

Border Place

By Linda Okoth

When I was growing up, my family came back to my mother's hometown of El Paso, Texas every year for a month-long summer stay. As the plane would touch down, my mother would squeeze my hand, while looking through the narrow window at the Franklin Mountains, and remind me that this was *my home*. Through multi-generational family stories, which took place in this city of my birth, the message of belonging became a part of me. I did feel like I belonged, as well as feeling like I nearly belonged, because I never really lived in *the place*, which is often a precursor to calling a place "home." And where and what exactly is *El Paso del Norte*? As the name implies, it is a threshold to elsewhere.

Investigating the concepts of belonging, place, identity and storytelling was my impetus for taking part in this class through the NEH Summer Institute, Tales From the Chihuahuan Desert: Borderlands Narratives about Identity and Binationalism. Of course I have my own stories to tell. Growing up with a sense of these sister cities, the artist in me loved to visit Ciudad Juarez, as well as El Paso. My yearly visits to the area opened windows of perspective, priority, and political consciousness, not only as I compared these cities, but also as I compared them to life back in Ohio or Virginia.

Yet, I did not come back to El Paso with an expectation of simply revisiting my history or my family history. I came with a desire to see this place and the people who are here now in a new context and with the “lens of now.” This focus has given me an entirely new set of perspectives; there is in fact not one lens, but many. This appreciation for identity, and especially hidden identities, was revealed to me through numerous sources and experiences.

One of my most significant practices during this study has been a daily connection with the mountains. Recalling my mother’s endearing hand squeeze at the sight of them, I began every day peaking out my venetian blinds for a glimpse. Sometimes drawing them, always taking strength from the mountains, this daily ritual helped to give me my bearings while finding my way in this personal and educational quest. This grounding became essential on Day Three, when we were out with on the Border Patrol visit-- I saw the hidden identity of Mount Cristo Rey. The process of writing and illustrating the poem below (illustration provided in the E-portfolio materials) has become a way of analyzing the essential questions and concepts of this course, which I hope to spend the rest of my life contemplating. Embracing the contradictions inherent in this place has both filled and emptied my heart. I am grateful.

Anapra

Dependably, the sun greets the top of the mountain every morning, Mount Cristo Rey
Enlightening the contour of the ridges, as well as
Casting narrow, vertical ravines in darkness.

The nuanced colors of its shape are changed—
Pale tan tipped in white neighbors green and purple shadows in the descent
Striations of tawny beige bulwark the base.

Could there be a more dependable place of beauty for daily affirmation?
To let the empty cross remind me of the many resurrections I've been granted: grace, forgiveness, new life-
And to offer them. I *am* affirmed.

The mountain stays; I change my view, swerving, I now see from the North looking back
From the mesa, above, a transformation.

Anapra Anapra Anapra
A descent beyond my feet, the grave of this town
Caught, clutched, crumpled
By the blood, bodies, bullets.

emptied

lost

The light becomes the shade, which suddenly reveals
El Otro Lado: what I now know
And can't un-know.

I am a witness—
A different affirmation.

Penitents' keening echoed in the vaulted ceiling of *Catedral de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* at any hour of the day, as the faithful slowly and ritualistically made their way to the altar. Staccato trumpet blasts; earthy, handmade tortillas; magic, spinning orbs of molten glass; towering, psychedelically-colored *papier mâché* cats; and lively conversations in Spanish--that I saw more than understood--enchanted the artist in me. This was the place I really felt like I belonged.

Of course, this view of *Juárez*, prepared with the day tourist in mind, was not a complete one. Glimpses of another side of the city, one more tenuous, were seen from the air-conditioned backseat of our moving car. Family members gladly declared "American" as we crossed the Zaragoza Bridge back to El Paso, leaving behind a city and lives they thought offered less than their own. In service to our American lives, we said silent prayers of thanksgiving from simple

Methodist pews, practiced delicate Chopin *études*, and ate casseroles prepared from recipes found in Family Circle magazine. Yet, these yearly visits to El Paso and Juárez opened windows of perspective, priority, and political consciousness that led to my feeling of “otherness” in my family, especially as I embraced an artist’s awareness, central to my identity.

As my creative development evolved in adulthood, school, work, and new family bonds eclipsed these sensuous summer experiences; without my realizing, they grew pale. In the fall of 2007, I accompanied my elder daughter to the National Museum of the American Indian for an outside-learning project in her Spanish language class. As we walked into the museum, I felt the color flow back into my childhood memories, as I saw the fluttering *papel picado* and smelled the pungent *cempasúchil* blossoms. Seeing the art and culture that I associated with my childhood, delineated in the museum’s *El Día de Los Muertos* exhibition, helped me to understand its meaning more clearly as well as to see the truth: although a part of me, this belonged to another.

Rather than retreat from my love of and connection with Mexican culture, this experience renewed my vigor and appreciation of it. Naturally, as an artist and teacher, I wished to explore through the art studio and classroom the beauty of Mexican folk art found in *El Día de Los Muertos*, as well as celebrate the unifying themes of thanksgiving and ancestral honor. My mother’s unexpected death, in the winter of 2008, gave me further impetus to set up an *ofrenda* within my school community to loved ones remembered. Over the next six years, the *Día de los Muertos* art collective grew from my fourth grade students’ art project

into a Kindergarten through twelfth grade event, which eventually included the students of the Spanish teachers, fellow art teachers, and our Lower School music teacher, who directed students in performing a piece she wrote for the occasion.

Although grappling with a profound and difficult subject, the students understood the power of making and offering their artwork to a larger idea. In doing so, the *ofrenda* became much more than an art display. It also served as a lush crucible to share stories: “these were my grandfather’s sunglasses which he wore when he travelled—and he loved to travel”; “this is my great-grandmother, Ruth, and I didn’t know her, and I wish I had”; “this was my grandfather’s bible, which he kept with him during WWII”; “this is a picture of my dad’s parents who died in a terrible car accident when he was fifteen. My father wanted me to bring it in.” Serenaded by soulful music, surrounded by the woodsy smell of copal incense, cheered by the warmth of spicy hot chocolate and brightly colored artwork, we gratefully shared our stories every morning before school began. By welcoming the entire school community to the *ofrenda*, it became a border space for the living and the dead to reconvene; the tales, art, and music brought it from the edges of cultural replication to a valued, central experience in our community.

I now see the exploration of such liminal spaces as essential to my artistic and educational practice. Whether actual locations or metaphysical ones, I see how these thin boundaries enrich understanding through comparison and contrast, particularly when discovering identities. Appreciating the delicate

power of an uncertain and transitory presence requires patience and an open mind. This is at the heart of my willingness to take creative and intellectual risks in the processes of my life, art, and teaching, while welcoming those who come on my journey or invite me to theirs.

Taking part in a rare and thoughtful exploration of these collective themes through the NEH Summer Institute, Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert: Borderlands Narratives about Identity and Binationalism, would be a professional and personal dream-come-true. Researching and illuminating our human stories and experiences, particularly those at risk for marginalization, provides an avenue of respectful engagement. I want to be a part of this process, as well as to grow from it; as with all profound experiences in my life, I will find meaningful ways of sharing, expressing, and reciprocating this opportunity through visual and language arts. I feel called to take part in sharing stories that ache to be told, and ache from the telling, and to find understanding and *alegría* in this border place.