

University of Texas at Austin

The Paradox of The Mexican-American Border: Being Stuck in the Middle of a Unity Where
Coexistence Refuses to Exist

Isa Herrera

Professor Louis Waldman

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Abstract

Art is such a powerful catalyst for discourse on highly sensitive and polarizing issues. It shows what words can not, often producing reactions much more potent than any piece of literature could provoke. Camilo Ontiveros' *Temporary Storage* is an example of one of these simply efficacious pieces; Since seeing it for the first time almost two years ago, the image of intimate bedroom objects bound by archaic rope has not left my mind. Ontiveros demands attention for a very real issue that thousands of immigrants are facing today: the imminent threat of deportation. In my paper, I will be focusing on the Mexican-American border not as a physical marker, but rather as a cultural divide. Through researching the psychology behind attitudes toward immigration for American citizens, I will uncover how the issue has become so deeply divisive in contemporary society. I plan on highlighting the Mexican immigrant experience primarily through Ontiveros' piece "Temporary Storage", although I will touch on another one of his works. As a third born U.S. citizen, the Mexican immigration experience is something I feel a deep interpersonal connection to. Being both Anglo and Hispanic, I often feel stuck between the border: essentialist ideology has driven society toward exclusivity. In actuality, being a child of a mixed-race family is not only taxing in domestic dynamics, but also presents significant moral conflict in the social justice issue of immigration as a whole. Through this paper, I hope to illustrate the realities of Mexican immigrants and present an open discourse on how this influences modern art.

A twin sized bed, desk chair, small TV, boxing gloves, a suit and tie, and other bedroom knick-knacks, all bound by rope and balanced precariously on two simple sawhorses. Alluding to an invisible subject, it presents a feeling of vulnerability violated in the contrast of intimate bedroom articles strangled by the rough rope. It feels chaotic, like the objects were all thrown together and at any moment could come tumbling down. The sawhorses evoke an image of construction workers, one of the many low-wage jobs that exploit Mexican migrants. The gravity-defying movement of the piece is a commentary on the absurdity of immigration law. This is Temporary Storage, a sculpture by Mexican-born artist Camilo Ontiveros. The objects in the work belong to Juan Manuel Montes: the first recipient of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program to be deported under the Trump administration. The fragile balance of the sculpture reflects the attitudes of Mexican immigrants in the U.S.: fearing deportation even with protected status.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA is a governmental aid issued by the Obama administration that protects immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children from deportation. DACA was put into effect after the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act did not pass in Congress; It has been voted on several times since its introduction in 2001 to just last year. Under current U.S. eligibility requirements, children do not have the ability to obtain legal citizenship, and the decision of crossing the border is beyond their control. Most immigrants who arrive in the U.S. as children don't even realize they are undocumented until it comes time to obtain a driver's licence or apply for higher education financial aid. In September of 2017, former President Trump ordered an end to DACA, however was only able to limit immigration due to ambiguous stipulations and Homeland Security's reliance on Dreamer's

interest-related financial contributions. DACA was formalized by the Biden administration, and went into effect on October 31st of this year. Although DACA assists in allowing immigrant children to obtain an education and potentially a better life trajectory, it is not without boundaries and limitations. There is an age restriction, meaning that in order to be eligible recipients must be under 16 when they arrive in the U.S. The status must be renewed every two years, and the fee to request an application is \$495. The application process is not the most accessible, especially considering most immigrants are learning English as a second language. DACA Advance Parole exists, which allows recipients to preemptively apply for readmittance in the U.S. after traveling abroad for humanitarian, work, or educational purposes; However, Customs and Border Patrol agents have full discretion to deny entry and even with Advance Parole there is no guarantee an immigrant will be allowed to re-enter the country. Under the Trump administration, immigrants could not even consider leaving the country because they were at risk of deportation even with an official DACA status.

Camilo Ontiveros, an immigrant, says he sees himself in Montes- arriving illegally and having the same kind of fears growing up. Ontiveros arrived in the U.S. at 15 years old, but became a legal resident in the 90s. Temporary Storage is actually Ontiveros' second rendering of the project: initially he created a sculpture with his own bedroom objects as a UCLA graduate student. The first iteration of Temporary Storage was constructed in 2009, when similar scenarios of deportation took place during Obama's campaign. Border issues and immigration remain a central theme in Ontiveros' work. He has said that he doesn't deal with the border literally, but rather focuses on the idea of exchange within migration and labor. In 2012, Ontiveros created a piece titled "El Pedón", in which he planned to display soil from a hillside in

Nayarit, Mexico. However, his sample exceeded Border Patrol and Customs' maximum requirements, so he instead presented a thick binder of correspondence between U.S. government agencies denying his petition to bring the soil across the border. What was initially meant to show the oneness that we share, all coming from the same soil, instead became a commentary on strict border regulations. Like women who were historically categorized as property (of their husband), El Pedón realizes the grouping of immigrants and objects. Curator Cesar Garcia pointed out that "it is sad, troubling, and ironic that the same laws applied to soil are applied to human beings". Secluded to the public sphere that many artists participate in, Ontiveros prefers to be outspoken in his artistic endeavors, letting his works do the bold speaking. When asked why choose to address issues like immigration in an art museum, he responded: "It brings the issue up in a different platform... It allows for a conversation. Though I don't know that the art world is very prone to have these kinds of discussions. They want to talk about objects". For Ontiveros, abstaining from the public eye is more about facilitating a compelling discussion. His opinion that the art world isn't inclined to discourse on sensitive issues such as immigration proves only further the need for works like Temporary Storage. Art that makes people uncomfortable is the most effective medium to bring on social change. Ambiguity in works by Ontiveros and other migrant artists force the viewer to interpret the visual in front of them and find their own meaning in it, accosting their attitudes and beliefs. Limited interjection from the artist exudes confidence in the ability of viewers to have a more comprehensive discussion from all sides.

In the political climate that seems to be growing more polarizing by the day, one of the issues that remains on the forefront is immigration- but only along the Mexican border. As of late,

“immigration” in the U.S. has become synonymous with “Mexican immigration”. This is especially prevalent in Texas, being the longest boundary state on the border. Vehement backlash of Mexicans immigrating to the U.S. contradicts the foundation America was built on- the land of immigrants. So how did we become so anti-immigration?

After the U.S. gained most of the land that makes up Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, California, and Utah in the Mexican-American War, tens of thousands of Mexicans became American citizens. Although technically they had citizenship based on their place of residency, they were still treated as outsiders by Americans. At this point the border was unguarded, however many Mexicans living in rural areas could not afford to cross into the U.S.; Border Patrol was not an issue. This changed during the Mexican Revolution, which led to social instability and more difficult living conditions. Because rural living was increasingly difficult, many Mexicans began to emigrate and cross the border.

The movement of Mexican immigrants is strongly correlated with economic demand in the U.S. The first large wave of immigration came in the early 20th century, when demand for agricultural workers coincided with population growth in America. The U.S. had adopted a laissez-faire immigration policy, leaving borders unpatrolled and allowing for Mexicans to enter and find work. The U.S. shifted attitudes on immigration during the Great Depression, and began to see immigrants as a strain on welfare services and other already limited resources. This did not last long, because as the U.S. entered World War II, there was an increased demand for cheap labor.

In 1942, the U.S. government established the Bracero Program. Braceros were contract farmers from Mexico, who were guaranteed minimum working and living conditions in the U.S. under the Department of Agriculture. More Braceros entered Texas than any other state, however no Texan growers participated in the program. Because the program placed new regulations on immigration and employee conditions, border farmers were unhappy that they no longer had access to direct labor. In other words, these farmers were upset that it was more difficult to exploit Mexicans for cheap work. They even went as far as to appeal to immigration services to “let down the bars” and allow more migrant workers to enter. Although they were unsuccessful in removing boundaries, the Bracero Program was eventually terminated because of (surprise) “economic strain” on American proprietors. However, the program established numerous networks of friends, relatives, and labor markets that decreased risks of immigrating after termination of Braceros. Immigrants had a sort of social system available to them after arriving in the U.S., making it much more favorable than staying in Mexico. Being ultimately counterintuitive, the Bracero Program is perhaps the biggest factor leading to today’s levels of immigration, particularly illegal immigration.

There are many factors that have influenced attitudes about Mexican immigration, however the biggest one seems to be how beneficial migrants can be to the U.S. economy- usually through exploitation of cheap labor. Americans oscillate in their feelings towards Mexican immigrants based on market demands, a cycle that has been perpetuated since the boundary was drawn between the two countries. Americans evaluate Mexicans solely on the basis of perceived economic value, using this completely unrelated quality to form social judgements. A Mexican

immigrant is only a “rapist” until the demand for labor rises and there is nobody around to exploit.

Disguised as concern for the economy, the true driving force for American opposition to Mexican immigration is racism. Opinion polls have revealed that most white Americans believe that racial discrimination does not influence the advancement of minorities, which is simply not true. One of the biggest apprehensions is a fear of the loss of national identity- the same national identity rooted in being the land of the immigrants. Americans argue that the refusal of Mexican immigrants to assimilate to the U.S.’ way of living threatens the very existence of our nation. Historically, America has struggled with the idea of assimilation: the oppressed break free, and then become the oppressor. It’s an ambiguous idea not rooted in logical basis, because in the melting pot of our country, it’s impossible to define what it means to be “American”. But just for fun, let’s entertain this racist definition of assimilation, because the truth is that Mexicans *are* assimilating. A clear majority of Hispanic citizens believe that you must be able to speak English to be a part of American society, and for the most part it’s true: English is necessary for education, job applications, and naturalization. Mexicans do have the slowest naturalization rate compared to other minority groups in the U.S., but this is due to insufficient English-speaking skills, which has been identified as the largest obstacle for Mexicans. Naturalization rate is not an indicator of willingness to obtain citizenship, but rather a reflection of the difficult process. Historically, an increase in population directly correlates to an increase in U.S. income. If immigration continues at the same rate, it’s projected to generate “favorable ratios of benefits to costs for American society”. It’s true that Mexican immigrants utilize social services at a higher rate than the native population, but both legal and illegal immigrants pay more in taxes than they

consume in educational and welfare programs. The most unskilled and low-wage migrant workers typically return to Mexico within 10 years, which only leaves the most likely to succeed in the U.S., which is ultimately a long-term payoff for American industry. The idea of Mexicans as drug dealers, rapists, and criminals is rooted in perceived stereotypes, and there is no empirical evidence to support increased rates of crime due to immigrants. There is a larger legal Mexican-born population in the U.S. than illegal. Perhaps most important to consider in entertaining this arbitrary idea is intermarriage, which has been noted by sociologists as the biggest indicator of assimilation. The biggest category of mixed race marriages in the U.S. are White/Hispanic. Ethnoracial mixing has risen steadily since the 60s, and only continues to increase. The reality of it is that our nation was founded by immigration, and a big part of American identity is diversity in culture. Celebrating ethnic heritage is not a rejection of American nationalism, and identity is not mutually exclusive: I am Hispanic *and* White.

Because immigration has gained such a large role in modern social and policy debate, the border itself can be seen as its own work of art. Although the metaphorical concept of borders often comes up in literature, that same metaphorical context is not employed in discourse on the Mexican-American border. Rather than just a line representing separation between two countries, the border is a merging of culture, geographical, and social space. It is not static. Just like people are affected by immigration, people who stay are affected by emigration. It's not one-sided, but rather a dynamic exchange.

The first time I encountered Temporary Storage, I was nauseated. It angered me, because it is so unfair that there are people with power to uproot someone's life like that. It made me

uncomfortable, because I felt like I was intruding by looking at someone's personal belongings, despite the fact that they stood in the center of an exhibit hall. It made me sad, because I thought about how I have the same objects in my room. I can't imagine being torn from my home like that, much less not being able to bring my belongings. It made me feel guilty that although I'm Hispanic like Montes, I will never have to experience something like that; Even worse, that it's neither mine or Montes' fault. We don't get to choose where we're born or what socioeconomic status we're born into. At that moment, I felt stuck on the border being connected to both sides of the issue. I have never felt more emotion looking at an art piece, and I think that's what Ontiveros was trying to accomplish. Behind the statistics, there are real people, with real stories. The dehumanization of immigrants makes me believe that those in power know that deep down, what's going on is not right. I wanted to show it to every single person who has told me they support building a wall: how could they even consider that after seeing a watered down consequence for people who are just trying to make a better life for themselves. It's heartbreaking knowing that Ontiveros is one of the lucky ones. I don't care about anyone's stance on immigration: it's unacceptable for not dying to be the *best case* scenario.

As long as cultural stigmas exist, it doesn't matter where the border is. If Americans continue with this "us" versus "them" mentality, the location of border crossers maps the border. Examining the border as a work of art in itself presents an evocative paradigm of paradox, with meaning determined by the viewer and what side of the boundary they stand on. You are on one side or the other because interspace does not live here. I resonate with this particularly, as someone who is biracial. In a society driven by labels and categories, I have grown up feeling "too White" for my Hispanic family and "too Hispanic" for my White family. The border is not

just a separator, it pervades into our social constructs: existing both physically and metaphorically. The border is dividing yet unifying. Mexico and the U.S. lie on their respective sides, but they also converge at an arbitrary line drawn in the sand. It's a symbol of hope, oppression, evil, war, injustice, death, and opportunity from all sides. It simultaneously exists as the focus and periphery for people. The border is a point of interest, but also what lies beyond it. A Mexican immigrant and American citizen both see the same border as a risk, a danger, something to be feared. It seems like the perfect formula for the genesis of a coalescent locale. And yet, even in this shared perception, the border is still the single most divisive contrivance of our generation.

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