The Border Mural in the Electronic Age: Xican@ Literacy as Rhetorical Agency

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THE BORDER MURAL IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE: XICAN@ LITERACY AS RHETORICAL AGENCY

JOSE ANGEL MALDONADO

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Benjamin C. Flores, Ph.D.
Acting Dean of Graduate School
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by

José Angel Maldonado

2011
A special thanks

To my parents Eva Y. Olivas y José A. Maldonado
To Dr. Scenters-Zapico for his faith in this project and his guidance throughout
To Dr. Carlos Salinas and Dr. Stacey Sowards
To Natalie for her patience and support
To Ethan for his camerawork
To Eddie Vélez
To the muralists that beautify the borderlands
And to the sponsors who support them

Gracias
THE BORDER MURAL IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE: XICAN@ LITERACY AS
RHETORICAL AGENCY

by

JOSE ANGEL MALDONADO, MA

THESIS

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The University of Texas at El Paso

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Department of English

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2011
# The Border Mural in the Electronic Age: Xican@ Literacy as Rhetorical Agency

José Angel Maldonado

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Abstract

*The Border Mural in the Electronic Age* is a project that responds to blanket statements, not only about a people’s literacy (or illiteracy), but at the ways in which we define and measure literacy in the electronic age. In this study, literacy is located on the US-México border, and this specific location serves as the social, political, and economic grounds on which to study the types of literacies used by the local population. A cultural ecology approach is necessary when studying niche literacies, and in today’s world, traditional literacies coexist among emergent forms of literacy most likely attributed to technological advances in communication media. A wall is no longer made of mere brick and mortar. A wall is a place in cyberspace where your friends of a new definition converge at your fingertips. To use a cultural ecology approach implies that one is not only to use the first person *I* when relating to stories encountered—the implication runs deeper. A cultural ecology approach asks the researcher to share the personal reasons that drove him or her to research a given topic. In my personal experience, I had been haunted by Gayatri Spivak’s question; can the subaltern speak? While in college as a graduate and undergraduate student, I was well aware that my experience, and therefore also my perspectives, differed from those of some of my classmates. Where, then, can the subaltern speak? I chose to look at the alley walls of my barrio and the findings did not disappoint.
First Impressions: A Look at Contemporary El Paso

If people felt that your academic language was unfamiliar to them, or even your style of being, they wouldn’t listen. That’s when I began to think not only about the power of storytelling but about the power of personal testimony. I found that if people could identify with you through the act of personal testimony or confession in some way, they were more open to grappling with different jargon, different paradigms. (bell hooks, 113-4)

In the past years, scholars have begun to approach literacy studies from a cultural ecology perspective—taking into account the different types of contexts that shape our understanding of reading and writing in today’s multifaceted, multimedia social settings and stating that computer literacies have been irreversibly absorbed by the end of the 20th Century. Scholars like Cooper (1986), Brandt (1998), Hull (2003), Hawisher (2004), Selfe (1999), and Scenters-Zapico (2010) come upon the subject of literacy knowing well that it is inseparable from the conditions, motivations, and circumstances already present in the world of the social being and the word in its written and spoken forms. Specifically, they narrow in on socioeconomic factors like access to literacy artifacts, power structures like race, sex, class, and representation, and most importantly, the power of an ethnographic, even autobiographical methodology.

Before we talk about cultural ecologies of writing, it is important to define literacy—and we will see that it is impossible to separate contemporary literacy from the ecologies in which reading and writing occur. Most academics agree on varying forms of two definitions of literacy—the first definition is the fundamental, and perhaps superficial, *ability to read and write*
while the second definition hints at the social, political, and economic intersections of functionality and the ability to read and write. In the United States, literacy surveys often overlook language differences, as seen in John Scenters-Zapico’s *Generaciones’ Narratives*. Scenters-Zapico’s initial approach to a literacy study on the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez borderland is sparked by his reading of a report that ranks El Paso among the most illiterate cities in the United States (4). The conclusion is made from information that overlooks contact with Ciudad Juárez, but also the forms of literacies that occur along the borderlands that fall under the category of formal language—activities like the decoding of murals found throughout the borderland barrios.

Robert Calfee separates language into two categories—natural (utterance) and formal (text) language (9). Natural language is said to be highly explicit and interactive, bound to the context in which it exists, unique, idiosyncratic, and personal, sequential and descriptive; whereas formal language is described as logical, rational, expository, highly-descriptive, free of context, repeatable, and supported by memory (9). To Calfee, literacy:

as a characteristic of the ‘modern’ person, encompasses both the skills and knowledge needed to handle language as an object and the technology for working with ideas in decontextualized settings. It includes a set of awareness (metacognition), an explicit and conscious sense of strategies and procedures for handling language. (9)

It is important to keep in mind that the modern literate person uses both forms of language on a daily basis. We do not decidedly give up our logics and take up intuition as the only guiding principle—nor do we completely ignore the idiosyncrasies that life presents us with because a principle like obedience to the law, for example, is the most logical thing to do. We live in ecologies of writing, in cultural webs, and will inevitably respond to different stimuli.
differently. The mural is a place where the meeting of natural and formal language occurs—the mural is not without the influence of tradition textual forms, yet it is located in areas where the spoken word, orality, is abundant. Furthermore, several of the narratives told in murals are visual representations of stories found in oral traditions—immigration narratives and creation myths, for example, that contribute to the rhetorical creation of borderland identities. Similarly, electronic literacies (which can be called computer or digital literacies) exist in a historical moment when alphabetic and syllabic—traditional—literacies are being used simultaneously with a new form of hieroglyphic writing.

In the evolution of computer interfaces—from command-line to menu-driven to graphical—it is not hard to notice a growing reliance on the visual, both in the interfaces themselves and in the texts created through interfaces. English teachers trained to work with words often find it difficult, on both functional and conceptual levels, to integrate verbal and visual information, especially in new media contexts that multiply the presentation options. (Selber, 336)

A cultural ecology approach more than merely contextualizes a case study or ethnography. In fact, the epistemological idea of context, of an object’s proper context, comes undone, deconstructed, as we begin to analyze the work of art in the electronic age. The mural taken out of its barrio context is placed into its new digital, reproducible, resizable, and portable physicality. The graffiti of alleys, for example, is now marketable, making itself present on billboards and t-shirts—from Marc Ecko, to Tribal Gear, to LRG. How many stencils of Che Guevara did we witness on t-shirts during the Bush Administration and Operation Iraqi Freedom? Exit through the Gift Shop (2010), a documentary about graffiti art, was nominated for
an Academy Award in 2011, even though it is not the first documentary to approach this subject and it probably won’t be the last. In fact, some might perceive its nomination to have come a few decades too late. Still, other questions arise when we think about the ways that street art is pushing the boundaries of so-called high and low art; what are legitimate grounds for the appreciation of art in the age of electronic reproducibility and replication? What is the new value of uniqueness and individuality? What is the value of an original in comparison to its reproduction? In particular to the border, who decides what narratives to display on publicly owned works of art and how are these works of art given historical and cultural legitimacy?

But in the actual activity of writing—as in the economy—the systems are entirely interwoven in their effects and manner of operation. The systems reflect the various ways writers connect with one another through writing: through systems of ideas, of purposes, of interpersonal interactions, of cultural norms, of textual forms […] The metaphor for writing suggested by the ecological model is that of a web, in which anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole. To reiterate, models are ways of thinking about, or ways of seeing, complex situations. (Cooper, 369-70)

A border is thought of as a dangerous place nowadays—and maybe it has always been. Living in El Paso, it is not uncommon to hear about shootings in Ciudad Juárez. It is not uncommon to hear about the recruitment of young men by the federal police or by drug-trafficking cartels, or to hear the speculation that violence might be spilling over. Still, we give meaning to the border through a logic that does little in way of understanding its complexities and more in way of moving beyond what we do not try to understand. Logic itself makes our border a dangerous place: we put up a wall and expect it to solve our century-old sociopolitical
problems. In order to see the failure of logic we need only acknowledge that the human is an imperfect subject. Imperfection manifests itself in the human’s existential inability to feel complete—the human’s inability to grasp the meaning of the universe and life within it—the human’s inability to know it all. To uncover some of these flawed logics we need only contrast the border culture of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez to mainstream America.

The first reality we must deal with in a border culture is hybridity/mestizaje. In composition studies, hybridity often refers to the hybrid online/lecture classes—classes where students can communicate from their off-campus locations using computers, and meet for lectures having previously communicated online. To talk about hybridity and mestizaje is not to say that purity has been lost—it is to say something different entirely. Purity must be approached as a mental and linguistic construction with its own rhetorics—its intended audiences, its own goals, and its own place in the sociohistorical mind. In contemporary terminology, mestizaje makes itself present in Census questionnaires and that attempt to define the modern-day phenomenon of ethnicity. Ethnicity appears to be the best way we know, or seem to know, to describe who we are physically, culturally, and linguistically, where we locate ourselves temporally, and how we summarize the histories of how we came to be.

Under this light, ethnicity appears to be a result of post- and neo-colonialism, and the contemporary academic realms of anthropology and sociology. How is one to answer? White would only cover one part of the answer, as the presence of the Hispanic/Latino footnote demonstrates. Native American would only cover another, probably less-known part of the answer. And certainly a considerable portion could bubble in African American and carry only some of the visual signifiers—dark skin, thick lips, wide hips, or curly hair. The question of ethnicity attempts to simultaneously answer for a definite culture and race—and borderland
cultures defy this definition, weaving in and out of the lines constantly. Lastly, there is the eternal *capitalist* power struggle between the mentioned Latino and Hispanic labels. And the closer we come to a definition, the more complicated our understanding of region, culture, language, and nation becomes—we gain something at the cost of something else; Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano/a, Xican@, our labels seem to have no end.

In 2008, the US Census Bureau estimated that 80.13% of El Paso’s population is Hispanic or Latino of any race. Of those, 76.40% are described as Mexican. It is estimated that 19.87% of El Pasoans are not Mexican, by nationality, nation, or culture. Still, only over 89,000 El Pasoans, 14.78%, are identified as White alone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>602,422</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>482,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(of any race)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>460,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>119,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White alone</td>
<td>89,037</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau¹

National surveys tell a different story. The story of Latin@s in the United States is full of controversy, contradiction, and paradox. Perhaps this is the reason numbers are often distrusted when making overarching judgments about people and places. According to the US Census Bureau, Hispanics make up 16% of the US population as of July 1, 2009. This large minority of

¹ Although 602,422 people answered the survey, the population of El Paso on December 31, 2008 is estimated to be 725,017.
48.4 million people make the United States the country with the second largest Hispanic population worldwide—right after Mexico’s 111 million people. But the Hispanic or Latin@ people of the United States do not share an important commonality with Mexico; a land, culture, and history to call a nation-state, something that has historically been denied to the fragmented forms of Latin@s scattered throughout the United States.

Language itself becomes a subject of social and political conflict. One of the most obvious cultural differences between the United States and Mexico is the use of English and Spanish, respectively, as official languages, de facto or de jure. Historically, Spanish has been spoken across the borderlands. It is futile to deny, as Candelaria-Greene demonstrates, that Spanish has a cultural and linguistic history on the continental United States. To do so is to deny the truths of history’s grand narratives—to deny that the American South once belonged to a different imperial and political entity. Today, the number of English-only speakers in El Paso is low—25.89% of the surveyed population reported speaking English only. Spanish-speakers add up to 71.62% of the surveyed population; and of those Spanish-speakers, 27.84% of the population reported speaking English “less than very well.” The assumption that logically follows is that roughly one quarter of the population struggles to communicate with another quarter and that about half of the population is to serve as interpreters for these two monolingual groups. But this assumption takes the human element out of language and makes machines of humans—assumes that learning does not take place, assumes that humans that speak different languages do not meet halfway for the sake of functionality.

The rest of the country stands in contrast. The majority of the population is made up of monolingual English-speakers, about 80% of the country, giving legitimacy to the belief that the
The official language of the United States is English, de facto. At the same time, 20% of the country speaks a language other than English as a primary language, and of those 20%, the majority, 12.4%, are Spanish-speakers. It is important to keep in mind that this is not a uniform Spanish, as is largely the case in El Paso, and to a limited extent in Mexico\(^3\). A variety of Spanishes can be

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2 Languages other than English and Spanish constituted 2.5% of the population and make up a variety of Indo-European and Asian and Pacific Islander languages.
found in the US, as diverse as the people they represent. The transnational element of American Spanishes is a result of migration, a phenomenon that can be credited to global capitalism. Nowhere is this clash of Spanishes more evident than in border cultures—circuits that serve as windows into the future of our nations’ languages. It is important to note that less than half of that population, about 5.7%, reported speaking English less than “very well.” A percentage that is severely low compared to El Paso’s 27.84%. From these initial differences, El Paso can be seen as a niche literacy zone—a place where literacy is influenced by phenomena that contrasts to mainstream practices in linguistic spheres—social, educational, and political.

El Paso differs from the rest of the United States when we analyze educational attainment. El Paso reported lower levels of education in nearly every category. But the categories are all, for lack of a better term, conventional. Civic and social functionality is not taken into account in the educational evaluations carried out by the Census Bureau. Multilingualism, a highly valued skill in today’s world and certainly along the niches of the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border, is not regarded as an important educational achievement—even when its attainment can equate to socioeconomic functionality. This is a troubling finding when we try to contextualize the types of engagements and interactions that fronteriz@s experience on a daily basis. Multilingual persons have to interact in different systems of meaning—shifting back and forth, coding and decoding. The numbers tell us that in 2008 El Paso had more high school and college dropouts than the 2009 national average. As can be expected, educational institutions play an important role in the lives of El Pasoans, but because we are located in a niche literacy zone, those intended roles might gradually become alternative educational roles.

3 Although Mexico has a vast variety of Spanishes, television, film, and radio media have historically attempted to create a uniform, *Mexican*, Spanish language.
Lastly, it is important to make one other comparison that further marks El Paso as a niche literacy zone—median household income\(^4\). The 2008 US Census estimated that the median household income for El Paso County was $36,519. For the rest of Texas it was $50,049 and for the rest of the nation it was $50,112. At a national level, the median household income for Hispanic household was estimated to be $37,913 for 2008. Low income, if not poverty, then, is without a doubt an important factor to take into account.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population 25 years and over, US</th>
<th>Pop 25 years and older, EP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 9th grade</td>
<td>Less than 9th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12,640,961</td>
<td>56,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>16.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12 grade, no diploma</td>
<td>9-12 grade, no diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17,144,287</td>
<td>31,919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>9.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57,551,671</td>
<td>83,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>23.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college no degree</td>
<td>Some college no degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43,087,484</td>
<td>80,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>22.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15,192,326</td>
<td>23,113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>6.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35,494,367</td>
<td>51,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>14.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,841,287</td>
<td>26,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>7.56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The Aesthetic Functions of Traditional and Electronic Walls

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest recorded use of the word mural in the English language dates to the 15th Century. Its definition: “A wall.” To the Spanish-speaker this comes with little surprise—the Spanish word mural, when it does not refer to a painting on a wall or the wall itself that has been painted, refers simply to a wall. The word muralla and the word muro, similar to the German word Mauer, indicates that this type of wall is likely found outdoors and therefore is larger than an indoor wall that separates, say, rooms of the same house—these walls are typically called Wände in German and paredes in Spanish.

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Wikipedia, a website that is immensely frequented world-wide, defines a mural as “any piece of artwork painted directly on a wall, ceiling or other large permanent surface.” Wikipedia then explains that a mural can be anything from the paintings in the Chauvet Cave in France, dating to 30,000 BCE, to works of art of the Mexican Muralista Movement. Yet, there is something that is left out of these definitions. To my surprise, the contemporary definition found in Wikipedia placed mural art on permanent surfaces—immediately drawing attention to the life of murals in discourse and memory, and to the new physicality of art in the electronic age.

A mural is a wall. The simplicity of this statement is complicated when we remember that the electronic age and art are at a revolutionary crossroads. This is not an idea—even a reality—that should strike us as new. In fact, we deal with this reality all the time: when we watch high definition Blue Ray discs instead of attending live theatrical performances, when we share digital photographs of our vacations instead of sending post cards, or when we watch a sitcom instead of reading a serial novel. Art has entered the electronic age and, among other changes, mass replication and distribution may be the defining characteristics that today’s work of art does not share with its predecessors. Today the Internet is revolutionizing the way we interpret art and this revolution is occurring at a velocity perhaps too enormous to fathom.

In this revolution the idea of permanence as it pertains to art takes on a new definition as the work of art enters the electronic, information age. Today’s concerns, for example, include teen sexting, the digital sharing of nudity through cellular phones—pictures that once in cyberspace, are virtually impossible to delete or retract. Permanence and decay in cyberspace are not the same type of permanence and decay found in the natural world, or in the neo-Romantic world, to put it in artistic terms. A wall is no longer made of mere brick and mortar. A wall is a

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place in facebook where your friends of a new definition come together. A wall in natural space can be painted over and redrawn. This largely characterizes murals; we can rarely refer to the permanence of a mural—we more appropriately refer to the life of one. The difference lies in that a mural in the natural world is exposed to the elements—to decay. A wall in cyberspace is trickier—it is constantly renewed and updated, but what was once existent in cyberspace, is potentially and oftentimes easily accessed—perhaps even more easily than the hieroglyphics of an archaeological site, to use an example from the natural world. Of course, the limitation of technology is technology itself. What good is a DVD in a post-apocalyptic world where DVD drives no longer function or exist? But for now, your facebook wall is yours to do with what you desire, and because this wall is yours, it becomes the microcosm of you—inevitably centering the self at the midpoint of the universe. Within this paradigm, even the wall on facebook can be considered a mural—a newly-defined permanent surface where discourses and artworks are shared. But there is still something strange, something uncanny about simultaneous permanence and renewal, or something lost in the artwork in the electronic age.

To a large extent today’s work of art is measured by past concepts of originality and purity. These ideas persist in our interactions with art—we call indie musical artists sellouts
when they join a major record label, forgetting that their music, their art, is their moneymaker in our capitalist economy. Or perhaps it is not. Perhaps the money made from art as a product has taken second place to the money made in corporate advertisement and endorsements—in the sale of a lifestyle, say. Today, we discredit the cliché photographs of calendars or motivational posters as wannabe art, and believe that real art belongs in one of two places; fancy museums or the long-gone past. We wait for a higher authority to tell us who an artist is and why their art is art. We live in the Age of Reproducibility that Walter Benjamin took notice of and foresaw. The mass reproduction of artworks has existed for centuries, but today, digital replication is marking the difference between the methods of replication of the last century and those of the present. A musician’s album on CD can be ripped into a laptop and reproduced many times over. Should a musician be paid every time her music is reproduced, every time her music is played, or every time her music is heard?

On a superficial level, the strangeness is nostalgia for an imagined time when things were better. Original works of art were being painted by artists of real talent, composers did not flow from the top of the dome or host jam sessions, they composed real music, and poets were concerned with the woes of the human condition, not with confusing postmodern nonsense. Only decades ago singers—interpreters—like Charles Aznavour, Riccardo Cocciante, and Julio Iglesias sang their songs in different languages, accommodating to their audiences. Today, an audience is expected to accommodate to the language of the artist, a shift in art that can be credited to globalization and is undeniably changing the perspective of artists on the world and on art itself, not to mention the new perspectives of audiences on the social functions of artists. In a controversial collection, Sven Birkerts draws attention to what he considers is a loss of aesthetic depth in our contemporary times. Birkerts credits this loss of depth to the exponential
rise of technology in the past decades. Though I certainly disagree with several of the conclusions at which he arrives, it is not difficult to see the premises that led him to such conclusions. We live in a proto-electronic age, as he terms it, and the work of art is changing.

There is one place of sanctuary. Not a physical place—not church or office—but a metaphysical one. Depth survives, condensed and enfolded, in authentic works of art. In anything that can grant us true aesthetic experience. For this experience is vertical; it transpires in deep time and, in a sense, secures that time for us […] The more we live according to the lateral orientation, the greater a blow is required, and the more disorienting is the effect. A rather unfortunate vicious cycle can result, for the harder it is to do the work, the less inclined we are to do it. (The Gutenberg Elegies, 76)

Furthermore, Birkerts states that “in our culture, access is not a problem, but proliferation is” (72). We skim across surfaces, know large amount of useless and decontextualized information—and elevate quantity over quality (72). Should we have seen this coming? Is it really true? Birkerts refers mostly to traditional literary works of art—poetry and the genre of the novel, which belongs in prose writing and fiction, as his concern for a loss of depth is connected to a loss of imagination. At the center of this nostalgia is what Walter Benjamin calls the aura of historical objects:

One might encompass the eliminated element within the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura. The process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art. It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replacing the work many times
over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. (Benjamin, 254; emphasis not added)

In the electronic age, we can say that the mural is a genre of art fixed in a historical tradition, but this tradition is not often thought of as a literary tradition. The given tradition that a mural finds itself in varies across culture and time, but what remains particular to all murals is their eventual decay. That is to say that, assuming there are no alien efforts to conserve a mural, its decay is inevitable. Borrowing Benjamin’s terminology to describe the work of art, we can divide murals into two categories. On one hand, we have the original image or facsimile [Bild, Abbild]—pure and decaying, bearing its wear, before any intentional alteration, with an aura defined by the place where the viewer finds him/herself when viewing the work of art. This first category includes the emotions reached as the senses interpret the space between the viewer and the surface of the mural. This category also assumes that external forces may alter the viewer’s perception and interpretation of the artwork—which is at times described as authentic, though authenticity entails endless other philosophies. On the other hand, there is the reproduction [Reproduktion]. This can be any photograph or video of an original mural or a digital mural that can now be reproduced. For all purposes, the photographs to be shown in this thesis are reproductions of original murals that exist in other ecologies. I am taking the mural out of its ecology, substituting its unique existence for a mass existence, and placing it inside a different world—decontextualizing an original work of art in order to introduce it to new audiences.

In its digital reproduction, the mural faces the same forces that it would in its physical (which Benjamin calls natural) existence. Paraphrasing Morpheus from the Matrix (1999), we can say that in the digital realm, the rules of the physical world still apply—some rules can be
bent, while other rules can be broken. Decay is a reality in the digital world—any person with the proper training can delete files, break links, or create viruses; essentially make things disappear. But if from one reproduction several others are made—exponentially—it would be difficult to mourn the absence of an original photograph of Frida Kahlo or Federico Garcia Lorca when infinite replicas exist. And just as decay is present in the digital world, permanence—or its semblance—can also be found. Take the earlier example of the Facebook wall. We can log on daily to see what sort of mischief others are up to—posting their regrettable opinions on their profiles, commenting on current events or photographs, or announcing their attendance to an upcoming social event. There is a widespread belief that the information posted on Facebook, and other similar sites, will exist permanently in virtual space, stored in databases, email accounts, and even blogs. The difference between the two categories, original and reproduction, has to do not only with the historical existence of the mural as a genre and as a singular/particular, but also with the physical and/or natural existence of the work of art. This difference is key to the interpretations we make of what we believe to be the same mural, because even when contextualized, one must remember that language is constantly adapting to our social, interpretative needs.

We define the aura of [natural objects] as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. In the light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura’s present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to “get closer” to things spatially and humanly, and
their equal passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness [Überwindung des Einmaligen jeder Gegebenheit] by assimilating it as a reproduction. (Benjamin, 255; emphasis not added)

The work of art in the electronic age cannot be separated from past and present discursive spheres of social and the political events. In the electronic age, the work of art has become a hurdle to be overcome by the individual—songs and movies get old after a while, some are one-hit wonders, others are flops that can’t enjoy even the one-hit status. Have you ever had someone ask why you’re watching a movie you’ve already seen? Even films, as difficult and expensive as they are to produce, are to be overcome by viewing them only once. To have heard a song, seen a music video, watched a film, or read a book is to have overcome it. It is a flaw, of course, to assume that having experienced a work of art equates to having it stored permanently in our memory. This is a phenomenon of our age. Memory in humans is not the same as memory on an MP3 player or on a USB drive. Recall on humans deteriorates—decays. This decay, however, is usually irreversible as it is a sign of our own aging. Decay on a USB drive is hardly worthy of mourning—it is artificial memory that we lose, it is not real memory. Similarly, the work of art is actualized only when its audience (reader, viewer, listener) has overcome its newness. In the electronic age, the work of art has for uniqueness and purity only its newness. When its newness fades, the work of art also fades—into museums, databases, cultural memory, or oblivion. This way of understanding art is reminiscent of Birkert’s critique of the modern-day masses; our growing inability to stop and dive into the depths of a work of art. This is why originality, uniqueness, and purity no longer suffice as the proper qualities and characteristics of for the work of art. The work of art is entering a more and more horizontal plane and understanding the work of art as a hurdle is therefore nearly inevitable.
As a hurdle, the work of art is a border, a conceptual wall—we exist in the same ecology as the work of art, and therefore our cultural ecologies cannot escape the different types of boundaries that we create. Take the following video as an example—it documents what the border wall itself looks like from the US side—from the César Chávez freeway, but it inescapably, inevitably, records what the other side looks like from the El Paso perspective. The viewer is simultaneously conscious of the wall’s function to deter movement and of the wall’s unnatural translucency—its simultaneous metal robustness and textile penetrability.

Drive video

These boundaries are places where one can feel the tension created when two contradicting ways of living are forced to coexist. In Borderlands/La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa explains that the U.S.-Mexico border is a perpetually open wound:

The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.
The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who pass over, cross over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’ (25)

Among many, one force is global capitalism and the other is the conservation of a national identity. Oddly, the conservation of national identities is regarded as fundamental to a functioning global, capitalist market. Although multinational and transnational identities exist within border circuits, these are often ignored in order to uphold the construction of two different, irreconcilable national identities. Still, global capitalism encourages the free flow of goods (and even of people as labor forces) from one area to another. Free trade is regarded as a mutual interest of the parties involved, and therefore reducing the number of barriers that might otherwise hinder trade is mutually beneficial. The economies involved become *irreversibly* interdependent of each other as a result of a free trade agreement. As for national identity, it does not exist as a binary opposition to free trade and global capitalism; rather, their opposition is constructed in an effort to facilitate the transmission of ideologies from (often privileged) interest groups to the masses that will serve as the face of that interest. Space for hybridity becomes available, but such hybridity/*mestizaje* does not fit into the preexisting binary framework and becomes an alternative to the mainstream cultures of the nations involved. Xenophobia is then regarded as a *border issue*, and we hope that local or state powers on both sides of the border deal with the collateral damage caused by a border that is virtually closed in one of four ways—into the United States.
The following video was taken in Anapra. Anapra is the name of the area where the New Mexico, Texas, and Chihuahua state lines converge. This area witnessed a gathering of people that seek an end to drug violence, and the nucleus of this meeting was the border wall.

Anapra video

To live on the hurdle—to live in the wound—to live in the border—is to live in the work of art in the making and the way we think about art along the US-Mexico border is not without the taint of past conceptions of purity and originality—imagined conceptions of art. 20th-century philosopher José Ortega y Gasset offers an alternative way of thinking about history in *Man Has No Nature*. The following excerpt captures the concluding point of Ortega’s thesis and draws attention to a connection between history and art:

Man is a substantial emigrant on a pilgrimage of being, and it is accordingly meaningless to set limits to what he is capable of being. In this initial illimitableness of possibilities […] there stands out only one fixed, pre-established, and given line by which he may chart his course, only one limit: the past. The experiments already made with life narrow man’s future. If we do not know what he is going to be, we know what he is not going to

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3 The use of the word “man” to mean “human in general” is considered a sexist generalization today. Though I do not promote sexism of any type, I ask that this choice not be the focus of attention.
be. Man lives on view of the past. *Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is—history.* Expressed differently: what nature is to things, history, *res gestae*[^4], is to man.

(157, emphasis not added)

In border murals, globalization and national identity are always present—at times in conflict. Colonization is one historical context into which borders belong, the reference from which both emerge. In essential historical terms, Europeans encountered a new world, the premature global. European preference became colonial preference, then global preference. Today we refer to this as colonization. Resistance is likely referred to as post-colonialism, a confusing and contradictory world after colonialism, or decolonization, an attempt to recapture past cultural practices or an attempt to return (in some manner) to an *imaginary* pre-Columbian world. Globalization spreads ideas to more places and at a faster speed, and just as communication can colonize, it can also give voice to alternative groups. We can use music as an example and note the contemporary oxymoronic use of the word *alternative* as a genre that is popular among nonconformists—effectively skipping through the moment’s albums like a sprinter through hurdles. We can argue that colonial preference is no longer necessarily European, but cosmopolitan, though this preference in itself may be regarded as the present European preference. Historically, colonization may easily be the single most important event in the *history* of the US-México border. Likewise, globalization may easily be the single most important longitudinal and current event—a process we are in and is not completed, as colonization, deceitfully, is also incomplete. In globalization, colonization is a shared experience found through different history books and languages. These changes, colonization belonging to

[^4]: *Res gestae*, “things done,” or from the beginning to the end.
history and globalization belonging to our current nature (in which history plays an active role), influence the perceptions of artists in undeniable ways. Benjamin explains:

> Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history. The era of the migration of peoples, an era which saw the rise of the late-Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a different perception. (Benjamin, 255; emphasis not added)

The border mural responds to the daily transactions that take place between the two places—to the movement of people and goods—the movement of ideas—the sharing of histories. The border mural accepts and rejects what it is given. It navigates identities. It walks on broken glass, on skeletons, on eggshells. The border mural is bilingual. The border mural is multicultural. The border mural brings people together. The border mural can only exist on the border. To draw it out is to change it. But the border mural understands movement, displacement, and change, and simultaneously, the border mural avoids and welcomes its reproduction, its extraction from the ecology in which it exists—understanding that it may not rightfully belong to the rhetoric of a nation, but to the agency of a moment in time that may already have faded.
Today, the power of personal testimony in academic writing is becoming more common and more easily accepted where it once held a vague status as legitimate, or illegitimate, academic thought. The changes that the world is currently undergoing—the shrinkage of the world under globalization and the expansion of new information and communication technologies is making—and not to be cliché—critics of everyone and experts of few. Anyone with the right training can rate a video on youtube or review a product online. The personal narrative falls into a similar category—some have little hope, as Birkerts might say, and be too deeply wired to a horizontal worldview while others—those that I have faith in—are critical of the narrative and not too quick to discard its rhetorical power. It is important for me as the author of this writing to put into context the experiences that led me to write about muralismo. I have been interested in painting for as long as I can remember. As a kid I drew and painted all the time. My parents encouraged it. I have also been an admirer of art—first of photography. I liked to watch the discovery channel because of the slow motion pictures of lions and zebras splashing water in a river. Later I became interested in paintings—famous, traditional ones as well as alley murals and digitally edited photographs. Film and music were also interesting to me, but the more traditional genre of painting was without a doubt my favorite.

I moved to the United States when I was ten years old. I had visited the United States on two occasions before moving here. I remember thinking of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez as one city, even though my mother and father would correct me if I referred to El Paso as Juárez and vise versa. I thought of this area as a core, but I did not exactly know what it was a core of. I
simply thought, as most do, that this is where one place begins and another ends and there is nothing more to it. But after visiting the United States it was not difficult to notice that the place that had ended, Mexico, had not actually ended—it was all an illusion—an appearance. My uncle watched TV in Spanish and had Tecates in his refrigerator. A few things were undoubtedly different, but there in Gallup, New Mexico, one could still find traces of Mexico. And if we look into Mexico, I went my entire childhood oblivious to the fact that my grandfather was a US resident. My grandfather had worked in Chicago for years before I was born and at some point during the 1970’s or 1980’s he decided to move back to Mexico.

When I first moved to El Paso I was fascinated with the proximity of another country, but not just any country. Mexico was then (and is still today) the place that I am often associated with—whether I’m Mexican by nationality or ancestry, Mexico is the landmass from which I presumably originate. I may never return—I may gain ten other citizenships and nationalities—but Mexico will always be a part of me, and I of it. It is not that I seek to promote nationalism, nor hatred, inferiority, or disdain for the people of other countries—I can try my hardest to acculturate or assimilate, but mestizaje is the closest I can come to assimilation. To identify myself as Other is simply a reflection about the places where I have lived—Chihuahua, Nuevo México, y Texas. Mexico is the country of my past. It is the country where my parents and grandparents met and fell in love. It is the country where I was born. It is the country where I left my childhood. I live in the United States now, and for now, Mexico is a place that I cannot return to. And so El Paso is as close as I can come to Mexico. My education, like that of many in my situation, is undoubtedly touched by having migrated and encountered a new world.

Indeed, our willingness to believe these claims contributes to the potency of what Graff has called the ‘literacy myth,’ a widely held belief that literacy and literacy education
lead autonomously, automatically, and directly to liberation, personal success, or economic prosperity. This myth, however, is delusory in its simplicity. (Selfe, 420)

When I finished high school I had to look into universities that accepted undocumented international students. Sadly, the University of New Mexico was not one in 2004. My brother and my cousin currently attend UNM. At the time I graduated from high school, the University of Texas at El Paso was one of the schools that was accepting undocumented students and was also affordable. My sister was attending UTEP at that time. She graduated with a degree in Finance and was the first person in my family to obtain a college education. After graduation I had the false sense or belief that the progressive movement of allowing undocumented students into universities was growing across the country. Though I was right in thinking so in regards to acceptance, I was wrong in regards to employment and affordability. In 2009 I was accepted into a master’s program at Washington State University. I was excited because I had recently read Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps* and was going to be able to work with him. I soon found out that I would not be able to accept their offer, a teaching assistantship, and that their tuition was not within my budget. So UTEP rescued me again. I began my Master’s degree in August of 2009 and I plan to have it by May of 2011. I still do not have a teaching position, which makes me realize that as long as I am labeled *undocumented*, my degrees will not be able to feed me or keep me warm. And this is only one way in which we can begin to uncover the myth that Selfe refers to and state that gaining, earning, or possessing an education does not always necessarily lead to socioeconomic success—I will have a master’s degree…and hopefully a working permit.

My consciousness today is obviously shaped around the identity I have reappropriated. It is an identity that works at various levels—all levels being interactive and present when I engage in any type of discourse—in any location, in Spanish, English, or Spanglish, with an academic
audience, with an audience of family and friends, with a audience of perhaps-undocumented coworkers, with a multilingual and transnational audience in cyberspace, or with an audience of strangers—and when I think about the contemporary work of art and the murals of my neighborhood. The ever-present, interactive levels of this identity come from a simultaneous acceptance and resistance to labels and to environments—illegal alien and illegal immigrant all imply illness—all imply that before any step can be taken, we must assume the status-quo, the current state of the person, to be one that needs normalizing—naturalization. And if we throw illiteracy into the mix, yet another illness, it may appear impossible to break down decades of stereotypes. The label immigrant is further distinguished from labels given to our European predecessors—the migrants or emigrants that somehow avoid the contemporary im- prefix. The term undocumented worker also plays a role in the identity given to me and reappropriated by me. Here, illegal is exchanged for a more politically correct undocumented—though I came to the United States legally in August 1, 1996, and the Department of Homeland Security has documentation of this. Furthermore, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has had documentation of my I-765, Application for Employment Authorization, for years. Lastly, the IRS surely has documentation of my family’s residence and employers. The term alien is also exchanged for the more flattering, progressive, and socioeconomically active worker.

It can be said that thinking of this Homo sacer population in more positive terms can have a positive effect on how we come to view migration phenomena. The fear I have is that the exchange of terms is one of mere semblance—one that creates the illusion that we are progressing as a nation, even as a human species—while actually continuing different forms of

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1 “The species of what the Ancient Romans called Homo sacer, those who, although they were human, were excluded from the human community, which is why one can kill them with impunity—and, for that reason, one cannot sacrifice them (because they are not a worthy sacrificial offering)” (Zizek, 141). See also Roxanne Lynn Doty’s The Law into their Own Hands: Immigration and the Politics of Exceptionalism. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009.
silence, family disintegration, and under-the-table oppressive employment—that we are
becoming blind victims to external dominance. This is one of the reasons I decided to stick with
the word Xican@—a word that may appear odd on the page, may be disliked by some, but it is
nonetheless the word that, in my opinion, best summarizes border cultures—cultures that are not
entirely Mexican, not entirely Hispanic, not entirely Anglo-American, not entirely anything—
defying labels, but also submitting in the act of creating one. In his examination of Antonio
Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Victor Villanueva draws attention to the roles of those not in
dominance (123)—in my argument, Xican@s along the border who after seeing the effects that
accepting labels from without can have on the communities decide to resist consenting to the
creation of a label. Villanueva explains:

The usual definition: hegemony equals ideological domination. Gramsci adds an essential
qualifier: domination by consent. Without consent, hegemony fails. And consent is
granted ideologically […] We accept commonly held worldviews as truths. The dominant
does more than accept; it capitalizes. We accept the dominant’s actions as based on
truths; we approve of acts based on truths; we consent. (123)

The US-México border is the core of a cultural imposition from without, but today, the
undoing of the border seems impossible—this bleeding wound is too long, extending across the
continent, too deep in the minds of the local population—border crossing implies abiding by the
new system or choosing to go around it, and one of the most pressing border issues—drug
violence—is often met with apathy. The voices that speak out are local and few, and when they
escape the borderlands they are often silenced or dismissed. Pablo Vila’s understanding of
identity on the border sheds light on certain social and political characteristics of systems of
classification used throughout the borderlands. Pablo Vila’s argument is that intercultural racism occurs on the border among Mexican and Mexican-American groups in one particular way; pointing the finger elsewhere. For El Pasoans, Juarenses are to blamed for variety of socioeconomic problems, and for Juarenses the blame is simply redirected further south—to smaller communities in Chihuahua or other cities in Mexico. Vila notices two major systems of classification. He explains:

These similarities and differences come together on the border, giving rise to an unusually complex common sense that forces people to move from one system of classification to another, oftentimes daily. And not only are people moving from one system to another, but the proliferation of the classification systems in which a person can be found, means that people are constantly mixing different systems of classification in order to “understand” that which is perceived as “Other.” On the Mexican side, the main system of classification is based on region, while on the American side the system is ethnic-racial. As a consequence, on one side it is difficult to separate the different identities that are often juxtaposed, where gender, class, religion, age, race, ethnicity, and region always intersect in the narratives of Juarenses and Paseños/as. (45, translated)

Under Vila’s model, the Mexican way of making meaning on the border is to ask where—and the American way is more complicated because often we do not know what we are being asked. The questions may appear to seek out different answers, though this may only be a surface level difference. Mestiz@s, as people of mixed heritages, languages, and histories, find it difficult, if not impossible, to produce at a moment’s notice a single satisfactory answer. While in El Paso I played on two soccer teams and a slow-pitch softball team—in Canutillo, UTEP, and
the San Juan area, respectively. At try-outs I would usually hear the same question: *where’d you go?* Meaning to ask where I attended high school. The first impression I had of El Paso’s high schools is that they serve to align territory and that territory, region in Vila’s terms, serves as further grounds of meaning. The kids from Segundo Barrio, for example, went to Bowie High School. If you want to ask *what part of town are you from?* but don’t want to be impolite, you ask *where’d you go to school?* Implications naturally follow. Do poverty-stricken areas in El Paso have a better, worst, or equal educational experience? Do areas known to be occupied by a particular ethnic or racial group receive a better, worst, or equal educational experience? And what if we move this question out of El Paso and into the state of Texas—seeing that El Paso County itself is at high economic contrast with the remainder of the state.

This model, inherited from a *norteño* way of making meaning through territory, is but one inheritance as the murals of El Paso are influenced by the Muralista Movement in Mexico of only a few decades before the Xican@ Muralista Movement of Segundo Barrio. The impression that follows is a dialogic conflict more likely found in Vila’s American system of classification—*étnico-racial*—as Anglo-American school systems in the Southwest have often served as centers of acculturation. What dimensions does this binational dialogue take and who, exactly, is at conflict? I was relatively shocked to see a Porfirio Diaz street in El Paso. Then I found an Avenida Abraham Lincoln in Ciudad Juárez. Then I read about *The Equestrian*, a larger-than-life statue of Juan de Oñate that was received with controversy—Oñate being perceived as a villainous colonial figure to the Acoma Pueblo—but also as an undeniable part of who mestiz@s are today.

It does not end with streets and statues. In a similar fashion, the names of El Paso’s high schools are charged with meaning. The name of the school tells others the location of the school,
implying, more or less, the area of the city in which a student resides, but the name also appears to honor a chapter in a history book—a historical section of mestizaje’s heritage—a happy story, a menacing story, an epic history. National heroes make themselves present, but the national heroes of what nation? During my first years in El Paso, for example, I lived on Alameda Street, down from La Jeff—Thomas Jefferson High School, Home of the Silver Foxes. Thomas Jefferson was the third president of the United States. He died in 1826, twenty years before the Mexican-American War that would end with the partial signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. It is safe to say, then, that Thomas Jefferson was never the territorial president of El Paso. To say the opposite, that his rule extends across territory and time, is, for lack of better words, to manifest destiny—to make cultural and colonial claims. To accept these claims is to give consent, give up power, and take up a submissive role at the cost of being an eternal foreigner in a nation that, at the end of the day, has you under its political and economic control.

Lincoln video

And this is one way to introduce the border mural—through a dialogic understanding of culture and history. Lincoln Park is located only a few blocks from Thomas Jefferson High School. Although many stop and visit Lincoln Park, millions more drive through it because it is centrally located underneath the Spaghetti Bowl—the busy intersection of Interstate 10 and US-
54, also known as the Patriot Freeway. This intersection also leads to one of the busiest ports of entry along the US-México border. As I walked through the colossal murals of the park, I recognized some of the narratives—the pictures of revolutionary heroes and heroines, the Santa Muerte skulls, the Virgencita, Comandanta Ramona, Emiliano Zapata, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But I also came upon stories that I did not recognize, like the story of Ruben Salazar. According to the mural, Salazar was reporting on the LA Riots during the Vietnam War when the police attacked the rioters, killing Salazar. Ruben Salazar was from El Paso. His representation here, among these other transnational figures, both transcends and draws attention to regional understandings of identity because, although Salazar was separated from this part of the US-Mexico border, it is socially understood that he died fighting the same struggle that Mexican-Americans have encountered here.

As I continued walking I came upon a mural that I could not get out of my mind. It is the picture of a snake constricting a man underwater, shown below. On one riverbank there appears to be a rose garden and on the other, a pile of skulls. The man appears to be struggling to fight off the snake. His head is raised toward the surface, though his sight appears to be veiled. If he could see, he might reach for the chain that descends into the water and try to pull himself out. Needless to say, it does not appear that he will be able to. He will remain there, unable to move, but
never fully giving into the choking power of the snake. Two interpretations come to mind. First, the obvious—this is the immigrant narrative that tells of the dangers associated with crossing the US-Mexico border. It can serve as a warning—and warnings like these exist, but to have one on the US side seems unnecessary. The second reading is perhaps the most appropriate and *vertical*, a sort of *Grecian Urn* interpretation—this is the narrative that can only be told after having crossed the border. The system itself appears to be holding him down—the mural is something that the subject cannot escape. And he remains there, perpetually fighting off the constrictor, perpetually drowning, until the mural’s imagined permanence gives into the elements and erodes.

This mural caught my attention because it was not difficult to imagine myself as the subject—the drowning figure. For example, if I compare my situation to that of most citizens of the United States I can fairly say that I am at a comparative disadvantage in the realms of opportunity—in economic and employment opportunities, in terms of political representation, and in the ever-claimed tax-payer dollars (even as undocumented workers, my parents have always paid taxes—and this is well documented) that built a wall to further divide El Paso from Ciudad Juárez, México from the United States, English from Español, and my family from the rest of my familia. However, if I can help it I do not allow
myself to see this current situation exclusively from one perspective, from the perspective of the drowning figure—doing so would be contradictory to the idea of ecologies. I do not like the idea of being stuck in one place—maybe because to a certain extent, external policies have from time to time kept me in one place. I view my current situation as a blessing because in navigating the border (identities, languages, ways of life) I gain a type of knowledge that can only be found when navigating borders—places that dominant thinking would call extremities, but globalization would see as living, bleeding cores. I cannot say whether fate or coincidence has played a role on what my life has been up until now, but I have a very difficult time believing in either.

A mural that appears to converse with this constricted figure is Francisco Delgado’s Sacred Heart Mural, pictured above as seen from Father Rahm Street. The mural shares a lot of stories—the one I am particularly interested in is the image of la Virgen de Guadalupe. Virgen de Guadalupe murals are found throughout El Paso, but this one has a striking particularity. La Virgen appears to be holding a towel, as can be seen in the following pictures. The towel glows as if with divinity and shines on a man carrying a girl on his shoulders across the river. Upon
viewing the mural, I cannot help to hear “secate—dry yourself.” This message is in conversation with common derogatory terms used when referring to undocumented migrants, the dreaded words: mojado/a, wetback. There are other formal subtleties in the mural—not only is the virgin’s towel attempting to welcome the figures, the girl is wrapped in red and white stripes—in what appears to be an American flag. Unlike the mural of the constricted man, this image is but a section of the entire mural. The mural attempts to capture not only an ethnic-racial sentiment, but also a holistic, longitudinal, and decentralized life experience—maybe a childhood narrative—in a zone of bilingualism, binationalism, and biculturalism. Among other subjects, we see Father Rahm riding a bicycle, a kid wearing a Mexican-American luchador mask, the alligators of the Plaza de los Lagartos, the Ochoaplane, and even Pancho Villa eating Chico’s Tacos.

This mural reminds me that every time we honor a person by naming a building or an institution after them, or by displaying their portrait on our currency, our walls, our flags, we are taking a political stance and making a political claim. To say that these types of actions are innocent is to ignore the power and influence that, year after year, we are taught our words possess. To stand in opposition to these institutions of power is also a rhetorical move—which is one of the main functions of mural art whose most basic form is graffiti. Still, it is difficult to see oneself renewed—to look in the mirror and not see the shackles of nation, ethnicity, language,
and sex—the snake constricting the drowning figure. To live on the border is to face Otherness all the time. To live on the border is to not have the option of looking away, because even when we opt for apathy we feel an itch somewhere inside our skull—in a place where we bleed and can’t seem to help it. To live on the border is to live under the constant reminder that we are not alone in the world and that our actions vibrate through a global web—that those vibrations resonate in the most obscure places of the world, at times with fearful consequence.

El Paso borders Mexico, but it also marks the westernmost point of Texas—that place that east Texas seems to ignore, but could never be rid off—that place that can never be tamed. El Paso borders the badlands of New Mexico, as Marty Robbins called them in his English-language corrido entitled “El Paso.” Those same badlands are depicted in Salt of the Earth (1954), a film that addresses issues of machismo and ethnic oppression within political activism—creating the type of juxtapositions that Stacey Sowards addresses in “Rhetorical Agency as Haciendo Caras.” The muralists of Lincoln Park make a powerful move in choosing Comandanta Ramona as the subject of a mural. The Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) is a leftist, non-violent group that has declared war on the Mexican government. The group has a particular set of Revolutionary Laws in which they promote the advancement of women in social and political realms. Among these laws, the controversial liberation army demands that women have the right to an education, the right to a fair salary, health care and proper nutrition for women and children, protection against family violence, the right to choose their partner and not be forced to marry, and the democratic right to participate in the politics of their community. When I visited Lincoln Park I knew little about Comandanta Ramona and less still about Dolores Huerta. I was glad to see Comandanta Ramona because her presence here, in El Paso, demonstrated a transnational concern for civil and human
rights, for gender equality, and demanded that these concerns be seen by a global population.

Still, the mural of César Chávez makes no mention of Dolores Huerta, a person that, as Sowards explains, was critical throughout the Chicano Movement and the political activism of the United Farm Workers (224).

Rhetorical agency is highly undervalued in our contemporary consumer society—and the switch from print media and into electronic media might be replicating the belief that agency is no more than an undertone. It is no surprise, for example, to see that those with access to computers tend to discredit the literate power of those very computers, while those without them are, within certain discourses, stricken of voice—stricken of one source of power. Stacey Sowards states that rhetorical agency is an ambiguous term to define, but if we analyze constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and national origin status we can expand our understanding of it (226). Rhetorical agency, at a fundamental level, is the act of making a claim that stands in opposition to mainstream society. Put differently, rhetorical agency is resistance to dominance—the type of dominance that Victor Villanueva addresses. Rhetorical agency, for one thing, is the ability to rebel—to tell a history that contradicts or that stands alternative to grand narrative history is to be an active, creative, and rhetorical agent.

Traditionally, literacy is thought of as the ability to read and write. As we complicate this definition, we question the communication skills a person might have or the social and political functionality demonstrated in their literate lives, as surely, literacy is important because it is understood as the way to an education and to responsible political activism. However, we must be careful in assuming that the mere possession of a skill or the access to a tool will lead to its utilization. It is important that we continue unmasking the literacy myths present in our community. In El Paso, murals serve an educative and communicative role that is highly
underestimated by traditional pedagogies because the approach to unorthodox, but equally legitimate pedagogies, assumes that the value of what can be learned through a visual rhetoric is less important than that which can be learned through traditional literacy methods.

Hieroglyphic writing is relatively transparent. The author is somewhat limited in the choice of topics, to be sure, but if you can draw a picture of your topic, you can be fairly certain that your audience will require relatively little training in order to grasp the technology for communication. Alphabetic and syllabic writing systems are much less obvious. (Calfee, 11)

At this moment I decided to search for a particular type of mural. My personal interest in graffiti murals, for example, had to be put aside for the moment. The murals that fell into a particular border tradition, murals like the ones in Lincoln Park and the Sacred Heart Church, demonstrate rhetorical agency, but they suffer from decontextualization. The authors have moved out of the borderlands, and although they return to their communities, they have been gone for some time. These murals present a history that may already be known to some members of the community. They can help a parent, for example, tell her child stories about César Chávez or Chicos Tacos, but they are nonetheless stories anchored to protagonists—whether its Father Rahm or John F. Kennedy—and so the individual narratives exist only orally. I had to find a third type of mural—one concerned with the border mural tradition, but also with the characteristics of the cultural ecology: local issues, local events, and their longitudinal implications through time and space—their parallel concern with the past and future and with the dimensions of rhetorical agency, representation, and alternative pedagogy.
Me Diste Fé y Consuelo: Rhetorical Agency in Segundo Barrio Muralismo

The ability to render one’s world as changeable and oneself as an agent able to direct that change is integrally linked to acts of self-representation through writing, as Freire taught us long ago, and through other semiotic systems. When those moments of self-representation are intensely performative, as with digital storytelling, they can be especially powerful. I am suggesting, then, that those of us who are interested in new literacies might consider, as many learning theorists and ethnographers of personhood have begun to do, the connection between conceptions of self and how and why we learn, and the linkage between the desire to acquire new skills and knowledge and who we yearn to become as people. How might such a focus reorient our curriculum and projects, both in and out of school? (Glynda Hull, *Youth Culture and Digital Media: New Literacies for New Times*, 232)

Driving through Segundo Barrio, *the Second Ward*, a neighborhood in El Paso located along the border with Ciudad Juárez, I’m reminded that *I am* on the border. The borderlands of Mexico and the United States have certain places like this; places where biculturalism is seen in the old brick-walls, felt in the warm breeze that blows from the mountains in Juárez, and heard on the radio news blasting from speakers across the shops on Santa Fé Street. When distanced from El Paso and the borderlands, it is easy to forget what this place is like—it is easy to forget that borders are constructions of the mind that have no place in the Real. But even this statement seems like too simple a description; to say that the wind does not differentiate between one country and another or that birds whistle their songs regardless of the languages spoken by the
humans of this or that place. Geopolitics and biopolitics have become such a strong markers of identity in the new millennium that it may feel impossible to simultaneously be identified with Mexico and the United States—with Spanish and with English—with brown skin and with white skin—with the university and the blue collar. National discourse in the United States consistently asks that we unite and identify as one people, not thinking about what this could imply for someone living in El Chuco—wherever that is. Chicanas/os on the border fear that in this national unifying their voices can suddenly become silent. And from this silencing, old methods of communicating are resurrected in new ways.

John Scenters-Zapico’s *Generaciones’ Narratives* attempts to answer a question that is crucial to the understanding of the US-México border and to the understanding of national forms of repression of Other and subaltern: “Do El Pasoans […] ‘fix’ their literacy for a better standard of living, or do they accept second-class citizenship status?” (3). More importantly, Scenters-Zapico asks whether national methods of analyzing literacy and literate practices take into account an entire ecology of communication—in terms of multilingualism, multiculturalism, and the multiple manifestations of literacy we are trying to measure. To situate these concerns, he asks a broader and simpler question: are El Paso and its people overlooked—even worst, silenced and ignored—because alternative local linguistics are not considered legitimate forms of literacy? (3). Does the fact that Spanish and Spanglish are spoken on the border make the border a less literate or more literate place? Does national discourse about borders rely on the belief that the wall stops all communication between one entity, El Paso, and another, Ciudad Juárez? Lastly, is English the only valuable language in the globalizing present?

Carl Kaestle states that historically, literacy practices began with pictures, direct representations—hieroglyphics that through innovations became mnemonic symbols (15). These
turned into phonetic alphabets, which then became what we know as text today. Text has come to dominate our ways of thinking about literacy to the extent that nonalphabetic forms of communication are currently ignored as legitimate practices of literacy. But recently scholars have noticed that hieroglyphic writing practices are returning with the rise of new technologies. Stuart Selber explains that “in the evolution of computer interfaces […] it is not hard to notice a growing reliance on the visual” (335-6). For example, computer systems today feature shortcuts identified by a graphic symbol—typically a picture that stands for an action without naming the action itself: from a the picture of a printer that symbolizes the option to print, to the picture of a white screen that symbolizes the beginning of a slide show, to the envelope that symbolizes a shortcut to email, to the icons on a desktop that open applications. In the context of muralismo and other official forms of visual writing, the messages depicted are a combination of images that have meaning within the community and texts that function to reinforce the meaning behind these narratives. Within a border community, the discursive practices found in the murals of Segundo Barrio are never without the presence of Ciudad Juárez—whether this presence manifests itself as Spanish or Spanglish, portraits of Benito Juárez or Emiliano Zapata, Mestiza/o narrative images of La Virgen de Guadalupe, or the journey from Aztlán.

On the Juárez side of the border, muralismo also has a strong discursive history among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. In fact, one has to wonder the extent to which Mexican muralism of the post-revolutionary period has been influential in the muralism seen in Segundo Barrio. But Mexican muralism is typically thought of as something from the past—something seen in museums—it has been frozen to signify the historical moment of a new and growing nation concerned with empowering the peasants and giving rights for the working class—it is no longer thought of as dealing with current political issues. Bruce Campbell explains that Mexican
muralismo has been “so categorically identified with its official canonical forms that there is little research available on its practice at the neighborhood or street level” (29). Because muralismo continues to exist as a means of conveying messages through an available medium—a medium that becomes the artist’s agency in changing the world—we have to analyze the messages within the mural and the rhetorical tools used to convey the message itself. In doing so we have to pay attention to the narrative strategies that contribute to the creation of sociopolitical identities:

Narrative analysis is a particularly useful way in which to consider how this process of discursive constraint occurs. In order to communicate meaningfully with others, individuals must draw upon publicly-available narrative themes when describing their own beliefs. None of us can construct completely idiosyncratic narratives, therefore, but must choose which public narratives we will draw upon from a ‘repertoire’ of narratives which are afforded legitimacy or delegitimated, depending on their relation to existing institutions and structures of power. (Schofield Clark et. al., 532)

In the Segundo Barrio, there is a grocery store named La Nave Grocery. It is located on the corner of Campbell Street and 4th Avenue. On the side of the building there is a mural entitled “A Crosno Day.” The mural celebrates a piece of El Paso history—oldies music and the cultural effects that radio has had along the border in Mexican, American, and Mexican-American music. In Heard it on the X, Roberto Avant-Mier explains that Mexican radio stations have had an impacting influence on the history of popular American music of the twentieth century, yet this side of history is rarely acknowledged in American national discourse (50). In fact, a lot of the Mexican AM stations between the 1930’s and 1960’s, known as the X stations,
where outlawed in the United States because they “defied the logic of borders” (48). Similarly, the mural under analysis draws attention to the cultural impact that radio technology has had on this border community. The mural celebrates the lives of two people, Sonny Powell and Steve Crosno, Segundote artists that might otherwise have little space in the history of El Paso and American music. Crosno died recently, and although the mural does not mention his death, a few lines were written next to the ghetto blaster, a stereo, that can be interpreted as mourning his absence.

Eddie Vélez Talks about the Mural

In the video above, Eddie Vélez introduces a mural that he co-authored. He began by going through the list of the people involved in the making of the mural. Once he had done this, he began to tell me a story—the story of Steve Crosno and Sonny Powell. According to Vélez, Sonny Powell went to what he referred to as “d-home,” a juvenile correctional facility on Delta Street. Already, we begin to see a multidimensional crossroads of identity: location is important, as Vélez explains that he does not know where Powell was born, but he knows he was raised in
Segundo—“he lived on Oregon [Street].” Skin color and language also mark identity in Segundo, as Vélez explains that Powell was “a black guy,” who spoke Spanish like a lot of the people in the neighborhood. Lastly, Vélez explains that Powell was involved in gang life “at a young age.” This could potentially mean that he was involved in some form of criminal activity that landed him at d-home, “and when he got out he wanted to start a band.” This is when he met Steve Crosno. Crosno was highly involved in the community, organizing dances at the Boys Club and at the Sacred Heart Church, both located a walking distance from La Nave Grocery. Crosno was also known for recording local artists in his home studio. Identity is further marked by generation, and in terms of the mural, it extends from the time oldies were made (1930’s-1970’s, according to Vélez) to the time of their revival and newfound interest, as Vélez explains, “late 80’s, early 90’s.” Lastly, Vélez mentions that he has had visitors from the gay community who claim that Crosno was the first artist of this generation to be openly gay, though he spends little time talking about this, implying that his sexual orientation is “something personal”

Location is further explained by Vélez in the following statement, when he talks about growing up in a vecindad in Segundo Barrio and listening to the Crosno show on the street corner:

This picture is from the vecindad over there, ok, the thing is, I grew up there, and I remember hearing the Crosno show, the Cruzin with Crosno, with a ghetto blaster, and the B93, I mean, I’m talking about, back then, like around late 80’s early 90’s, we used to listen to Crosno on the corner […] and we tried to put pictures of some old cars and some ghetto theme, some elotes, pictures of a shopping cart…
In this excerpt, Vélez explains that the artists also tried to capture other *ghetto themes* present in their daily lives. A *vecindad* is a small two-story apartment building. The root of the word is *vecina/o*, which means neighbor in Spanish. A *vecindad* can be understood as a small community of neighbors—even when they do not get along, as parodied in Roberto Gómez Bolaños’ popular television show *El Chavo del Ocho*. These themes also include shopping carts, present in Segundo Barrio because of the busy neighboring shopping district, and *elotes*—a popular Mexican snack—corn on the cob or in a cup served with butter, cheese, and chile.

In the following excerpt, Vélez explains that the mural is also educational:

> It’s educational. He [Crosno] wasn’t just a local DJ. He was an *El Paso* DJ. He’s the first one that opened the doors to oldies. He was the first one to have a disco. He was the first one to do…you know the Sunday oldies? He was the first one to do it […] He was the first one that played that rare and hard-to-find oldies that we didn’t know until he played them.

It can be inferred from Vélez’s statement, that he believes that the mural can play an educational role in the lives of other Segundo Barrio residents—especially the youth. The stress given to being more than simply local indicates that Vélez believes El Paso to have a unique insider cultural identity—one that allowed him to introduce Segundo Barrio residents, as well as other listeners, to music that was “rare” and “hard to find.” It is from this belief that Vélez acted. 

Agency, as mentioned before, rests on the belief that the world is changeable and that one can be an agent of that change. Vélez continues:
I decided to do a mural because he [Crosno] died in August 5 of 2005 […] One day I decided, hey you know, there’s nobody doing nothing for him, and he did a lot, I mean, he recorded not only Sonny Powell, he recorded Bobby Rosales, he recorded Four Frogs, some other artists from Las Cruces and El Paso, so he helped the community out, and so I decided, you know what, let’s do something.

It was this agency itself that led to other practices that some may regard as impossible in illiterate/preliterate/nonliterate societies; practices like civil organization in contemporary bureaucratic society. In the following excerpt, Vélez reflects on the unveiling of the mural and the social event that was organized in honor of Steve Crosno:

When we did the unveiling, it was last year […] ‘cause I closed this street [4th Avenue] Sonny Powell came here to sing, and Bobby Rosales came too, and it was a pretty good show that we did, and in honor of him [of Crosno].

Other forms of agency-narrative through which Vélez attempts to recreate his world—to tell his own story—has to do with new technologies. Vélez told me about a website he helped create, segundobarrioscenes.com. In this website, Vélez recently wrote a paragraph about growing up in Segundo Barrio and about the Vélez Brothers, a group that claims partial authorship of the Crosno mural. *Segundo Barrio Scene* also features some of the oldies music that defined an epoch for Segundo, as well as feature current events from a Cinco de Mayo block party to gentrification resistance movements.
Above: La Nave Gro from South Campbell Street. Below: Sony Powell and the Nite Dreamers.
Top left: A replica of Mr. Pitiful. Top right: A vecindad and a ghetto blaster. Middle left: Signatures and acknowledgement to sponsors. Middle right: A portrait of Stevie Crosno. Bottom: An allusion to an oldies song, possibly re-contextualized as an elegy.
I use the subtitle “textual analysis” to indicate an analysis of text that goes beyond just alphabetic forms of text and includes other forms, namely images and symbols. The difference I mark is in the manner of transmitting a message—through an alphabetic text, whether in English, Spanish, or Spanglish—or through the use of images and symbols that speak to preexisting narratives known and understood by members of the community. In the following excerpt, Scenters-Zapico explains the use of language in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border:

The first three powerful literacies in El Paso and Juárez are Spanish, English, and Spanglish. Spanglish is a combination of Englishes and Spanishes, a hybrid that exists in different forms on the varying stretches of the U.S.-Mexico border, primarily on the U.S. side where more first- through fourth- generación participants reside and are exposed to both languages in myriad ways. (13)

Examples of both forms of literacy, alphabetic and nonalphabetic, as well as literacies in English, Spanish, and Spanglish are present in the photographs. In the picture of the vecindad and the ghetto blaster, the artists purposefully painted a colorful sunset—characteristic of the southwest. In fact, the white framing of the pictures themselves creates a border between one image and another—a border that is broken by the large presence of Crosno. The stereo that appears superimposed on the postcard-like picture appears to be speaking the words that were written next to its speakers. The scene as a whole can be said to celebrate a recent cultural tradition of hybridity along the border—one that is historically marked by radio listening, what Avant-Mier refers to as the first authentically multicultural medium with its simultaneous line-up.
of poor and working-class Whites, African-Americans, and Latinas/os (50). One can also understand that the mural honors the past because film photography and vinyl 45’s are technological artifacts that have been replaced by digital photography, electronic file sharing, and MP3 files.

Themes within the mural speak to a generation and the culture of an entire epoch. Within this historical time frame, nostalgia can arise when remembering the politics at the time; the buildings that existed at a particular moment and in a particular place, or something as basic as the pastimes a certain generation once practiced. For example, many local people know that La Plaza de los Lagartos, located downtown, once had live alligators, but not many local people are old enough to have seen them. Similarly, as early as 2004 it was a common practice for the youth of El Paso to spend the weekend in bars and nightclubs in Ciudad Juárez due to the legal drinking age—eighteen. Today, due to a severe rise in drug violence, El Pasoans are less likely to visit their sister city and Juarenses are rarely seen out of their homes after dark. As a result of drug violence, Juárez has become the shadow of its past—a city where the human presence is felt, though the city is becoming more defined by the absences of its people.

Generation and age are important in finding meaning in the mural, but Scenters-Zapico’s term generación does not literally equate to the English generation. As he explains, a generación refers to any age or age group “united by the fact that they are naturalized immigrants” (8). Furthermore, generación is based on “relative social, historical, and cultural commonalities and connectedness” (9). Vélez states in Segundo Barrio Scene that he grew up in the neighborhood during some of the most difficult times, the 1990’s, when gang violence was at a high level. Still, he was able to avoid involvement with criminal gangs and organize events that promote voices like his own—voices from Segundo Barrio that share traditions like listening to oldies on
weekends, though this tradition is becoming part of Segundo Barrio history. The nostalgia for this tradition is given attention by the lines next to the stereo, which are a basic form of alphabetic literacy:

Me hiciste revivir  
You made me live again

Me diste fé y consuelo  
You gave me faith and comfort

Trajiste para mi cariño nuevo  
You brought to me new tenderness

These lines allude to the Tejano hit *Cariño Nuevo* by Sunny and the Sunliners. As stated before, the mural does not present itself as an elegy because there is no direct mention of Crosno’s death—no date of birth and death, no “rest in peace”—though one cannot help to wonder whether certain people of Segundo Barrio automatically understood the mural as honoring someone important who has recently passed away. The lines above can be interpreted as a dedication to Crosno from his loyal listeners, to whom Crosno was “more than just a local DJ”—he was the source of faith and comfort to an entire community, and as Vélez explains, the organizer of cultural events that come to shape the social understanding of place and identity. The allusion is not without reason as Vélez explains that El Pasoans may not have known about the Sunliners if it had not been for Crosno.

Sponsorship and Agency

In *The Literate Potter*, Beth Cohen analyses pottery from ancient Greece for signatures incised on Attic vases. Her study focuses on the incised, rather than painted, use of the verb *epoiesen*, made, to indicate the name of the potter (49). As she explains, there is a debate...
whether the signature indicates the name of the potter, the name of the workshop from where the artifact came, or the name of the owner for whom the pot was made (49). In analyzing a sixth-century B.C.E. artifact that reads “Sophilos made me,” Cohen states that, “They exude the joy of writing. Since Sophilos appears to have been both potter and painter, all of his signatures unquestionably are autograph” (52). Furthermore, she notes that signatures were also a form of tradition that allowed the potter to partake in the history of his profession:

From Nearchos to Lydos to Exekias the incised *epoiese*-signature surely must have been passed on from one master potter-painter to another. The potter Andokides applied the special signature he learned from his teacher, Exekias, to the vases with avant-garde red-figure pictures by painters in his employ. The Pioneer painters Euthymides and Euphronios looked to the red-figure precedent of Andokides when they became potters themselves. And the pioneering coroplast-potter(-painter) Charinos also appreciated the inherent suitability of an Andocidean incised signature for his refined plastic wares. These men, who were evidently involved in the several major aspects of the pottery industry, understood best the tools and materials of the trade, and, thereby, the particular appropriateness of an incised signature for a potter. This Attic tradition came to an end in the fifth century B.C. with the incised signatures of one potter, Hieron, and one coroplast-potter(-painter), Sotades. (Cohen, 84)

In the muralismo of Segundo Barrio described by Vélez, we see that part of the reason that muralists continue to paint neighborhood walls has to do with finding pride in cultural identity in the work muralists do. In order to do so, one must first see oneself as creator of identity so that from this point forward, the work itself can become a representation that speaks
to an older, formally established tradition of muralismo. In El Paso, these traditions can be easily traced back—one need only look around Segundo Barrio in order to find traces of Chicano/a muralism. But even these murals can be traced back to an older tradition of Mexican muralismo, making Segundo’s muralismo a result of mestizaje, migration, and diasporic self-representation. As creators of their own place and identity, the muralists of Segundo Barrio that took part in the painting of the Crosno mural designated a special section for signatures, gratitude, and dedication (image found on page 48):

A Crosno Day
from “Los Heroes del Segundo Barrio”

Jesus “Cimi” Alvarado

Fabian Araiza

Velez Brothers

Arturo “Tejano” Reynosa

Jose “Chino” Sandoval

Alberto “Tweety” Calzada

Carmelo Gamez

Luis “Wicho” Vasques

Thanks to: Sra. Lupe & Pancho Castañeda (La Nave Gro), Calvillo Family, George Reynosa (All that music), Sonny Powell, Manny Rivera, Bobby Rosales & to our Oldies DJ’s Pete “Dr. Love” & Kaggs (Que Buena Oldies) Mike Guerrero (Fox Jukebox)

First, the writing on the wall offers a title: A Crosno Day. Vélez explains that the title came from El Paso’s 1967 mayor, Judson F. Williams, who officially made July 9th Crosno Day.
Furthermore, as we analyze the location of the title within the entire mural, we see that titles are located at the top and that larger font indicates greater importance—not unlike the academic essay—moving from top to bottom, larger to smaller. The larger letters advertise “La Nave Gro: Beer and Wine To Go.” The letters next in size are a type of subtitle where the audience learns about the mural—about history, place, identity, and sponsorship: “A Crosno Day.”

The list that follows names the artists—uniting them all under the title “Los Heroes del Segundo Barrio.” As Vélez explained, Jesus “Cimi” Alvarado is the muralist that organized the painting of the mural. The rest of the artists are people from the community. Eddie Vélez himself is not individually named because he falls under the name of Velez Brothers. According to Vélez, Alvarado tends to work with kids from d-home and he is currently painting a César Chávez mural on Yandell Street. We can assume that some of the other artists are teenagers that found themselves in a situation like that of Sonny Powell when he met Steve Crosno; fresh out of d-home, presumably having realized that the path of gang life may lead to self-destruction, and wanting to do something expressive that will keep him from reentering gang life.

Identifying themselves as heroes is also a play on identity—seeing that in their work they fight the ever-present influence of crime and poverty, and seeing also that as heroes they are the active figures of their own narratives. In the mural, we see that the signatures use the names of the artists—names given to them by their parents and reinforced by society at large—but also nicknames, names given to them by others that may indicate a particular characteristic about the person. Tejano may indicate that this person is a Texan proud of his particular mestizaje—whether that is defined by the use of Spanish and Spanglish in the United States, his interest in Tejano music and cowboy boots, or any other form of situated cultural diversity. Chino typically indicates that this person carries a visual signifier of mesitzaje—slanted eyes. This common
nickname is a type of joke as others are aware that the person is not Asian, but still insist on mentioning his facial similarity to a social construction of *Chino*. Mestizaje is also present in *Wicho*, a nickname usually given to people with the name Luis. This nickname is usually spelled *Huicho* or *Güicho*—the alternative use of a *W* can be understood as contact with English phonetics, as the letter *W* is rarely present in Spanish.

In *Sponsors of Literacy*, Deborah Brandt uses the terms sponsors to refer to those who are, directly or indirectly, encouraging or suggesting that certain people around them learn important literate skills that will, theoretically, lead them to a better place in society in terms of education, economy, and opportunity. She states that a sponsor could be anyone that at some point promoted literacy in a variety of scenarios:

older relatives, teachers, priests, supervisors, military officers, editors, influential authors. Sponsors, as we ordinarily think of them, are powerful figures who bankroll events or smooth the way for initiates. Usually richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched than the sponsored, sponsors nevertheless enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite. They lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association. (167)

Eddie Vélez can be seen as fulfilling both roles, that of sponsor and that of sponsored. To the neighborhood youth that contributed to the painting of the mural, Vélez fulfills the role of sponsor, as he is one of the organizers of mural painting—one of many behind the curtains pulling some of the strings. For example, Vélez was the one that found the grocery store and arranged the event, convincing the storeowner to allow them to paint a mural—after all, privately
owned grocery stores are common places for mural art across the Southwest and Mexico. In fact, when I asked the storeowner about the mural he said he was not the right person to speak to—that I should speak to Vélez. Yet from the list of signatures and from the interview with Vélez, we see that he does not see himself as the ultimate holder of knowledge; not as the ultimate sponsor but as sponsored by, or working as a partner of, Alvarado. Vélez relies on other members of the community to give meaning to the mural through narrative strategies, and then he relates the narrative of the mural to the narrative of his own experiences in Segundo Barrio. Vélez explains that Alvarado is the muralist that taught them certain artistic processes of mural painting. Furthermore, Alvarado also seeks out places within El Paso that may be interested in displaying a mural—the mural being regarded as an important means of communicating within the community. The last and perhaps most important form of sponsorship is the one mentioned on the mural itself—thanking Mr. and Mrs. Castañeda, storeowners, George Reynosa of All That Music for providing photographs, as explained by Vélez, and Sonny Powell for playing music during the unveiling, among others names listed.
Iron Giants: A Window into the Contemporary Border Mural

The film, as visual writing, stresses iconic placement over historical contextualization. With this in mind, the Writing About Cool class began to think of *American Graffiti* as iconic writing (albeit film writing) relative to the cultural concerns raised by Baraka. The analogy we considered was how film media of the ‘70s used the icon to depict or ignore racial issues in ways the media, specifically hypertext, of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is doing. If detachment is a cool form of cultural reaction, how does it fare in a cool medium like hypertext—cool because of its extensive demands of interaction on the part of the reader and writer? What does the iconic writing of the Web do to our understandings of social issues? We had to consider if hypertext merely reinforced traditional cultural studies investigations into these matters (that is, a lack or abundance of representation of a racial group, which is one way to read *American Graffiti*) or asked us to approach them from a different perspective. (230)

I first came upon the subject of graffiti as a type of experiment. As a child, I would write on walls and books. In a Vygotskyan sense, this was something that I was scolded for, though I was simultaneously encouraged to continue drawing. At an early age, I learned my parents’ concept of proper places for drawing. As I went through school and even in college, I often drew on the margins of my notebooks. In fact, in second grade my mom had to buy me a new school notebook because I filled all 100 pages with drawings—she wasn’t happy about it. In high school, I often had to defend graffiti as legitimate artistic expression. It was difficult because simply talking about art was something new to me. I didn’t have the words yet, and as stated
before, social conceptions of *good* art are often grounded on tradition, and the ways in which tradition is formed is difficult to analyze because it is a process that outlasts our own lives—like attempting to view the Milky Way, but being unable to step outside of it.

In this final chapter I will strengthen the voices of a group that I have not yet had the chance of meeting. It is my understanding that the Iron Giants, or the Iron Giants Krew, or IGK, get together and paint murals all throughout El Paso. I have spotted their graffiti before, as well as their more traditionally *commissioned* murals, on the walls of auto-mechanic shops, corner stores, and remote neighborhood walls. I ask about them wherever I find their murals, and shop owners typically say that they come and go. They show up, paint, and leave. By placing their works of art here, in this final chapter, I hope to provide the viewer with a window into the future of electronic aesthetics, as it is my belief that art is in constant dialogue with the novel and traditional technologies it employs.

These first three pictures are frontal images of murals I encountered near auto mechanic shops. These were my first encounters with the works of the Iron Giants. These three pieces of art (were) found in the central area of El Paso—the first two are located off Copia and Gateway East and the second on the Five Points area. I say *were* because I soon found out that the Iron
Giants paint over their creations constantly—bringing into question the contemporary idea of permanence in mural art found in Wikipedia’s definition, and highlighting the importance of paying temporal attention to the social and cultural meanings of the messages in borderland muralismo.

Top and Middle are on opposite sides of the same street. Bottom is in a neighborhood.
As we discussed in previous sections, permanence is questionable in the work of art of the electronic age. Permanence as it pertains to the work of art is more likely related to traditional and physical works of art—works of art that decay naturally, and therefore permanence is in the interest of the appreciator of the given work of art. Here, we have three physical works of art located outdoors. They are like birds in the windstorm—taking the shape that the elements give them—and their creators, having realized, having actualized this work of art, having hurdled this border, will soon wipe the slate clean and paint another mural on the same wall. The background of the first image is two different colors. The top is a shade of green and the bottom is a shade of melon. These are signs that before this mural, which reads *Iron Giants*, another existed underneath. Similarly, if we look underneath the creature’s left wing on the second mural, we can still observe signs of an earlier painting. The damage of the elements is more noticeable on the last of the three murals. If we look on the bottom left corner we can see that the wall has a large piece missing that the paint has started to peel off.

The last observation of these three murals is that the Iron Giants, like the Greek potters mentioned by Beth Cohen, also appear to enjoy writing. The first mural, as busy and as ornate as it is, spells Iron Giants. It is a collaborative signature. The last two murals, the third in particular, shows a definite interest in signature—known as a tag—and in the rhetorical act of self-representation. Authorship is claimed when we notice the word “by” in red letters near the center of the piece, though the word itself could be another signature or an abbreviation. This is how we come upon the groups initials—IGK—in blue letters, bottom center, followed by various other signatures; Jaws, Sik, Slim, and Kuko to name a few.

The last place where I found the works of the Iron Giants is in Segundo Barrio. The murals take up an entire block and are found block north of Guillen Middle School on Cotton
Street. I happened to come by them in the middle of painting sessions. The artists were not present, but the first drafts of their works were. I asked around, the way I usually do, and I was told the answer I dreaded—they’re a group of kids that come and paint now and then—they show up, they paint, and they leave. In the graffiti murals below we find a place that acknowledges the help of sponsors, mentors, and organizers—similar to the one found in the Crosno Mural. Pictured underneath is the dedication and acknowledgement to sponsors, and next to it we find a note that gives legitimacy and authority to the murals of this entire block.

Lastly, we find a process—we are given a window into one phase of the mural—one dissection that allows us to see the mural at an initial stage of its composition. In the pictures below, the background is mostly black and from the blue print, it appears that the mural will headline “Iron Giants.” This middle ground, the work of art before its completion is a good
metaphor for the border mural in the electronic age. In terms of technology, it is in a proto stage, being traditional and electronic at the same time. In terms of location, it is in the borderlands, and within the borderlands, in a zone of niche literacies and hybrid languages. And as for the work of art itself, whether it inhabits an electronic or natural space, it is characterized by its eventual and definite renewal, replacement, and/or decay.

Literacy is not dichotomous—it is not black and white—it is not as simple as compartmentalizing two groups, the literate and the rest—illiterate—nonliterate—preliterate. Literacy cannot be viewed as having value in only one manifestation—English and alphabetic. Rhetorical
strategies of communication exceed this one manifestation of literacy and manage to create meaning, association, and community without resorting to patriarchal and xenophobic claims of language purity, linguistic supremacy, and economic dominance. In a globalizing playground, it is important to acknowledge that English-only policies are detrimental not only to people that are not fluent in formal English literacies—in this case Spanish and Spanglish speakers of the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border—but to the nation as a whole by not making use of a population’s preexisting and rich forms of literacy. For example, in an interview with the El Paso Times, Francisco “Pancho” Castañeda, owner of La Nave Grocery, is quoted saying that the store has its regular costumers: “we know everyone around here,” and “some even come in everyday at the same time” (qtd. in Rivera). It is precisely these community members that may be engaging in alternative forms of literacy that are not taken into consideration when making blanket claims about the literacy or illiteracy of a place and its people. It is these members of the community that are constantly choosing rhetorical identities to present in different scenarios—from the voice of a written paragraph in a website, to an interview with the local newspaper, to the essays we write in university classes.
References


Curriculum Vita

José Angel Maldonado was born in Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, México and migrated to the United States at the age of 10. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and American Literature from the University of Texas at El Paso in the Fall of 2008, graduating Cum Laude. With the completion of this thesis, he will have earned a Master of Arts degree in Rhetoric and Writing Studies from said university with a 4.0 GPA. The chapters of this thesis were presented at the First Annual Joint Graduate Student Conference: Imagining the Transnational Literature, Film, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy and at the Frontera Rétorica Spring Symposium, where he was the only Master-level graduate student to present. He also designed the flyer for a series of public graduate student presentations entitled Real Walls Meet Virtual Murals/Virtual Walls Meet Real Murals and interned at the Center Against Family Violence, an organization with whom he keeps close ties. José Angel is an active member of Miners Without Borders and Peace and Justice Sin Fronteras; groups that have recently been working hand in hand with MEChA, the Border Network for Human Rights, La Mujer Obrera, and other border rights organizations.

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