

## **Translucent Borders: Mexico to America**

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At times, a border is a physical material that exists undeniably, but there are also intangible borders, such as the fear that can exist between two countries. When I look at the world, I find it inexcusable that countries can have such varying degrees of living standards, where the rich are often exploiting the poor. Being a citizen of the United States, I can see the differences between my country and our bordering neighbor, Mexico. I am drawn to learning more about how immigration and border restrictions impact the relationship between the two countries. *Translucent Borders: Mexico to America* is aimed at connecting U.S. citizens with the complex social circumstances along the border between the United States and Mexico through an installation consisting of paper drawings and books that introduce viewers to the lives of immigrants closely affected by the border.

Although I am concerned with how people interact with one another all around the world, my personal motivation for focusing on the United States and Mexico arose from my experience of the border first-hand. I lived in Anapra, a “squatter settlement” near Juárez, Mexico with Alternative Spring Break, a student-run community service group at the University of Michigan. Since Juárez is a border town across from El Paso, Texas, I had the opportunity to talk to a variety of people who were affected by the border: living near it, enforcing it, engaging in illegal crossings, or working to ameliorate some of its negative effects. The people shared personal stories and philosophies, revealing many social problems in areas such as government, the economy, and education that impact their everyday lives. The stories that I heard were powerful, and I want them to be known to others by representing them in my work.

Ultimately, the project is geared towards revealing the struggles that Mexicans face when confronted with the border. Although the U.S. has the right to control its immigration numbers and act accordingly to protect its citizens from various dangers, I feel that the additional construction of barriers has larger consequences on people’s livelihoods. According to the World Bank, “in 2002, half the population in Mexico was living in poverty and one fifth was living in extreme poverty.” Many families do not make nearly enough income to feed one another, have electricity, or send their children to school.

Finding close to no help from the Mexican government, I am not surprised by the lengths Mexicans go to in order to find work in the United States. Some U.S. companies employ illegal immigrants in order to get away with non-standard American working conditions. Other companies build maquiladoras in Mexico that often exploit labor through inadequate pay. There has been a “boost to the activities of the maquila industry –

the small factories that assemble duty-free imports into duty-free exported final products” ever since Mexico decided to globalize its economy. Mexico has moved from using its domestic market as a source for income and turned towards exporting to the United States, “accompanied by the government’s closer relationship with U.S. foreign policy (Salas 33). On one hand, the United States has opened its doors to cheap trade with Mexico, allowing the construction of maquiladoras. Through trade agreements, the U.S. has “committed itself to lowering barriers to the cross-border movement of goods, capital, raw materials, and services” (Massey 5).

The U.S. government ironically loosened restrictions on trade to benefit the American economy, but increased border patrol to stop immigration from Mexico, even though many Mexicans are trying to find jobs in America due to the trade agreements that have weakened their economy. With stricter policies at border crossings, migrants are steadily “crossing at more remote sections and less accessible locations in mountains, deserts, and untamed sections of the Rio Grande River,” leading to “a tripling of their death rate during entry” (Massey 6). With the increase in security at crossing points, desperate migrants feel the necessity to risk their lives on more dangerous routes to get to U.S. soil. More lives are lost in the long run. Regardless of new walls or stricter policies, Mexicans will continue to cross the border in search of a better life. The consequence of stricter policies is too great when people’s lives are at stake.

The target audience of my project is the everyday U.S. citizen who may be unfamiliar with the realities of Mexican migrants. My intention is to show U.S. citizens, who may be in favor of building more walls, that migrants are relatable people who deserve certain inalienable rights, such as the rights to attain basic food, clothing, and shelter. By giving viewers a glimpse into a few personal lives of migrants, the project will demonstrate why migrants are striving for a piece of the American dream. I want my project to question whether border laws are just and to have viewers connect to people from another culture.

Being able to create a narrative is important to me in *Translucent Borders: Mexico to America* because I want to create a relationship between my audience and the Mexican people. In the project, I developed an installation consisting of drawings that mimic physical walls, using ink, paper cutouts, aqueous stains, and burn marks. The drawings relate directly to three books. Each book is dedicated to one migrant who has dealt with the border, based off of oral histories that I conducted in 2008. The first book introduces the harshness of Carmina’s deportation. The following book illustrates Mari’s path to the United States and her difficulties with immigration. The last book in the series describes the lives of Mexican migrants through the voice of Daniela, a South American immigrant who works to improve migrants’ lives. The drawings and books work together to

create a narrative with a stark introduction to immigration problems, as well as an outline for some hopeful futures.

The drawings are large and grab the viewer's attention. In total, I have six pieces of vellum, each six feet long by three feet wide. The vellum pieces are grouped into sets of two, accompanied by a book on a migrant. In each set, the vellum sheets are hung parallel to one another, with only eight inches between each piece to create layers. The sets are hung parallel to one another as well, with space between each set to allow viewers to walk around them. The positions of the large drawings separate the gallery space like a maze, creating physical borders that people will navigate through. I want the audience to experience the presence of tangible borders to begin questioning what it feels like to be on one side versus the other.



(side view of installation)



(gallery viewers interacting with installation)

In addition to creating the physical experience of walls, I play with what viewers can see through borders. Since I drew on semi-transparent vellum, the viewer can see through the paper at varying degrees. I want to address intangible borders along with the physical. Since the paper itself is a thin border that barely exists, it serves as a metaphor for both types of borders. At first, viewers may think that they can see through all the pieces at once due to the semi-transparency of the vellum, but it is only with closer inspection that one can see the subtle differences that occur in each piece itself. The relationship between America and Mexico is complicated, and it requires a close look to begin understanding all of its components.

Each piece of vellum acts as a layer of information that relates to a personal story in its accompanying book. The common layer in all three sets is a piece with sections from a map drawn in ink. I used street maps

because they are recognizable and allude to geographical data. I used maps from Juárez, Mexico and El Paso, Texas since more migrants pass through these two cities than any other immigration point in the world. If the migrant in the corresponding book traveled between Mexico and the United States frequently, the order of the maps sections also alternated between the two countries. The maps in each piece are drawn to coincide with the migrants' stories.



(details from each set of drawings)

Accompanying the first map is a paper silhouette that resembles chain-link and barbed wire fences. The imagery of the fence illustrates the difficulties that come with trying to move between the two countries. To get to the United States, migrants must pass barbed wire along the way to an immigration crossing point or illegally hop fences. Carmina had to wait behind bars before realizing that she was being deported back to Mexico. The sections of paper cutouts further aid or obstruct the viewer's ability to see the corresponding layer of maps behind it.

The piece of vellum for the second set also has paper cutouts, but this time, the cuts form wave-like shapes that follow the border on the map behind it. The Rio Grande is the natural border that separates the United States from Mexico, and it is another obstacle that many migrants must overcome. Mari mentions "the river" in her book, but I also remember her vivid recollection of how "the river" has taken the life of someone connected to her. To physically add water to the vellum, I painted tea and dirt infused water onto the waves, and thus got the vellum to crinkle. The water caused the paper cuts to separate and form holes that viewers can peer through.

The final layer for the last set represents the desert and heat. Viewers can see that the vellum has hundreds of burnt holes that follow the outline of the border on the map behind it. I formed the holes by sticking lit incense through the vellum, drawing with the burnt marks. For larger gaps in the vellum, I used the flame from matches. Since Daniela described how migrant farmers have to travel and labor during the summer between Texas and Michigan, I set her book next to the drawings created with heat.

From a distance, the vellum also looks inviting with an aesthetically pleasing quality due to its delicate quality, but up close, viewers will notice the imagery embedded in each piece. Even if the paper version may seem gentle, physical barbed wire is threatening, heat is destructive, and water from river crossings leaves many dead. By surprising and grabbing the viewer's attention with the unexpected imagery, I can get viewers to further wonder and examine the content. Each layer in the installation is intentional and forms a narrative with a beginning and an end, guiding the audience to soak in more information one step at a time.

After seeing the initial large pieces of drawings, viewers can spend time with the small books. I want to give viewers the opportunity to read the words of the migrants themselves since their stories are so revealing. A few years have gone by since I volunteered in Anapra, Mexico, but I still remember the stories that I heard from immigrants about their personal lives. Despite all their hardships, the immigrants continued to work hard and help one another. The stories of determination by the Mexican people remain an integral influence on how I live my life, and I want to share them with the public.

I decided to conduct new oral histories in order to have full recollections of the stories. By recording and transcribing the interviews, I was able to stay true to the interviewees' words and emotions. Most of the interviews lasted for about an hour; therefore, I ended up taking pieces from the interviews to form narratives in their words for the books. I then used expressive typography within the text to represent key emotional moments. The text changes in size, weight, and color to create visual movement along with the moving story.



(cover and spread from Carmina's book)



(cover and spread from Mari's book)

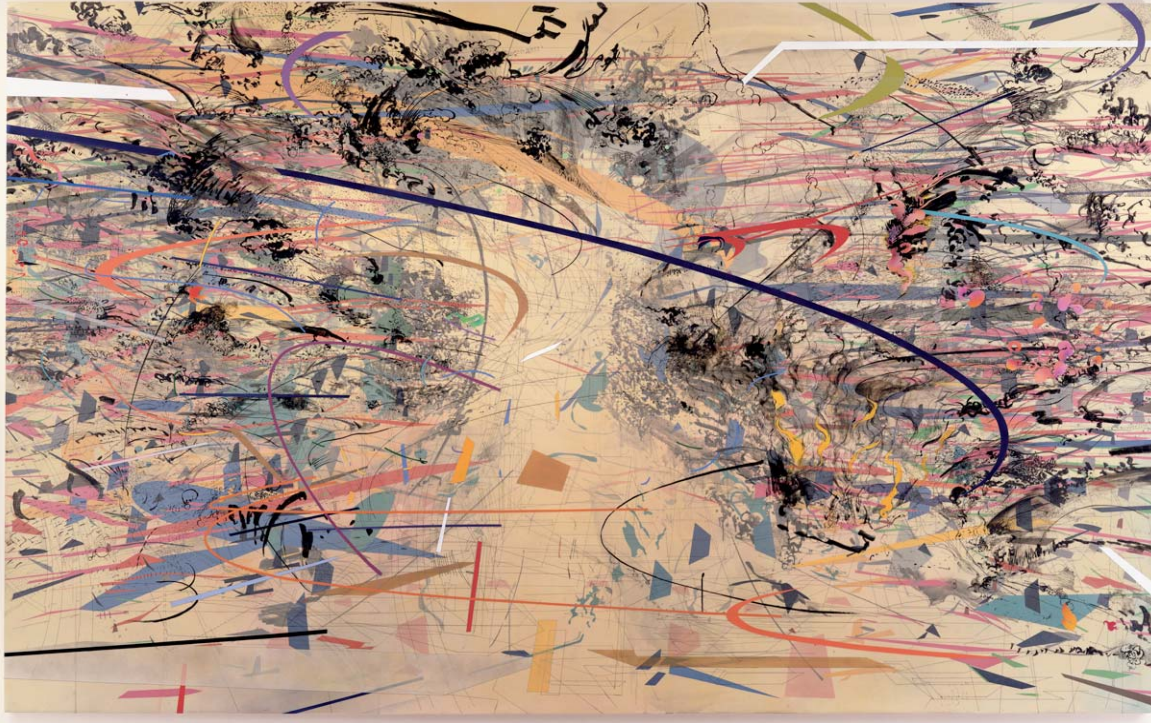


(cover and spread from Daniela's book)

The forms of the books also work with the idea of layers. Each book has multiple layers of writing and imagery that mimic the large drawings in the installation. Viewers unfold new information with each turn of a page. I use both semi-transparent vellum and opaque papers to pace the story. Opaque pages are used for quieter moments and act as pauses. In contrast, vellum pages create a chaotic look that reflects the tone of the story since viewers can see the composition of text through multiple pages at a time. The only way to figure out the content is to flip through each page. I am evoking the complexity of people and their experiences through the use of vellum, showing that an outsider cannot form an opinion on someone based on first impression alone. Instead of simply labeling someone as an illegal immigrant, viewers can learn more about the history behind each person. The intimate book format also allows readers to concentrate solely on one story at a time, pacing the narrative page by page.

One of my main references for choosing to work with multiple layers of information is Julie Mehretu, an abstract painter. Mehretu addresses complex narratives in history such as wars, natural disasters, and cities with dense layers of gestures and mark-making media. In describing her work, Mehretu explains that “the underlying conceptual framework of my paintings lies in the relationship between the individual and the community, the whole. Each mark represents individual agency, an active social character,” (Fogle and Ilesanmi 13). I have had the opportunity to see the artist’s large paintings in person, and I remember being in awe at how her marks interact with one another, representing the time and movement that may have occurred in the narrative she is portraying. I began my journey of working with the U.S. and Mexican border knowing that the topic is extremely complicated. Border issues involve jobs, money, worker’s rights, education, drugs, and so much more. Even though my work is not pointing out facts from all the complicated components surrounding the border, I show the complexity of the lives of immigrants by using multiple layers of information.





(Julie Mehretu, *Dispersion*, ink and acrylic on canvas)

After a year spent working to create a finished piece, I realize that I am chasing a goal that will take a lifetime to complete. I decided to start *Translucent Borders: Mexico to America* because I realized that my experience along the United States and Mexican border impacted my ideas on social justice more than any other occurrence. I gained a whole new perspective on what is necessary for life through the compassion of the Mexican people, and I want to pass along a piece of what I found with the public as well. I am a firm believer that even though I went to Anapra to volunteer and help others, it is actually I who received the most help by having the opportunity to experience something powerful. I know that I will never satisfy my desire to raise awareness because there will always be more that I can do.

I plan on pursuing new ideas to expand on my project. Although I have shared three interviews, I can reach out to more members of the community. Even in the last two months before the completion of my project, I have gotten in contact with new sources for meeting members of the immigrant community. I need to continue my project after its deadline to give my new sources the time and attention they deserve. I would like to expand my work to be more interactive with the public as well. There are many ambitious possibilities that may take years to complete, but I am excited about their development.

For now, I know that I learned immensely from my journey in creating *Translucent Borders: Mexico to America*. Through using large-scale installation pieces of paper in combination with intimate books, I hope that my work can touch a few souls and connect cultures. The vivid paper drawings capture the scale of the consequences associated with stricter border policies. The books then share the powerful words of the migrants themselves, revealing how the Mexican people are humans who share common emotions and necessities for life. My goal is to break down social borders to enable a new understanding on how immigration policies can develop.

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