

With Borders: U.S. Latinas

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Integrative Project Thesis Paper

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I. Introduction

Around the time that I was born, my great-grandmother, Delores Hernandez became too old to take care of herself. At the same time, Mari Jimenez, a middle-aged nurse who was living in Aguascalientes, Mexico had just gone through a breakup. The school teacher of my second cousin happened to be Mari's niece, and in an effort to free Mari from her unhappiness in Mexico offered her the opportunity to come to the States and work as a nurse to my great-grandmother. After six months in the U.S. Mari's tourist visa had expired and she had become an illegal immigrant. Mari had also become part of the family, and so when Delores died my parents asked her if she would like to live in our house and help take care of my brother and I.

I lived with Mari from ages two to eight. She was technically our nanny, but really she was like a grandmother. After 9/11 it became increasingly difficult for Mari to find work, and it was around 2004 that she finally decided to move back to Mexico. My brother and I cried in the airport as we hugged her goodbye because we knew we would not be able to visit her in Mexico and she would likely never be able to return to the United States.

The years passed and we lost our Spanish. Mari would call on Christmas and my dad would translate for us over the phone. I would visit my grandmother in southwest Detroit and propose trips to Mexico and she would laugh at me. I spoke with an American accent, she said. I could never go to Mexico because, "you're a *guera*¹, *mija*." At the same time, I did not fit in at my predominately white high school. I ran for student body president my

¹ A light skinned woman.

freshman year, and during gym class a white boy turned to me and told me that as a woman with periods I would be too emotional, and as a *beaner*² I was too lazy to do a good job.

My mother is Caucasian, and my father is Mexican Colombian. I was born with fair skin and ambiguous features and am often mistaken as Italian, Jewish, or white before Latina. I am proud of the Martinez name because it is proof of my heritage, but at the same time I am uncomfortable with being labeled a 'Latina person of color' because I am white passing. In the beginnings of my integrative project I stumbled upon Linda Martín Alcoff: author, feminist, and mixed person herself, who describes her racial experience in the United States, "Only recently have I finally come to some acceptance of my ambiguous identity. I am not simply white nor simply Latina, and the gap that exists between my two identities (indeed, my two families) -- a gap that is cultural, racial, linguistic, and national -- feels too wide and deep for me to span. I cannot bridge the gap, so I negotiate it, standing at one point here, and then there, moving between locations as events or other people's responses propel me. I never reach shore: I never wholly occupy either the Anglo or the Latina identity."³

I, too am constantly navigating the line between two cultures. In southwest Detroit, more commonly known as "Mexicantown" I feel my whiteness. In the white suburban neighborhood where I went to high school, I feel my *Latinidad*. I operate between these two identities, never fully subscribing to one or the other.

² *Beaner* is derogatory slang for Mexicans or people of Mexican descent. The term originates from the prevalence of pinto beans and other beans in Mexican cuisine

³ Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, pg. 280. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006.

Mari's departure meant a significant loss of Mexican culture in my life, and if ethnicity is defined as an ethnic/social group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, or the like⁴ - how am I to identify? I no longer speak Spanish, go to church, or take much part in Mexican culture. I am very much American, but at the same time I am marked by my last name. For my integrative project I was driven to explore this phenomenon- the feelings of confusion and ambiguity related to my ethnic and racial identities. To find what it means to be a Latina woman living bi-culturally in the United States, and to understand if I am wrong in my assumption that there is any one authentic Latina experience.

II. Context:

A year after Mari had gone back to Mexico I had to present a famous artist to my fourth grade class. On the way home from school I asked my mom who I should research. Well, she said, since you are Latina maybe you should present on Frida Kahlo. This was the first time I had been introduced to the concept of racial and ethnic categories. I was too young to understand the implications of my Latina identity, but nevertheless I went on to present Kahlo's harrowing life and the complicated themes present in her work.

Kahlo's paintings explore questions of identity related to her gender, sexuality, race, and class. They are highly political, and often referenced her thoughts on post colonialism, communism, and what it meant to be Mexican during the time that she was alive. These

⁴ Cornell, Stephen E., and Douglas Hartmann. *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 1998.

ideas, which interest me deeply today, were not what I was drawn to at the time. Instead I became fascinated with Kahlo's surreal portraiture and the ways in which she expressed emotional suffering through physical pain. I began to emulate her "magical realism" in my own work. Slowly my interest in two-dimensional portraiture developed into sculpture, and by the time I was in high school I was solely sculpting faces and busts.

Artists like Johnson Tsang and Tip Toland then became highly influential. Their surrealism, or what I called 'exaggerated realism' inspired me to make figurative work that pushed the boundaries of form and the material characteristics of clay. Like them, I could make faces that were monumental in size. I could make objects that appeared to be made out of rubber or water. Clay lends itself to the creation of work that can be both structural and organic, and like them I was driven to explore its possibilities. What I produced, however, lacked meaning and concept, and I was urged to question my motivations behind making faces. Intermixed with questions about my work were new questions about my Latina identity. In college I aimed to learn more about myself through women's studies and Latinx Culture courses, and in my research found that Latinas navigate a complicated racial system here in the United States.

Beginning with colonization, monarchies in Europe established societies in the Americas that had race playing a major role in founding dominating power structures over others. Race hierarchies in the Americas developed differently based upon the geography of the colonizing nations. Spain's proximity to Africa had historically allowed for race mixing, and generated different perceptions of race when they crossed the Atlantic. Spain's imperialism established the 'Casta' System: a system of power that dictated one's agency, status, and wealth based upon

your skin color and ancestry. Individuals born in Spain or descendants of Spanish people were at the top of the caste system. Furthered mixing with individuals from African or Indigenous descent placed you lower in society. '*Limpieza la sangre*' or cleaning/purifying your bloodline through mixing with European descendants was the only way you could elevate the status of your children. You could change your culture, your language, and your visual appearance, but you could not change your skin color. Visual race characteristics therefore became a leading factor in determining the status of others.

Based on their geographic isolation, Great Britain developed different concepts of race and race mixing in their colonization of the Americas. The UK had observed ties with the east and Africa, but because of their unique location were able to be more selective about immigration and race mixing. This precedent led to the United State's development of the 'One Drop' policy, which established that any trace of blackness or color in your ancestry meant that you were also a colored person. Skin color and visual characteristics could not change these blood legacies, and went on to further develop a system of a dominating white class and an ostracized and subordinate ethnic class.

Latina and Hispanic women in the United states operate in a system of dominating powers that references a legacy of both of these systems. To my Mexican family I am white based upon my physical characteristics. To white society I am Latina/Hispanic. The oppression that Latinas face is transcultural and transnational, and as the United States has socially progressed to improve the status and treatment of people of color, Latinas have found themselves excluded and caught between progressive movements. The first and second wave of the feminist movement centralized itself on the white woman's experience. Latina's and black women,

though fighting in tandem for their rights, were not recognized for their multiple and intersecting points of oppression. Major feminist and critical race theorist, Patricia Hill Collins was one of the first to articulate the intersectional approach to understanding oppression,

“We must first recognize race, class, and gender as interlocking categories of analysis that together cultivate profound differences in our personal biographies. But then we must transcend those very differences by re-conceptualizing race, class and gender in order to create new categories of connection.”⁵

At the same time, the Latino/Chicano movement failed to support the female experience. Men stood as leading figures, and pushed the concept of ‘*La familia*’ and the continued domestication of women in the home as mothers. Latina women were excluded from these movements. They understood the concept of intersectional-ity before its popularity in the women’s liberation movement, and they continue to navigate oppressive societal structures based upon their gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and class.

As I began to iterate and brainstorm ideas for my Latina focused project I was introduced to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. Her poem, *To Live in the Borderlands means you* begins,

“To live in the borderlands means you
are neither *hispana india negra Española*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed

⁵ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Toward a New Vision: Race, Class and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection*, page 27. Memphis (TN): Research Clearinghouse and Curriculum Integration Project, Center for Research on Women, 1989.

caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;”⁶

For Anzaldúa, the borderlands are more than the physical border in the southwest United States. The border signifies the many invisible obstacles that people of color must face on a daily basis. She explains that Latinx people *are* the border. They materialize and carry the border with them in their skin color, their physical characteristics, their culture, and their overlapping identities. No matter where you are in the United States or what your experience is, Latinx people carry the legacy and the struggle of the border in their bodies. It was with these historical precedents in mind that I began my Integrative Project.

III. Methodology

In the first iterations of my Integrative Project I was simply driven to materialize the Latina experience of oppression in sculptural form. I knew that I would be working large scale, and that the form of my work would include modified faces and portraiture. I began with the concept of intersectionality, and the idea that an individual can be discriminated against based upon the many intersecting points of their identity. My first sketches exhibited faces in compressed and manipulated posed, with physical objects pushing against their skin. The objects stood to

⁶ Anzaldúa, Gloria. “To Live in the Borderlands Means You.” Accessed April 20, 2018, <https://umich.instructure.com/courses/195290/files?preview=6747582>.

represent the invisible acts of discrimination that exist in spoken racism and micro aggressions, and the expression of the faces signified the individual's emotional state.

As I began iterating in clay, I envisioned a face entrapped in an acrylic box. The box standing as a metaphor for the ways in which society entraps us in our identities. It was at this point that I realized the tangible objects were unnecessary, and that the oppressive forces could remain invisible. The invisible box could then be further interpreted as a manipulation of the skin; another restrictive force that you cannot shed.

The facial form that I created displayed six sides of compression. Its face pushes up against the invisible barrier and conveys a general sense of discomfort. The form is not gruesome or painful, but instead a whimsical interpretation of facial manipulation. I began to refer to this piece as a 'brick form', and then further envisioned a mass accumulation of facial brick forms, which I could then bring together to create a wall. I created a plaster mold of the brick negative, and began casting the repeatable form in ceramic slip. Once I had made a few, I decided that I would create a larger version of the brick form. My exhibition plan then became to create a large 10" x 8" wall, built out of compressed brick form portraits.

What began as an accumulation of subjects from both the Ann Arbor and Detroit area became a focus on Latina women who currently lived in, or had roots in southwest Detroit. I interviewed and photographed nine women in total, and asked them to pose in a manner that they felt conveyed their feelings of oppression. It is interesting to note that the younger women were more adept in their ability to describe moments of prejudice they had faced in their lives. My older subjects, Thelma Martinez and Jessica Travino recalled little to no direct acts of

discrimination in their lifetime. At the same time, however, in asking Jessica Trevino about the roots of her last name she told me,

“Well, its really Treviño. And there comes the other problem. I dropped the ñ because back when I was younger in school, y’know, they couldn’t type it. And when I wrote it people were like ‘what’s that?’. So it fell off. Which I feel bad about,”⁷.

While she may not have been able to recall poignant moments of discrimination, she was able to understand how a small change to her name also meant a significant change in the way she presented herself to the world, as she had changed parts of her identity in order to assimilate into white American culture.

My older subjects and I shared similar experiences, being that we were light skinned Latina women from similar families. After interviewing my younger subjects from Cass Technical High School in Detroit, it became clear that while we were similar in age we had vastly different lives. As first and second generation immigrants, many of their parents and family were undocumented. They recalled the times in which their loved ones had been deported, and the feelings of constant surveillance from immigration officials. They discussed their fears of different public spaces, with airports being a common place that they avoided. I had been required to gain photography release forms for these women because they were minors, but after collecting the forms and photographing these women it became clear that I could not share their names in my work.

⁷ "With Borders: U.S. Latinas." Interview by author. February 9, 2018.
Jessica Trevino

In a story told to me by my professor William Calvo Quirós, he recalled a food drive he attended in southwest Detroit. The white people began to take photos of event, and Prof. Quirós had to stop them. He explained that many of the people there were undocumented, and that publishing images of them online would have posed a very real threat of deportation. I realized then how signing my form could have been highly uncomfortable for their parents, who had to disclose their name and signature.

My project had departed from its origins as a mode of representation for Latina women and their experiences. As I began to sculpt the faces, it became apparent that in the loss of their features through compression and manipulation I was further removing their identity. Failures in slip casting also resulted in changes to the form, and so I was required to make ceramic tiles that mimicked the appearance of a brick façade. In the final months before exhibition, I decided to embrace the oppressive nature of my work. My final piece then became a visualization of the psychological impact faced by Latinas embodied in a literal border wall. Their faces compressed and distorted in order to make tangible nationality, race, and class based discrimination, while also reminding the viewer of the physical borders we build between one another.

IV. Creative Work

The wall was constructed out of five 8" x 2" x 2" plywood segments to stand at a final height of ten feet tall. The front wall is enveloped in a combination of differently sized and rustically colored ceramic tiles that are positioned to mimic a brick facade. Interspersed within the tiles are fifteen portraits of women from southwest, Detroit. Their features are flattened and squashed to convey their compression within the border wall. The rear facing wall was left uncovered, and instead displays three centered facial tiles.

A cold read of the final wall does not exemplify my initial exhibition plan. From a blind standpoint, the wall can be interpreted as a political statement on the border wall that lies between the American southwest and Mexico. The faces of my subjects are compressed under the weight of the wall, and the hundreds of blank tiles go on to further represent the millions of women who face the same discrimination based on their Latina identity. The size and height of the wall is monumental in scale. It is positioned near the entrance of the gallery so that its looming form oppresses the viewer as they enter the space. The women themselves are organized within the wall based upon their age. With the older subjects positioned toward the bottom, and the younger women appearing further up. The older women, then, feel the greatest weight of the wall, as they have experienced a greater amount of discrimination throughout their lifetime.

Idealistically, I would erect these border walls in Latina communities all over the country. These walls would emphasize the existence of Latina women with unique experiences outside of the American southwest. These border walls, then, will manifest themselves as metaphors for the spoken and unspoken discrimination and prejudice that these women face across the United States.

V. *Conclusion*

As I reflect on this work, I am inclined to acknowledge why I did not include Mari in this project. In the time that I spent working on my thesis, it came to my attention that much of what I had known or remembered about Mari was false. When I called my dad to confirm her story, he corrected me, and gave me information that further humanized her in my mind. Before speaking to my father, Mari existed to me as a happy and wholesome woman who brought authentic

Mexican culture to my life. A culture that I did not experience in my Americanized family. It was after hearing her true story that I more accurately understood her: her imperfections, her pain, and the fears that she lived with as an immigrant in the United States.

It is important to note that in addition to learning that yes, of course I can claim my Latina identity, I also have to acknowledge the privilege that allows me to do so. As Cherríe Moraga states in her work *La Guera*:

“I have had to look critically at my claim to color, at a time when, among many white feminist ranks, it is a “politically correct” (and at times peripherally advantageous) assertion to make. I must acknowledge the fact that, physically, I have had a choice about making that claim, in contrast to women who have not had such a choice and have been abused for their color. I must reckon with the fact that for most of my life, by virtue of the very fact that I am white-looking, I identified with and aspired toward white values, and that I rode the wave of that southern California privilege as far as conscience would let me,”⁸

As a white passing woman I exist with privileges that my Cass Tech counterparts do not. I am lucky to be in the position that I am in. As a Latina person, who is able to live in the United States and receive higher education, who lives without the fear or threat of deportation to my family. It is through this experience that I understand the responsibility that comes with creating political art. That as a person who represents both white and non, Spanish-speaking and English, I have

⁸ Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa. *This Bridge Called My Back Writings by Radical Women of Color. La Guera*, Page 50. Albany: SUNY Press, 2015.

the advantage of operating in both worlds and the responsibility of advocating for marginalized people.

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