throughout each composition with dancing, floating, and flourishing elements. This drawing series became an expression of my interior feelings as I moved through and in between distinct geographic spaces.



## Territories Familiares



Territories Familiares, Installation, Millrace studios, 2022

Using similar shapes that recur in my drawings, I translate my patterns into three-dimensional forms, clustering them into varying sizes and compositions that exist beyond paper. Tracing the forms onto clay and turning the slabs into ceramic sculptures became a way to occupy physical space. Asking willing participants to move through the meandering pieces on a ground plane was an attempt for viewers to engage with the work in a way that engaged their bodies, creating the possibility for folks to reflect and slow down. Each sculpture has unique folds and contours, gathered in varying formations, representing different emotional states. Sometimes the clay sculptures crack and split during kiln firing, which I embrace rather than considering them failed objects. I see the cracks and breaks as visceral points of interest related to the way that I experience the delicate nature of familial relationships and the passing of life from one state to another. In creating these works, I intentionally leave open interpretation, while thinking about grief, portals, openings, falling apart, and coming together myself.



## Guidance for grief

*P.S. If there happens to be a multitude of griefs upon you, individual and collective, or fast and slow, or small and large, add equal parts of these considerations:*

- that the broken heart can cover more territory.*
- that perhaps love can only be as large as grief demands.*
- that grief is the growing up of the heart that bursts boundaries like an old skin or a finished life.*
- that grief is gratitude.*
- that water seeks scale, that even your tears seek the recognition of community.*
- that the heart is a front line and the fight is to feel in a world of distraction.*
- that death might be the only freedom.*
- that your grief is a worthwhile use of your time.*
- that your body will feel only as much as it is able to.*
- that the ones you grieve may be grieving you.*
- that the sacred comes from the limitations.*
- that you are excellent at loving.*

Excerpt from *Spell for Grief or Letting Go* - adrienne maree brown<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <http://adriennemareebrown.net/2014/10/09/spell-for-grief-or-letting-go/>

## Jardines

My abuelo was having a hard time seeing. He called our home phone and my mom picked up. I always knew it was him listening from a distance because my mother's tone would change, usually laughing while she replied in Spanish. She called me over saying he was asking for me. "Hola abuelo, ¿cómo estás?" I said and he replied "Hola mijo, muy bien. ¿Quiero ver si me puedes ayudar, y manejar al jardin en la casa de Broadway esta semana?" I was back at my parent's house on occasion while in college, working, in a serious relationship, and always in and out of Chula Vista, the city where I grew up. I was living in different places during my early 20's trying to be independent, but always returning home. "Ah sí, claro abuelo. Cuando quieres." It wasn't a long conversation before we made plans to work together. I was going to help my abuelo clean up the backyard of their first home near Imperial Avenue in San Diego. My abuelos had been renting the house out to an older gentleman for many, many years. He mostly stayed to himself inside of the house so the backyard would overgrow with tall plants, weeds, and layers of fallen leaves, flourishing wildly, especially during the rainy season. My abuelo would trim, rake and take care of the yard. It was becoming harder for him to get around as his eyesight was declining. Working as a welder, tiny pieces of scrap metal got into his eyes, impairing his vision drastically over the years. It meant a lot to me when he would ask for help and I enjoyed spending time with him. He had this copper-brown Chevy pickup truck as a work vehicle, constantly driving across the border to carry materials and trabajar en construcción projects when his vision was better. It had a built-in 8-track player with a few cassettes near the dash and a tuning radio. I remember running errands with him in the same truck as a kid. I would push the buttons to start the cassette deck, turning the knobs on the stereo to see what was playing, usually banda blaring. I sat on the passenger side, pulling things out from behind the seats to keep myself occupied. There were miscellaneous tools and the truck somehow always smelled like the 70s. The truck felt like a time machine. We rode together as he guided me. This time he sat in the passenger seat. The day felt important and I couldn't explain why. I don't know if it was the tone of his voice, his body language, or the timing. We pulled up to the Broadway house and it was overgrown with green vegetation. Fallen palm fronds

covered parts of the front yard. My abuelo welded the fence at this house, made out of steel, painted over with layers of white, rusting on the surface but strong as it withstood years of relentless sun rays and corroding moisture from rain and morning dew. My abuelo slid the gate open and I parked in the driveway. He took some gardening tools out from the bed of the truck and we walked to the back yard. The weeds were like a dense forest with deep roots grasping at earth, seeking out nutrients. There was an ancient pepper tree growing tall, providing shade from the warm weather and a place for my mother and uncle to play as children. The sand-like specks of tiny pirul leaves collected in the yard, creating a deep layer of rich soil that had been building up over decades. We worked together for hours pulling up tangled weeds and racking the sea of freshly fallen leaves into piles. At times we would find our own rhythms and cared for the yard silently. It felt holy tending to the needs of the garden together.

Reflecting on this memory I'm reminded of a quote by the poet Khaty Xiong. "*Just as grief is shapeshifting, so is memory, like a doorway leading to more doorways, and what lies beyond them changes every time we walk through those portals. After all, death has such a way with asking for our attention.*"<sup>16</sup> The loving labor of memory has been asking for my attention. My abuelo held us together and exemplified care for family. Permeable Boundaries está dedicado a mi abuelo Encarnación Montes.

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<sup>16</sup>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/157105/grief-in-three-bodies-a-conversation>



Encarnación Montes, Chula Vista, CA, 1990's

### Patterns de amor

rituals remembering faded fotos  
mantenido on ancestral shrine  
limones and roses crecen  
flourishing fruit por siempre  
petals gently fall to lawn  
green grass verde  
front yard jardines hold histories  
chiltepin peppers collected para caldo  
care for home, dedicación to familia  
presencia felt on faint paint  
garage door open  
lead to rusted memoria  
welded patterns de amor  
hold the entrance, held us juntos  
home beyond wood beams y techo  
¿qué pasa cuando el espacio se cambia?  
montes as mountain as apellido  
shaped by hand  
signal for visitantes  
con tiempo, time shifts  
leaving traces





Lourdes & Encarnación Montes, 1960's

## The future

*“Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division. The journey takes four thousand eight hundred and thirty miles, more than the length of this country. The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past.”<sup>17</sup>*

- Ocean Vuong

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<sup>17</sup> Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. Large print edition. New York, Random House Large Print, 2019.

## **Special thanks & inspiration**

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Paty Siller

Will Zeng

Anastaysia Gutnik

Lily Wai Brennan

Mary Evans

Mario Mesquita

Cris Scorza

Christian Alvarado

Liz Reyes

Adam DeSorbo

Joe Sussi

Megan Hayes

Zoë Gamell Brown

Rachael Lee

Alyssa Navas Hutton

Hivemind

CLLAS

Gloria Anzaldúa

bell hooks

adrienne maree brown

Sonya Renee Taylor

Bayo Akomolafe

Marwa Helal

Ocean Vuong

Natalie Diaz

Tania Bruguera

Grupo Frontera

Laraaji

Chula Vista, CA

Tijuana, MX

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