



4-15-2003

Entre Amigos / Among Friends

Patricia L. Price
Florida International University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.12.02>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Price, Patricia L. (2003) "Entre Amigos / Among Friends," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 12 , Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.12.02>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol12/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

Patricia L. Price

Entre Amigos / Among Friends

Introduction

This is not traditional academic prose. It is, rather, an amalgam of meditations, images, and poetry that gathers around the play of civilities and incivilities which together constitute the border between Mexico and the United States. It is also play-like, arranged in three 'acts' of sorts. Act One picks out (and at) the myriad ways that incivility masquerades as strict politeness at the border: a neat row of stadium lights, the symmetrical staccato click of the turnstile, stacks of coins in toll-booths, an occasional smile by the customs officer, and the Budweiser billboard reminding us all that friendship has clear limits. Act Two follows the arc of the cast-off beer bottle from the billboard in Act One to sort through border garbage. It examines the praxis of disposability as constituting a life-cycle from birth to decline, to death, and then resurrection at various ontological levels. Act Two delves into the deepest incivility, turning on the disposability of human lives as well as on the miraculous ways that everything from old tires to human souls can literally and figuratively rise from the dead to haunt the landscape of the present. In Act Three, these repetitive plays between opposites—civil/uncivil, alive/dead, useful/useless, here/there, us/them—are pursued to the point where their ceaseless fission results in something wholly new and lovely. For no one could live in a place so constantly riven, yet the fact that so many of us do suggests that we engage in constant acts of healing, faith, and even love, acts that render any divide partial at best.

It is not, however, play-ful. For play can evoke a light-hearted distraction that would constitute a dangerous approach to the violent edges of empire. My use here of poetry and photographs to examine the sharply contentious edges of the contemporary world is intended, rather, to be productive, and can be thought of as an artisanal un-

dertaking. It attends to the border embroidery craft, *bordando fronteras*. By weaving together representational approaches we bridge literal and figurative divides. Poetry and visual images can provide an oblique method to get at ideas and feelings that are elusive, ineffable, difficult to grasp outright. Combined with academic writing of a more mainstream sort, the resulting critical poesis provides a much needed complement to the bulk of academic writing about borders. It is consistent with the call for scholars engaged in wholly prose-based disciplines to undertake such experimental writing strategies (e.g., Bleiker). Though expository writing is expected of academic social scientists as we claw our own ways over (or around) institutional borders of our own making, it is a genre that can severely limit the depth of our understandings of civilities and incivilities and their mutual interplay in the contemporary world. Visual and aural crystallizations of meaning can provide lines of flight, bypassing the detailed terrain of the analytical and forging alternate paths to arrive at the narratives of belonging and exclusion that undergird geopolitical borders. Poesis is part of the healing process. We need all the tools we can get.

Act I: Entre Amigos / Among Friends

Budweiser has recently embarked upon a new campaign, apparently to broaden their working class consumer base through a series of billboard advertisements in Spanish. In Miami, where I live, Little Havana is now awash with larger-than-life images of a relaxing man holding a bikini-clad woman on his lap with one arm, a cold Bud in his other hand, with the words "no la sueltes" emblazoned above them. "No la sueltes" has a double meaning, as the 'la' can refer to 'her' as in "don't let go of her"; it can also refer to the beer, which is 'cerveza' in Spanish and takes the feminine article 'la'. The message then becomes "don't let go of the beer." The girl and the beer are interchangeable, both in image and word. Both are used to forge bonds among working class men. Thus the girl and the beer become interchangeable in deed, as well.

In Texas, another Budweiser billboard uses the slogan "entre amigos" above a crowd of happy faces, beers in hand. The camera is focused on a woman's face to the right-hand side of the advertisement, while the rest of the faces to the left are slightly out of focus. "Entre amigos," too, derives its polyvalent meanings from a double entendre, for it is unclear whether what is being shared "among friends" is the beer, or the girl, or both.

And the uncertainty bespeaks a wider circulation of marked bodies and consumer goods across the border between the U.S. and Mexico. The people crossing the bridge from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, to El Paso, Texas, where this billboard was photographed, are overwhelmingly short-term commuters. Most of them are going to work in El Paso as domestic servants, gardeners, construction workers, day laborers, and will return again at night or every weekend (Quintanilla and Copeland). Or they are zooming across from El Paso to Juárez, zapping laser visas in the fast lane, earning their daily bread managing factories on the Mexico side of the line. On weekends, most are spending their wages on the other side: groceries and gasoline and clothing are better and cheaper in El Paso, while booze and fun and pharmaceuticals are less expensive and less restrained in Juárez.

The lines of gender, race, and class that parse these labor arrangements are stark. Within the sorting-box of nation, they are themselves borders that edge the walls of the taxonomy of labor. Beyond such boxes, the vast majority of crossers are *mexicanos*, regardless of their current country of residence, and have family members on both sides of the border. Some of them are recent arrivals—it is estimated that Ciudad Juárez grows by two city blocks and 600 people daily (Stack), most of them moving north from the interior of Mexico—while others have familial roots running deep along both sides of the border, stretching out for hundreds of years.

Juárez and El Paso are deeply entwined in their mutual past, present, and future, and this is true all along the cartographic cat's-cradle from Tijuana to San Diego to Matamoros to Brownsville and back again. Yet recognizing this and dignifying what it means has been tremendously difficult for the nations on either side of the line, for to do so would mean recognizing and dignifying our commonalities rather than our differences, would mean valuing what now turns on cheapness, would entail really crossing borders.

For the moment, it appears that we're happy to keep it "entre amigos," among friends.



Image 1: "Entre Amigos / Among friends: Santa Fe bridge from Juárez to El Paso"



Image 2: "In, out, repeat: Border convenience store near Sunland Park, New Mexico"

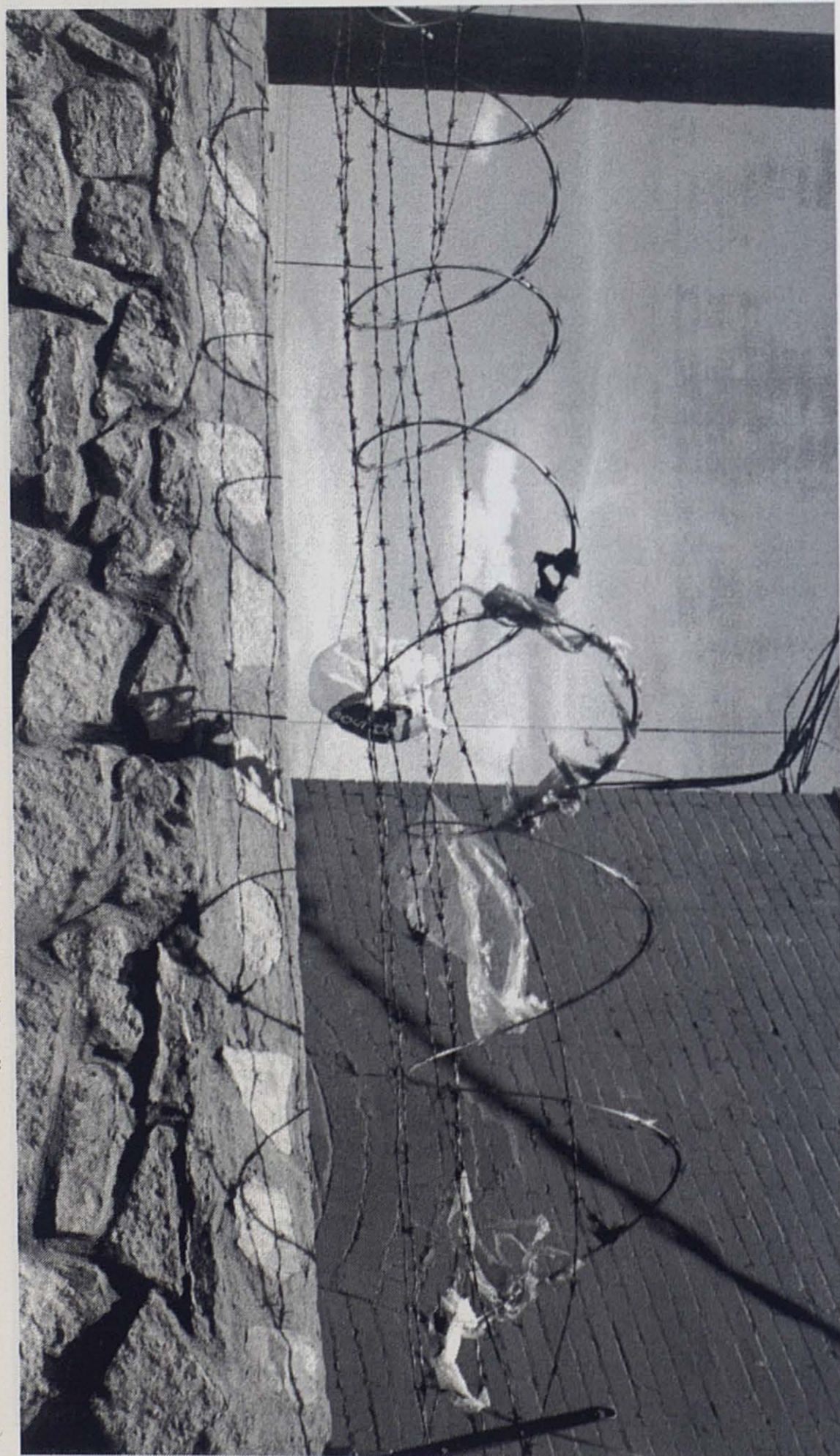


Image 3: "Strong fences and good neighbors: border at El Paso"

* * *

Borderlining

I could be
 patrolling the line in a stiff green uniform and
 a dog with alert ears, night-vision eyes, a nose for death
 and a Blazer like an agile beetle to scuttle the sand
 or
 Cutting for sign in soft moccasins
 with my notebook and tape recorder
 and a set of 24 pastels
 or
 Slinking shadowing waiting for the chance to break over and out
 alone

I expect a chain link fence
 chicken wire?
 A cheap string of Christmas lights would do the trick
 or a faint line scratched with a stick in the rusty dirt
 Something, anything, to stake those long miles
 Holding hands, spanning the howling space to
 force meaning like a green lawn out of this dry place
 Us
 Them

Texaco
 Motel 6
 Denny's
 Those, I suppose, are the chains that hold hands
 back-to-back to
 stretch a twinkling fence
 underlining the fact that
 there really is no border on the border
 Only borderlining

This smooth space from which so much is conjured
 and into which so much has been distilled
 Embroidered by patient hands, surgical minds, blessed hearts, sacred feet
 Colored and flavored with blood, sweat, tears, hopes, dreams, fears
 Ground into dry sand
 Pulverized and dribbled
 A shaman's scribbles
 A Kool-Aid trail
 Nazca lines in the shape of a snail
 A chain of stories
 A silver lining
 Borderlining

II. Zone of Discard

In urban theory, that area of transition experiencing an economic and physical degeneration in type of business or residential occupant is known as "the zone of discard" (Knox 96). Porn shops, pawn shops, and crack houses are prominent features in this portion of the urban landscape. Zones of discard are thorough-fares for desires, places of transit for used things and used people and users. They are haunted by the drifting shadows of forgetting, loss, and obsolescence. Zones of discard are littered with garbage.

There is a lot of garbage on the border. Some of it sits in vast toxic heaps, compressing and groaning and hissing and stinking and dribbling out the distilled elixir of flexible production to the beat of the sun and rain and the endless turn of the seasons. Yet garbage, like all matter, never really disappears—it is merely transformed. In Mexico most garbage is sooner or later resurrected through the miracle of recycling. Not the organized programs of recycling many of us in the urban United States are used to, the magician's trick of now-you-see-it-in-the-bright-box-on-the-curb, now-you-don't. Recycling on Mexico's side of the line is far more direct, intimate, and flexible than any curbside program in the United States will ever be.

That icon of progress, U.S.-style—the automobile—is granted a seemingly endless stream of lives once it has been used and discarded in the United States. Many of them now prowl Tijuana's streets, granted a new life as part of the city's distinctive fleet of enormous 1970s-style station wagon taxicabs. Old tires find their way to Mexico, too, becoming a common landscaping material in low-income communities: foundations, terraces, stairways, and planters are made from old tires. An alternate mode of transport, the human foot, may well be embellished by sandals cut from tires. Garage doors, assembled at the Sears plant in Nogales, live a carefree first life in U.S. suburbs. But the Sears plant is a veritable well of souls, for many garage doors eventually make their way home as building materials. An entire low income neighborhood in Tijuana has dwellings fashioned from cast-off *gringo* garage doors (Valenzuela Arce).

Garbage exists on many ontological levels.¹ People, as well as things, can be used up and discarded. Mexico's *maquiladora* program has resulted in the blooming of thousands of in-bond factories along the border (and increasingly, in the interior of Mexico), the creation of millions of jobs, and the provision of a key component of Mexico's gross domestic product. *Maquiladoras* are touted as the epitome of efficient and flexible production approaches, scanning the uneven surface of wage levels and legal-institutional constraints to provide the lowest-cost product possible. It's a cut-throat world, after all.

Yet a common criticism of *maquiladoras* and the jobs they create turns on garbage: in the form of the toxic waste generated (and dumped) on Mexico's side of the line (Saldaña), and in the management's view of *maquila* workers, who are often perceived as just another input into the labor process, one with a definite lifespan (Nathan). Once a worker is used up, she is thrown away and another worker is inserted to take her place. Simple repetitive motion.

Journalist Debbie Nathan takes a more immediate view of the connections between the metaphorical disposability of female factory workers and their actual disposability. Nathan notes how the recent killings of women in Ciudad Juárez—

well over 200 since the murders began in 1993—can be understood as an extension of this equation between women's disposability as women and their disposability as workers.² Many of the murdered women worked in *maquiladora* plants and had apparently been abducted on their way to or from work. Yet a great deal of uncertainty and speculation has swirled around the Juárez killings: is it the work of a serial killer? If so, why do the killings continue regardless of the jailing of many suspects? Is the killer a psychopath, or an insider, maybe a plant manager or even a local policeman assigned to crack the case? Perhaps even more important than these questions regarding the identity of the killer(s) is the suggestion that the murders may not in fact fit any pattern, that they may be simply reflective of a larger climate of violent flux where things and people seem to come and go at random.³

After being raped and strangled, some of the bodies were discarded in an enormous expanse of undeveloped land called Lote Bravo. Lote Bravo is a vast zone of discard, intruded at the edges by shanties and plied by former U.S. school buses, currently incarnated as personnel transportation for the *maquiladora* workers who live on the outskirts of Lote Bravo. The interior of Lote Bravo, however, fairly buzzes with silence and heat and decay, strewn with the detritus of border life: worn-out shoes, ratty furniture, dead animals and animal parts left over from meat packing, junked cars, and more old tires than I have ever seen before. Most of this garbage has finally come to rest here in Lote Bravo, its useable lives but a distant memory, beyond the reach of even the most tenacious recycler.

The bodies were hidden amongst this burnt-out garbage, some for years before they were discovered. Many slowly mummified in the dry desert air. Maybe their souls are condemned to walk the border, and this is what has given rise to folk tales of *La Llorona*, the faceless chalk-white wailing woman sobbing for her lost children, who dates from the fall of Tenochtitlán in 1521. She has been seen along the border fence lately. Perhaps she is wailing for the souls of the hundreds of would-be border crossers who, pushed to the desert margins by urban border lockdown programs in the mid-1990s, have died of dehydration, heat exhaustion, or (ironically) been hit by cars (Eschbach, et.al; Annerino; Verhovek).

To commemorate the Day of the Dead, 1998, activists and artists on both sides of *la línea* assembled a mile's worth of crosses to mark these deaths (image 6). Some crosses had names, ages, and states of origin, while others simply bore the words '*no identificado*,' unidentified. All had empty gallon jugs of water affixed to them, offerings reminiscent of the extra glass of wine at the table on the Day of the Dead, spilt in the hope that its perfume would stretch across time and space to bring the vague memory of earthly delight to the dear departed. Water to wine, blood to water, and the fragrance of it all like a fast-moving irrigation ditch, the Río Bravo enigmatically still and broad as a blue plate or bright puddles in the desert after rare rain.

The border can be understood as a liminal place, a space of quick passage and averted gaze for most border crossers, and a zone of discard where people and things that are no longer useful can finally rest. But it can also be seen as a haunted place, where echoes and shadows and possibilities roam. Brian Jarvis writes of the terrain of abjection using Henri Lefebvre's description of the *mundus*, a sacred/accursed pit in the middle of the township into which trash and

dead bodies and filth of every kind were thrown. The pit was also a generative space, providing a passageway through which the souls of the dead could re-emerge and be reborn: "In its ambiguity it encompassed the greatest foulness and greatest purity, life and death, fertility and destruction, horror and fascination" (qtd. in Jarvis 192). Jarvis speculates that the image of the *mundus* might be used strategically. After all, this space of abjection was centrally located in a physical sense; what would it mean to reposition the *mundus* to a central discursive site? In the case of the border between Mexico and the United States, that which is constructed as marginal in both a literally geographic and a figurative sense, would be understood as central to contemporary negotiations of nation, identity, and narratives of belonging and exclusion. For to bring the abjected margins to the center is to profoundly contest the power relations that relegate some things and places and people to the category of garbage in the first place.

* * *

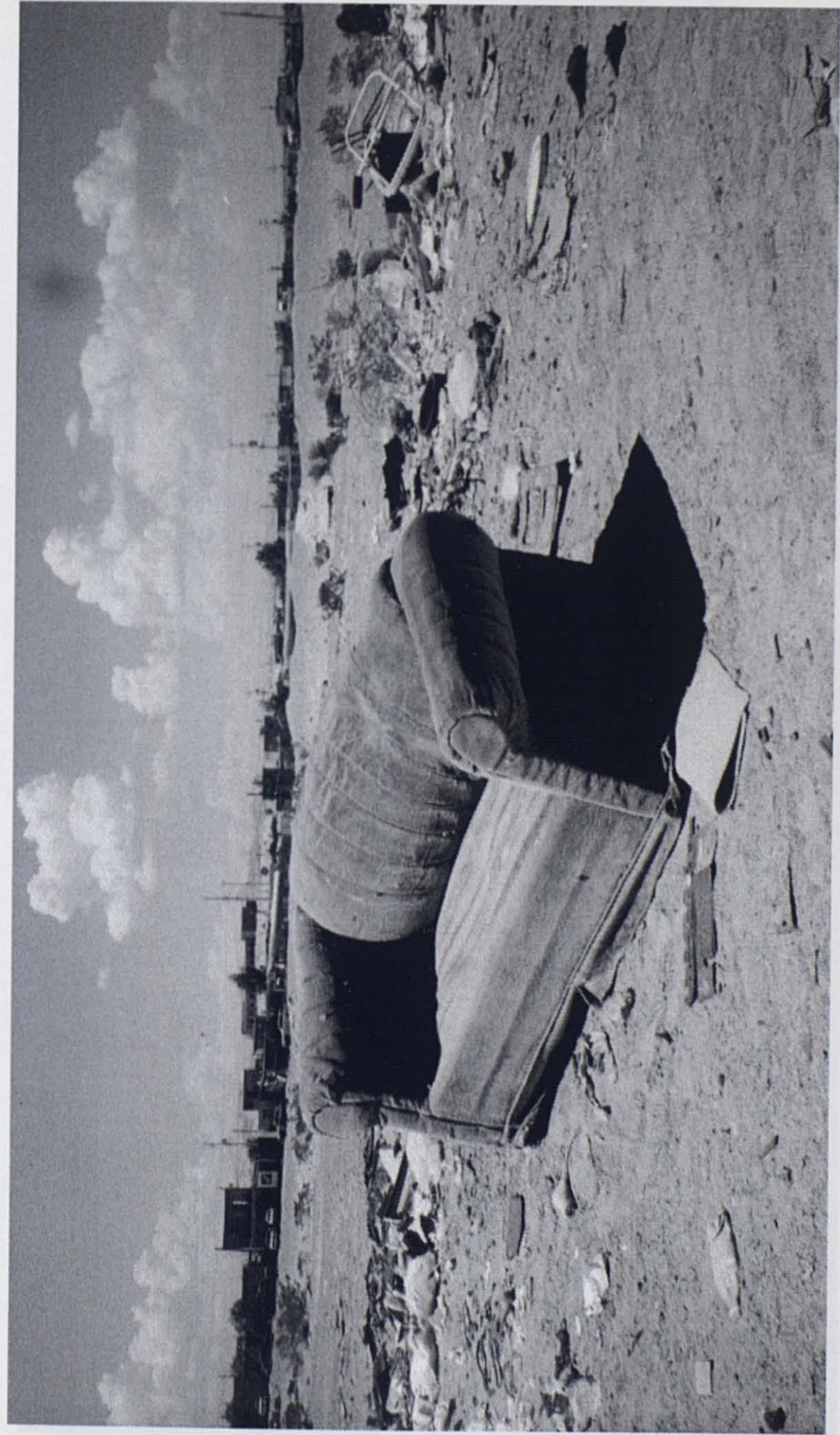


Image 4: "Sit a spell: discarded sofa in Lote Bravo, Ciudad Juárez"



Image 5: "Daisy's front yard: Ciudad Juárez"



Image 6: "Cross markers / marking crossers: border fence outside Tijuana airport"

Angel

The Angel of History is
 a ninety year-old woman in Tijuana
 Picking over the junk heap of modernity
 Looking for something to recycle

* * *

III. Crossing Over

To cross a border is to enact a basic gesture in the performance of nation. Waiting to cross, waiting while crossing, suspended in liminal places—airports, Greyhound Bus stations, idled at border check points—I have had more than adequate time to reflect on this act. The ritual sanctifies the line, makes the wholly (holy) imaginary wholly (holy) real, solidifies the notion through simple repetitive motion: in/out, open/closed, here/there, us/them. The border is conjured into existence through these acts of faith: you must believe, even though you do not understand.

Border crossing at once invokes a near-purity of civility and incivility. Boundaries at all scales are tested, probed, pushed, stretched, perforated, violated, profaned, sanctified, sutured, tagged, zipped, locked, made whole again. Passports, visas, stamps, interviews, x-rays, scans, luggage searches, trunk searches, body searches, uniforms, lines, boarding passes, gate checks, document checks . . . rape and purification walk hand in hand down the jetway. The state's chattering, incessant insistence upon *knowing* belies its deepest anxieties. Smoothness, ease, and internal homogeneity are but a recurring wish for intact fullness, a virgin desire constantly shredded as it washes again and again upon the ragged edges of uncertainty, inchoate difference, That Which Cannot Be Translated. Borders are born of such tensions, and they are maintained by an ongoing conversation amongst them.

Yet these repeated crossings over and over again by so many people cannot help but embroider a tapestry that is at once hideous *and* lovely. Crispin Sartwell recently wrote that "new and inconceivable hatreds will spring up and yield beautiful things" (21). This is precisely what is happening along the border between Mexico and the United States. Incivility masked as the utmost in civility shades across the spectrum to outright violence, hatred, and bloody murder along this border, yet many of us are made to live in these borderlands and live we do. Creating meaning—here as anywhere else—is itself a patient sort of embroidery, a crafting of order from chaos which is both our burden and joy as individual human beings, born naked and alone in a hostile world ever weaving and embellishing garments of belonging from the materials we are given and those we are able to make.

* * *



Image 7: "From the mirador, can you see the line?: nightfall over El Paso and Ciudad Juárez"



Image 8: Shrine to Juan Soldado, patron saint of the border crossers: Tijuana

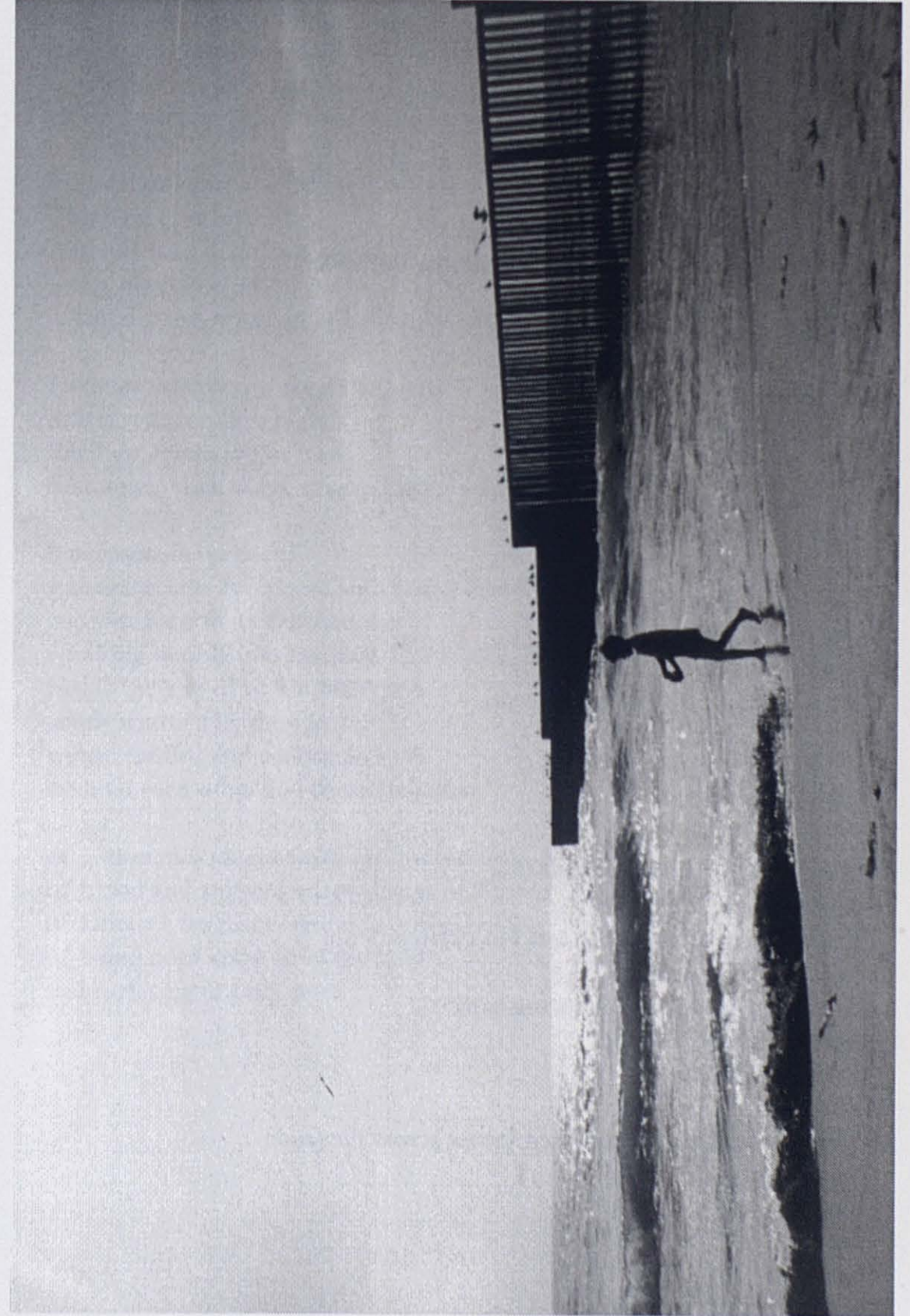


Image 9: "Tequila sunset: child playing along the border fence at Tijuana"

Twin Cities

From the mirador
they are inseparable.
Undulating strings of sodium vapor
pool ghost pink along the river and
stretch eager fingers for hills all around.

Shared blood circulates
as people and cars, wires and bars
cross bridges and streets and railways.
Cut the veins and they bleed out into the thirsty land,
turning the water red,
painting the desert sand.

We know.
We have tried.

Because connecting capillaries
conjoin the brothers
who, back to back
have sealed their pacts
with a stitch in time,
a hairline fracture,
and a delicate scroll of barbed wire.

MV Coho

It is difficult to imagine Spaniards
this far north.
Their breastplates and helmets not sweltering but
chilled to the bone,
grey light glinting and bouncing hard
like cold bright bullets
across the Straits

They left their names scattered stones across the land:
Juan de Fuca
Quadra
Flores
Garibaldi
Texada
But disappointed, the men
turned their horses,
tightened slack ropes,
and left.

"Acá no hay nada"
Canada

Blinded by a feverish golden haze to
the silver flash of salmon,
emerald firs suddenly shedding diamonds of snow,
sapphire seas swallowing it all.
Gems pulsating before their hallucinatory eyes.

I shade my brow aboard the MV Coho
This light blinds me too.
And just then a line is crossed.
Deep, vegetable, silent.
A liquid totem snaking far below the surface.

Pitch up: robin's egg skies
Roll down: cerulean night
Pitch up: Spanish blue eyes
Roll down: dark water streaked with crisp white

Some remain on deck,
screaming into the breeze with raised fists
and words carried backward, or
vomiting bitterly into the mist.
Inside the rest of us are silent and
gently warmed by the sun
we are cradled and rocked and
we hold each other and dream together

of god-men wrought from furious red-gold desire
of blood and soil and warm shades of brown
of fantastic languages and odd-shaped roots
of being born anew from the land
and surfacing in a dry port.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was delivered via video at the American Association of Geographers annual meeting in Los Angeles, March 21, 2001. Phil Steinberg invited the presentation and Melissa Wright provided commentary at the AAG meeting. Field research was conducted during the Summer of 2001 in El Paso, Ciudad Juárez, Culiacán, and Tijuana. Funding was provided by a Florida International University Foundation Grant. Colleagues Sarah Hill, Manuel Valenzuela, César Fuentes, Alfredo Rodríguez, Emilia Casillas, and Leticia Castillo were most generous with their time and knowledge during the field research. All poetry and photographs are the author's.

Notes

1. For a brilliant exposition of the discursive uses of literal and figurative associations of garbage and low-income urban populations on the U.S.-Mexico border, see Hill.
2. Most *maquiladora* workers are women; however, men have slowly become a larger proportion of assembly line workers. For another exploration of the links between gender and disability, see Wright, 1999.
3. Conversations with colleagues, particularly Alfredo Rodríguez and César Fuentes, at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Ciudad Juárez during the summer of 2001 were most helpful here. Also contributing to the discussion were Sarah Hill, who was conducting field research in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez area at the same time I was (summer 2001), and Leticia Castillo at IMIP (Instituto Municipal de Información y Planificación). For published sources in Spanish, see Benítez, et.al. and Monárrez Fragoso. In English, see Wright, 2001, and a 2002 newspaper series authored by Diana Washington Valdez in the *El Paso Times* on the murders.

Works Cited

- Annerino, John. *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands*. New York: Four Walls and Eight Windows, 1999.
- Benítez, Rohry, Adriana Candia, Patricia Cabrera, Guadalupe de la Mora, Josefina Martínez, Isabel Velásquez, and Ramona Ortiz. *El Silencio Que la Voz de Todas Quiébra: Mujeres y Víctimas de Ciudad Juárez*. Chihuahua, Mexico: Ediciones del Azar, 1999.
- Bleiker, Roland, ed. "Poetic World Politics." Spec. issue of *Alternatives* 25 (2000).
- Eschbach, Karl, Jacqueline Hagan, Nestor Rodríguez, Rubén Hernández-León, and Stanley Bailey. *Death at the Border*. Working Paper WPS 97-2. Houston: Center for Immigration Research, 1997.
- Hill, Sarah. "Metaphoric Enrichment and Material Poverty on the U.S.-Mexico Border: The Making of 'Colonias'." *Border Ethnographies: The Limits of Border Theory*. Ed. Pablo Vila. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming.
- Jarvis, Brian. *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

- Knox, Paul. *Urbanization: An Introduction to Urban Geography*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994.
- Monárrez Fragoso, Julia Estela. "La Cultura del Femicidio en Ciudad Juárez." *Frontera Norte* 12 (2000): 88-117.
- Nathan, Debbie. "Work, Sex, and Danger in Ciudad Juárez." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 33 (1999): 24-30.
- Quintanilla, Michael and Peter Copeland. "Mexican Maids: El Paso's Worst-kept Secret." *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Oscar J. Martínez. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1996. 213-21.
- Saldaña, Lori. "Tijuana's Toxic Waters." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 33.3 (1999): 31-5.
- Sartwell, Crispin. "Satanic Beauty." *Harper's Magazine* 299 (1999): 21-6.
- Stack, Megan K. Stack. "Till Death Came to her Door." *Los Angeles Times* 11 Sept. 2001: A1, A10.
- Valdez, Diana Washington. "Death Stalks the Border." *El Paso Times* June 23 and 24 2002. 19 December 2002 <<http://www.elpasotimes.com/borderdeath/>>.
- Valenzuela Arce, José Manuel. *Personal Interview*. July 29, 2001.
- Verhovek, Sam Howe. "'Silent Deaths' Climbing Steadily as Migrants Cross Mexican Border." *New York Times* 27 Aug. 1997: A1, A20.
- Wright, Melissa W. "The Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women and Maquiladoras." *Public Culture* 11 (1999): 453-74.
- . "A Manifesto against Femicide." *Antipode* 33 (2001): 550-66.