

**IMMIGRANT INVISIBILITY AND THE POST-9/11 BORDER IN SANDRA FERNANDEZ'S  
COMING OF AGE**

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*This article examines contemporary artistic representations of territoriality and migration. The rise in surveillance of undocumented migrants in the post-9/11 United States produces mechanisms of invisibility and redeploys the border as a movable center of power. I trace this geopolitical shift in territorial representation through the work of Ecuadoran American artist Sandra C. Fernandez, whose print *Coming of Age (Transformations)* (2008) stages the city of Austin, Texas, as an expanding American metropolis, attracting immigrants in search of work, but insistent on obscuring their presence. Made at the Austin-based workshop Coronado Studio, *Coming of Age* dialogues with the work of fellow resident artists Ester Hernandez and Tony Ortega, who share an interest in migration and trade liberalization. But in contrast, Fernandez offers a vivid example of the reterritorialization of the nation's borders, and further connects these notions of territory to historical forms of racial oppression.*

For ten years, I called Austin, Texas, my home. Like the droves of creatives who move to the city, the vibrant music scene, the high tech boom, and the intellectual life fostered by its many universities, enamored me. On many occasion I found myself gazing out over the shores of Town Lake, a dammed portion of the Lower Colorado that bisects the city, and taking in the panoramic view. It was a mesmerizing sight, the way the water reflected off of skyscrapers at sunset, a series of pyramidal forms that tapered across green flatlands. For a long time, and perhaps unaware of my own privilege, I was convinced this was a space for self-invention. I was

not alone in this naive perception, urban geographers such as Richard Florida describe Austin as a paradigmatic example of the “creative city” where the convergence of technology, talent, and tolerance fuel the city’s cultural assets and diversity (Florida 298-299).<sup>1</sup> The critical work of Latina/o artists in the region, particularly those affiliated with the Eastside graphic workshop Coronado Studio, opened my eyes to a more nuanced viewpoint. Perhaps the mesmerizing sight before me was not as romantic or as benign as I first perceived.

I would like to explore this alternate vision of the city as part of a shift in the way contemporary artists conceptualize territoriality and migration. Among the most pressing civil rights issues of our time, the surveillance of undocumented migration produces mechanisms of invisibility and strategically redeploys the border as a mobile center of power. I examine this shift in territorial representation through the work of Ecuadoran American artist Sandra C. Fernandez (b. 1964).<sup>2</sup> Fernandez’s *Coming of Age (Transformations)* (2008, fig. 1) welcomes these immigrants to the shores of Town Lake and warns them of the mirage that a title like ‘sanctuary city’<sup>3</sup> suggests. *Coming of Age* critiques U.S. immigration policy and the racial knowledge it produces on those deemed “impossible subjects” (Ngai 5).<sup>4</sup> What I aim to show is how Fernandez draws attention to the spatialized mechanisms inside the urban American city that control and surveil this population, offering a vivid example of the post-9/11 reterritorialization of the nation’s borders, and further connecting these to historical forms of racial oppression.

This study is divided into three sections. In the first, I provide a close reading of *Coming of Age* paying particular attention to how it seeks to reveal the mechanisms of invisibility that work to obscure the presence of undocumented workers in the city. The focus on the territoriality of the city, and its implicit racial divide, leads to my next section on the reconceptualization of the border and its shifting interpretation by artists such as Ester Hernandez and Tony Ortega in the post-9/11 era.<sup>5</sup> I conclude the study with a nod toward the immigrant rights movement, and the hopeful elements that pervade *Coming of Age*, examining how some representations of undocumented subjects afford dignity and resist the victimization of those ‘without papers.’



Figure 1 Sandra C. Fernandez, *Coming of Age (Transformations)*, 2008. Serigraph, 17.5 x 24 inches, edition of 50. Printed at Coronado Studio with master printer Brian Johnson. Courtesy of the artist.

### ***Mechanisms of invisibility***

The Master Plan of 1928 produced a “racial script” foundational to the organization of space and labor in Austin. The law complied with the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine, confirmed in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and enabled *de jure* segregation through an expansion of Jim Crow law. The Master Plan displaced 30% of Austin’s population to the Eastside by relocating facilities and housing for Mexican American and black families east of East Avenue (now Interstate 35).<sup>6</sup> Many of the displaced were formally enslaved workers (or their descendants) who settled the communities of Clarksville, Wheatville, and Pleasant Hill in West Austin, now among the most exclusive and high-priced neighborhoods in the city (Tate 28). Also displaced was a small but significant immigrant community of Mexican laborers and

their families who had settled the area around Republic Square Park, then known as Mexican Park. To enforce Jim Crow, city officials targeted the closure of specific schools, and in the master plan justified their decision: "It is our recommendation that the nearest approach to the solution of the race segregation problem will be the recommendation of this district [just east of East Avenue and south of the city cemetery] as a *negro district* (my emphasis); and that all the facilities and conveniences be provided the negroes in this district as an incentive to draw the negro population to this area" (Koch & Fowler 57). Developers and neighborhood associations embraced the plan by restricting home ownership in Downtown and West Austin to whites only.

I return to this shameful episode of Austin's history because it enabled a particular set of mechanisms by which to organize the spatial politics of the city, as well as to make future generations of vulnerable workers necessary, but much less visible. According to historian Natalia Molina, "racial scripts" are recurring trends in the production of racial knowledge: "once attitudes, practices, customs, policies, and laws are directed at one group, they are more readily available and easily applied to other groups" (Molina 7). The historical treatment and displacement of Mexican and African American workers in this city created a blueprint for how subsequent racialized groups would be treated until they were out of sight or in the shadows of the city.

Sandra Fernandez (fig. 2) moved to Austin in 2005 to begin a tenure-track position in printmaking at the University of Texas. Her work had often examined the social identities of gender and *mestizaje* (racial mixture), while experimenting with the possibilities of blending printmaking, sewing, and collage. Born to Ecuadoran immigrants in New York, Fernandez grew up in Quito and returned to the United States at the age of twenty-two with the hopes of continuing her artistic career. Her upbringing in the global south informed a critical viewpoint of what her native country represented in the geopolitical matrix of the Americas. In Austin, she was drawn to a circle of artists that revolved around Coronado Studio (fig. 3), a fine art serigraphy workshop founded by artist Sam Coronado (1946-2013). The workshop, and its residency program, Serie Project, served as an art production hub, but more importantly as an

intellectual space to debate Latina/o life in the United States and the trade liberalization that drastically altered the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.



Figure 2. Portrait of Sandra Fernandez, 2013. Photograph by Scott David Gordon.



Figure 3. Sandra Fernandez collaborating with printers Sam Coronado, Jonathan Reboloso and Logan Hill, 2013. Photograph by Scott David Gordon.

*Coming of Age* stages the city as a magnet attracting immigrants in search of work, but reveals the constructed nature of this mirage of sanctuary. According to the U.S. census, Austin is one of the fastest growing cities in the nation due to its strong economy and low unemployment rate.<sup>7</sup> The city nets 110 new residents each day (Tate 22). Perhaps due to her own upbringing and the circular migration that characterized her life and that of her Ecuadoran immigrant parents, Fernandez is critical of what happens to immigrant subjectivity as it enters this engine of growth only to be subsumed into the landscape.

In *Coming of Age*, a female doll with a collaged cornhusk dress stands next to a large tree trunk. As if welcoming the viewer, the doll gestures toward a cityscape, a panoramic view of downtown Austin with its skyscrapers, high rise condos, and its iconic state capitol. Cars drive in on the Congress Avenue. The full color foreground and grayscale skyline reinforce a temporal rupture. The artist reveals the fabricated nature of this multi-layered sight (a sixteen color serigraph), where the visible and the inscrutable create an allegorical portrait of a modern American city. *Coming of Age* implies that this sight has a politics. By printing the cityscape devoid of color, Fernandez reveals the hidden histories concealed in its making.

Unlike previous accounts of immigrants who were greeted with hope by the Statue of Liberty as they entered the port of New York, Fernandez's doll welcomes viewers with caution. The doll raises her crown in the same manner Lady Liberty raises her torch and yet she does not project a majestic image. Her awkward frontal pose with one arm bending backward, and one shoulder higher than the other makes her appear to be standing on uneven ground or perhaps magically hovering like a fairy. The paper doll looks to the right and through an authoritative stance, seems to halt an incomer before they cross the Lower Colorado and enter the city. The artist contrasts the three-dimensionality of her rubbery rosy face with the flatness and paper-like weight of her dress perhaps owing to the many interventions she made on the matrix of mylar prior to burning the screen (Fernandez, "RE"). While the Statue of Liberty holds the torch on her right hand, Fernandez's doll uses her left and raises two dried red chili peppers from the stem, which balance a jeweled crown. The crown pays homage to Coronado Studio as it mimics its printer's chop.

Carved deeply into the trunk of the tree, Fernandez warns of a foreboding reality in a place that offers little protection for this vulnerable population. Inside this towering form, the artist writes brief messages in bold green lettering that detail the realities of undocumented life in Austin: “no health insurance,” “no money,” “*me agarró la migra.*” She juxtaposes these cautionary tales with the values and aspirations of most newcomers written in light green: “equality,” “family,” “justice,” “future.” In other words, these aspirations are met with a perpetual threat of deportation. Through the Secure Communities program established by the Department of Homeland Security, the Sheriff’s Office in Austin deported thousands of non-violent undocumented immigrants. Between 2011 and 2015, local authorities forced the removal of upwards of 4,600 people detained through routine investigations such as a traffic stop (Auyero 16). The collaboration between local and federal law enforcement made it more difficult for the undocumented to report crimes, wage theft, or assist with investigations, and instilled fear to remain in the shadows as they took up jobs in the city as domestics, gardeners, and construction workers.

In Fernandez’s print, viewers are asked to question how the city’s growth requires the labor of these workers. As if welcoming the viewer and the implied immigrant subject, the doll gestures toward a cityscape that shows a growing spatial concentration of capital. Yet this picture perfect cityscape mimics mainstream accounts of economic globalization by obscuring the presence of low-wage labor. Austin, much like the financial centers Saskia Sassen describes in *The Global City*, participates in the production of a specialized high tech workforce, top-level management, and state-control operations that depend heavily on a low wage and low profit economic sectors to support the upper sectors of capital (Sassen 4-5). While most of us assume that undocumented immigrants are a rural population employed in the farming sector, research shows otherwise. According to a Pew Research Study, the majority of unauthorized immigrants work in the service sector (maids, cooks, groundskeepers), while only four percent work in farming, fishing or forestry (Passel and Cohn “Share”). In this manner Fernandez points to the reality that most undocumented immigrants live and work in urban American cities and disperse about them as restless objects of consumption.

Light and shadow play off of the doll's A-line skirt, creating a topographic terrain that could very well gesture to the desert crossing that many immigrants will make prior to their arrival in the U.S. The triangular motif of the skirt appears consistently throughout Fernandez's oeuvre, most noticeably in her *Paper Doll* series (fig. 4, 5), which began as early as 1993 following a trip to Cuba (Fernandez, Interview). Undulating grooves in the husk show an infinitesimal number of verticals and diagonals that make up her unrealistically large body. The peculiar dress presents detailed stitching of pink and green thread creating thin, zigzag lines. Art historian Tatiana Flores has made note that this recurring characteristic in Fernandez's work is a "gendered practice of [using] sewing as a surrogate for drawing" (171). In effect the line work mimics the steadiness of machine stitching but grows increasingly fluid and expressive on the roots of the tree. While a detailed analysis of the gender issues in Fernandez's work is beyond the scope of this article, the practice of sowing also points to the gendered labor of immigrants who work in the garment industry, as well as the recent rise in women and unaccompanied minors requesting asylum status at the border.



**Figure 4. Sandra C. Fernandez, *Behind what is seen (Paper Doll/Cucas series)*, 1998. Mixed Media: Paper, book pages, silk thread, wire, color xerox-copy of an old photograph. Vandyke printing, machine sewing and hand stitching; 17.5 x 12 x 2.75. Courtesy of the artist.**





Figure 5. Sandra C. Fernandez, *Niña de Chiapas (Paper Doll/Cucas series)*, 1998. Mixed Media: Vandykes printed on veneer, cyanotypes printed on cheesecloth. Paper, thread, old positive paper photograph, worry doll. Machine sewing and hand stitching; 17.5 x 10 x 2.75. Courtesy of the artist.

*Coming of Age* narrates the story of an American city that becomes a signifier for what sociologist Anibal Quijano calls the “coloniality of power.” According to Quijano, the structure of power is colonial, and the coloniality of power is only possible through the “systematic racial division of labor” (536). Fernandez positions this Eurocentric model of power as the backdrop of the city with partially legible Spanish script written in light blue cursive. The inscrutable text is an excerpt of the Codex Mendoza, a 16<sup>th</sup> century document written two decades after the fall of Tenochitlán (the Aztec capital) and commissioned by the Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza to relay detailed information about the Aztec empire, its economy, and organization (fig. 6). For the artist, the Codex Mendoza represents, “a permanent reminder of the conquest and the relationship of dominator and dominated that persists when there are conditions of inequality” (Fernandez, “RE”). Fernandez’s print suggests that Austin operates under a similar racial logic,

most evident in the 1928 Master Plan, as the one implemented during the colonization of the Americas ensuring domination through the control of space and labor.



Figure 6. MS. Arch. Selden. Frontispiece, *Codex Mendoza*, Viceroyalty of New Spain, c. 1541–1542, pigment on paper © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

The staging creates conceptual links between the racial and spatial classification system of modern Europe with the way American cities organize space and labor along a racial axis, as well as who gets to be visible in these cities. According to Quijano, “One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism” (533). Eurocentrism, as a global hegemonic theory of knowledge, gave way to a hierarchical structure in which women and people of color were considered inferior, closer to nature than to reason. Moreover, this theory of knowledge structures the field of vision and those closer to nature than to reason appear as objects of the landscape not as autonomous beings. The artist does not visualize undocumented workers as whole, in fact the landscape is devoid of human figures, but sees their poignant messages: “haven’t seen my children in 5

years,” “*me agarro la migra*,” or “*coyotes*,” in the trunk of a large tree. The task of coloniality is to make their presence invisible.

The chilling effect of this erasure brings us back to Austin’s Master Plan of 1928 as simply an episode in a larger narrative arc of power. The “racial scripts” that determine punitive measures for those on the margins of the body politic subscribe to longer trajectories of domination. In these traces of the Codex Mendoza, we find blueprints for the engineering of social exclusion in the city that go much further than the Master Plan. The concealment of these “racial scripts” and the patterns of their enactment leads many to ask about the allegiance of immigrants, who in many ways are considered an imminent threat to the stability of American identity. Such Eurocentric thinking is evident in the writings of political scientists such as Samuel Huntington,

Past immigrants wept with joy when, after overcoming hardship and risk, they saw the Statue of Liberty; enthusiastically identified themselves with their new country that offered them liberty, work, and hope; and often became the most intensely patriotic of citizens. In 2000 the proportion of foreign born was somewhat less than in 1910, but the proportion of people in America who were also loyal to and identified with other countries was quite possibly higher than at any time since the American revolution. (5)

The imagery and affect that Huntington and Fernandez conjure is not all that different. What is different is the way in which they understand the ethno-racial composition of migration, which makes many immigrants ‘unassimilable’ without the privilege of whiteness. Fernandez’s foreboding Lady Liberty-esque *Paper Doll* challenges us to see how American cities deploy a territoriality that welcomes homogenization and conceals difference.

### ***The Post 9/11 Border***

According to cultural critic Claire Fox, trade liberalization in the western hemisphere created a problem of representation for the border (Fox 4-5). While the nation-states encouraged the movement of capital and goods across geo-political borders, or a borderless neoliberal economy, they further restricted the mobility of workers and heavily enforced the

boundaries of citizenship. In these highly contentious spatial registers, where these literary and artistic representations of the U.S.-Mexico border unfolded, Fox found that national space and its management persisted as central concerns, despite the borderless rhetoric of free trade (Fox 11). The latter, in fact, reinforced the primacy and agency of the border instead of diluting its power. Building on Fox's work, I am interested in the way artists, such as Fernandez, interpret the reterritorialization of the border in the wake of September 11, 2001, when al-Qaeda militants carried out the most deadly suicide attack in U.S. history, and immigration surveillance and border security reached unprecedented levels.

Following the attacks, what Fox calls the "capitalist spatial organization" of the U.S.-Mexico border shifted and reorganized its model of power to an expanded notion of the border as being policed in every part of the nation. The new Department of Homeland Security created two immigration enforcement agencies: Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Customs and Border Protection (CPB). ICE investigates, detains, and departs undocumented immigrants in the country's interior, while CPB prevents illegal crossings at U.S. ports of entry. The border is thus reterritorialized across the nation-at-large making it much easier to restrict mobility, and erase the presence of *indocumentados*. Perhaps in contrast to the limited mobility of undocumented workers, Fernandez includes the icon of a bat to represent the 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats that migrate to Austin every spring. The endangered creatures roost under the Congress Avenue Bridge, visible on the right side of *Coming of Age*. With its muted yellow wings and faint brown outline, the artist makes a sardonic commentary on Austin's embrace of the Mexican free-tailed bat as an eco-tourist attraction and how it differs markedly from the treatment and fate of undocumented Mexican and Central American nationals.

The reterritorialization of the border-at-large poses a new problem of representation. Artists like Sandra Fernandez are not alone in their pursuit of representing the anxious redeployment of national space. The San Francisco-based, Chicana artist Ester Hernandez (b. 1944), for example, is much more explicit in drawing attention to the devastating effects of free trade on indigenous Mexican farmworkers. In *Sun Raid* (2008, fig. 7), she directs viewers to the rural Southern communities of Mixtecos, Zapotecos, Triques, and Purepecha, whose farming economy collapsed after the ratification of the North American Free Trade agreement (1993),

spurring a wave of migration, only to be met with exceedingly stringent U.S. immigration policies.

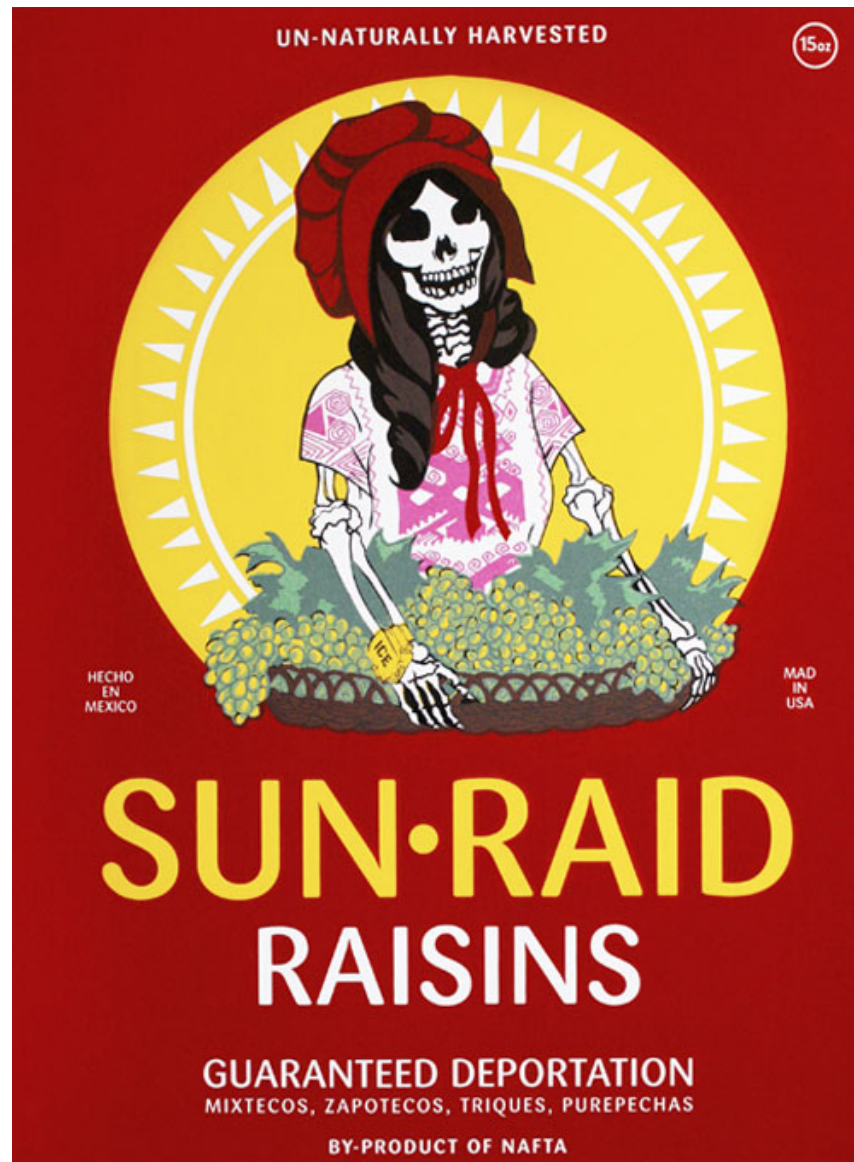


Figure 7. Ester Hernandez, *Sun Raid*, 2008. Serigraph, 20 x 15 inches, edition of 50. Printed at Coronado Studio. Courtesy of the artist.

Hernandez's work is an unapologetic visual statement that denounces U.S. neoliberal policies for ravaging some of the most economically vulnerable communities, forcing their desperate migration north, and discarding their right to earn a living through a violent process of deportation. The artist revisits her iconic 1982 print *Sun Mad*, a Warholian gesture that

catapulted her to national prominence by transforming the Sun Maid raisin box into an icon of the farmworkers' grape boycott in California's Central Valley. The plight of the vulnerable farmworker is one of personal significance for Hernandez, who recalls growing up as part of a migrant farmworker family in Dinuba, California: "Slowly I began to realize how to transform the Sun Maid and unmask the truth behind the wholesome figures of agribusiness. *Sun Mad* evolved out of my anger and my fear of what would happen to my family, my community, and to myself" (Heyman 166). She retains the basic formal elements of the design, but alters the maiden to signal agribusiness' new casualties. Her Posada-like *calavera* now dons a *huipil*, a traditional garment associated with Southern Mexican and Guatemalan indigenous women.<sup>8</sup> The figure's bracelet inscribed with the initials ICE warns of her detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.<sup>9</sup> Hernandez revisits the trope of the farmworker through the eyes of a new and much more vulnerable workforce, who unable to compete in the international marketplace, have no other recourse but to flee north in search of work. However her sense of location in *Sun Raid* moves beyond the specificity of the U.S.-Mexico border to encompass migrant farming across the United States—in locations as remote as the Pacific Northwest and Vermont's organic farm-to-table movement—which operates under the threat of ICE raids.

While Hernandez's critique of neoliberalism and border enforcement remains firmly grounded in the rural landscape, Fernandez shifts viewers' attention to the mechanisms that create "illegality" in the metropolis, where most of the country's eleven million unauthorized workers reside (Passel and Cohn "20"). *Coming of Age* reveals some of the internal borders of the city. Despite the assumptions of sight: the economic growth, the population boom, the creative life of Austin, there are so many hidden barriers for those on the margin of the body politic. *Coming of Age* encourages viewers to question what they cannot see, the underlying structure that divides space and labor: who gets to live in what part of town? On whom does the building boom rely for labor exploitation? Who makes the beds in that high-rise hotel? Who is more likely to get stopped by police? By including the voices of undocumented workers in the trunk of the tree, Fernandez reminds viewers that "the individuals who clean residential homes, care for children while parents go to work... cook and wash dishes at the restaurants where we eat... and fix roofs around town do not live in another world" (Auyero 4). They are here and we

have simply been conditioned to not see them. But the redeployment of the border across the nation-at-large makes exclusion, and perhaps even invisibility, more palpable than ever before.

In comparing these works, made the same year at the same workshop in Austin, I seek to track a reconceptualization of the U.S.-Mexico border, no longer grounded to that specific locality. Recent ICE raids, in California, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Kansas, New York, and Texas, under the Trump Administration are only a continuation of a deportation machine that began around the time these works were made earning President Obama the moniker, the “deporter-in-chief.”<sup>10</sup> The border’s spatial mobility in these works, as well as in the policing of immigrant populations makes it abundantly clear that the post-9/11 border is what Walter Mignolo calls a “movable center,” where “the power of the center does not depend on geographical representations but, on the contrary, geographical representations are built around the power of the center” (266). In other words, in Fernandez’s work we witness how the border does not depend on a static geographic location, but rather how the panorama of the American metropolis is built around the movable border. Thus in staging Austin as a bordered city and rural farmlands as a site of surveillance, these artists point to the current forms of territoriality that subaltern populations must navigate.

The vulnerable populations the artists allude to experience territoriality in different ways. In naming indigenous populations of Southern Mexico and Guatemala, Hernandez considers communities whose language barriers may prevent their geographic mobility and access to information in both English and Spanish. On the other hand, Fernandez is likely attuned, as a university professor at this time, to the worries and educational aspirations of Dreamers, that is, undocumented students who entered the country illegally with their parents and lobbied the administration for protection from deportation. This focus is much more explicit in a later work titled *Caution: Dreamers in/on sight* (2013, fig. 8) where portraits of undocumented youth emerge out of a transfrontier port of entry map.



Figure 8. Sandra Fernandez, *CAUTION: Dreamers in/on sight*, 2013. Serigraph, 22 x 30 inches, edition of 50. Printed at Coronado Studio with master printer Jonathan Reboloso and Logan Hill. Courtesy of the artist.

According to Flores, Fernandez appeals to “viewer’s sympathy, she successfully humanizes a group of anonymous minors who have been victims of circumstances beyond their control,” aligning her work with the activist print media of Chicana graphic artists such as Hernandez (Flores 170). But in contrast, there is a kind of ambiguity that permeates *Coming of Age*. It seems plausible that Fernandez is commenting on the coming of age narratives of undocumented youth who call Austin home while living in its shadows. The hopeful tone of her imagery, which I’ll return to, suggests this is a strong possibility.

I do not mean to suggest that *Coming of Age* is apolitical, but rather, I point to the different tactics the artists use to appeal to viewers. *Sun Raid* is ireful and tragic. It dwells on



the wicked post-NAFTA effects on Mexican nationals: the coercive movement of bodies through political borders and the criminalization not only of illegal entry but, by extension, of brownness as the tide of anti-immigrant hate rhetoric rises. The reliance on the Mexican trope of the *calavera* is not simply an homage to the long history of modern printmaking in Mexico, but an indictment of the necropolitics embedded in trade liberalization that is capable of transforming workers into expendable lives or communities of living dead. On the other hand, *Coming of Age* leaves viewers with more questions than answers. It does not name the agencies that surveil, incarcerate and deport migrants. *Coming of Age* does not dwell on trade liberalization or the economic and military interventions that force migrations north. It takes a long view of history by reminding viewers that these contemporary patterns of oppression are consistent with a colonial framework that has been in place for five hundred years in the Americas. Commenting on this “long view of history” in Fernandez’s work, the Ecuadoran writer Marco Antonio Rodriguez adds, “Time passes just outside movement, but it supposes a world that is successive, and this continual duration allows us to make strange connections between yesterday, today and tomorrow” (Rodriguez 13). The artist makes this temporal quality visible by layering historical documents with a photo stencil of the Austin skyline and creating playful juxtapositions with a fantasy world—an Alice in Wonderland— full color foreground. In a sense, Fernandez moves away from the iconicity of Latino farm labor present in Hernandez’s work, and opts instead for what Nicole Fleetwood calls the “non-iconicity” aesthetic that resists, “the desire to have the cultural product solve the very problem that it represents” (Fleetwood, 3-9). *Coming of Age* deflects the urge to iconicize illegality as a problem of the scopopic regime that relies on making undocumented workers invisible and works instead on revealing the far-reaching colonial structure that determines the visual field. This interplay of iconicity and non-iconicity is likewise relevant when we consider the portrayal of the racialized immigrant body.

### ***The Border and the Body***

In the spring of 2006, nationwide demonstrations took place protesting the recent House bill, sponsored by Representative James Sensenbrenner, which would have made an

illegal status a felony subject to prison time, fines, and ultimately, deportation.<sup>11</sup> This modern day immigrant rights movement spread to every major metropolis when thousands of Americans (native, foreign-born, and undocumented) filled the streets demanding the humane and compassionate treatment of workers and their families. Denver-based artist Tony Ortega (b. 1958) commemorated the marches during a residency at Coronado Studios in a print titled *La Marcha de Lupe Liberty* (2006, fig. 9).



Figure 9. Tony Ortega, *La Marcha de Lupe Liberty*, 2006. Serigraph, 23 x 16 inches, edition of 50. Courtesy of the artist.

Ortega's impressionistic treatment of the figures makes their representation hover between figuration and abstraction. His faceless marchers deny the privileged viewer something they are already conditioned to not see and in this way make visible the attitudes and behaviors that shape immigration policy. I find his treatment of the figures curious in that it implicitly links the human body, and in this case the brown body, to conceptions of territory and belonging.<sup>12</sup> Immigration law obscures the migrant body at best, or worse, presupposes an abject carrier of disease.<sup>13</sup> Both Ortega and Fernandez grapple with this aspect of representing the migrant body and its connection to the border, but also aim to create dignified portrayals of subjects who have overcome insurmountable odds.

In this reimagining of migrant subjectivity, both artists appeal to icons of faith. Ortega's subjects march under the guidance of a syncretic icon, a patina-green crowned Virgin carrying the freedom torch. Ortega's *Lupe Liberty* invokes the iconicity of the Statue of Liberty to grant freedom and opportunity to all immigrants, as well as Our Lady of Guadalupe to grant safety and protection. Fernandez, on the other hand, turns to the use of the *milagro*, an icon common in Latin American and Latino Catholic practices. Rather than view this from the cynical perspective of appealing to respectability politics, or a strictly religious demonstration of faith, I find their use of icons geared toward mobilizing a particular audience who share in this transborder iconography.

*Coming of Age* uses the *milagro* as a stand in for the migrant body. Out of strands of pink thread that emanate from the tree, Fernandez hangs a small pink foot to represent a body part often associated with the undocumented who come "by foot" to the United States. The foot is a metonym for the bodies who journey, as well as the physical pain of walking through desolate deserts to reach "the other side." Pinned to the robes of a saint or hung with ribbon in shrines, *milagros* plead and give thanks for healing or safe passage. Fernandez, however, ties the dismembered body part to the branch of the tree. Perhaps this offering takes on new meaning, as it becomes part of a message board and informal shrine for newcomers.

The pink foot is a signifier for an array of physical and psychological experiences whose depth there is an inability or unwillingness to represent. How can artists represent that sojourn

and the memories of that body? “His first entrance into Texas was scarcely promising. To cross the U.S. Mexico border, he walked alone in the desert for sixteen days, eating prickly pears and drinking water from the windmill-powered pumps that he came across every couple of days,” writes sociologist Jacinto Cuvi after interviewing Santos, a Mexican national who lives in Austin and crossed illegally in the 1960s (Cuvi 45). Fernandez’s foot is a small gesture, rasterized in a way that eludes identification. Hence I find it useful to consider her use of the *milagro* in relation to Fleetwood’s concept of “non-iconicity.” If the artist had used a more realistic palette, the foot would shock viewers. Instead, it invokes curiosity like strange fruit hanging from a tree. When a twenty-four year old single-mother embarked on her journey to Austin, she recalled walking under an oppressive sun, “You couldn’t imagine how long we walked to get here! Araceli was just two at the time... *Pero los solazos* [but the sun], the hunger, the thirst... They would give me something to drink, and I would save it for her, for the walk. Everything that they gave me I would save for her” (Dunning-Lozano 84). In addition to recalling the physical sensations, this mother, who walked with a child “strapped” to her back, expressed the fear and anguish she felt for her child’s safety. Her sojourn was nothing short of a miracle.

Fernandez’s use of the foot to symbolize the subaltern body’s inhumane treatment also points to hopeful possibilities. The *milagro* invokes a positive association that the migrant body has value, but also that faith has power. When a young Santos decided to leave his family’s ranch in the village of Cutzmala de Pinzón, and set off from the state of Guerrero, “He left his rancho on foot on a blistering morning in March of 1968 with about thirty dollars in his pocket and a big, fuzzy, northward-pointing dream” (Cuvi 44). Before gaining his permanent resident status through the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, this Austin resident made the northward trip seventeen times after suffering sixteen deportations (Cuvi 45). When an interviewer questioned his tenacity, “What were you looking for?” the man replied, “Happiness” (Cuvi 45). Fernandez is probably not referencing a religious or dogmatic view of faith implied in the *milagro*, but the kind of aspiration and belief that motivates someone like Santos to risk his life and cross the border. Her interest in sewing and mending, visible in the folds of the doll’s skirt, the pink thread that hangs from the foot, or the wavy lines of the tree, suggest possibilities for rooting and belonging even in a place that is not all that welcoming.

Immigrant subjectivity reinvents itself in these works, and eludes narratives of victimization while challenging the “racial scripts” that prevent their acknowledgement as whole beings.

### **Conclusion**

Readers might wonder if the print medium is the most apt for debating these socio-political issues. I have often wondered the same. But given the propensity and vigor of migration and territoriality in Latina/o printmaking, I have come to believe it is symptomatic of what borderlands scholar Anita Huizar-Hernández calls the Latino “paradox of paper,” a materiality that contest how personhood is predicated on the legibility to immigration authorities (237). While operating in the realm of aesthetics as a limited edition fine art serigraph, *Coming of Age* does not aim to effect political transformation. But those who look closely will no doubt question what is visible and inscrutable in the metropolis. This was how my vision of Austin slowly began to change, and has since transformed how I view other geographies. What Fernandez and her contemporaries make clear is that the nation is continually in the process of redrawing its boundaries. Whether colonized, segregated, or policed, space is the battleground where the nation state exerts its sovereignty, and one must remain vigilant of a movable center of power that renders some of us invisible or merely contingent.

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### **Notes:**

Special thanks to the editor and reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback on this article. I would also like to thank Dr. Mary Coffey for her encouragement and feedback on this research.

<sup>1</sup> However, even Florida has begun to question this untenable position given the growing inequality in the United States. Statements such as, "The rise of a new economic and social order is a double-edged sword: it unleashes incredible energies, but it also causes tremendous hardships," reflect a more nuanced position that accounts for the post-Fordist stark class divides between creative knowledge workers and low wage service sector jobs, which became most apparent after the 2008 economic crisis. Richard Florida, "The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited," *The Atlantic City Lab*, June 25, 2012, <https://www.citylab.com/life/2012/06/rise-creative-class-revisited/2220/>.

<sup>2</sup> The artist does not employ an accent on her last name, except for Spanish-language publications.

<sup>3</sup> Sanctuary city is a term used by cities with de jure or de facto practices for avoiding local law enforcement's persecution of undocumented immigrants. In the 1980s, as Central Americans fled war torn countries in search of refuge, several Texas cities, including Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, became part of the sanctuary movement led by religious groups and local governments. Though the efficacy of such measures has always been subject to pressure from the federal government.

Recently the Trump Administration has threatened to cut off federal funding to these cities if they do not comply with federal immigration authorities.

<sup>4</sup> According to legal historian Mae Ngai, immigration law renders undocumented immigrants “impossible subjects,” without access to subjecthood and as an unresolvable problem.

<sup>5</sup> Hernandez does not employ an accent on her last name.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the Master Plan of 1928 see Gray (29-37).

<sup>7</sup> Between 2010 and 2014, the Austin population grew by nearly 16 percent.

<http://www.texastribune.org/2015/05/21/interactive-texas-population-growth-2010-2014/>. The job creation growth rate is over 3% annually since 2010.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2015/10/06/the-cities-americans-are-thronging-to-and-fleeing/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Calaveras* are skeletal figures often associated with *Día de los Muertos* and popularized by the Mexican illustrator and engraver José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913). *Huipiles* are usually woven on a back-strap loom and their intricate patterns suggest site-specificity and ethnic origin.

<sup>9</sup> As opposed to the U.S. Border Patrol, created through an appropriations act in 1924, that enforced U.S. Customs and Immigration laws in the border zone particularly with check points along the U.S.-Mexico border.

<sup>10</sup> Examples of the term are found in: John Burnet and Lakshmi Singh, “ICE Says Recent Immigrant Raids are Business as Usual,” *NPR’s All Things Considered*, February 11, 2017. Eyder Perlata, “National Council of La Raza dubs Obama ‘deporter-in-chief,’” *NPR*, March 4, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> For more information see: N.C. Aizenman, “Immigration Debate Wakes a “Sleeping Latino Giant,” *Washington Post*, April 6, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> I should point out this treatment of the figure is not specific to this work alone, but a stylistic choice present in most of Ortega’s oeuvre.

<sup>13</sup> For an insightful discussion of the fear of disease in immigration and border control policy see Mckiernan-González.