

Sacred Migrations: Gestating the Border

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The border between México and the United States is nearly two thousand miles in length. The politically manufactured separation between the two countries is architecturally defined by concrete and metal structures that rust and decay over time, connecting an assortment of checkpoints policed by border patrol agents near cities, reservations, and deserts alike. For many, encountering this geographical site is a once-in-a-lifetime event that connotes immeasurable pain and sorrow. For others, it's a quotidian part of life requiring an exorbitant amount of emotional and psychological labor. *Fronteriza* artist [Tanya Aguiñiga](#) embodied the latter experience as she grew up crossing the border every day to attend school in San Diego while residing in Tijuana; her artistic practice responds to that lived experience.

Aguiñiga's *Metabolizing the Border* (2020) is a "political art action" the artist created alongside the México/United States border.¹ Beyond performance and unlike activism that merely promotes social change, a political art action collides civics and aesthetics via actions that demand civic engagement and generate political consciousness; the artist thus confronts politics while challenging the nature of performance to incite sociopolitical action. *Metabolizing the Border* is a land-based performance and embodied prayer similar to rituals undertaken in sacred spaces, and akin to artist Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series.² My goal in this analysis is to understand the work beyond performance and activism to instead anchor *Metabolizing the Border* as a political art action. With this artwork, Aguiñiga mindfully grounds a multisensory ritual that utilizes her entire being to express that which her spirit yearns. Through this work, *fronteriza* artist Aguiñiga emphasizes her corporeal experience as part of the undocumented diaspora to heal from her intangible connection to the border.³ Aguiñiga's *Metabolizing the Border* is also an embodied prayer that consecrates the site. In her words, "I have distilled the 2000-mile border through my body and senses, attempting to metabolize the physical as emotional and release the border's demands upon my body."⁴ *Metabolizing the Border* is therefore



Tanya Aguiñiga, *Metabolizing the Border*, (2020).

Photo by Gina Clyne.

¹ Erika Hirugami, "Political Art Action: The Aesthetics of Undocumentedness" (Guadalajara-México: Impronta Casa Editorial, 2024), 23.

² Kendra R. Greendeer, "Rematriating Indigeneity in Contemporary Native American Art" (PhD diss. 30574910, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2023), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

³ Individuals in the undocumented diaspora have not embodied being undocumented but live in close proximity to undocumentedness and are impacted by it. In Aguiñiga's case this meant daily encounters with deportees and undocumented border-crossing hopefuls.

⁴ Tanya Aguiñiga, "Public + Performance — Tanya Aguiñiga," accessed August 25, 2022, <http://www.tanyaaguiniga.com/public-performance#/metabolizing-the-border/>.

Aguñiga's attempt to discharge corporeal harm wrought by the militarization of the border through spiritual and corporeal means.

Through the political art action, Aguñiga aestheticized her corporeal abilities to challenge the border. *Metabolizing the Border* consisted of Aguñiga walking along the United States side of the border with glass vessels attached to her body covered in a flesh-toned bodysuit. Each vessel contained minute fragments of the border wall. Each border fragment was carefully placed to directly interact with each of Aguñiga's senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. Furthermore, placing border fragments near her reproductive organs suggests Aguñiga's intimate gestation of the border.

Aguñiga's eyes were directly covered by a semicircular horizontal H-shaped glass, holding rusted metal fragments of the border wall over Aguñiga's eyes, partially obscuring her vision. She held a glass container shaped like the lower half of an hourglass in her mouth, culminating in a U shape that connected her mouth to her nostrils, allowing her to both breathe and taste the corroded metal border wall fragments placed inside the half hourglass. In her right hand, Aguñiga held a flashlight encased in glass, a chalice-like support encircling a border wall fragment. A semicircular glass case rested upon Aguñiga's head, tightly secured by leather straps. Below this glass contraption rested both the eye covering and two separate glass pieces which covered both her ears, enclosing encrusted microscopic border wall fragments. Aguñiga also wore glass huaraches during *Metabolizing the Border*. These huaraches represented the fragile or nonexistent support system greeting migrants when arriving in the United States.⁵

The most visually intriguing component of the glass armature is a distended U-shaped piece resting directly upon Aguñiga's uterus. Connected by leather straps acting as suspenders, its weight is balanced by a water vessel strapped to her back. The frontal glass contains the largest of the border wall fragments, which is resting directly on Aguñiga's belly as if to connote pregnancy. With this visual composition, Aguñiga visualizes the gestation of the border from deep within the Nepantla state of her Coyolxauhqui Imperative, theorized by scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa's theory deeply aligns with curanderismo's ideations of soul retrieval ceremonies.⁶ Such spiritual activism relies heavily on the ongoing process of making and unmaking the self, according to Anzaldúa.⁷ To heal and reach the Coyolxauhqui Imperative, Anzaldúa states that one must traverse Nepantla (a liminal space of in betweenness) to remove that which no longer serves the body and soul, to emerge whole on the other side. Thus, *Metabolizing the Border* is a political art action and an embodied immigrant prayer in Nepantla in search of the Coyolxauhqui Imperative. Aguñiga thus gestates a sacred soul retrieval upon her corporeal reality. Furthermore, this political art action simultaneously converts the border into a sacred site that honors *undoc+* (formerly or currently undocumented) and *fronterizo* immigrant journeys, while gestating new life onto this complex reality.

Metabolizing the Border denounces the political structures that subjugate *undoc+* immigrants and acknowledges the corporeal effects that the border has on *fronterizo* and *undoc+* individuals, such as the case of Aguñiga herself. This too, renders visible a release of all of that which Aguñiga's body invisibly carries, both in her *fronteriza* embodied experience and as part of the undocumented diaspora.⁸ This political art action and embodied prayer spiritually and conceptually releases some of

⁵ Aguñiga, "Public + Performance — Tanya Aguñiga."

⁶ Erika Hirugami, "Luis Álvaro Sahagún Nuño's Aesthetic Curanderismo," *The Latinx Project at NYU*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/interventions/luis-alvaro-sahagun-nuno-aesthetic-curanderismo>.

⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Duke University Press, 2015).

⁸ Rafael Salazar Moreno and Ava Wiland, "Borderlands," *Art21*, video, October 2020, 55 min., 20 sec., <https://www.pbs.org/video/borderlands-4m0kef/>.



the emotional and physical anxieties that living close to the border placed upon Aguiñiga's body throughout her life.⁹

Migration is sacred despite contemporary media that will have us believe that border crossing generates violence for the host society, or that undoc+ individuals, immigrants, and fronterizo members of our community deserve to be forcefully removed from the geographical man-made ideation of the United States as a nation. The history of humanity is filled with stories of people who left their homes in search of a better possibility, more resources, and a different life for future generations, ironically starting with the very foundation of this country. Under the current administration, border crossers (undoc+ or not) are targeted daily, our neighbors are sequestered, our families are shattered, our children and elders are at risk, and many in our community fear leaving their homes.

The emotional, psychological, and physical toll that the border has on immigrant communities is what Aguiñiga explored in *Metabolizing the Border*. By visually gestating the border, Aguiñiga signals another reality in which the México/United States border is not a bleeding wound that torments millions of border crossers. In Anzaldúa's words, "the U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta, where the Third world grates against the first and bleeds."¹⁰ With this political art action, I argue that Aguiñiga challenges the policies and politics of the United States at fault for manufacturing a surplus of sorrow within immigrant communities. As an embodied prayer that gestated sacredness on the border, *Metabolizing the Border* serves as a reminder of the sacredness of migration.

⁹ Salazar Moreno and Wiland, "Borderlands."

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

