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Cruces

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

Cruces is a multimedia installation depicting immigrant conditions and experiences throughout landscapes, Latinx communities, and borderlands. Made during the last two years, it is constructed as a multivocal ethnography of immigrants with varying legal statuses, countries of origin, and stages in their journey. The imagery, sounds, and narratives are composed of the distributed yet relational geographies of immigrants' experience and the pieces are structured to highlight the constitutive elements of human mobilities, such as trains, rivers and immigration hubs, as well as the natural obstacles they face in their perilous transit, such as forests and deserts.

The fieldwork was carried out during summer 2019 and winter 2019-2020, when I collected and photographed the experiences of immigrants and their intersection with the geographies of immigration. By interrelating cities along the US East Coast, US-Mexico borderlands, and the southern Mexican states, the project offers a wide range of ideas, circumstances, and situations immigrants have to face in their day-to-day.

This project explores the ideas of citizenship of immigrants who have settled, the relations on borders and immigrants' hazardous experiences, and the operation of the so-called "expanded borders" in Mexico. Using photographic images, video pieces, maps, and personal notes, the project addresses the complexity and the challenge of portraying such a complex subject matter. Cruces was created using documentary aesthetics and sensory depictions while also critically

examining the idea of objectivity through its use of multiple points of view to the migratory experience.

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Cruces

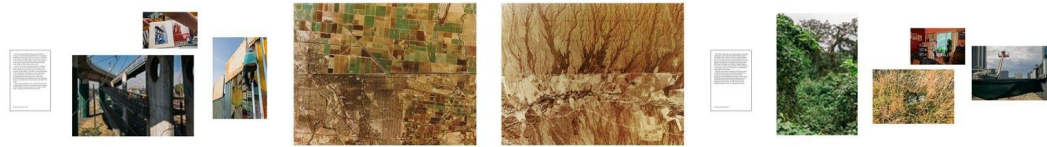


Fig. 1. *Project Installation*, 2020.

Cruces is a multimedia project that reflects on the challenges of immigration into the United States. Interwoven throughout are narratives from different perspectives, the aesthetics of perilous geographies, and the movement of human transit, all expressed through video, photographs and sound. The project portrays immigration through first-person narratives, visual landscapes, and the rhetoric behind policies and national borders.

Cruces is an interesting Spanish word that has various meanings, all relevant to the topic of migration. It signifies crossings, which is the basic premise of the process: a journey from point A to point B, and everything in-between. It can also be translated as a cross, which is the visual symbol in the Christian religion for a grave or a place where someone has died. Moreover, *Cruces* can capture cultural fusion, for instance when someone has parents of two different ethnicities. Last but not least, *Cruces* means favors, a personal and essential courtesy. I believe in

our interconnected capitalist world, we share the responsibility for inequality, violence, and exodus. These definitions comprise the basis of this project: to share the experiences of departures, crossings, arrivals, and living in the shadows. It's my hope that this project will create awareness of this social phenomena.

The fieldwork for this project started in the Summer of 2019. I visited three major immigration-related settings: cities along the East Coast, US-Mexico borderlands, and the southern Mexican states. Beginning in the Northeastern United States, I met immigrants from Colombia and Ecuador in the East Boston and Revere areas. I heard accounts of violence and lack of opportunities, situations that forced them to overstay their visas and live undocumented. From there I moved to New York City and spent three weeks in the Jackson Heights, Corona, and Flushing neighborhoods. I sought stories from Central Americans living in the area. The immigrants I met told me about their perilous arrivals via the southern border, as well as tricks they use day-to-day to navigate their new homes. Social security numbers, remittances and packages with food and clothes, as well as networks for getting jobs under the table are major issues. My first series of urban travels ended in Miami, where I met Haitians, Venezuelans and Cubans, the diasporic communities that have shaped the city into a Caribbean hub. The topics of these conversations were natural disasters, like the earthquake that shook in Haiti in 2009, poverty and deficit of the basic needs in Venezuela, and political persecution to non-communist and non-government affiliates in Cuba.

My first border experience was in southern Arizona, in the Sonoran Desert near Ajo. I spent time in the Sonoyta/Lukeville crossing point interviewing immigrants in Mexican shelters, native Americans on their reservation lands, and humanitarian aid workers. Later I moved to the Rio

Grande Valley, where I realized how the twin cities Laredo/Nuevo Laredo work as a reflection of each other. While on the Mexican side they invoke the American Dream, and in its US counterpart they yearn for their Mexican heritage. In the winter of 2019, I explored the San Diego/Tijuana area. I met people waiting in Mexico to cross via the beach or the desert, as well as some returning after failing numerous times. I also met clergy and faith-based organizations helping asylum seekers make a living while waiting in Mexico for their immigration court appearances.

My fieldwork ended in the southern Mexican border with Guatemala. There, I could see how the idea of an expanded border operated with the recently created Mexican National Guard. By massively stopping immigrants and ignoring lawful procedures, these areas have become a bottleneck for human transit. Many of these unfortunate policies stem from the economic threats imposed by the Trump Administration in 2019.

Cruces uses ethnography as its basic methodological tool. Ethnography is roughly defined as a thick description¹ of social activities, considering not only the actions but the meanings of these actions within context. In that sense, I got close to the people and the geographies approaching their circumstances, and interviewed immigrants to get to know their thoughts. I walked with them, took rides, joined celebrations, and accompanied them on their daily jobs. Contrary to regular cause-effect theory-practice approaches, I didn't go into the field to confirm any preconceived ideas. I approached the fieldwork as a time to allow my theories to grow and flourish or to disregard them and look for new ways of thinking. Briefly, I let the people I encountered guide me to address the topics. That was perhaps the most rewarding part of my

¹ Geertz pushed for an analytical approach based on detailed observations whereas analysis based on Western social structures and phenomena was used. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.

fieldwork: staying open minded and aware of how immigrants live their lives, seeing how geography forms their day-to-day activities, and learning how their journey shaped their lives.

My relationship to immigration started when a family incident touched my everyday reality. After reading in Mexican writer Juan Villoro's seminal novel, *The Witness* (2006), "that which is not autobiographical is plagiarism", I realized many of my interests have a strong connection to my own past and this is what engages me. Six years ago, my Uncle Nicolas was shot dead in my hometown in Colombia. This episode shook my entire family; my father was his closest friend, which meant that he was also in danger. My father ended up moving to Miami, where a family member hosted him and told him the possibilities of working in his profession of construction. I visited him six months after his arrival and got to know the United States for the first time. As a social anthropologist in training at the time, the realities and personal stories that he and his fellow immigrants shared shocked me and brought me into direct contact with the facts of immigration.

When uncle Nicolas passed away, my grandmother, Margarita, was still alive. She was a 90-year-old woman with serious health problems. My family decided not to tell her the painful truth about her son, as it might worsen her health— but she started to ask. They decided to tell her something had happened to Nicolas, but, for her sake, changed the narrative. Like Jorge Luis Borges' short story, *South* (1963), in which a person who is lying dead in bed imagines he passed away in a knife fight somewhere rather than being consumed by illness, my family wanted to create a more meaningful narrative for Nicolas' departure. One of my aunts thought to tell my grandma that Nicolas had been trying to cross the US-Mexico border to join his brother when they lost contact with him. He could be dead in the desert or alive in the custody of the Border

Patrol, or in the United States trying to lead a shadow life. They told her that they knew nothing. As she waited to hear news about Nicolas, she died from heart complications. This family story struck me because of the concept of a meaningful death, and how this is often associated with the journey of migration, regardless of its final results. Many people south of the United States' border believe this is a journey worth taking. It is better to die trying to reach a dream, either in the desert, in the jungle, or on a train called "the beast," than starving to death or waiting for a bullet to hit you. These family stories helped me understand the real-life situations in which people are forced to flee life-threatening scenarios. They also informed the ways I have come to understand both the imaginary and symbolic meanings people in the south attribute to the journey.

Immigration in its many forms has been a contentious issue for most of human history. The process of the population of countries such as Australia and the United States or the exodus from Germany during the Second World War emphasizes the idea that human mobility is an ongoing event (Castles, 2014). However, there are two significant changes to this process in recent decades. First, there is the increase in the number of people displaced by armed conflicts, which the United Nations estimates at 70 million by 2020.² Secondly, previously negotiated international policies related to the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers have been replaced with policies based on national security (White, 2016). Policies such as the so-called Prevention Through Deterrence,³ abuse and corruption by authorities and the violence by

² "Figures at a Glance", United Nations Refugee Agency. Accessed April 20, 2020, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

³ Recent ethnographic and archeological investigations in borderlands point out how these areas are not dangerous by themselves but deadly constructions to limit immigrants' crossing. See Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

organized crime that control the transit routes all converge on vulnerable migrants. These transients are often extorted, murdered, raped, and become victims of human trafficking. In the last few years, newspapers and broadcast channels have depicted shocking images of immigrants lying dead in the Rio Grande, Sonoran Desert, or Mediterranean Sea, an unprecedented phenomenon. The fact is that these popular images and the discourse around them only topically address this complex issue. Since 2015, statistics speak of more than 1000 deaths and nearly 2000 disappearances on the southern border of the United States.⁴ A similar situation is happening in the Mediterranean Sea, the Darien jungle on the Colombian-Panama border, and in Central America and Mexico.

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and his slogan "build the wall" is an example of a trend that is being echoed by other leaders such as Boris Johnson in the UK and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Disregarding cooperative treaties on issues such as asylum, the environment, nuclear weapons and international conflicts, these leaders seek to isolate their countries, supposedly to protect its citizens, industry, and economy from international threats. Through tariffs, the threat of war and economic blockades, they force their neighbors with dependent economies to operate at their will. While wars, violence and droughts break out in most of the global south, the so-called First World closes its doors, equating immigration to organized crime, while declaring national emergencies to protect themselves from "invasions." But human transit does not stop. The dream of a better future and a dignified life without violence is alive and growing. The drive to realize this dream is unstoppable.

⁴ For recent statistics see: "Disappeared: How the US Border Enforcement Agencies Are Fueling A Missing Persons Crisis," No More Deaths, Accessed April 20, 2018, <http://www.thedisappearedreport.org/reports.html>

Immigration is a multi-variable phenomenon. It is an individual action with collective consequences, generating economic, social and political changes in places of reception, origin and intermediate areas (Castles, 2014). In the industrial era, economic displacement was considered the driving force for immigration. However, we know that not all of those who are economically disadvantaged are willing to move. Those who do so must consider financial opportunities and existing familial networks, as well as cultural differences, among other variables (White, 2016). These characteristics have opened a wide field of analysis from the social sciences. Anthropology has looked at the phenomenon based on personal narratives (Bretell, 2012), with a particular interest in understanding immigrants' adaptive process and relations to their countries of origin (Olwig, 1999). These studies include immigrants' contributions to urban developments (Caglar, 2010), places of origin and their "culture towards emigration" (Massey, 1993), dynamics of the border territories (Salter, 2006), and the ideas of citizenship by the receiving nation-state (De Genova, 2002). It is also interesting to note that since the end of the 20th century, the vectors of displacement have changed as regulations and laws have adapted to new global developments. The "usual" north-south movements have been modified by undefined patterns. Immigrants seek gaps by creating new routes, scales and temporalities. These arrangements have given rise to concepts such as mobilities (Bissell, 2007), which address the movement itself as a classification and frees immigration from a teleological view of departures/arrivals.

Under this theoretical framework, *Cruces* explores three key elements of the phenomenon. First, during fieldwork in American cities, I question the everyday struggles of immigrants, their relationship with the society that receives them, and the creation of their newly-shaped identities.

Second, with an analysis of "migratory spaces," immigrant neighborhoods and border territories, I want to establish the ways that transit influences spaces and vice-versa. Following investigations by anthropologist Jason De Leon (2014), my objective is to consider geography as a character within the broader phenomenon. Lastly, during my journey to Mexico during the time of so-called "expanded borders," I aim to evaluate current repressive ideas in international relations at the US-Mexico border.

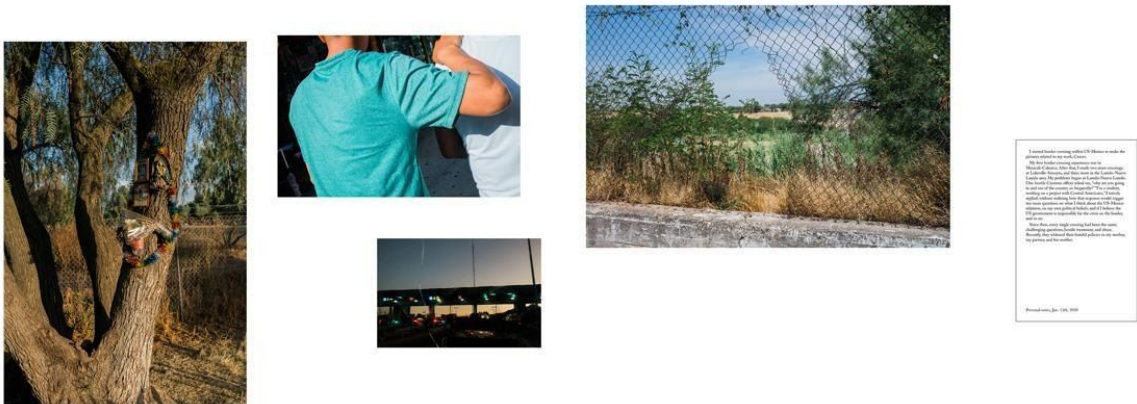


Fig. 2. *Installation* (detail), 2020.

Cruces is a multimedia installation comprised of still images, text pieces, and a single-channel video projection. Since the invention of photography, its relation with reality was

taken for granted, which is to say that photographic images were considered objective, faithful depictions of events. This is why photographs are widely used as a companion to writing in journalism: they are documents that certify truth. The truth-seeking impulse of photography led early 21st-century photographers such as Jacob Riis to use photographic images to raise awareness and drive social change. This use of images peaked during the Vietnam War with *The Terror of War* (1973) by Nick Ut. In his famous picture, Ut captured the suffering of armed conflicts reflected in kids escaping a US napalm bombing. However, painful documentary images have become everyday features in tabloids, newspapers and television. The abundance of these images led cultural critic Susan Sontag to suggest that documentary imagery alienated and desensitized viewers (Sontag, 1977). Broomberg and Chanarin⁵ assert that we have been seeing the same images for decades: grieving mothers, children playing with toy guns, needles in junkies' arms, Palestinian boys throwing stones, and so on.

The politicized documentary gaze and the challenge of maintaining objectivity in images created an uncertain scenario for documentary imagery later in the 1970s. For instance, critic Frits Gierstberg (2005) pointed out that the document is itself a fiction based on a set of established rules such as the invisibility of the image-maker, dramatic tones, and spontaneity. When viewers become aware of these processes, they can recognize the staged nature of documentary representations. In the face of these assertions, scholars like Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler (1981) have shown how the aim of the genre has been directed more towards moralism than structural change or understanding. Sekula's work is an attempt to use the documentary's potential for social issues, which is to say using the external world rather than a

⁵ Cited in Julian Stallabrass, ed. *Documentary. Documents of Contemporary Art*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013), 99.

text as a reference. His scholarly-based art practice focuses on capitalism's structural problems (Roberts, 2012) and follows what critics have called the "ethnographic turn." In his seminal work, "Fish Story," Sekula examines port cities and their relationships in the network of moving goods created by globalization. Using a vernacular, natural, and snapshot aesthetic, Sekula exemplifies how when compassion is mediated by an artful appreciation, it can undermine the political message.⁶

In this slippery scenario, social researchers have tried to use visual documentary tools to complement their scholarly writings. How social theory is visualized through imagery has been significantly challenged for more than one hundred years of visual aids in social sciences. In the early 20th-century, a contemplative look, following the premises of non-intervention, was taken as an objective way of representation. Yet this process was soon questioned since the presence of the author changes cultural events and his gaze is mediated by his cultural bias. Beginning in the 1950s, Jean Rouch embraced these limitations by creating his films collectively with his subjects, following the ideals of collaborative filmmaking (Rouch, 2003). This vision was later questioned as it was based on the premise of analogous importance of the cinematic or photographic media for the researcher and the subjects of study. Because of the uncertain direction of the production for the subjects of study, it was not clear whether it was for, or from the subjects (MacDougall, 1991).

With the use of different approaches in *Cruces'* installation, I reflect on the complex nature of human transit, its ambivalences, and contradictions. I realized I couldn't express everything I wanted with still images, writing, or video/sound pieces alone. The immigrants' stories were

⁶ See: Alan Sekula. "Dismantling modernism – reinventing documentary," In *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photoworks 1973-1983*, (Halifax, N.S., Canada : Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 53.

broad in content, as well as confusing and contradictory, to say the least. I also realized a direct depiction of the subjects would lead the project down the same path as the repetitive grieving imagery used by newspapers and broadcast news daily. This project advocates for a subtle reflection on geographies, situations, and processes, in which each one of the mediums works by itself and complements the others. I am aware of the documentary form's limitations in conveying reality, although using this genre is the ethical and compassionate way of approaching immigrants' vulnerability. When working with such delicate situations, in times of post-truth rhetoric in which artificial intelligence fakes political agendas, using an intimate and honest approach to subjects, geographies, and scenarios is a decisive choice.

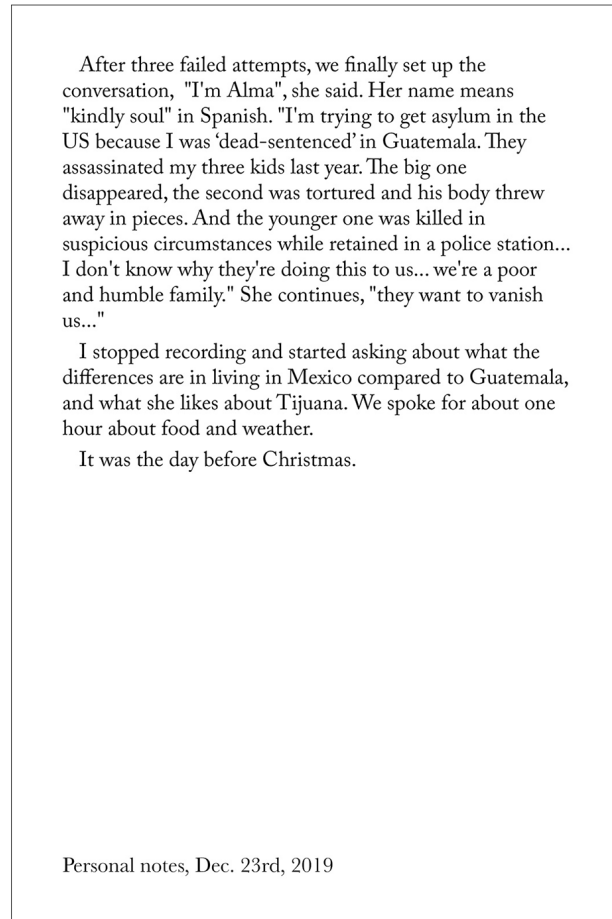


Fig. 3. *Text* (detail), 2020.

The image-text pieces consist of photographs taken in the field with additional research annotations on the places, thoughts, and off-the-record interviews. The pictures were taken in cities, during interviews, and while living my own migratory experience throughout border points, airports, buses and trains. These images intend to break with the over-analytical and classically-composed style of imagery. By using a collaborative editing process with immigrants, I attempt to deauthorize my images and to look for direct, raw, and vernacular compositions, which mimics the pictures taken daily. This way of working aims to challenge the viewing

experience, which is otherwise contrary to the peaceful and quiet contemplation of composed photographs (Van Gelder, 2009). This choice follows Walter Benjamin's call for artists to aesthetically fight the order and cleanliness imposed by fascist states.⁷

When considering image-text narratives, Martha Rosler, in her seminal project *The Bowery in Two Inappropriate Descriptive Systems* from 1974-75, addresses both the pairing system and social documentary in the age of tabloids. As a way of reflecting on a place associated with alcoholism and homelessness, Rosler created a document without directly depicting the subjects. She used the collective social imagery (edwards, 2012) associated with the situation to make her point by showing traces and suggestive words associated with drunkenness. These were paired with straight, flattening shots of the area, images apparently unrelated for an incautious viewer. Working similarly, I'm using notes to comment on places, stories and experiences, which aims to create mental images via images and text. I'm not intending to illustrate or to create a complete description or account with every single picture, but to suggest meanings in between the photographic messages and words. I'm doing so even by intentionally omitting images in some scenarios, trying to show the hardness and impossibility of representation within the genre of documentary. Including myself in the project as another character, the texts pieces highlight the failure of an objective account of this phenomenon. I write about my own struggles, frustrations, feelings, and even my personal experience as an immigrant living in the United States.

⁷ The politicization of aesthetics was one of the key ideas in Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*. In doing so, artists can challenge the aestheticization of politics imposed by authoritarian states. See: Walter Benjamin, Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, and E. F. N. Jephcott. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).



Fig. 4. *Video piece frame at 10'50"*, 2020.

Contemporary advances for production of multimodal work in the social sciences came primarily out of the theoretical lines explored by the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University. Using Maturana's (1980) concepts of autopoiesis and the perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro (2014), these approximations aim to include the components of social phenomena and the perspective of the actors in the productions. Maturana's concepts of autopoiesis and Viveiros' perspectivism aim to eliminate cultural preconceptions at the moment of recording and editing, giving equal value to the non-human points and importance to the senses. This is done by increasing the value of the auditory and haptic elements. An example of the use of these premises is the documentary film *Leviathan* (2012), made by the directors of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab Lucien Taylor and Verena Paravel. Using cameras on the bodies of fishermen, the frame of the boat, and from the perspective of fish, the film reflects the experience of commercial fishing off the Massachusetts coast. With deafening sounds, dizzying movements,

and unthinkable camera angles—in the hands of the fishermen, for example—this 90-minute production is as vivid as being on the boat itself. In the end, to paraphrase Taylor,⁸ documentaries should not be made to communicate anthropological realities but to evoke the lived experiences through the production process.

My 20-minute video piece is composed as a multivocal ethnography in which migrants with varying legal statuses, countries of origin and stages in their journey, relate their experiences. I do this as well with directors of humanitarian NGOs and residents of border areas. The imagery is gathered from the distributed yet relational geographies of the immigrants. The piece is structured to highlight elements of transit in trains and hubs in US cities, also revealing the obstacles immigrants have to face in their journeys along the Rio Grande River in Texas, the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, and the border wall in Tijuana. By using long conversations instead of brief sound bites, like what would be used in news media, the objective is to have a closer and more humanistic approximation of their stories, while connecting with real people and remaining universal. These faceless interviews aim to create a non-character, non-distinguishable situation, opening the phenomenon to a wide range of individuals and details of their struggles instead of just a few cases. Similarly, the landscape is portrayed throughout long cinematic takes, following Frederic Wiseman and James Benning in their approaches to geography and space⁹. It's my hope to challenge the common perception that these scenarios are dangerous by themselves.

⁸ Lucien Taylor. ed. *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R., 1990-1994*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

⁹ I'm looking to take the narrative to quiet and contemplative scenarios, to experience these geographies with wonder and curiosity. Both Wiseman and Benning have explored the long take as a narrative approach in their productions. See: Lutz P. Koepnick. *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

During my fieldwork, I became aware of the repetitive patterns of the sounds of the jungle on the Mexico-Guatemala border, the waves of the sea crashing against the wall in Tijuana, and the wind in the Sonoran Desert. These notes led me to think about sound as a medium for understanding and sharing the immigrant experience. I was intrigued by the repetitive noises I found, whether it was the jarring, aggressive, and metallic noises of the 7-line trains in Queens, the Greenline subway in East Boston or the transnational freight train in the Laredo/Nuevo Laredo area. The sound of the water's waves in the Rio Grande Valley echoed the sounds I heard by the Mystic River near Boston, and by the East River in Queens. These sound associations were a breakthrough for the sonic possibilities within the video piece. The use of these repetitive, similar, and immigrant-related settings could provide additional layers for portraying experiences of human mobility. In fact, these experiences led me to deepen my knowledge in the discipline referred to as sound studies.

The auditory experience offers a different, rather than better, understanding of social events, perhaps revealing non-visible patterns and allowing us to uncover deeper dynamics and structures (Mieszkowski, 2007). Sound studies also attempts to distance cultural studies from its vision-centric approach through its sensorial differences. Sound is spherical, images are directional; hearing immerses, viewing provides a perspective. Sound comes to us, vision travels from an object; hearing offers a connection to the world, viewing requires a distance. Sounds immerse us in the world, while images remove us from it (Sterne, 2003). Audio was also an important element to my editing process. Peak moments in the conversations, as well as ambient sound triggers were used to create non-rhythmic sequence cuts, to disrupt a linear and

chronological timeline, and to open the piece to more experimental and unstructured observation (Schneider and Caterina Pasqualino, 2014).

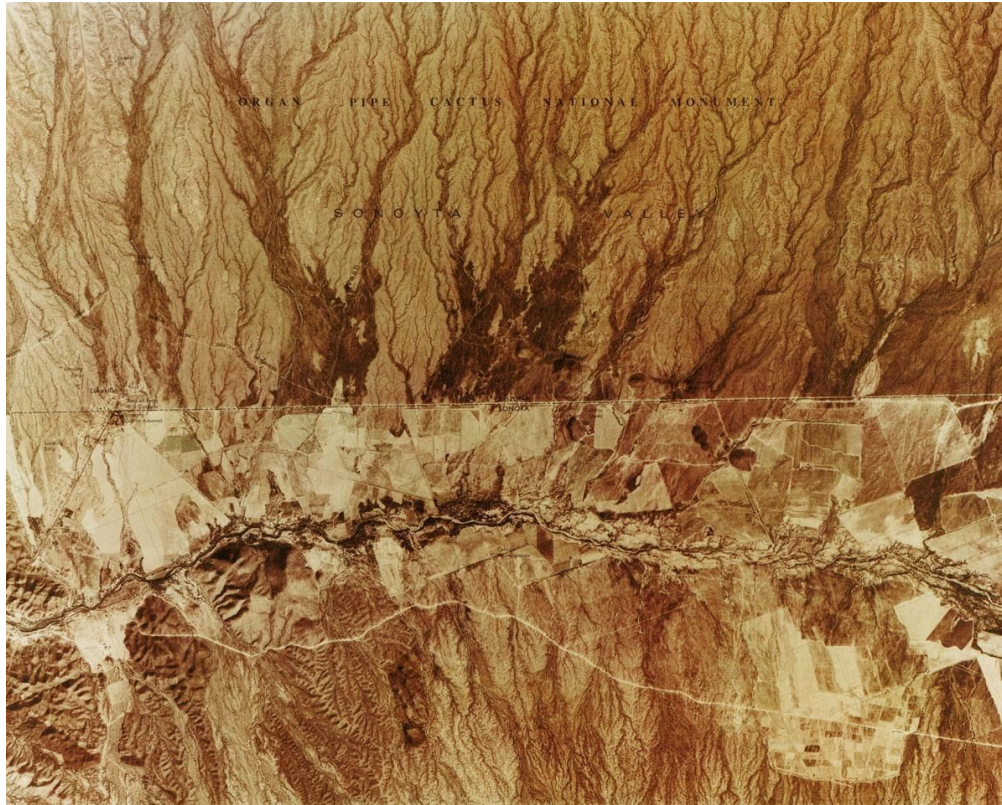


Fig. 5. *Border Map Near Sonoyta, 2020.*

I consider the elements in this work as different parts of information on the subject of immigration. The text pieces are my personal views. The imagery uses cinematic and photographic language to represent the spaces and processes, and the interviews describe the subjectivity of the people crossing borders. Something still seemed to be missing. Serendipitously, I found aerial topographic images of border areas when trying to illustrate the places I've been during this project. This was the last piece in the puzzle I was trying to solve. It was a so-called “scientific” point of view, though the idea of a map is also challenged in this

work. Maps are considered objective, precise, and factual depictions of areas, thus the more accurate way for representing spatial coordinates. Though maps are cultural creations with arranged conventions, they are not a motionless discipline concerning "static things" captured from a skyward position. Recent ideas based on Marx's materialism consider land and social and cultural interactions as the object of geography. These ideas are developed within the field of "experimental geography," which connects the concept of "material production" with the "space created" by human beings. Marx's key concept is that humans produce material life, and that production is fundamentally spatially-based.¹⁰ These new geographies are created throughout the vast spectrum of human interactions with space in time. This perspective opens up a new way of looking at this aerial and topographic imagery and allows us to see the US-Mexico border not just as a political and arbitrary barrier, but a cultural, ideological, geographical, racial, and economic division. In that line is where the US Border Patrol violates human rights, immigrants suffer, and smugglers thrive—all taking place alongside the flora and fauna and 100F-plus temperatures. The differences in the use and abuse of land, for instance, are quite dramatic in these images. In fact, some scholars point out the US-Mexico border as a long-committed project by the United States seen with disparities in use of land with dams, river engineering and surveillance infrastructure (Alvarez, 2019).

¹⁰ See: Trevor Paglen, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space." In *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*, edited by Scott Emily Eliza and Swenson Kirsten (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 34-42.

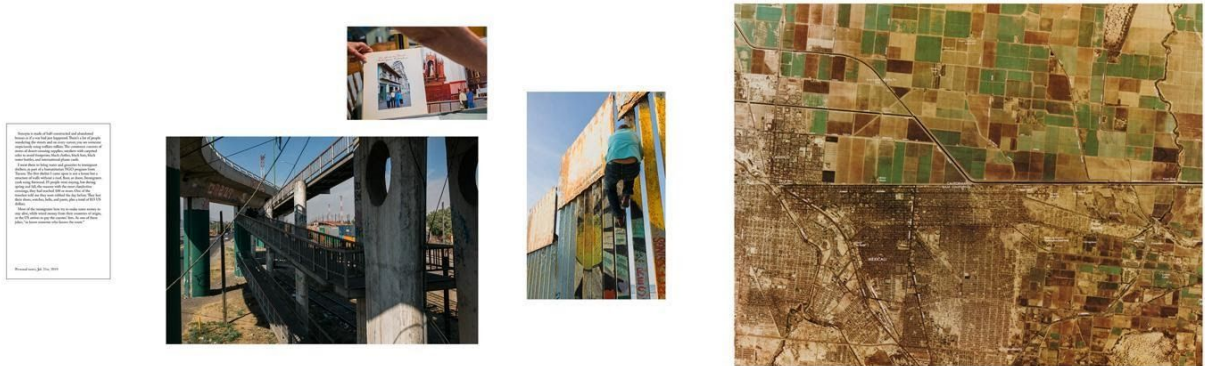


Fig. 6. *Installation* (detail), 2020.

In conceiving this project and creating this installation, I identified, followed, and recreated the traces of the migratory experience. These immigration routes, composed of treacherous trails and painful memories, lead me to a new view on the phenomenon. Imprisoned among violence and poverty, immigrants walk out driven by beliefs and the hope of a better future. Meanwhile, power, surveillance, and violence are imposed upon immigrants, creating a battleground in borderlands.

I completed my initially set objectives by using parallel imagery, multi-sensory components, a broad spectrum of immigrant experiences, and a critique of traditional documentary approaches. By including my stories and struggles in the project, the perspective is moved towards a subjective yet universal scenario. Being Latinx myself was a strong point of

connection when moving in these areas, though having a visa in my pocket showed how distant, privileged, and different my experience was—yet I, too, was a frequent target for authorities with searches and stops in borderlands, based solely on my accent and phenotype. With each crossing, customs officers in checkpoints and airports asked me about my political beliefs and preferences, which shows how the abuse, persecution, and surveillance is not an isolated event, but a systematic process against every person of color and everyone who wants to challenge the status quo.

Stories of crossing the border, waiting in shelters, and walking silently through city neighborhoods came back to me each time I addressed these images and sounds. I later tried to contact some of the people I worked with, often receiving good news from the US side, but just as often met with silence. Are they alive? Were they deported? Were they abandoned while walking in the desert? Like in my uncle Nicolas' story, I would like to think of their silence as a metaphor for the muted life they are facing. When they arrive in the US, they have to move carefully to avoid authorities and persecution. In their countries of origin, they are silenced by bullets, hunger, political prosecution, and autocrat regimes.

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