

Dangerous Spaces, Dangerous Liaisons: Performance Arts on and of the U.S./Mexico Border

Kirsten F. Nigro*
The University of Texas at El Paso

The nearly 2,000-mile border between Mexico and the United States has long been a paradox, experienced as well as imagined by citizens of both countries as a space of desire and revulsion, pleasure and pain, life and death. In the early twenty-first century—the time of NAFTA, illegal immigration and ruthlessly powerful drug cartels—the border is seen by many as a threat to these neighboring countries: to the “homeland security” and economy of the United States, and to the very existence of Mexico as a law-abiding and viable nation-state. The building of walls in an era of globalization is the latest contradiction of this extensive border: it is open and often invisible as an economic passage way, while also increasingly closed and visible as a crossing point for human transit. Given these paradoxes, it is not surprising that artists who personally live this border experience should find it rich material for their work. Although the political and economic challenges of the border are prime features in the news media, the ones that get the most and loudest sound bites, there is another border phenomenon that also merits close attention: the arts, which have so blossomed there that a city as maligned as Tijuana was heralded by *Newsweek* as a cultural mecca for our new century.¹ This essay will consider the performative arts on the border, ranging from script-based plays to performance pieces in urban spaces and public installation pieces. These will be ana-

lyzed according to their focus on 1) the plight of the illegal immigrant; 2) the violence that has become a daily factor in the lives of border citizens; and 3) the symbolic efforts to make a sacred space out of one as seemingly unsacred as the border; and if not a sacred space, one that is more transparent and hopefully, less dangerous and threatening.

Everyone's Worst Nightmare: The Illegal Border Crosser

The final moments of the 1987 film *Born in East L.A.* humorously capture the Anglo American's deep-seated fear of the "brown menace" from the south. Having been accidentally deported to Mexico, the film's lead character, played by Cheech Marin, undergoes a life-changing experience in Tijuana, where he comes to embrace his Mexican heritage. He no longer denies his ancestral roots and is now eager to take them back with him to L.A., along with as many Mexicans as he can; the film closes with this Chicano Pied Piper leading his horde of followers over the hills of Tijuana into the Promised Land. Obviously, the humor of this scene has been lost on many citizens and policy makers in the United States, who in the following two decades have constructed more and more physical barriers along the border, first with Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, and later, thanks to the fall-out of 9/11, with the Secure Fence Act of 2006.² People in the United States generally have worried about what this means for them, as misinformation and media fear-mongering have fed the xenophobic nightmare about illegal aliens. Too few of us are overly concerned about the nightmare that getting to and crossing the border has become for the would-be illegal migrant. While south of the border there may be a greater sense of what this journey entails, there is no generalized concern there either, as many Mexicans continue to view those who abandon Mexico for the United States as traitors to the nation or, given the growing number of indigenous border crossers, as something Other than themselves.

For Mexican artists on the border, the challenge is to make the situation known by giving it a human face, to not let this reality become a mere footnote in local and national newspapers. While the impact they can have is limited, given that their audience is way smaller than the one for mass entertainment, these artists nonetheless mean to chip away at the corrupt politics and economics that

have made for the exodus of Mexico's poorest people. *Cartas al pie de un árbol* 'Letters at the Foot of a Tree,' (1st staging in 2002) by Angel Norzagaray and Ciudad Juárez native Edeberto "Pilo" Galindo's *Arizona en llamas* 'Arizona in Flames,' (2005) are cautionary tales for those who contemplate the perilous journey to *el otro lado* 'the other side,' given that hundreds of them do not survive and those who do can end up broken physically and spiritually. *Arizona en llamas* is based on actual events that were given brief notice, hidden deep in the pages of newspapers; *Cartas al pie de un árbol* weaves together many of these throw-away news items into an original story. Both texts are representative of much playwrighting on the Mexican side, in their unapologetic nod to hard-hitting, socially-committed drama, as well as in their fine-tuned use of performance spaces. While Norzagaray's play has had one professional staging in Mexico City, the performance history of these plays has been made up mostly of semi-professional productions in small, experimental venues, and staged on shoe-string budgets. In this they also are quite typical of much theatre being staged on the Mexican side of the border.

Arizona en llamas begins with the first steps in the Mexican migrants' ill-fated journey, undertaken with the naïve belief that while hazardous, the trip will turn out fine for them. Such is not the case. As the title of Galindo's play suggests, his characters will end up dying under the blistering sun of the Arizona desert.³ In *Cartas al pie de un árbol* there are three major journeys: one is north to south, as a son returns to Mexico in search of the mother he left behind. His first trip was made years before, when he crossed the border in the trunk of a small car, packed in like a sardine with other illegals; this trip had no happy ending for soon after crossing an explosion left him blind. As he heads home years later, his mother makes a journey south to north, in a desperate quest to find her prodigal son. Their paths do cross, but ironically, he cannot see her and she cannot hear him because she is deaf. An unnamed wooden cross on stage signals that the mother's misguided trip has ended in just one more anonymous death in the borderlands. Only Galindo's illegal immigrants enter fully into their much-desired destination, but rather than rising to heaven, they sink into hell; and as one of them learns, he is not welcome in this land: a rancher shoots him dead, preferring to kill an illegal rather than giving him the drink of water

he so obviously and desperately needs.

In addition to having a common subject matter, these plays coincide in how to perform it. Neither opts for traditional proscenium stage realism, although in the realist manner, they insist on clear extra-theatrical referents such as “real life” border characters that speak “real life” border Spanish and find themselves in “real life” border dramas. However, the dramatic spaces, while referents to “real life” off-stage spaces, on stage they are represented more by suggestion, metaphor and metonymy than by realism’s iconicity. *Cartas al pie de un árbol* is the most economical in its stage language, using a nearly empty stage that is filled primarily by the human body, which assumes various semiotic functions, among them the car in which the son crosses over into California.⁴ In other instances, the actor substitutes for other sign systems and acts as a prop; when there are real props, they are minimalistic, functioning as a kind of theatrical shorthand: a red carpet to signify the roads leading north and south; a character carrying a *petate* (the straw mat on which Mexican peasants sleep) to indicate the idea of traveling; a little bundle with a character’s meager possessions to signal, along with the *petate*, economic class and race; the *rebozo* or traditional shawl worn by rural Mexican women that acts as a redundant sign of the character’s socioeconomic status; a row of simple wooden crosses that marks where anonymous travelers have died a sad and lonely death. These simple props are combined with stark lighting effects in various hues, especially of red and yellow and with an often expressionistic acting style, to create a powerful effect. The presence of a strange, dream-like character—a punk dressed in leather, with spiky hair in various shades of pink and purples, who speaks in mysterious ways and presages death, adds to the overall effect that makes the world on stage both familiar—in the story it tells—, and unfamiliar—in its surrealistic touches.

Galindo’s *Arizona en llamas* goes back and forth in time and space in fifteen scenes that together follow the trip of three migrants from Veracruz to Monterrey, where they meet up with a *coyote* (a smuggler of illegals) who abandons them soon after they cross the border. The south/north divide is represented by a mesh that cuts a diagonal from downstage left to upstage right. Mexico, from Veracruz to the border, is on the lower part of the stage and on the upper

one, there is a partial view of the Arizona desert. Transitions from one to the other are meant to be seamless through the use of different colored gels, reflected light and the gradual dimming of lights or sudden lights out. The props are few; for example, tables to represent a bar in Monterrey and benches to indicate the boardwalk in Veracruz. Sound effects, such as of the ocean, also help to establish when the characters are in Veracruz. However, once they are in the desert, the ocean waves take on another signification: heat stroke and delirium. The confusion of the deictics “here” and “there” in the characters’ dialogue reveals that while they are in one place, they hallucinate that they are in another. Music also plays an important role, with occasional pieces of *música banda* (a German-influenced music from Northern and border regions of Mexico) and contemporary rock. Galindo’s minimalism, however, is broken by a small platform at the bottom of stage right, on which dancers in folkloric costumes perform well-known dances from Veracruz, to mark the beginning and end of various scenes. While this last detail could easily clutter the stage and be a distraction, it is also a kind of hybrid staging style that fuses the post-modern (theatrical minimalism), the traditional (folkloric music and dance) and the popular (rock and *música banda*). Together, they represent the three worlds that the migrants simultaneously inhabit: the postmodern one of economic globalization, with people on the move throughout the world in search of a better life; the local one of Veracruz; and the global one of rock and roll that travels globally as the German polka once did (albeit within a more limited geography), and whose migration accounts for the distinctive sounds of Northern Mexico’s *música banda*.

Dead Women. Dead Towns

Two important texts deal with the second category of plays mentioned in the introduction to this essay: those concerned with the violence that has intruded on daily life in Mexico. In *Contrabando* ‘Contraband,’ (1st staging in 1991), Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda depicts the violence born of drug trafficking and the vicious wars among drug lords that have effectively destroyed the infrastructure of many small towns in the playwright’s native Chihuahua.⁵ In *Antígona: las voces que incendian el desierto* ‘Antígona: The Voic-

es that Burn the Desert' (1st staging in 2003), Perla de la Rosa is concerned with the *femicidio* 'femicide' of hundreds of women whose mutilated bodies have been tossed like garbage into empty lots in the poorer area of Ciudad Juárez, or dumped in the desert, to be further mutilated by vultures and an unforgiving sun. While both playwrights share a strong commitment to socially-relevant theatre, their style in these plays is diametrically opposed: Rascón Banda opts for a more standard realism, while de la Rosa is more abstract and uses inter-textuality with Sophocles' eponymous play to connect her fictive stage world with its "real," extra-textual referent in her hometown of Ciudad Juárez. Although it is never mentioned, the dramatic action in *Antígona: las voces que incendian el desierto* takes place in "la desértica Ciudad Tebas" 'the desert city of Tebas' (187), an easily understood code for Ciudad Juárez. As in the Attic text, Tebas 'Thebes' is at war, but in de la Rosa's play the war is specifically against women, whose cadavers lay unburied in the desert. The governor, Creón, prohibits their even being taken to the morgue and what is more, he insists that there have been no murders, that such talk is just vicious propaganda against the great city of Tebas; and, if a few women have been killed, they were from elsewhere, outsiders who deserved to die for not being loyal to "una ciudad que generosa las recibió como una madre" 'a city that generously welcomed them like a mother' (197). His declarations echo those of officials in Mexico City, the governor of Chihuahua and the mayor as well as citizens of Ciudad Juárez when news of the murders finally entered public discourse.⁶ The victims were demonized as loose young women who had come to work in the *maquiladoras* (assembly factories) and who had asked for what they got because they smoked, hung out at bars, wore provocative clothes, and walked alone along darkened streets at hours when all decent women were safely asleep in their beds.

In Sophocles' text, as in de la Rosa's, the protagonist seeks to bury a sibling felled by war, and in so doing, must defy patriarchal power. However, in *Antígona: las voces que incendian el desierto* it is a sister who needs burying. There are other important differences between the two texts, notably the meta-theatricality used by de la Rosa, the play-within-the-play in which two sisters, Isabel and Elena, worry about their other sister, Clara, who has not come home from her job at a factory. The three of them, like most women in

Tebas, live in an underground refuge because women are being hunted down above ground. When someone knocks at their door, Elena opens it, only to find Clara's mutilated body, her hands tied behind her back, a mode of operation used on many of the dead women of Juárez. This interior drama fuses with the larger one in the following scene—"El regreso de Antígona" 'Antigone's Return'. When Elena walks into the night to defy authority, Antígona comes out from it, to decry Creón's tyranny; in this way, Elena ghosts Antígona, being always present although physically absent during the rest of the dramatic action. The play-within-the-play, with its post-apocalyptic story of women literally driven underground to escape the war against them, is a metaphor for the "real life" drama against women in Ciudad Juárez, which while not yet apocalyptic, is certainly almost inconceivable in its brutality. There is, nonetheless, a ray of hope here, for unlike Sophocles' protagonist, Antígona does not die. She survives and ends the play with a *j'acuse* of everyone who has tyrannized Tebas, calling for a strong civil society to defy Creón and everything he stands for. One can, then, assume that Elena does not die either, for the two women are doubles of each other. That women will be at the forefront of this struggle is suggested by the playwright's giving Antígona/Elena the last word in a drama that far from seeking closure, is open ended enough to allow for another act and another conclusion.

Whereas the staging of de la Rosa's text is very simple, with a few props such as chairs, colored gauze fabrics that serve to divide dramatic spaces and an abstract use of lighting, Rascón Banda's *Contrabando* requires a fixed set that represents the interior of the building that houses the municipal governor of the small town of Santa Rosa in the highlands of Chihuahua. The set is not complicated but it must have a reception desk, a bench, four chairs, a radio phone. There also should be a little hallway leading to the municipal governor's private office, as well as windows that face the plaza, which is suggested but never seen. The dramatic action revolves around three women who exchange stories, passing the time while one of them, Damiana, waits to see the municipal governor. Conrada is in charge of the radio phone and Jacinta is hanging around the office, remembering when she was younger, thinner and the Queen of the Santa Rosa festival. A young man dressed in a leather jacket, boots and

cowboy hat reads a book while also eavesdropping on the women's conversation, every now and again writing down notes. No one has ever seen him before, but little by little the women find out that his name is Víctor Banda, that he is a writer and that he too is waiting to see the municipal governor. What he overhears is not just idle girl-talk, for each of these women has been touched by the drug trafficking that is killing their town. Damiana has lost family members, including her husband and son, in a hail of bullets at their ranch house, although she vehemently denies that they were involved in the business of drugs. Jacinta ran off with a young man in a red pick-up the night she was crowned queen; during the years that they were together, she never questioned his long absences or the very lavish life style they enjoyed together. Conrada is in denial as well, unwilling to admit that she was complicit in her son's death for not questioning where he was going the day he left home to make some quick money, money that would let Conrada have cosmetic surgery on her varicose veins. The place where her son was headed turned out to be a small plot of land where he and a friend were going to start their own little marijuana farm, a dangerous enterprise given the big-time competitors in the area. Twelve days after he left, Conrada's son was dead, killed accidentally by his hunting rifle (unlikely) or shot dead from a helicopter (most likely). The man who hired her afterwards, the municipal governor who said that he pitied her being so alone, was almost certainly involved with the same *narcos* who killed her son. While all three women unquestionably are victims of the drug business, none of them is able or willing to confess that she too is, wittingly or unwittingly, implicated in it.

Throughout the play's one act, messages periodically come in on the radio phone, most of them garbled by a bad reception, but others by interference from the wave lengths used by drug dealers whose isolated sentences suggest that they are planning some kind of attack for some time after 7 p.m. Víctor Banda looks at his watch and at the clock on the wall (which marks real time during the play, starting at 6 p.m.), perhaps a little too often. At 7:45 p.m., the shooting starts, leaving the municipal governor dead, among many others. Jacinta runs away and Conrada starts to burn her boss's files; the writer puts out the fire and then tries to contact someone on the radio phone. When Conrada falls down dead from machine gun

fire, he gives her body a quick look, turns around and goes back to placing his call. At this point, a man with a gun appears at the door—he could be a police officer or a *narco* dressed in the typical garb of Northern Mexico—and summarily kills the writer.⁷ Contemplating his dead body, Damiana closes the play by asking just who he was and what had really brought him to Santa Rosa. Was he a drug dealer? Who was he trying to contact? Why was he waiting to see the municipal governor? Was he really who he said he was? If so, and given the similarity of his name to the playwright's, the web of guilt is spread wider, to include intellectuals and artists (including Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda) who make art about the drug violence that is ripping Mexico apart, without engaging the situation directly, and sometimes even making some money off of it.

Sacred Spaces. Transparent Spaces

Although the border often has been theorized as a postmodern space, one art form that is postmodern “par excellence”—performance art—has had no significant presence on the Mexican side of the border. This seems especially surprising because of the fame that the Mexican-born performance artist, Guillermo Gómez Peña, has attained in the U.S. as the authentic voice for border identities.⁹ And perhaps even more surprising is the fact that despite the time that Gómez Peña spent in the Tijuana area from 1984 to 1990, he hardly left a foot print on the arts scene there.¹⁰ There is really only one artist who, in his own way, followed Gómez Peña's example—Gerardo Navarro, also known as the “Gitano Fronterizo” (an echo of Gómez Peña's “Border Brujo”).¹¹ In performance pieces such as “El gitano fronterizo. Monodílogo esquizoétnico” (in Spanglish), “Shizoethnic: A Fractured Mind by the Color Line” and “Cockroach in Paradise” (the latter two mostly in English), Navarro explored issues of race, sexuality and hybrid identities in much the way that Chicano scholars and artists have. Born and schooled in the San Diego area (his mother crossed over the border illegally to give birth to him), Navarro has an intimate relationship with the Chicano world and more often than not, he has performed on the California side of *la línea*. When he has performed in Tijuana, many in his audience have been perplexed by this art form so unknown to them and have been unable to fully understand either the Spanglish or the English

that Navarro uses. The fact is that Tijuana is not a bilingual city and Spanglish is associated there mostly with so-called *pochos* (a derogatory term used by Mexicans to refer to Mexican-Americans). However, Navarro was able to catch the attention of everyday *tijuanenses* when he took his art to the streets with a performance in which he mixed ancient and contemporary signs to create a public art that was both ritual and politics. In *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art in the Americas*, Coco Fusco has noted that in Latin America very often “performative interventions in public spaces emanate from various situations in which political repression is spacially articulated” (14); obvious examples are the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires and the Plaza de Tlaltelolco in Mexico City. But Fusco also speaks of performance artists who insert themselves into public spaces for ritualistic purposes in order to create a sense of the sacred. Navarro’s piece combined both these uses of space, but his politics were more about the degradation that first-world political and economic hegemony have inflicted on third-world spaces, notably on border cities like Tijuana, which have the widely-held reputation of being unclean, both morally and physically. In his performance piece, Navarro not only sought to metaphorically cleanse Tijuana, but also to show what in it is already sacred, worthy of “worship” if seen with new eyes.¹² To do this, Navarro received permission from city officials to “take over” a major intersection in the very hub of downtown Tijuana; its usual fast-moving nighttime traffic, crisscrossing behind and in front of him, provided a kind of magical lighting effect to Navarro’s performance space. At the center of this space was a sewer manhole encircled by large and small fires. On one corner of the intersection the neon lights from a major supermarket chain (CALIMAX) served as a background for the larger “set.” By de-contextualizing and then re-contextualizing this everyday space, Navarro converted a site associated with sewage into a symbolic altar of sorts, and the crossroads on Constitution Avenue (which a few blocks away leads into *la Zona Norte*, the most infamous area in Tijuana) into a figurative aleph where all things, peoples and meanings met. The supermarket signaled Tijuana as a modernized city, whereas the sound of the drums that Navarro played and to whose rhythms he danced, dressed in a costume that looked kind of Aztec (which would have nothing to do with Tijuana) but also kind of Apache (which again, would have

nothing to do with Tijuana itself, but much to do with the history of indigenous-peoples in Northern Mexico), was a clear referent to the past; but also, and perhaps more importantly, to a present in which Tijuana is experiencing a growing presence of indigenous people from southern Mexico. Seen from this vantage point, the pseudo-Aztec/Apache costume does have something to do with this border city, one which has not always been hospitable to this new wave of migrants. The very contemporary U.S. brand-name sandals on Navarro's feet more than hinted at economic globalization and the maquila industry in Tijuana. Navarro's persona functioned as a sign not so much of a postmodern identity crisis or of unfixed subjectivities, as it did of Tijuana's very own, specific identity. The individual pieces of the performance—manholes, non-stop traffic with its constant hum and honking, supermarket chains, Navarro's mixed-bag garb, the globalized sandals, the downtown intersection at the very periphery of the city's red light district and dangerous drug zone—if separated and looked at individually, all can become signs of what has degraded Tijuana's image, in its own eyes and those of outsiders. Still, the over-all effect of the performance, at night, with its shimmering lights, burning fires, drum beats and the bright colors of Navarro's dress, the participatory atmosphere of the performance, combined to make a ritual-like moment in which the ugly became beautiful, allowing for a different glimpse of Tijuana *la horrible*.¹³

Unlike performance art, installation art, has received much attention along the Tijuana/San Diego border, largely due to a festival known as InSITE, which since 1994 has periodically brought artists from around the world to create specific pieces with border themes.¹⁴ Among those who have exhibited at InSite are a handful of local artists, among them Marcos Ramírez "ERRE," who has attained considerable international fame since his "Toy an Horse" was shown during InSITE, 1997.¹⁵ This piece was a high, two-headed horse that was wheeled right up to the international line, one half of it on the San Ysidro side and the other, on the Tijuana side. Ten meters high, nine meters long and four meters wide at the base, "Toy an Horse" was inserted into a highly contested space, amid the hustle and bustle of automobile, pedestrian and bicycle border crossers, border check points, street vendors, curio stands and money exchange shops. Built of wood, with solid legs and a transparent

body and heads, Ramirez's installation piece "appeared out of nowhere, and in the same way, it vanished. . . . [i]mpossibly occupying both sides at once in defiance of the dialectic forces that govern the space" (Cruz, "Border Postcard: Chronicles from the Edge," np). "Toy an Horse" was like a happening, making the border "strange" in a very Brechtian sense, turning unsuspecting passers-by into spectators who took a double take of this enormous equestrian "antimonument" (Cruz np), whose most obvious referent was the classical Trojan horse traditionally identified with war and treachery. However, as Ramírez has explained, he made his horse and heads out of widely-spaced wooden slats so that there would be nothing to hide. This horse was more a gigantic toy than a hiding place for transporting warriors into enemy territory: it clearly harbored no illegal immigrants (a relief for the U.S. side) and no hostile U.S. forces hidden in its belly (a relief for Mexico). With this transparency, Ramírez wanted to signal that both countries had a real possibility for dialogue across international boundaries. Even though by 1997 Operation Gatekeeper was in full effect, it was not difficult for Ramírez to get permission to place part of his installation on the U.S. side. Although the border patrol was somewhat perplexed and amused by what Ramírez was doing, they were not particularly worried by it. From the vantage point of post-9/11, however, with the increased barricading and militarization of the border, the friendly relationship that Ramírez enjoyed with officials on the other side would be difficult if not impossible to rekindle. This makes it almost regrettable that "Toy an Horse" was so ephemeral, leaving too little trace of its ever "happening." However, it can be reassembled, as it was for the 2007 Valencia Biennial, where it was used as the event's emblem and re-semanticized to signify the bridge between the Spanish and Latin American artists shown at the Biennial; once the latter finished, the horse disappeared once again. If "Toy an Horse" were able to suddenly reappear in its original site, it would most probably still convey the same powerful message it originally did—that closing doors and building walls can make for ever more dangerous spaces and ever more dangerous liaisons, leading to the disastrous consequences of the original Trojan horse, but this time around with no clear victor on either side of the dividing line.

Concluding Considerations

Throughout this essay the notion of the performative arts has embraced standard stage productions as well other forms that are theatrical in nature, such as performance and installation art. This concept comes from the erasure of boundaries among artistic genres and clearly is a result of new ways of conceptualizing and producing cultural products. On the other hand, throughout this essay the border has been considered more as a stable geographic marker than as the fluid space of free-floating signifiers of much border theorizing done by U.S. scholars. The works that have been analyzed themselves approach the border as a geographical boundary, and so perhaps it could be argued that they have been carefully chosen to disprove this “postmodern” border theory. But such is not the case, for the fact is that some of it just does not bear itself out in real life. One of the most convincing reminders of this is offered by Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba in *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera*. After carefully reviewing and critiquing border theories in general and Chicano theory more specifically, and while not dismissing their important contributions, Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba stress that:

when one examines studies on border literature, two very distinct perspectives come into view: the Mexican perspective, which focuses on the literature produced within the region, and the U.S. perspective, which focuses on more abstract theoretical concerns with typical gestures in the direction of Chicano/a and Latin American literature. Despite numerous elements that would seem to suggest the affinity between U.S. and Mexican border theories and literatures, the asymmetry between the United States and Mexico also marks the difference between the two cultural projects. The border as perceived from the United States is more of a textual—theoretical—border than a geographical one. U.S. Chicano/a scholars use the border metaphor to create a multicultural space in the United States in order to erase geographical boundaries. They use the real geopolitical border to construct an alternative Chicano/a discourse and to denounce centralist hegemony in the United States, and sometimes,—more rarely—in Mexico as well. Strikingly, however, the global phenomenon of transnationalization turns binational and local as we turn our

gaze to the border zone. . . . [F]rom the Mexican side the geopolitical referent never entirely disappears. (5-6)

It seems important, then, to do as we have in this essay: to pay attention to the performative arts on the Mexican side of the border, to analyze and appreciate them on their own terms and to fully contextualize them within specific sociopolitical and artistic contexts. This is not to retreat to a limiting kind of regionalism that would once again assign cultural production on the border to the “hinterlands”; it is, however, to suggest that critical and theoretical tools imposed from the outside cannot always fully grasp or understand the cultural effervescence on the Mexican side of the border, where the “recreation of everyday life is given priority” (Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba, 24).

There are, inarguably, cultural coincidences between the U.S. and Mexico along the border. But the differences can be deep and at times quite alienating. One example of a well-intentioned, but misguided project to bring theatre artists together from both sides is highly illustrative. In 2002, the San Diego Repertory Theatre and playwrights and actors from Baja California came together to jointly create a text about the border and then, using the same cast, perform it in English in the San Diego area and in Spanish in Tijuana.¹⁶ The actors from Baja California had a working knowledge of English, but those from the U.S. mostly had no or few abilities in Spanish. Very quickly, different directing and acting styles made for a difficult collaboration; the actors from the U.S. were Equity and commanded much higher salaries than those from Baja California, a situation that while not intentional, reiterated the unequal economies of the U.S. and Mexico. Some Mexican actors withdrew from the project and the playwright from Baja California left it as well; the development of a text was handed over to a U.S. Latino from California. The resulting text, “Nuestro California,” reflected a thoroughly multicultural point of view, in which a black Pope decides to reconfigure present-day boundaries in the Americas, much as they were drawn by Papal fiat in times of the conquest. In “Nuestro California” the two Californias of “old Mexico” are to be reunited, creating a new country; the “*Nuestro*” signaling what would be different about this recovered utopia, where all races and ethnicities

would unite against hegemonic dictates (including those of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language). The plot revolved around the cultural and linguistic identity crises that reuniting the Californias might bring about, as well as on the economic and political advantages such a reunion could produce. The text spoke wholly from the U.S./Chicano/U.S. Latino point of view and not surprisingly, did not resonate among many Mexicans who saw it in San Diego or attended the reading in Tijuana. The issues in “Nuestro California” were not their issues. The themes of identity politics and multiculturalism did not resonate with them; they did not understand the ungrammaticality of the text’s title and frankly, did not see the point in reuniting the two Californias; additionally, they could not see why the Pope had to be black. While the actors from Baja, California were able to perform in English, those from San Diego did not master the linguistic skills needed to perform the text in Spanish translation. Therefore, the reading in Tijuana ended up being in English, a language, as noted before, not spoken by most *tijuanaenses*; little wonder, then, that the play never had a full production on the Mexican side, nor any other readings there.

The collapse of this well-intentioned bi-national project underscores that despite living so near to each other, the theatre artists involved in this project were actually distant neighbors. While not every such project is necessarily doomed to fail, the failure of this one highlights the danger of the mistaken assumption that the U.S./Mexico border is a hybrid space where everything mixes and blends, and that this process is both democratic and liberating. Clearly it is not seen that way by many people on the Mexican side and thus, the fundamental premise of this essay: that Mexican border artists should be understood for who and what they are, and evaluated on their own terms. Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba also underscore the “valid claim of border(s) literature(s) to be reread and evaluated in an appropriate context” (24). This essay has meant to do this with the performative arts, by looking at them according to cultural and sociopolitical realities in their homeland. The hope is that more attention will be paid to this cultural project, but not through the distorted lens of a total outsider or a theoretical framework that turns the border into an abstraction, a metaphor that erases border reality as it is actually lived by people south of *la línea*.

*This essay is dedicated to Isela Chiu Olivares (1950-2008), dear friend, strong woman and fellow border dweller.

Notes

1 "The World's New Cultural Meccas." *Newsweek* September 2, 2002; updated web version October 25, 2007, < <http://www.newsweek.com/id/655524/output/print>>. Other cities among these meccas are: Austin, Texas; Cape Town, South Africa; Zhongguancun, China; Antwerp, Belgium; Newcastle Gateshead, United Kingdom; Kabul, Afghanistan; Marseilles, France.

2 Part of Operation Gatekeeper's mission was to build a metal wall, starting in the Pacific Ocean, outside Playas de Tijuana, extending another 14 miles along the Baja California border. As a consequence, migration shifted further east, to the Imperial and the Sonoran deserts, resulting in increased human smuggling and increased border fatalities. The "Secure Fence Act" mandates the building of 854 miles of double-layered fence along 35% of the border, from San Diego to Brownsville, Texas.

3 The route followed by Galindo's illegal migrants is very similar to the one that Luis Alberto Urrea traces in his splendid book of non-fiction, *The Devil's Highway. A True Story*. The true story that Urrea narrates is about twenty-six men who in 2001 crossed the border into southern Arizona's "desert highway," so called because of its isolation and deadly heat; only twelve of the men survived.

4 This analysis of *Cartas al pie de un árbol* is based on a 2002 performance, directed by Norzagaray, at the Centro Cultural de Tijuana, as well as on various private interviews with the playwright.

5 The escalation of drug wars along the border since January 2008 have left more than 500 dead in Tijuana and over 1,000 in Ciudad Juárez. While most of those killed have been involved in narco-traffic, many have been police officers, lawyers and members of the press, as well as ordinary people caught in the crossfire, all of this making for very tense and fear-ridden cities. The violence has also affected the local economies, as present and potential foreign businesses are quite nervous about the situation; tourism

is way down and those who can afford to have moved to the U.S. side. The inability of thousands of federal troops in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, as well as of state and local law enforcement, to defeat the drug cartels has profound implications for the rest of Mexico, even its capitol city, where members of the judiciary recently have been gunned down by cartel assassins.

6 There is by now a quite extensive bibliography on the murder of women in Juárez; among the most highly recommended is: Diana Washington Valdez's *Cosecha de mujeres: safari en el desierto mexicano*; in English, *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women*.

7 In the original production of *Contrabando* (August 2, 1991, at the Teatro Benito Juárez in Mexico City), the director Enrique Pineda ended the play differently by having eighty shots from a machine gun blast through the windows facing the plaza, shattering the (we assume fake) glass on the audience seated in the first row and killing the Writer in the hail of bullets; the playwright was quite pleased with this more spectacular ending.

8 The cultural anthropologist Néstor García Canclini was among the first to declare the border a hybrid space, evincing all the characteristics of postmodernity, using the Tijuana/San Diego border as an example (*Hybrid Cultures. Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, especially 228-41). However in his 2003 essay "Rewriting Cultural Studies in the Borderlands" García Canclini revisits some of his earlier propositions, stating: "We now feel the need to avoid the concept of 'hotel migration,' infused by a post-modern idealization of nomadism.... As a matter of fact, ethnographic studies on borders, and the work of artists who investigate them, show that at borders, horizons expand, but that barriers to trade, migration, and identity persist" (283).

9 Gómez Peña has received many awards in the United States, the most prestigious among them a MacArthur Genius Award (1991-1996). His most notable performances about the "border" are "Border Brujo" (1988), "Naftazteca" (1994) and 'The Mexterminator' (1995).

10 Gómez Peña was a founding member of the Border Arts Workshop/

Taller de Arte Fronterizo (1985-1990). See Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba (*Border Women. Writing from La Frontera*) for a discussion of how differences among Chicano and Mexican artists caused enough friction for some Mexicans to abandon the Workshop, rejecting Gómez Peña's vision/version of the border.

11 In 2004, Navarro began calling himself the "Nemónico," a name that refers to his new artistic identity as a mind and magic illusionist. He now gives shows, workshops and performances that combine magic, psychology and theatrics. He also is a blogger and uses MySpace for his video work; in both activities, he has continued with some of his early themes about the border, life in Tijuana and *narcocultura*.

12 This analysis of Navarro's performance piece is based on photographic material that he provided as well as on numerous interviews with him in the spring and fall of 2002. Navarro did not mention the date or title of the piece.

13 *Tijuana la horrible. Entre la historia y el mito*, by Humberto Félix Berumen, is a detailed study of how Tijuana came by her reputation as a modern Sodom and Gomorrah. Berumen's approach is both historical and cultural, with special emphasis on the role of the U.S. in the abuse and maligning of Tijuana.

14 More information about InSITE can be found in the catalogues for 1994, 1997, 2001, 2005. These have different publishers and for more information, contact <http://www.cecutech.org.mx>. Also refer to Jo-Anne Berelowitz's discussion of InSITE in her essay "Border Art Since 1965" (in *Postborder City. Cultural Spaces of Baja California*, 143-80).

15 Ramirez's first piece for InSITE was "Century 21" (1994), the recreation of a typical house in the shantytown called "Cartolandia," which was razed for urban development of the *Zona Rio*, the upscale area where the Centro Cultural de Tijuana was built. Ramirez's answer to this insensitivity was to place his house right next to the CECUT, as a reminder of the human cost of modernization and real-estate speculation; thus the piece's ironic title. Visitors were welcome to enter and wander around the house, whose

interior was tidy and quaint, despite the obvious poverty of its inhabitants; Ramírez's point here was that the poor also have a deep pride in their home dwellings and that poverty does not equal the filth and decay that the more privileged in society assume it does. Since 1997, Ramírez has built a quite impressive curriculum, with pieces shown at the VI Havana 1997 Biennial, the 2000 Whitney Biennial, the Seattle Art Museum, the Iturralde Gallery in Los Angeles, the Wexler Center at Ohio State University, the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, the 2nd Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art, the Rubin Gallery at the University of Texas at El Paso and ArtPace in San Antonio, among many other venues.

16 This discussion of "Nuestro California" is based on the San Diego reading, a careful reading of the script, as well as interviews with the director of the San Diego Repertory Theatre, actors from Tijuana and people who attended the reading in Tijuana.

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