

# Crossing the Line : Walking the United States - Mexico Border Crossing Checkpoints

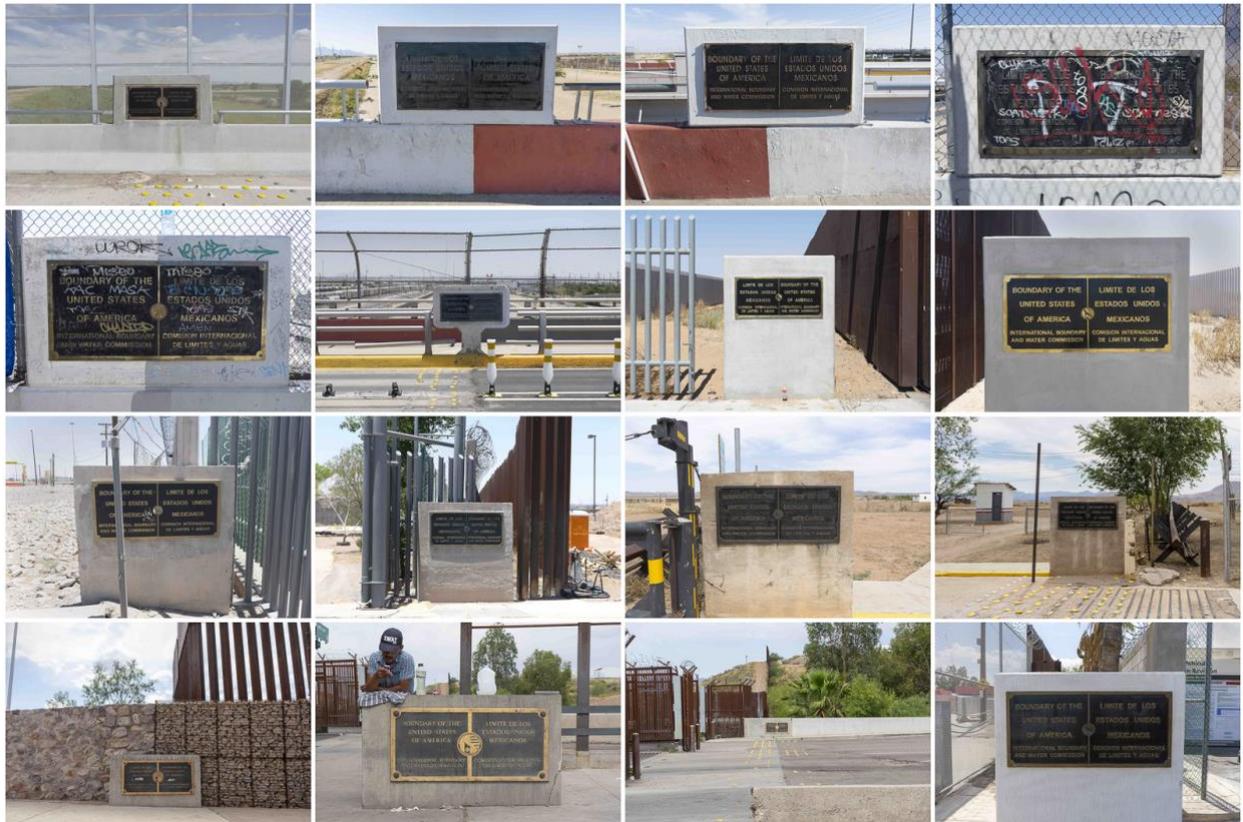
Laura Kim Meckling



*No matter how abstract the line, no matter how abstract the map, real bodies will be implicated.*

Francis Alijs

Borders are physical and psychological. The political climate in the United States of America intensifies the impact of physical borders with dialogue designed to influence perceptions about differing cultures. Reports on immigration, family separation and chanting rhetoric to “build a wall” between the US and Mexico, are propagated by news organizations with opposing ideologies, causing passionate divisions within our nation. The provably false statements propagated by the US President are easily contested and yet embraced as the truth by some people.<sup>1</sup> What is the meaning of *truth* if tangible facts are no longer understood as the truth for many of his supporters? In the summer of 2018, I moved freely across the US - Mexico border to directly engage and investigate the physical barrier that divides my nation of citizenship from our neighbours.



Walking allows us to directly engage and investigate tangible structures of division, and is a means to process the abstracted, psychological conditions of borders. This performance of the walking body involved spontaneous interactions and dialogue with the people I encountered on my journey. The US- Mexico border is approximately 1,933 miles long.<sup>2</sup> The border begins in the east at the Las Palomas Wildlife Management Area in southern Texas, where the Rio Grande empties into Gulf of Mexico. It heads in a general west/north-westerly direction and ends at a fence that extends approximately fifty yards into the Pacific Ocean, between San Ysidro, California, and Tijuana, Mexico. There are forty-eight listed entry and/or exit points “where people can cross the Mexico-United States border.”<sup>3</sup> Most of the crossings are accessible by walking. Some crossings are for vehicles only, such as the 5 Freeway in San Ysidro, California, and the World Trade Bridge, in Laredo, Texas, which is only accessible to commercial trucks. The Tijuana airport is walkable, but the signage at the passageway reads, “Entry for ticketed passengers only”. In addition, there are two crossings that are initially accessible by walking, however, a ferry boat ride is required to access Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, Mexico from Los Ebanos, Texas, and the crossing from Big Bend National Park, Texas, to Boquillas, Mexico, is a waist deep wade through the opaque, summer river. Alternatively, you can opt for a very short boat ride rowed by a Mexican caballero.

One of the original functions of the border patrol was to “round up runaway slaves”.<sup>4</sup> The first physical portions of the southern border wall were made of tree branches and barbed wire, constructed to control the flow of Asians, specifically Chinese people, as the government implemented the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.<sup>5</sup> This act would remain in US legislation until 1943.<sup>6</sup> During the Second World War, the US government placed Japanese-American

citizens into internment camps, located in states in the west as well as North Dakota. Presently, the words, “Muslim” or “Mexican”, cast a wide net over cultures with similar languages or religions, becoming monikers representing people from any Middle Eastern or Hispanic and Latinx origins, respectively. This raises concerns about the shifting nature of divisions and cultural perceptions.



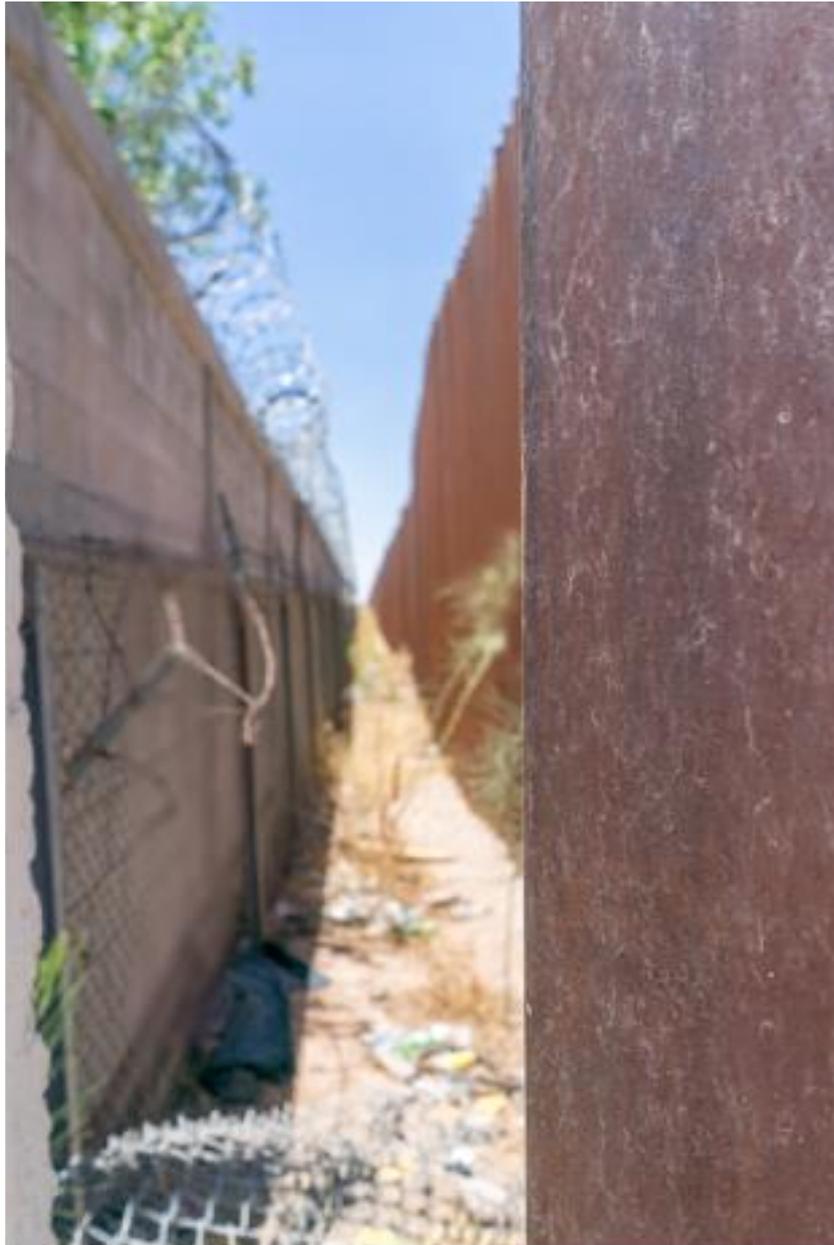
Taking a boat across the Rio Grande to Mexico from Big Bend National Park, Texas. The span of the river is approximately twelve meters. The cost of the boat ride is \$5, round-trip.

As a mixed-race individual, I perpetually exist in a liminal zone between two cultures. I am categorized as Asian-American, in general, or Korean-American, more specifically, though it was simply, *Oriental* in my youth.<sup>7</sup> In Korea, I'm referred to as, 혼혈 (honhyeol), or “mixed-blood”. Half of me is consistently perceived as *the other*, resulting in an inherent cultural border that cannot be crossed. Though my culture is not currently the concern, I question, if the US were to go to war with North Korea, whether it will matter that I was born in South Korea, or will I just be seen as *a Korean*? I exercise my privilege to cross the US- Mexico border because, at this moment in history, I can. It may seem trite to say so, but the profundity exists in the hope that the statement, “because I can”, remains true, and can be expanded to include more people. I acknowledge that my status as a US citizen comes with privileges and freedoms not available to many, and feel a pang of guilt for never having to *earn* these liberties.<sup>8</sup> Those with daily access to food, water, shelter and education must recognize that they, too, are among the privileged. The wide spectrum of the division finds some born into the daily struggle for basic provisions, education or human rights, while others live in gross excess. How do we, or can we, reconcile the divisions?



A significant portion of the journey was spent walking in the liminal zones between the US and Mexico; The liminal zone is the area where you have officially left the United States of America, yet have not quite entered Mexico. These areas ranged in distance from twenty meters to four kilometres. Then, there were painted lines or markings that indicated the *actual* border, where the width would occasionally span both boots, signalling a true liminal space of, an apparent nowhere, ostensibly void of identity and politics, yet surrounded by controversy. I would often film my boots walking across these narrow set lines, one foot in front of the other, occasionally stepping off to one side, feeling as if my body was residing in two places at once. The still frames of the video display the heavy, black forms of my boots and trousers' leg, encroaching upon the varying surfaces of the terrain and emphasizing the steps guiding the movement across space.

The simple act of taking a step across a designated line, such as a yellow, painted line, that marks the space between the US and Mexico, can redefine one's identity as, "us or them/the other/outsider, citizen or tourist, legal and/or illegal". It is an absurd proposition, viewed from many perspectives, largely dependent on one's perspective. In his book, *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems and Loqueras for the End of the Century*, artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña states, "Crossing the border from North to South has very different implications than crossing the same border from South to North; the border cannot possibly mean the same to a tourist as it does to an undocumented worker."<sup>9</sup> Naturally, a shift in perspective and identity of the person would alter an experience. As a female citizen of the US, I do not suggest that I can comprehend the hardships of an undocumented worker or a person needing to flee their country for survival. If I were to attempt multiple crossings of a border between, for example, Israel and Palestine, India and Pakistan, or North and South Korea,



The unused land between the walls of the United States of America (right) and Mexico (left).

the significance of my gender and nationality could be detrimental, yet I would still not experience the burden and dire *need* to immigrate. I am aware of and appreciate my capacity to legally cross the US/Mexico border, and easily shift between the roles of citizen and tourist. Engaging directly with this environment through walking cultivates knowledge that extends beyond media narratives, informing a reality of the structural, and psychologically intimidating, from my position of privilege.

My United States citizenship allowed me to successfully cross through forty-four of the listed points and all thirty-nine US Border Patrol offices along the US - Mexico border.<sup>10</sup> I utilized a GPS app on my iPhone called LiveTrekker to track my movements across each border. The formal compositions of the geometric shapes and lines defining the architecture, roads and the border itself are juxtaposed by the vibrant red line of my movements.



I had many interesting and unusual exchanges, but nothing close to the “rapists, drug dealers or criminals,” that our President has repeatedly described. The most prominent drug dealers were the rows of *farmacias* (pharmacies) that characterize the border towns on the Mexico side. Conversations with other crossers included subjects such as art, family and politics. The border patrol and Mexican Federal Police seemed intrigued by the gesture (or perhaps it was my long, black jumpsuit) and were mostly supportive. I was placed in secondary holding for additional questioning only once, in Lukeville, Arizona, where Border Patrol officers examined and critiqued my photographs. I realize it must have been very unusual for them to understand the purpose of my artistic gesture or the desire to walk along extended roadways without sidewalks, where pedestrians typically weren’t present. I feel conflicted that the process of being placed in secondary holding can be a moment of sheer terror for some, and yet it became an anecdote for me. The walk exists as a memory, experienced only in the moment of occurrence with an audience of whomever was present. The work is shared through photographs, maps, videos and storytelling, allowing the non-participant viewer to engage with the idea of crossing lines on a map, in their own subjective capacity.



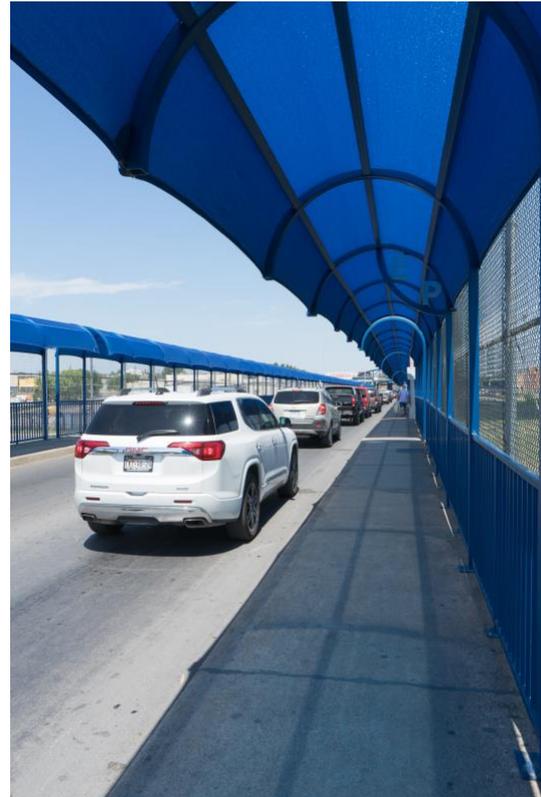
Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin suggested that “art must be engaged with daily life, but also that art’s transfiguration of an audience’s experience will be a momentary, liminal experience rather than a revolutionary transformation.”<sup>11</sup> The journey of discovery as an artist finds me in a place admitting my gestures will not transform the world overnight. However, by continually moving forward and incorporating direct physical experience as a method of understanding the conditions in real time, perhaps the opportunity for subtle interactions and

exchanges with others along the journey, will inform transformational opportunities. I walk to demonstrate and encourage movement beyond liens that divide.

I will always remember the smell and heat of the commercial trucks idling on my first, mile-long walk along the Veteran's International Bridge crossing in Brownsville, Texas. I will be forever fascinated by the blue awning at Eagle Pass, Texas; While in line to enter the US, there was a conversation about the way the blue awning tries to use cool colours, in a feeble attempt, to overcome the sweltering, yellow sun, making the world around us turn green. Colour theory at the border. What could be more real?



Eagle Pass, Texas border crossing.  
Heading south to Piedras Negras,  
Coahuila, Mexico.



Eagle Pass, Texas border crossing.  
Heading north to Eagle Pass, Texas,  
USA.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Kessler, Glenn, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly. "President Trump has made 9,014 false or misleading claims over 773 days," (Washington Post online, March 4, 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> Janice Cheryl Beaver, "U.S. International Borders: Brief Facts," in *CRS Report for Congress*, (November 9, 2006, Federation of American scientists.org).
- <sup>3</sup> Wikipedia, "List of Mexico-United States border crossings," wikipedia.org. (March 20, 2018)
- <sup>4</sup> Becky Little. "The Violent History of the U.S. - Mexico Border." *History Channel*, April 9, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/mexico-border-wall-military-facts>.
- <sup>5</sup> Little.
- <sup>6</sup> Little.
- <sup>7</sup> In the 1970's, when I was a child, the term *Oriental* was commonly used in America to describe people from Asia or mixed-race individuals originating from Asia. This term is not considered politically incorrect. I find the shift in semantics an interesting parallel to the way physical borders can shift over time.
- <sup>8</sup> I was naturalized as a US citizen at the age of eight, not cognizant of a swearing-in process or having to take a citizenship test, as required by adults.
- <sup>9</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems & Loqueras for the End of the Century* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), 9.
- <sup>10</sup> The four entry/exit points that were not crossed: The World Trade Bridge in Laredo, TX (commercial trucks only), the Grand Ave gate in Nogales, Arizona (cars only, however, I did cross the two additional points in Nogales, which are the Morley gate and Mariposa crossings), the Tijuana International Airport/Cross Border Express (for ticketed passengers only) and Interstate 5 between San Ysidro, California and Tijuana Metro (cars only).
- <sup>11</sup> Glenn Harper, ed. *Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture and Resistance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), vii (Intro).