

Ewa Antoszek

The U.S.-Mexico Border as a Palimpsest in Ana Teresa Fernández's Art

Abstract: The question of land has always been crucial to Latinos/as living in the U.S., due to the series of historical events that resulted in “[t]erritorial dispossession and dislocation” (Pérez 147) that have particularly influenced this ethnic group and relegated them both literally and metaphorically towards the margin—the border. Consequently, the border has played a significant role in the Latinx discourse for a long time. The complexity of spatial-social relations increased with subsequent waves of immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American states. However, as Monika Kaup notes, being both “natives of the Southwest before the American conquest” and immigrants, Latinos/as in the U.S. constitute “a charter as well as an immigrant group” (Kaup 26). This double status of the group is reflected in Chicano/a literary and cultural productions through nation-based and immigrant paradigms (Kaup 26) that have been constructed in direct reference to the border, since “[b]eneath the surface of these models lie two different concepts of the border” (Kaup 10). Combined with the transformations in the discourse on space the concept of the border has undergone several re-definitions and the changing role of the border—from the demarcation line to more porous and permeable space has been reflected in numerous artistic productions by Latinx authors and artists. Those artistic productions illustrate the transformations of the space and address the aforementioned interplay between indigenous and immigrant paradigms often present in the discourse on the Mexican-American border. The purpose of this article is to analyze how the space of the border is (re-)visioned by Latina artist Ana Teresa Fernández, turning the border into a cultural palimpsest. It focuses mainly on Fernández’s *Erasing the Border/Borrando La Frontera* (2013), together with the community project of the same title, and selected paintings from her series *Foreign Bodies* (2013) and *Pressing Matters* (2013) in order to examine the aforementioned redefinitions of the border and its multiple roles. Fernández’s revisionist performances of the border both contribute to the ongoing debate on the still urgent and pressing problem of the U.S.-Mexico border and are also an apt reflection on the status quo of borders in general.

Keywords: Mexican-American border, La Frontera, borderlands, Ana Teresa Fernández, immigrant and indigenous paradigms, border crossings, Latinos/as, Burgin’s pre-texts, Mieke Bal

The question of land or *tierra* has always been crucial to Latinos/as living in the U.S., due to the series of historical events that resulted in “[t]erritorial dispossession and dislocation” (Pérez 147) that have particularly influenced this ethnic group. Latinos/as in general and Mexican Americans specifically, have been described as de-spaced peoples whose deterritorialization has been reinforced through subsequent

historical events, including the sixteenth-century conquest, the annexation of Texas in 1836, or the Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty, ending the Mexican-American war in 1848 and taking away a large portion of formerly Mexican land, together with people living there. The events of the mid-nineteenth century influenced the socio-political status of the group, their cultural productions, and identity, since due to those transformations their location moved both literally and metaphorically towards the margin—the border.¹ Consequently, as Laura Pérez observes, “methodical displacement from the lands inhabited by our kin through wars of conquest and relocation to non-ancestral ‘reservations’ has gone hand in hand with economic, social, political, and cultural disenfranchisement” (148). Moreover, it is also true about the “experience of those whose families have immigrated from Mexico in the last two generations” (Pérez 147) that it “repeats this sense of cultural displacement, sharpened and conditioned by this historic anti-Mexicanism, still rooted for many in the assumption of the inferiority of both the Indians and the Spanish from whom Mexicans originally descended” (Pérez 147). These conclusions, among others, indicate that the spatial construct of the border has played a significant role in the Latinx discourse for a long time.

The complexity of spatial-social relations increased with subsequent waves of immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American states. The newcomers either joined the established Mexican-American/Latinx communities or started to occupy new locations, which led to a greater heterogeneity of the group and, as a result, the Latinx status in the U.S. became even more complex than before. However, as Monika Kaup notes, being both “natives of the Southwest before the American conquest” and immigrants, Latinos/as in the U.S. constitute “a charter as well as an immigrant group” (Kaup 26).²

This double status of the group is reflected in Chicano/a literary and cultural productions through nation-based and immigrant paradigms (Kaup 26) that have been constructed in direct reference to the border, since “[b]eneath the surface of these models lie two different concepts of the border” (Kaup 10). In the case of the nation-based paradigm, the border is treated as “home territory, as homeland, as viewed by

1 The margin and the border belong, as Edward Casey and Mary Watkins argue, “to the broad family of things we call ‘edges’” (13), which “mark the place where things lose their dense consistency and land relinquishes its spread-out character” (13), yet at the same time “edges are where energies of many kinds—personal and political, demographic, geographic and historical—collect and become concentrated” (13). Such a positioning of the border is also identified by Paul Ganster who attributes it to disparate interests of centers and margins—border regions. He maintains that “[n]ational institutions, indeed institutions in general, are often weak in border regions and border peoples are frequently economically and politically marginalized from the life of the nations of which they are citizens” (xxi) and hence they have often come up with strategies that allow them to combat this relegation to the margin.

2 See my discussion on the aforementioned concepts in *Out of the Margins: Identity Formation in Contemporary Chicana Writings*.

the original occupants of the borderlands” (Kaup 10). In the case of the immigrant paradigm, the border is regarded “as a line crossed in the northward migration from Mexico, as viewed by the new immigrants” (Kaup 10). Both “Chicano narrative” and “Chicano historiography” have presented “the border as filtered through these two paradigms, which derive from the patterns of *mexicano* history in the borderlands” (Kaup 10).

Owing to those two paradigms as well as the developments in the theory of space at the end of the twentieth century, the concept of the U.S.-Mexico border has also undergone significant transformations, from the definition of this space emphasizing its fixedness and stability to the concepts that underscore its permeability and in a sense fluidity. The former definitions of *La Frontera* were grounded in its historical and political functions and they resembled a generic definition of a border proposed by Edward Casey and Mary Watkins where “a border is a clearly and crisply delineated entity established by conventional agreements, such as treaties or laws... a border is primarily a product of human history and its vicissitudes” (14), “most often designed to be impervious” (15), which should be ideally guaranteed by its precise location (15). In their analysis of terminology applied to *La Frontera* Casey and Watkins maintain that this particular space also shows certain characteristics of a boundary, which they define as a concept that “too, can have cultural and historical aspects, but it is paradigmatically natural in status... rarely demarcated with exacting precision, varying in contour and extent depending on surrounding circumstances” (14) and “[m]ost important, it is porous” (15) and “lacks precise positioning” (15). According to Casey and Watkins, *La Frontera* combines elements of both concepts and, in order “to understand the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border” (21), they propose a set of concepts arranged in a specific order, namely “boundary, borderland, border, walls and fences, and borderline” (21) which allows for defining the border in a more precise way, at the same time acknowledging the transformations the concept has undergone, since according to this scheme, “the border... is closer to a borderline in terms of its putative precision but also integral to the very idea of a borderland” (21).³ Such positioning of the border also illustrates Kaup’s idea of the interplay of the indigenous and immigrant paradigms applied to define this space, as the border combines aspects of the demarcation line and homeland (i.e. Aztlán transformed into borderlands).

The mutability of the concept of the U.S.-Mexico border is also reflected

3 Casey and Watkins define the borderline as “a cartographic entity, a linear representation of a limit established by political negotiation” (20) and they argue that “neither aspect of *La Frontera* is to be confused with the *borderline* between the United States and Mexico” (20). Borderland in turn is defined by them as “the area that flanks a recognized international border, usually on both sides. It is an area, a region, in the form of a band or strip that cannot be measured in so many meters or miles. In its indeterminacy of the exact extent, a borderland resembles a boundary, but a borderland is bound, conceptually and concretely, to the border it surrounds” (21).

in its literary and artistic representations that include such disparate images as the aforementioned dividing line and a more inclusive space of the borderlands zone. Jesús Benito and Ana Manzanás examine the redefinitions of the concept of the border through the analysis of several terms that have been applied to describe the U.S.-Mexico border and which illustrate the transformations discussed above. They depart from the concept of the border as the demarcation line, and enumerate subsequent re-conceptualizations of the space, including Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands, Alfred Arteaga's "border zone," Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance, and Philip Sutton's "threshold," or Mary Louise Pratt's concept of contact zones, to name just a few.⁴ The trajectory of those changes supports the assumption about the liminal character of the border and regardless of the terms used, the successive concepts of the border imply both division and contiguity or, in some cases, permeability.

Moreover, the concept of the border is even more complex, due to the fact that it can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. As Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen observe, "the rich interdisciplinary body of research that has emerged since the 1990s conceives of borders as social constructions possessing both material and symbolic aspects" (9) where the material aspects, such as, for example, fences or walls, pertain to metaphorical borders crossed by Latinx on a daily basis. Casey and Watkins refer to this literal-metaphorical dichotomy of the interpretation of the border, maintaining that "the actual border and the material wall" (7) have "their multiple echoes in the divisions in our neighborhoods, schools and daily lives" (7). They argue that "[t]he wall that now marks the U.S.-Mexico border concretizes the metaphorical walls that have been born of racism, fear, and avarice in many towns and cities throughout the United States" (7) and "the border operates at psychological, interpersonal and intercommunity levels" (7). Emma Pérez, in the description of her course, "History 5351: Literature and Methodology of Borderlands" seems to confirm that conclusion, defining borderlands in two ways: 1) as "space, geography, territory, region, global, local"; and 2) as "psychic, imaginary, imposed demarcations, lines and boundaries" (in Engstrand 506). The emphasis, Pérez explains, "is upon racial and gender issues, new interpretations and questions dealing with distinctions between geographic spaces and imaginary psychic borderlands" (in Engstrand 506), which resonated also earlier in Anzaldúa's concept of *La Frontera*. Claire Fox in turn suggests that "[t]here exists not a Border with capital B but unpredictable boundary encounters which show how the border repeats itself in different locations and times" (in Benito and Manzanás 4) and, as a consequence, "[a]s a phenomenological category, the border was something that people carried within themselves, in addition to being an external factor structuring their perceptions" (in Benito and Manzanás 63).

The changing role of the border—from the demarcation line to more porous

4 I have discussed the aforementioned concepts in my articles "La Línea vs. La Frontera—Representations of the Border and Border Crossings in Grande's *Across a Hundred Mountains*" and "Contested Spaces/Striated Spaces: Representations of the Border in Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us: A Memoir*."

and permeable space has been reflected in numerous artistic productions by Latinx authors and artists who create images of the U.S.-Mexico border, presenting different roles of the border as well as its influence on border crossers and the environment. Those artistic productions illustrate the transformations of the space and address the aforementioned interplay between indigenous and immigrant paradigms often present in the discourse on the Mexican-American border. The purpose of this article is to analyze how the space of the border is (re-)visioned by a Latina artist Ana Teresa Fernández, turning the border into a cultural palimpsest. Due to the scope of the article, it focuses mainly on Fernández's *Erasing the Border/Borrando La Frontera* (2013), together with the community project of the same title, and selected paintings from her series *Foreign Bodies* (2013) and *Pressing Matters* (2013)⁵ in order to examine the aforementioned redefinitions of the border and its multiple roles. Fernández's revisionist performances of the border both contribute to the ongoing debate on the still urgent and pressing problem of the U.S.-Mexico border and are also an apt reflection on the status quo of borders in general.

Ana Teresa Fernández was born in Mexico (Tampico) and raised and educated in the U.S. In her works she often presents different roles of the border as well as its influence on border crossers and the environment. *Erasing the Border/Borrando la frontera* (2013)⁶ is part of her first individual exhibition—*Foreign Bodies*—that was hosted at Gallery Wendi Norris in San Francisco in 2014 and which “explores how women navigate the geographic, social, and physiological boundaries between the United States and Mexico” (anateresafernandez.com). Consequently, “[d]ocumenting her performances and installations using photography and the painted image, Fernández's work reveals how women's bodies become surfaces imprinted with political and social upheavals” (anateresafernandez.com) and represents the contested space of the U.S.-Mexico border in a broader context.

Erasing the Border/Borrando La Frontera (2013) depicts a woman, standing next to a tall fence with her back to the audience. The fence is located on a beach and it crosses the dunes, the beach itself and enters the ocean. There is also a ladder propped against the fence, as the woman is painting it blue and she will need the ladder to paint the upper parts of the fence. At first when we look at the painting we see the fence that becomes prominent in its role of a marker of the border that divides two nation-states. It functions as this sharp, fixed demarcation line that separates both space and people on both sides of the border. Owing to the fence, the space is striated—both in literal and Deleuzian sense—numerous vertical lines cut the space and divide it into separate entities, closed nations. Evoking Benito and Manzanás' comparison of the idea of the closed nation predetermined by the closed border to the concept of the classical body as expressed by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*

5 The dates referred to have been provided by the artist on her website, anateresafernandez.com.

6 The painting should not be mistaken with a photographic performance documentation of the same title dated to 2012.

(7), where “[t]he classical body/nation is an image of completeness” (7), it can be stated that the border “can be seen as a sharp line of demarcation which guards and protects an entirely finished and complete political and geographical body” (8). Nonetheless, Benito and Manzanos also observe that based on the definition proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin, the border is “also a part of the body/nation through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to the world” (8), which implies permeability of the border, or, in other words, means that it also functions “as an orifice in the body/nation” (8). In that sense their concept of the changing border resembles the way Casey and Watkins describe *La Frontera*—as having at the same time qualities of both a borderline and boundary as well as borderlands. Their conclusions are illustrated by Fernández’s work as well: first of all, the border is marked by a fence (not a wall yet)—we can see through the fence to the other side of the border, though the movement of humans between the two sides will be constricted. The ladder propped against the fence acquires symbolic meaning in that context, as it may be simply read as a device necessary for painting upper parts of the fence, but its prominent position—in the center of the painting—suggests its more important role. Consequently, it may also symbolize the instrument that allows the transgression to the other side, i.e. the U.S. Moreover, from the distance it looks like a ladder to the skies/heaven, which given the positionality of the viewer—we are behind the woman painting the fence, looking across from Mexico to the U.S.—implies that the other side is the object of one’s dreams. Such readings of the painting’s layout are justified by Mieke Bal’s analysis of “the cinematic in still pictures” (18) that she conducts in “Movement and the Still Image.” In her analysis Bal proposes that what “cinematic images share with painting and photography is *framing*” (“Movement” 18) but the painting can avoid “limitations imposed by the lens” (“Movement” 18), as “an artist can freely choose the size and proportions of the canvas or panel” (“Movement” 18), which implies an artist is also free to select the way objects are distributed and located on the canvas, i.e. the central position of the ladder is supposed to draw the viewer’s attention and calls for reinterpretation of its apparent functions.

Furthermore, we need to recognize the play of Victor Burgin’s pre-texts in *Borrando la Frontera* (2013). Burgin uses the term pre-text on several occasions while analyzing the way the audiences interpret visual arts (in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* and *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*) and he defines pre-texts as elements that exist in popular preconscious which even if they do not get chosen, exist and “can be called to mind by the majority of individuals in a given society at a particular moment in history” (in Calvo 216), thus revealing both “manifest and latent contents of the image” (61), and which “will yield a different set of images along the paradigmatic chain” (217) as well as make the interpretation depend on one’s cultural location (217).⁷ In that sense Burgin’s pre-

7 See my discussion on pre-texts in Alma López’s art in “Crossing the Borders of Tradition:

texts play the same role in perception of an image as memory in Mieke Bal's analysis. Bal claims that there is "the coexistence, in perception, of the act of perceiving in the present, and the role memory plays in that act" ("Movement" 17)—hence, the artwork is perceived by the viewer in the present but under the influence of the past. In her analysis Bal takes up on Bergson's concept of perception, which, as she claims, "is not a *construction*, as we have considered it in the post-realist era, but a *selection*.... an act *of* the body and *for* the body as it is positioned in the midst of things to select from" ("Movement" 25-26) and which "[w]hile occurring in the present... is bound to memory" ("Movement" 26). In fact, as Bal maintains, "[a] perception image that is not infused with memory images is impossible" ("Movement" 26) which Bal attributes to Bergson's idea how memory participates in perception, "which begins by being only memory, prolongs a *plurality* of moments into each other, *contracting* them into a single intuition" (Bergson in Bal, "Movement" 26) and which is later on taken up by Gilles Deleuze who analyzing Bergson's visions concludes that "Bergsonian duration is... defined less by succession than coexistence" (in Bal, "Movement" 26). Consequently, Burgin's pre-texts or Bergsonian duration allow for the analysis of the work of art as a cultural palimpsest with multiple layers located underneath the image and at the same time coming up to its surface.

In the case of *Borrando la Frontera* (2013) the pre-texts include the photos documenting Mexican Americans talking to their relatives through the fence in Friendship Park in San Diego/Tijuana that have often illustrated newspaper articles devoted to the questions of immigration. The photos depict people standing on both sides of the fence and talking to each other through the gaps in the fence. Very often families have met that way and those who have crossed to the other side could still keep in touch with those who have stayed in Mexico, not infrequently including their own offspring. All these photos show that some kind of contact or communication between the two sides is possible and therefore, it can be concluded that even this concept of the border as the dividing line allows transgression under certain circumstances. Therefore, in reality, the countries on both sides of the border should not be defined through the aforementioned image of the "classical body/nation" (7) but they resemble Bakhtin's "grotesque body/nation" (Benito and Manzanás 7). According to Benito and Manzanás who quote Mikhail Bakhtin's definition, "the grotesque body/nation is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (7). What is more, "[t]he grotesque body is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created and builds and creates another body" (Bakhtin qtd. in Benito and Manzanás 7), which implies progress rather than stability/integrity of the body/nation and, consequently defies fixedness of its border(s). Finally, as Benito and Manzanás conclude, "[w]hereas the classical body/nation is sealed from outer influences, the grotesque [body/nation] is permeable and stresses elements common to the entire cosmos" (8). Owing to

Alma López's *Our Lady* (1999) and *Our Lady of Controversy II* (2008)."

that, the border, as part of the body/nation turns into an outlet through which those influences are transferred and exchanged.

Casey and Watkins also emphasize the porosity of the border and they identify “many spontaneous transgressions of the wall at La Frontera” (18), which include “movements of the air, clouds, and weather over the wall; human voices that fly over the wall and can be heard on the other side; Internet communications between people in Tijuana and San Diego” (18). Those spontaneous transgressions are accompanied by intentional breaches, since the paradox of any limitation is that it calls for transgression, or as Casey and Watkins claim, quoting Foucault, “The limit and [the] transgression depend on each other... [;] a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows” (in Casey and Watkins 18). Therefore, as they conclude, “In the current context, the wall-as-limit intensifies the attraction of crossing over it: crossing becomes an achievement of its own” (18). The border becomes thus permeable and porous and it is transformed into a more liminal space which allows for some dialogue/contact/exchange. This idea and the unstable role of the fence are reinforced when we look at the results or effects of both *Borrando la frontera* (2013) and the community project of the same title—painting the fence the blue color means that it is not visible from the distance, which is particularly striking in the photographs documenting the project. Therefore, in the areas where the fence is already painted, the border becomes as if erased.

Such an attempt to eradicate symbolically the U.S.-Mexico border can be classified as the example of Paulo Freire’s limit acts evoked by Casey and Watkins to analyze border-wall art. They define the limit act as “an act that both resists the imposition of destructive limits and creates anew in the face of them” (206). Casey and Watkins examine several examples of border-wall art and conclude that this art has the “power to undermine the wall’s functions, to transmute the impending material surfaces into a gallery that nourishes critical consciousness, memorializes losses, and sparks prophetic imagination” (208). Moreover, they argue, “Border-wall art portrays marginalized points of view, critiques dominant messages, and not only posits alternate possibilities but creates them” (208). In the case of *Borrando la frontera* (2013) and *Borrando*, the project, the art has the power to “undo” the fence—the marker of the border—and in this way re-create the space on its both sides as one. Casey and Watkins also note a similar role of border-wall art and they argue that “Performative border art also defies the limit of the wall, rehearsing transgressions that allow imagination to transcend the wall’s brute technologized and material limit” (208) and so does *Borrando la Frontera*.

What is also interesting is the person who paints the fence. In the project we will have the whole community involved in this action. Here the painter is the aforementioned young woman, dressed in a black dress and wearing high heels—the attire seemingly not very suitable for the occasion. In the series *Foreign Bodies* the artist includes *Entre #1* through *Entre #4* (performance documentation at San Diego/Tijuana

border) (2013)—paintings which constitute a sequence of close-ups that present a detailed picture of a woman, documenting the performance on the U.S.-Mexico border. The woman defies traditional or stereotypical, representations of Mexican women and the artist herself explains such a representation of the person in charge:

Through performance-based paintings, I explore territories that encompass these different types of boundaries and stereotypes: the physical, the emotional, and the psychological.

My work investigates how women identify their strengths and sensuality in performing labor in which there is no visible economic or social value, and which is frequently considered 'dirty.' 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 tangos 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)

Through that Fernández shows how the border and border crossings function on different levels. She illustrates the existence of the "repeating border" (Benito and Manzanás 4)—a metaphorical border, mentioned above or what Davis calls a "third border" (70). He explains this idea, arguing that borders "tend to follow... Latinos wherever they live and regardless of how long they have been in the United States" (70-71). As a result, Davis maintains, "the interface between affluent Anglo majorities and growing blue-collar Latino populations is regulated by what can only be typed a 'third border'... [which] polices daily intercourse between two citizen communities" (71). Owing to that, the border will always play an important role in the migrant's life, either in its material or symbolic aspect. With such a representation of a potential border crosser Fernández implies that women have to cross those multiple borders on a daily basis.

The shift in the focus—from the fence as the marker of the border in *Borrando la Frontera* (2013) to the multiple border crosser—a woman in a black dress—is also emphasized by framing and spatial organization of the series, as the close-ups in *Entres* focus primarily on fragments of her figure. In *Entre #1* it is her head with a face put between the bars of the fence and turned towards the other side of the border. However, instead of painting the fence, as she does in *Borrando la Frontera* (2013) she holds tightly to the fence, as if looking longingly towards what there is on the other side. Such a positioning of the woman may also suggest that she is imprisoned behind those bars and as a prisoner of the border, she cannot cross it. In *Entre #2* spatial organization is much more balanced, as the image is divided between the fence and the woman's body—both seem to play an equally important role in the image. *Entre #3* in turn depicts both the fence and part of the dress but the blue fence against the blue skies almost disappears and this impression is reinforced by a contrast of the

painted fence with a black dress. *Entre #4* shifts the frame and focus—the woman is standing on the left side of the picture (when in previous sequences she was on the right side) and what draws the viewer’s attention immediately is her black stiletto shoes, looking completely out of place on a sandy beach. Once again in *Entre #1-4* Fernández defies a stereotypical portrayal of Latinas by using the aforementioned symbolic motif of “the quintessential little black dress” (anateresafernandez.com). However, on the basis of the scene in *Entre #4* it can be also concluded that the potential “American prosperity” (anateresafernandez.com) may not be attainable fully for the woman, as the border casts a shadow on her efforts, just like the fence in *Entre #4* casts a shadow on the sand, as if cutting this space with black lines. The striated space of the borderland symbolizes the divisions the border imposes and it may be also a reference to those borders that follow Latinas in their everyday lives in the U.S. and multiple metaphorical borders they have to cross daily.

Finally *Borrando la frontera* (2013) touches upon one more issue, crucial in the discussions about the U.S.-Mexico border, namely the environment—in the painting Fernández presents clean waters and clean sand at the background of the image of the fence and the woman. Here the artist plays with her other works from the series *Pressing Matters* (2013) where she refers to the environmental issues and the ecological disaster and devastation of the environment in the borderlands, due to the development of industry (*maquiladoras*) and addresses the question of female roles and domestic chores. The title itself—pun intended—refers to those two issues mentioned above and hence the series includes images of the lady in a black dress ironing (in different, often sexualized positions on the ironing board) and the same lady attempting at cleaning the polluted area of the U.S.- Mexico border. Hence the title, *Pressing Matters* may be read as an ironic call for the recognition of domestic chores usually performed by women, i.e. pressing a.k.a. ironing matters, but at the same time it may refer to those environmental issues and the influence of the border and its marker—the fence/wall on the environment on both sides of the border that have been disregarded for a long time, which has led to the destruction of the environment on both sides of the border, regardless of the political line dividing this space into two. Hence the title of the series can be also interpreted as pressing, i.e. urgent, serious matters. The artist herself describes the series in the following way:

In these performances, I portrayed this multiplication of self and the Sisyphean task of cleaning the environment to accentuate the idea of disposable labor resources. Moreover, the black dress is transformed into a funerary symbol of luto, the Mexican tradition of wearing black for a year after a death.

In addition to highlighting ongoing socio-political conflicts, the works also underscore the intersection of everyday tasks and fantasy from both sides of the political/gender divide, illuminating the psychological walls that confine and divide genders in a domestic space. (anateresafernandez.com)

Consequently, the two untitled paintings that depict the U.S.-Mexico border portray the woman in a black dress who is either preoccupied with cleaning the muddy-looking waters of the ocean with a mop, or, in the second painting, sweeping the sandy beach next to the fence. The latter painting is particularly interesting, due to the technique that Fernández deploys there. The artist puts in one painting the sequence of images of the same woman which, when watched from right to left constitute subsequent stages of the cleaning process. At the utmost right, the woman, standing with her back to the audience and facing the fence begins the sweeping. Then her body shifts to the left and at the same time the brush/broom goes up, as it does in the process of sweeping out some trash, leaving some trace of sand in the air. In the very last part of the sequence, the woman is kneeling and putting the sand into a dustpan. The succession of those images placed in one painting reinforces the notion of movement the viewer has when watching the painting and gives the work cinematic quality. In fact those images look more like snapshots or consecutive scenes from a film than a painting, which reinforces performativity of the image and lends the work of art to more interpretations. In this way the two untitled paintings from *Pressing Matters* resemble *Borrando la Frontera* (2013) and *Entres*. In all of them “movement is implied, halted, and the work suggests, will go on after we watch this scene. This foregrounds another aspect of visual art, cinema and painting alike: the encounter it stages and embodies” (Bal, “Movement” 19). At the same time it also “precludes a naïve view of the painting as a transparent, realistic representation” (Bal, “Movement” 19) and makes it possible for reinterpretation—it is not only the fence on the U.S.-Mexico border that is important but other walls have significance for Latinx as well.

To refer just briefly to the aforementioned community project *Borrando la frontera*—erasing the border—it took place in Nogales, Mexico in 2015. It involved painting the fence on the U.S.-Mexico border and it was also documented by photos. Fernández herself talks about this project and explains the reasons for performing this limit act:

‘If a color cannot cure, can it at least incite hope?’ writer Maggie Nelson asks in *Bluets*, a series of prose poems about the color blue. For residents of the border town of Nogales, Mexico, blue has become a promising signal of open skies and porous borders. On October 13, artist Ana Teresa Fernández led a group of volunteers equipped with paint rollers and brushes to ‘erase’ the border fence dividing the US and Mexico.... For those participating in and witnessing ‘Erasing the Border,’ the blue-painted fence represents not just a new view, but a way of reflecting on the experience of the border and connecting with others whose lives are impacted by the fence. (anateresafernandez.com)

In this way the artist alludes to what Casey and Watkins argue for in their analysis of the U.S.-Mexico border. They conclude that “[u]ltimately once it has

outlived its political, economic, or symbolic usefulness, every border is destined to become a boundary, returning to an abiding state of nature” (26) and they claim that it “will be the fate of La Frontera—even if, from today’s perspective such an outcome seems a long way off” (26). Whether this will be the actual outcome or not, it is hard to say, especially in the light of other border historians’ opinions who claim that “a borderless world is not an imminent possibility” (Diener and Hagen 4). Nevertheless, in the meantime, as Casey and Watkins notwithstanding admit, “much suffering is occurring at and in the immediate vicinity of the wall” (26) and those who transgress the space of the border are haunted by this experience in multiple ways. Mieke Bal in *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* claims that

an exposition makes something public, and that event of showing involves articulating in the public domain the most deeply held views and beliefs of a subject. This view extends the meaning of ‘to expose’ from the specific, literalized definition of it in, for example, the context of museum exhibitions to a broader, partly metaphorical use of the idea of ‘museum’ as a mise-en-abyme of culture’s present, a present that carries the past within itself. (5)

Ana Teresa Fernández’s attempt(s) to erase the border illustrate Bal’s statement, since similar endeavors were made already in the earliest reconceptualizations of the border—for example, in Herbert Eugene Bolton’s concept of the Spanish Borderlands (1902), Simón Bolívar’s Pan-Americanism or Martí’s idea of “Our America.” However, just as neither Pan-Americanism nor Pan-Latin Americanism were fully satisfying and capable of erasing the border, since they ignored, among others, the complex and diverse histories of people living in the region, Fernández’s project to undermine those multiple borders Latinx have to cross every day will not eradicate completely those physical and symbolic fences, either. Such a scenario seems particularly unlikely especially taking into account current political situation after the elections in the U.S. as well as the ongoing debate on migrants taking place in Europe.

At the same time the paintings and the project examined in this article constitute a specific (re)presentation of the U.S.-Mexico border, illustrating the interplay between the aforementioned indigenous and immigrant paradigms. In all of them the artist refers to the fence as the tangible marker of the border; they also present a potential border crosser. In this way Fernández suggests the interpretation of the border as the line to be crossed/transgressed—the process intrinsic to immigration. On the other hand, the idea of erasing the border that underlies both *Borrando*, the painting, and *Borrando*, the project, and uniting the space on both sides of the border into one may be interpreted as an allusion to the history of the region before political divisions striated this territory.

Consequently, Fernández’s works show the potential limit acts have to undermine the existing status quo and the changing images of the border indicate in

turn that “[a]s a space of confrontation, appropriation and translation, the site of the border defies all attempts at cultural stasis” (Benito and Manzananas 10). On the one hand, it is the boundary rather than the borderline, which allows for exchange and dialogue but on the other hand, it is still this dividing line with the fence/wall as its marker—“an imposition which keeps peoples detained and unable to communicate” (Benito and Manzananas 12) and the border crossing itself becomes the “process of recycling through which old worlds turn into new worlds” (Benito and Manzananas 12), repeating the well-known battle over power. The artist’s productions are an attempt to draw the attention of larger audiences to the problem of the U.S.-Mexico border and borders in general. At the same time they seem to confirm Foucault’s conclusion that “[s]pace is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (in Soja 149)—in this particular case it is the space of the U.S.-Mexico border that enters into this discussion and Fernández’s works provide an important voice in the debate about the contested space of the U.S.-Mexico border.

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