

Retoryka wizerunku publicznego

Rhetoric of the public image

9 (2) 2022 ISSUE EDITORS: ANNA BENDRAT, ELŻBIETA PAWLAK-HEJNO

VARIA

EWA ANTOSZEK

UNIwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2714-3031>

antoszek@umcs.edu.pl

Challenging the Border *Doxa*: Selected Examples of Border *Artivism*

Polemika z doksą granicy: wybrane przykłady artystycznego aktywizmu

Abstract

Referring to D. Robert DeChaine's argument in *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Border* in which the author puts forward the need to analyze rhetorical functions of the border, the article examines the examples of challenging of the border *doxa*. Thereby the article discusses selected examples of border *artivism* taking place at the U.S.-Mexico border and the Mediterranean since the 2000s. The rhetorical meaning of the border related to values, beliefs and attitudes is understood as a border *doxa* that influences the social perception of borders and migrants. The works of the artists discussed in the article challenge border-related narratives and question the legitimacy of borders, due to the detrimental effects they have, creating divisions between people, communities and the environment.

Odwołując się do tezy D. Roberta DeChaine'a zawartej w „Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Border”, w której autor postuluje zwrócenie uwagi na retoryczne funkcje granic, artykuł analizuje polemikę z doksą granicy. W artykule omówione są wybrane przykłady artystycznego aktywizmu (*artivism*) z pogranicza meksykańsko-amerykańskiego oraz w obrębie Morza Śródziemnego od 2000 roku. Retoryczne znaczenie granicy, związane z wartościami, przekonaniem i postawami rozumiane jest jako doksa pogranicza, wpływająca na społeczne postrzeganie granic i migrantów. Omawiane w artykule prace artystów kwestionują związane z granicami narracje i podważają zasadność granic ze względu na ich szkodliwe skutki: tworzenie podziałów między ludźmi, społecznościami i środowiskiem naturalnym.

Key words

the border *doxa*, The U.S.-Mexico border, border *artivism*
doksa granicy, granica meksykańsko-amerykańska, artystyczny aktywizm

License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 international (CC BY 4.0).
The content of the license is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Received: 28 April 2022 | Accepted: 1 June 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2022.2.7>

EWA ANTOSZEK

UNIwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2714-3031>

antoszek@umcs.edu.pl

Challenging the Border *Doxa*: Selected Examples of Border *Artivism*

Borders, edges, and margins are spatial constructs of contradictory character and, as such, can be both divisive and empowering for those occupying them. As D. Robert DeChaine argues in *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Border*, even though bordering practices have been studied from different perspectives, there is still “a lack of attention to the consummately rhetorical function of borders” (DeChaine 2012, 5). Such an approach, he argues, “sheds light on ways in which bordering produces public knowledge and “truth” about people, places, social statuses and communal allegiances” (DeChaine 2012, 5). Disregarding that aspect, on the other hand, or what DeChaine calls “a neglect of the rhetorical dimension of borders” (DeChaine 2012, 6), can have grievous consequences, as it “elides important questions about how people use borders to reinforce values, inculcate beliefs, mobilize attitudes, and provoke action” (DeChaine 2012, 6) or, in other words, how “symbolic ascriptions of the border function *doxastically* in public culture” (DeChaine 2012, 14), contributing to the creation of master narratives about the border.

The border *doxa* or popular belief entailed in, or propagated by, those master narratives has been continually challenged by activists and artists, who have been questioning the validity of borders and their power to divide people, communities and the environment. Such challenges of dominant discourse take place practically everywhere the border transforms its locale into tenuous space, be it on the Israeli-Palestinian border, between East and West Berlin under a communist government or on the U.S.-Mexico border. The latter is oftentimes regarded as an “exemplary site for examining both the localized and the diffused politics of bordering” (DeChaine 2012, 6) as it “provides a paradigmatic case of global border development” (Ganster 2016, xvi). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine selected examples of border *artivism*¹ taking place on the U.S.-Mexico border and in the Mediterranean since the 2000s in order to show how those images and actions counter the border *doxa* and thus influence the public’s perception of borders and

1. *Artivism* can be defined as artistic activism – a concept combining social activism and artistic endeavors, originating in the actions of artists in East Los Angeles, USA and Chiapas, Mexico, respectively, in the 1990s.

migrants. Examples of border *artivism* vary in scale and form, from graffiti slogans, to murals, performances and transnational events organized on both sides of the border.² This examination aims to reflect how the multifaceted character of border *artivism* allows individuals and groups to challenge border *doxa* more efficiently, hence the examples discussed range in scope from installations placed directly on the border fence or wall to community projects and individual performances, as each medium has its own advantages in challenging popular renderings of the border.

The Parade of Humanity

One of the earliest and well-known installations that undermine the rationale for the U.S.-Mexico border is *The Parade of Humanity (El Paseo de Humanidad)*, which decorated the fence in Nogales, Mexico, between 2004 and 2010. *The Parade* was created by Guadalupe Serrano, Alberto Morackis and Alfred Quiroz – artists from both sides of the border. Edward S. Casey and Mary Watkins who critically analyze border-wall art in *Up Against the Wall: Re-Imagining the U.S.-Mexico Border*, classify it as an example of “more complex border-wall art [that] often depicts the dynamics of the border from the perspective of those who live in its shadow” (Casey and Watkins 2014, 215). *The Parade* is comprised of 19 human figures carrying various objects referencing different cultural symbols and 16 milagros. The “metallic human figures” are created by “the Taller Yonke Arte Público artists Morackis and Serrano” and their aim is to “warn migrants of the dangers they will face as they cross the border” (Casey and Watkins 2014, 215). The figures of people going to the U.S. include migrants, who bring with them “not only their labor but also their culture, their music, and spirituality” and hence carry with them products often exported to the U.S., such as corn, mariachi instruments or images of the Virgen de Guadalupe (Casey and Watkins 2014, 217). The various cultural exchanges that take place on the border are also visually represented by specific historic figures, including Juan Soldado “who according to many was wrongfully executed in Tijuana for a crime he did not commit . . . [and who] symbolizes failed justice, an experience all too many migrants will encounter as they cross the border” (Casey and Watkins 2014, 217). Casey and Watkins also identify another person among the metallic figures – Jesús Malverde, who is “known as the saint of narcotraffickers, a folk hero in Sinaloa and analogous to Robin Hood in being a champion of the poor (Alvarez 2008)” (Casey and Watkins 2014, 217). When treated as a whole this installation provides a forum for the

2. I conduct an analysis of border graffiti, murals and selected artist-moderated community actions in in “The U.S.-Mexico Border Re-visions: Border *Artivism* in Time and Space,” forthcoming.

voices and experiences of ordinary people, who often do not get heard and who suffer most because of the border, both culturally and economically. Migrants are presented as active contributors to the cultural and economic well-being of their host country, which contradicts and troubles the stereotypical representations of migrants in mainstream media, which in turn influences the public *doxa* on migrants and immigration.

The economic aspect of border relations is also suggested by the figure of the Border Patrol agent, projected in a unique way. As Casey and Watkins describe, the agent, marked by a credit card logo, “is chasing the migrants with a big stick” and speaking some unintelligible language at the crossers – therefore, “from one point of view, he is an agent of the free-market capitalism that has forced these travelers to take flight from their homelands and is now intercepting them at the border” (Casey and Watkins 2014, 217). Such an image of the Border Patrol agent suggests a heartless officer, who often does not know the language of the people he meets daily whom he is supposed to assist. In addition to the financial connotations evoked by the credit card image, the figure of the agent can also be interpreted as a reference to the pull-push economic mechanisms that govern the border (and national) economy and influence flows of people, including Mexico-U.S. migrations, as a result of which the U.S.-Mexico borderlands are often described as an example of “strong asymmetrical interdependence” (Martínez 1994, 8) with the U.S. dominating and determining this relationship. This binational economic interdependence of the two nation-states is also symbolized by images of people coming back from the U.S to Mexico and the objects they carry, as many of them bring such commodities as shoes, washing machines or objects of everyday use. This implies the dependence of Mexicans on the money their relatives earn in the U.S. that goes beyond the area of the borderlands and reaches the most remote states in the south of Mexico. The artists also include images of “bomb[s] and weapons . . . for the United States is the largest exporter of arms to Mexico – which has strict gun-control laws. A shrouded body, a victim of the crossing itself, is carried back to its homeland” (Casey and Watkins 2014, 219). These particular images reinforce the idea of inequality in the dynamics of Mexican-American relationships and again counters popular beliefs regarding migration and migrants. The public border *doxa* proliferating in mainstream media in the U.S. renders migrants through a distorted lens, which represents them solely as a problem in more liberal outlets, or in media leaning toward the right, as the threatening ‘Other’ who takes advantage of their host country. *The Parade* aims to undermine those popular assumptions.

The metallic figures featured in the installation are accompanied by the aforementioned *milagros*, which Casey and Watkins define as “religious folk

charms illustrating the object of a person's prayers or gratitude . . . carried for good luck and protection" (Casey and Watkins 2014, 215). Given that they represent a combination of religious iconography and traditional practices of healing popular in Mexico, they transform the fence into an altar-like space and "[w]hile they are intended to help heal the sufferings of those who are on the way to cross the border," Casey and Watkins note, "it seems as though they might also act to heal the wall itself" and, moreover, "[p]lacing the milagros on the wall transforms it from a structure that reinscribes economic and national divides into a site of supplication and prayer" (Casey and Watkins 2014, 215). As a result, the border becomes a kind of Wailing Wall whose militarized character is subverted by people's activity. Moreover, such a transformation of this space opens it for possible re-interpretations. Apart from that, the *milagros* also refer to various border stories, including the experience of crossings or the aforementioned economic interdependence of the two nation-states. According to Margaret Regan, "[t]hey're meant to be read in sequence," as they chronicle the process of border crossing – starting with those symbolizing the departure from home ("a flaming heart"), through those referring to the crossing ("a snarling coyote head") to those that ". . . address the economic aspect of the situation: one depicts a retail bar code on a saguaro. Everything is up for sale . . ." (Casey and Watkins 2014, 217).

The religious function and spiritual undertone of the *milagros* are supplemented with additional implications, for the border itself re-inscribes their role and, reciprocally, they also re-write the story of the border, complementing it through this mutual relationship. The exchange of influences and values from both sides thus created by the border is visible in every aspect of the installation and, moreover, the role of the south of the border in this relationship is emphasized by the artists, as *The Parade* "borrows from Mayan, Aztec, and Catholic iconographies, asserting the generative power of Mexican peoples' cultures and traditions" (Casey and Watkins 2014, 217). The project aims at both challenging the divisive power of *la línea* and transforming that space into a contact zone. Casey and Watkins argue that "[t]heir transborder partnership reflects efforts to link artists who defy, through their artistic collaboration, the separation that the wall attempts to impose" (Casey and Watkins 2014, 15). They also quote one of the artists, Alfred Quiroz, who notes that "making the art was "like a rebellion, because people are not supposed to touch the border" (Personal communication)" (Casey and Watkins 2014, 215). Consequently, the project becomes what Paulo Freire termed a 'limit act' of subversive and transgressive character with aim to re-define the constricted and striated space of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

M. Jenea Sanchez

The human, environmental and spiritual destruction of the borderlands is also the focus of M. Jenea Sanchez's artwork and projects related to the U.S.-Mexico border. Sanchez is a borderlands artist, who identifies herself as a *nepantlera*, living between the two cultures and taking advantage of this "nomadic sensibility" (www.mjeneasanchez.com). In the artist's statement on her website she acknowledges controversies that have arisen around the U.S.-Mexico border and counters those with the concept to redesign that space (www.mjeneasanchez.com). The result of her interest and involvement in border issues is a large portfolio of "drawing, video, installation, performance and photography" (www.mjeneasanchez.com) on the U.S.-Mexico border. The most-known projects include *Border Boneyard* (2010) in Douglas, AZ, which shows how the borderlands turn into an environmental dead zone, devoid of plants and animals which have been replaced by trash discarded by border crossers. The provocative title of the project allows also for a literal interpretation – it can refer to the borderlands as the zone that has become a cemetery for those who have not managed to reach their destination in the U.S.

Another example of transgressive *artivism* by M. Jenea Sanchez is her border tapestry, the most famous of which is *La Tapiz de la Virgen de Guadalupe* created in collaboration with Gabriela Muñoz at the border in Douglas/Agua Prieta in 2009. The performance simultaneously addressed several border-related issues and referred to one of the most important cultural symbols of Mexico and Mexican diaspora: la Virgen de Guadalupe. The artists decided to weave the paper tapestry with the image of la Virgen into the border fence, which constitutes a transgression in and of itself, since the fence as the border marker should not be approached, let alone touched. Moreover, this particular combination is markedly powerful, as it incorporates one of the most important cultural and, what is even more important in that context, religious symbols of Mexicans and Mexican Americans into the space that clearly relates to the oppression of the Latinx community. As a result, the border fence is transformed into an altar-like space which can be healed of its afflictions and destructive potency with the remedial powers of la Virgen (Bańka 2016, 81). In this way the artists endeavor to re-imagine that space from a militarized zone into a more hospitable place, which in itself reflects hostipitality – a concept defined by Derrida (Derrida 2000, 45) that combines hospitality and hostility as central to this idea. Derrida's understanding of hospitality undermines both the division into hosts and guests as well as disputes the existence of unconditional hospitality. In their reflections on the world people prefer clear-cut categories or dichotomies that, even if lacking legitimacy, allow them to create seemingly cohesive images with distinct divisions and definitions. Derrida's hostipitality subverts such an

approach as does *La Tapiz*. Combining those incongruous functions of the border fence, *La Tapiz* challenges the popular perception of the fence, transforming it from a marker of separation and division into a sacred space that invites “pilgrims” from both sides of the border to pray to *la Virgen*.

In addition, the artists illustrate two paradigms deployed to discuss the status of Latinx in the U.S. In the act of transforming the border fence into a canvas or easel they reference the immigrant status of many Latinx in the U.S. – finally, popular connotations of the fence are those which allude to the fact that it is a physical marker of a political border. However, the artists simultaneously deploy what Monika Kaup calls a ‘nation-based paradigm,’ according to which the border is treated as “home territory, as homeland, as viewed by the original occupants of the borderlands” (Kaup 2001, 26). In the case of *La Tapiz* the reference to the indigenous past of the borderlands is the paper for the border tapestry which was handmade from plants indigenous to this territory. The project thus combines seemingly incongruous spaces, places and symbols, whose meaning becomes redefined from a transborder perspective.

In 2017 M. Jenea Sanchez cooperated with ecological artist Lauren Strohacker on the *Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando* project that “confront[ed] the multifaceted ecological effects of the border wall and envision[ed] removing barriers to ensure the survival of a wide diversity of species, including the iconic jaguar” (“Reuniting Culture and Ecology in the Borderlands”). The project featured photographs of animals that have their natural habitats in the borderlands on the U.S.-Mexico fence in Douglas, AZ. At the same time it was “part of a multicultural and binational celebration with its sister city Agua Prieta” (Ingram 2017). One of the iconic figures depicted during the event was a jaguar that was spotted by “a motion-activated camera walking a trail in Dos Cabezas Mountains on the night of November 16,” after crossing the border with “no papers” (Ingram 2017). It needs to be noted that, according to Mrill Ingram, “[j]aguars once roamed throughout the southwestern United States, but are now quite rare” (Ingram 2017). Due to their nature, they are regarded by borderlanders as “a symbol of resilience as well as possibility” (Ingram 2017). However, both jaguars and other animals living in the borderlands have been prevented from crossing the border freely because of the border fence that disrupts their natural habitats and constitutes an obstacle for the animals to move across the border. The planned construction of the wall would have an even more detrimental effect on the environment. Diana Hadley overtly criticized the plans:

If constructed the way Trump envisions – thirty feet high and two feet thick with deep footings – it would “obstruct all mammals from crossing the border,” says Hadley. It would block not just jaguars but javalina, deer, and other mammals, as well as toads, snakes, and other small animals,

and birds that can't fly up and over, like roadrunners and quail. Even bats and insects could be dissuaded by sudden encounters with the massive concrete barrier, she notes. "If he were to construct that wall, [animal] crossing would stop. Period." (quoted in Ingram 2017)

Such a view is also shared by Consuelo Jiménez Underwood, whose commentaries accompany her artwork and discuss environmental problems in the borderlands. Referring to plants endemic to the area and growing on both sides of the border, Underwood asks an ironic rhetorical question regarding whether they will also need documentation to grow freely north and south of the border. She also points out the increasing ecological destruction of the borderlands environment: "The flowers live on both sides of the US/MX border wall. All are undocumented, and are referred to as "illegal aliens." Worse yet, their homelands are becoming wastelands" (www.consuelojunderwood.com). Sanchez, in turn, commenting on the project draws analogies between the destruction of the environment by the border and the destruction of social, economic, and cultural bonds that the border generates. As a borderlander she argues that "[t]he majority of our community along the border see themselves as one. . . . Our binational connections are not only economically driven. We are interconnected by our ecology, family and culture" (quoted in Ingram 2017). The artist's conclusions resonate with other activist voices, and her concern about the ecological and cultural destruction of the borderlands echoes the objections against the wall raised by environmentalists, activists and artists from/at/on la frontera. *Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando* thereby aim at raising awareness about manifold border issues and undoing the divisions the fence creates. This communal action to challenge the destructive effects of the barrier, combined with a joint celebration of affinity and solidarity, emphasizes the need for cooperation and exchange to counter the effects of the wall more effectively. As such is another example of a limit act, performed to help create a new border community that will continue grassroots work addressing border issues in the future.

Ana Teresa Fernández

The last artist to be discussed is Ana Teresa Fernández – a Mexico-born artist who grew up in the U.S. or, as she herself suggests in a TEDx talk, "between two worlds" ("How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders" 7:10). As a result, border and border crossings have always been an inherent part of her life and art work and performances, which often address her hybrid identity and the influence the two sides of the border have had on her personal and professional life. The artist reveals that "[i]t was with the ability to see and understand the world on both sides of this wall that I began to find my voice" (Ana Teresa Fernández, *Interview*). In her

earliest works Fernández often challenges gender, racial and cultural stereotypes that have haunted women and resulted in the proliferation of multifold disfigured images persecuting females. Her “trademark” – a black dress and stiletto shoes – reappear throughout her artwork and performances, often in various forms. For example, she wears ice-stilettos during her performance in West Oakland with the purpose of melting the myths that have arisen about women’s roles and positions in society, which have relegated them to the margin (“How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders” 5:50). In another performance Fernández rides a white stallion dressed in the aforementioned attire to draw wider attention to the sacrificial deaths of young girls in the *cenotes* (sinkholes) in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Over time Fernández’s works began to address other examples of injustices and oppression and she has focused increasingly on subjects such as migration and the U.S.-Mexico border. As she states in an interview, she “had to go further away from the border to come back to it” (Ana Teresa Fernández, *Interview 4*). Significantly, wherever she travelled around the world – be it South Africa, South America or Europe, “there was always this concept of migrating and migration” present (Ana Teresa Fernández, *Interview 4:50*), which motivated Fernández to challenge manifold paradoxes that are intrinsic to the contested space of the border through artistic performances. Projects, such as *Erasing the Border/Borrando La Frontera* (2013), coupled with a community project of the same title, and selected paintings from her series *Foreign Bodies* (2013) and *Pressing Matters* (2013), re-vision the border, turning it into a cultural palimpsest.³ Fernández has conducted a plethora of “Sisyphean, impossible tasks” (*Interview 5:45*) at the border for a long time, including protests against the fence, taking place “directly on the wall, not in front of the wall, or around it, or about it, but . . . using the wall itself” (Ana Teresa Fernández, *Interview 6:29*) in 2011.

Her most recent works collected in the series *Ablution* and *Of Bodies and Borders* address the question of migration across the U.S.-Mexico border and across the Mediterranean Sea, respectively. In *Ablution* the artist “submerges the body into specific sites, addressing rituals of cleansing and maintenance, focusing on gender, labor, sexuality and race, “playing an ironic dirty twist for ‘wetback’” (anateresafernandez.com). *Of Bodies and Borders* identifies “what exists within liminal spaces, seeking what is lost in the margins, between light and shadow, positive and negative space, heavy and buoyant, seen and unseen” in the process of forced migration (anateresafernandez.com). The language of art allows Ana Teresa Fernández to tell stories that have not been told before, as she reveals in her *TEDx* talk, “so that we may begin to feel and emphasize with that which is

3. I conduct the analysis of her other projects in in “The U.S.-Mexico Border as a Palimpsest in Ana Teresa Fernández’s Art” (2018) and “Revisiting *La Frontera*: Consuelo Jiménez Underwood and Ana Teresa Fernández” (2021).

hard to digest and gets thrown to the back of people's consciousness" ("How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders" 6:40). *Ablution* and *Of Bodies and Borders* are two such stories whose main purpose is to draw attention to the question of borders and the experience of border crossing often resulting from forced migration and to defy gender stereotypes surrounding women, thus challenging the public *doxa* on those issues.

Ablution was inspired as a result of Fernández's personal experience, when a white man called her a wetback during a heated discussion ("How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders" 8:50). Wetback (*mojado*) is a derogatory term used to describe Mexican immigrants who crossed the border to the U.S. while "swimming or wading across the Rio Grande" (Instagram) and "were easily identifiable by their wet clothing" (Instagram). The term eventually entered the official register, as in 1954 the U.S. INS introduced "the mission to remove illegal immigrants from the United States" (Instagram) named "Operation Wetback." Fernández describes her emotions during this discussion:

In that moment, my body shook with shame, feeling the filth of that term, wetback, *mojado*: a term to describe an undocumented migrants. Similarly, so often women get portrayed in negative connotations in relationships to water as well. In archetypes such as siren, the voices that lure sailors to a watery grave, or La Llorona, the weeping woman that weeps for eternity because her husband left her. So she drowned her kids and will drown your own kids if they misbehave. ("How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders" 8:55)

Fernández identifies the process of othering that leads to oppression and discrimination. The stereotypes haunting those two groups – immigrants and women – relegate them to the margins of the society by tagging or categorizing them as the Other or ascribing to them particular gender-specific tasks and functions, respectively. Consequently, she decides to challenge those myths through her art.

As in the case of her other projects, *Ablution* originates in a performance by the artist that was subsequently recorded and then documented through paintings. Fernández herself explains the motivation between this performance in the following way: "I wanted to present a body that was strong in water, thriving. So I created my own myth; I plunged into a pool wearing a dress and stilettos, and with the drag of femininity, I swam for an hour each day for an entire week" ("How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders" 9:28). Afterwards, the performance was projected on large screens in the Mission District in San Francisco – a predominantly Latinx neighborhood. The videos from those sessions are now available on Ana Teresa Fernández's website under the eponymous title "Siren's Song" – a new, revised song that defies the well-known image of the beauty luring into temptation, but instead becomes "a beacon of light, of hope, of strength" ("How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders" 9:55).

Analyzing the series of paintings resulting from this performance it is crucial to identify what Victor Burgin describes as ‘pre-texts’ and Roland Barthes dubs ‘connoted messages’ (Barthes 1977, 46). Burgin examines the interpretation of visual arts by the public in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity or In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, and he refers to pre-texts as elements that exist in popular preconscious. Whether they will be called up to interpret the image depends on an individual’s cultural repository. Such a repository allows the viewer to identify “manifest and latent contents of the image” (Burgin 1986, 61), depending on the extent of such a repository. The pre-texts, as Luz Calvo notes, “will yield a different set of images along the paradigmatic chain” (Calvo 2004, 217) as well as make the interpretation of an image depend on one’s cultural location (Calvo 2004, 217).⁴ Roland Barthes refers to this phenomenon, analyzing the image interpretation in his now classic “Rhetoric of the Image” (1964) where he argues that connoted messages of an image depend on one’s cultural code and lexicon. They are defined by Barthes as “[a] portion of the symbolic plane (of language) which corresponds to a body of practices and techniques” (Barthes 1977, 46) which in turn justifies “variability of readings” (Barthes 1977, 47) of an image.

In the case of Fernández’s project the very term “ablution” – the title of the series – prompts various interpretations, depending on the cultural or religious context in which it is located. However, the common denominator of all the definitions is its key element of a ritualistic act of cleansing and purification with water. Water, in turn, also has several metaphorical meanings, with the major transition from paganism where in Fernández’s words it was “a symbol for fertility and strength” (anateresafernandez.com) to Catholicism, where it can “wash away our guilt” (anateresafernandez.com) or let one into the religious community through baptism. The cleansing role of the water in *Ablution* is underscored by Fernández herself, who comments: “I wanted to wash away the filth of the term “wetback” (“How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders” 10:08) and “deconstruct a watered down identity as a bicultural immigrant” (anateresafernandez.com).

This endeavor is particularly striking in *Aquarius*, where a Latina is kneeling on the beach at the U.S.-Mexico border attempting to clean it with her own hair. Here an intertextual reference to other series by Fernández should be made, as the artist performs a similar action of border cleaning in *Pressing Matters*, though in the case of the latter she does that with a mop. In *Aquarius* an anonymous woman performs this Sisyphean and futile task with her hair, which immediately evokes a series of cultural references. First of all, Fernández draws attention to

4. I refer to Luz Calvo’s analysis of pre-texts in my 2018 article, “The U.S.-Mexico Border as a Palimpsest in Ana Teresa Fernández’s Art.”

the mundane chores women in general and immigrants in the U.S. in particular, perform that involve menial work and hardly any gratification or recognition, which often leads to dehumanization of a person performing those tasks. The act of washing away the dirt with hair inescapably conjures the biblical story of Mary Magdalene washing the feet of Jesus, which was simultaneously an act of grace and an act of humility and submission. However, looking at the popular renditions of Mary Magdalene's story, through this act she was also absolved of her sins and, paradoxically, dignified. Finally, the body of the woman in *Aquarius* is striated by the shadows of the border fence, as are the lives of those who live in the shadow of the U.S.-Mexico border and those who attempt to cross it. The fence (or in some places fragments of the wall) as the aforementioned physical marker of the border cuts through borderland communities and habitats, leading to social divisions and environmental destruction. The act of cleaning may thus refer to the need to counter the ecological disaster that has been occurring at the border with its growing militarization. As Fernández observes, "I also wanted to wash away the filth that was rampant at the U.S.-Mexico border, even if it was mopping it with my own hair" ("How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders" 10:12).

In the other images from the series Fernández continues to challenge the automatic association of women with water. She does so with the use of the trademark attire – black dress and black stiletto shoes. It has to be noted that the Latina in *Aquarius* is also wearing a black dress, however, the attire does not come to the forefront there. The focus is on the action, for when the viewer looks at the image from a distance the clothing is not prominent at all. On the contrary, the Latina appears to be half-naked. In other images from the series, the clothes gain importance, particularly due to the fact that they seem odd in the context and challenge our automatic associations with swimming. We usually think of swimmers as sportspeople wearing special swimsuits that facilitate movement in the water. In *Ablution*, the swimmer dons attire that hampers her movement and seems out of place. Fernández deploys those clothes on numerous occasions – this outfit is indeed her trademark and she explains its use:

I also subvert the typical overtly folkloric representations of Mexican women in paintings by changing my protagonist's uniform to the quintessential little black dress. Wearing this symbol of American prosperity and femininity, the protagonist tangoes through this intangible dilemma with her performances at the San Diego/Tijuana Border — a place I myself had to cross to study and live in the US. (anateresafernandez.com)

In this way the artist defies stereotypical representations of Latinas and once again challenges public *doxa* regarding women and water. When Edna Pontellier ventures into the sea, she swims naked, in unity with nature embracing her. She swims towards her freedom, but it is a hard-won freedom that costs her her life.

In the same vein, La Llorona drowns her children and herself. Clytie from Eudora Welty's story of the same title drowns herself in a barrel of rainwater in a desperate search for her identity. So does the aunt whose name should not be mentioned in Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman," but "at least" in her case it is a spite suicide through which she manages to take her back on the village people who have led her into her humiliation and death. These are just a few examples that show how literary and cultural representations abound with women for whom water leads to their demise. In *Ablution*, in spite of the clothes that do not seem appropriate for the occasion, the female swimmer manages to succeed and get to the other side. However, the question remains, will she be able to attain prosperity in the U.S. as symbolized by her attire? In the penultimate image from the series her raised hand is as if sending a message: "I'm in for it! I won't give up!" It inadvertently evokes the image of the Statue of Liberty – a Latina Statue of Liberty, and may be also interpreted as this beacon of hope that is to guide Latinas in their efforts and endeavors to defy the *doxa* on Latinx immigrants.

In that context the last image in the series seems equivocal and dubious.⁵ *Left to Swoon* depicts a Latina in a bathtub. The painting constitutes a frame to the series, as both the first and the last image in *Ablution* are different from the other paintings. With this image Fernández visually revisits the realm of domesticity – we have a bathtub not a pool. The woman in that image may be taking a cleansing bath to clean herself of the filth from everyday chores, tiredness, and emotions. This, in turn, immediately evokes a literary reference to Blanche du Bois' baths. The woman in the image is immersing herself in the water with her face, which we cannot see, looking down at the water. Consequently, such a positioning may also suggest other interpretations: the woman is not relaxed but hides her head in the water. Therefore, that scene may also be read as a scene of suicide – a woman on the verge of taking away her life, a victim of domestic oppression or violence. Finally, it may also symbolize those who perished in the waters of the Rio Grande, crossing *al otro lado*.

With *Ablution* Ana Teresa Fernández challenges the *doxastic* attributes of the border, border crossers, and women in general shared by the mainstream public. The counter-narratives proposed by her performances and presented in the resultant images confront the dominant discourse that creates such perceptions. Unlike the previous examples of *artivism* discussed in this paper *Ablution* does not take place solely on the border. The performance's versatile settings allow the artist to expand the scope of issues subsequently challenged by her counter-images. Moreover, the medium deployed by Fernández to get her messages to the public – the on-site screenings in San Francisco and the Internet – extend the power of those images to

5. I analyze the series based on the order the images from this series appear on the website.

intervene and subvert common assumptions about women, border crossers and the border itself. Their presence on-line contributes to the creation of an alternative story that brings to light the invisible and voices the experiences of the silenced and oppressed.

She continues her “crusade” with another immigration-related project, *Of Bodies and Borders*. This time, however, it was the migrant crisis in Europe that inspired Ana Teresa Fernández’s subsequent series. As described on her website:

Pivoting from her previous work on U.S./Mexico border to the Mediterranean Sea, this five-year project was filmed in various locations off the island of Poros, Greece. . . . This new work observes what exists within liminal spaces, seeking what is lost in the margins, between light and shadow, positive and negative space, heavy and buoyant, seen and unseen. Fernández seeks to champion the invisible, unrecognized, undervalued, and in danger of sinking into oblivion. (anateresafernandez.com)

In *Of Bodies and Borders* the artist “aims to refocus attention of the plight of the thousands of migrants through a new body of work, including video, painting, drawing and installation” (anateresafernandez.com).

As in the case of her previous projects, *Of Bodies and Borders* started with the artist’s performance in the water, which was subsequently filmed and released as a video with an equivocal title “Drawn Below.” The paintings in this series document Fernández’s performances and their video recordings and are divided into three subseries: “Of Bodies and Borders,” “Within Without” and “Gauging Gravity” (anateresafernandez.com). The final subsection includes an untitled installation of cement oars on the floor. When watched in sequence, those three parts develop from documentary-like images to the most abstract drawings. Consequently, the first subsection, “Of Bodies and Borders,” depicts a woman wearing a black dress and stiletto shoes who is “suspended underwater” in the depths of the sea. However, apart from the trademark attire, the woman in those paintings is also wrapped up in the enormous piece of cloth that in some images seems to hamper her movements and in others makes her look like an underwater flower or medusa. The specific framing Fernández deploys here turns this painting into a snapshot-like image. As Mieke Bal observes in “Movement and the Still Image,” some paintings exhibit a particular propensity for “cinematic quality” (Bal 2016, 17). In such cases “movement is implied, halted, and the work suggests, will go on after we watch this scene” (Bal 2016,19). Moreover, as Bal claims, “[t]his precludes a naïve view of the painting as transparent and realistic representation” and “foregrounds another aspect of visual art, cinema and painting alike: the encounter it stages and embodies” (Bal 2016, 19).⁶ In that case the woman’s

6. I employ Mieke Bal’s approach in my 2018 article, “The U.S.-Mexico Border as a Palimpsest in Ana Teresa Fernández’s Art.”

underwater struggle with the piece of cloth is almost tangible and the viewer's encounter with her makes us wonder what she struggles with and how this struggle will end.

In the next subsections the piece of cloth becomes the focus of the artist's attention, as the female body turns into a more and more shapeless and anonymous form and almost disappears in the wrapping in "Gauging Gravity." This transformation is reinforced by the technique Fernández deploys in this subsection, as it includes drawings rather than paintings. As a result, the wrapped-up body no longer looks human; rather, it resembles an origami-like piece of art. Therefore, the piece of cloth also changes its function – from the physical obstacle that prevented the woman's free movement and forced her to fight to Alayna Wallace's description of it as a "burial shroud" (Wallace 2019, 2). Such an interpretation of this material is not far-fetched, especially with regard to the tenuous story of migration in the Mediterranean and the multiple accounts of tragic deaths of those trying to get to Europe on boats.

Those deaths are also commemorated by the artist in the last subsection, which includes the installation of the cement paddles on the floor. The oars are like the remnants of what is left after the border crossing and as such they evoke well-known images from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands so aptly illustrated in M. Jenea Sanchez's *Border Boneyard*. Scattered rubbish, empty water bottles, clothes, personal belongings and sometimes dead bodies – it all turns the borderlands into both a metaphorical and literal cemetery. The arrangement of the oars on the floor also suggests such an interpretation for the paddles resemble dead bodies laid out in makeshift morgues. Therefore, with that project Ana Teresa Fernández reiterates the question that Gordon Hanson and Craig McIntosh ask in their article "Is the Mediterranean the New Rio Grande?" The two researchers focus on statistics and prognostications, while the artist focuses on the human aspect of immigration and border crossings that is absent in the dominant discourse, which is overtaken by statistics, figures, charts and overgeneralizations.

Consequently, in both *Ablution* and *Of Bodies and Borders* Ana Teresa Fernández defies stereotypical portrayals of women, immigrants and acts of border crossing by focusing on the experience of oppression resulting from being othered – due to one's gender or status. As she observes, the purpose of this work is to subvert the long-lasting myths surrounding the aforementioned issues: "My intention is to challenge old ways of seeing things. My work aims to transcend the given" ("In the Make" 12). Owing to such an approach, her story becomes what a Polish Nobel prize winner Olga Tokarczuk describes in her *Czuły narrator* (*The Tender Narrator*) as the fifth element. Tokarczuk argues: "Thus a story is the fifth element that makes us see the world in one way, not the other, understand its

diversity and complexity and order our experience and pass it from generation to generation, from one existence to another” (Tokarczuk 2020, 24).⁷

Conclusions

All the examples of border *artivism* discussed in this paper constitute multifaceted responses to the border *doxa* that resist popular renderings of the border, border crossers and migration. Owing to their versatile character, each has a different potential to persuade the viewer to consider the values they propose. *The Parade of Humanity* and *La Tapiz de la Virgen de Guadalupe* both confront popular images regarding migration and re-define the character of the border fence – from the marker demarcating political divisions between separate nation-states into a provisional easel depicting new images of migrants and migration or an later-like space encouraging solidarity and contact rather than separation. The two projects also share another common denominator – by literally touching the border fence, since they were both placed directly on the border, they challenge its attribute of being untouchable. As such they also subvert the border’s ominous character, thus deflating its power attained in the process of militarization. Likewise, *Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando* reiterates the need to counter the divisive and destructive role the border has on borderland communities and environments. It brings to light issues that are oftentimes downplayed if not disregarded by mainstream media and postulates the changes that would allow dialogue and cooperation on both sides of the border emphasizing its potential to create a borderscape rather than two separate locations, particularly with regards to environmental and communal issues. Finally, Ana Teresa Fernández’s projects illustrate a new type of persuasive potential. In their case the themes they propose are of crucial importance, but it is their media images that reinforce their power to challenge the border *doxa*. Through their presence on the Internet the artist’s artwork extends the range of their messages and defy popular renderings of women and migration. Thus, it can be concluded that when DeChaine says that the “border functions as a powerful site of rhetorical invention” (DeChaine 2012, 1), rendered or re-imagined by artists, it functions as a site of both rhetorical invention and intervention, owing to which the artists’ works and projects have acquired far-reaching persuasive power that influences audience’s perception, thereby subverting the mainstream border *doxa*.

7. Translation mine.

Sources

- Fernández, Ana T.** 2022. *anateresafernandez.com*. [Accessed online in March 2022].
- Fernández, Ana T.** 2010. *Ablution*.
- Fernández, Ana T.** 2013. *Borrando la frontera/Erasing the Border*.
- Fernández, Ana T.** 2013. *Foreign Bodies*.
- Fernández, Ana T.** “How Art Allowed Me to Erase Borders.” 2017. *TEDx* [Accessed online in December 2021].
- Fernández, Ana T.** Instagram. [Accessed online in December 2021].
- Fernández, Ana T.** *Interview*. 2019. YouTube. [Accessed online in March 2022].
- Fernández, Ana T.** 2018. *Of Bodies and Borders*.
- Fernández, Ana T.** 2013. *Pressing Matters*.
- Jenea Sanchez, M.** 2010. *Border Boneyard*.
- Jenea Sanchez, M.** 2009. *La Tapiz de la Virgen de Guadalupe*.
- Jenea Sanchez, M.** and **Lauren Strohacker**. 2017. *Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando*.
- Jenea Sanchez, M.** *www.mjeneasanchez.com*. [Accessed online in October 2021].
- Serrano, Guadalupe, Alberto Morackis** and **Alfred Quiroz**. 2004-2010. *The Parade of Humanity*.

References

- Antoszek, Ewa.** 2018. “The U.S.-Mexico Border as a Palimpsest in Ana Teresa Fernández’s Art.” *Polish Journal for American Studies*. Vol. 12 (Spring 2018): 197-210.
- Antoszek, Ewa.** 2021. “Revisiting La Frontera: Consuelo Jiménez Underwood and Ana Teresa Fernández.” in *Latinidad at the Crossroads: Insights into Latinx Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, Amanda Ellen Gerke and Luisa María González Rodríguez, 135-151. Brill Rodopi.
- Bal, Mieke.** 2016. “Movement and the Still Image” *Art Moves: Performativity in Time, Space, and Form. Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* (4): 13-41. Universidad Nacional de Educación Distancia.
- Bañka, Ewelina.** 2016. “La Tapiz Fronteriza de la Virgen de Guadalupe: Healing the US-Mexican Border.” In *Borderlands: Art, Literature, Culture*, Ewelina Bañka and Zofia Kolbuszewska (eds), 77-92. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe KUL.
- Barthes, Roland.** 1977. “Rhetoric of the Image.” In *Image – Music – Text*. 32-51. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Burgin, Victor.** 1996. *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Burgin, Victor.** 1986. *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*. Hampshire: Macmillan.
- Calvo, Luz.** 2004. “Art Comes for the Archbishop: The Semiotics of Contemporary Chicana Feminism and the Work of Alma Lopez,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 5 (1): 201-224.
- Casey, Edward S.** and **Mary Watkins.** 2014. *Up Against the Wall: Re-Imagining the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Chopin, Kate.** 2003. *The Awakening*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- DeChaine, D. Robert** (ed.) 2012. *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Border*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Derrida, Jacques.** 2000. *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Freire, Paulo.** 2005. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Ganster, Paul** with **David E. Lorey.** 2016. *The U.S.-Mexican Border Today: Conflict and Cooperation in Historical Perspective*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

- Grandin, Greg.** 2019. *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company.
- Ingram, Mrill.** 2017. "The Border is a Beautiful Place." *The Progressive*, December 5.
- Jiménez Underwood, Consuelo.** www.consuelojunderwood.com. [Accessed online in November 2021].
- Kaup, Monika.** 2001. *Rewriting North American Borders in Chicano and Chicana Narrative*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong.** 1989. "No Name Woman." In *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage.
- "Reuniting Culture and Ecology in the Borderlands: An evening of wildlife projections on the US-Mexico Border." *Border Arts Corridor*. [Accessed online in October 2021].
- Tokarczuk, Olga.** 2020. *Czuły narrator*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Wallace, Alayana.** 2019. "Mexico Remixed Artist Ana Teresa Fernández conducts student critiques during campus visit." news.iu.edu/stories/2019/02/iub/14-mexico-remixed-artist-conducts-student-critiques.html. [Accessed online in March 2022].
- Welty, Eudora.** 1979. "Clytie." In *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*. Eugene: Harvest Books.