

The X and the Door: A Fable of Mexicanness

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The Pan-American highway runs from Ushuaia, Argentina to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. Of these 19,000 miles, there is a stretch of twenty that tells the past, present, and future of the neoliberal era.¹ This section of road—through Ciudad Juárez and El Paso—opens with a possibility, a door, and closes with a prohibition, an X.² This is the story of the rise and fall of that X; it is a fable. Telling fables always skirts the border of lying, but in the name of truth. A fable uses animals, for example, to transmit useful lessons—a truth deeper than whether or not animals actually talk—to their readers. Here, there are no animals, but rather monuments and some useful truths. This is the tale of how the enthusiasm surrounding the X’s construction was forgotten, how it was misunderstood by its own maker, then subsequently abandoned, and especially how this monumental X marks Ciudad Juárez as a choke point of migrant humanity.

This essay establishes a dialogue between bodies, the spaces they inhabit, and the monuments that mark this city at the U.S.–Mexico border. Until now, this relation

¹ Neoliberalism is commonly associated with Margaret Thatcher’s prime ministership (1970-1990) and Ronald Reagan’s presidency (1981-1989). I take neoliberalism as Harvey describes it in a *Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005); namely, as a practice of political economy that asserts that individual well-being stems from “strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2).

² Within Central America the Pan-American is known as the InterAmerican highway. Within the State of Chihuahua, Highway 45 is the “Ruta panamericana”. While it is not actually part of the official NAFTA Superhighway, it is referred to as the El Paso Spur (a capillary branch).

between bodies, spaces, and monumentality has not been analyzed systematically in the case of Ciudad Juárez. Following a linear path, I read the city's monumental 'grammar' as an itinerary from South to North along the highway. This itinerary traces a common path migrants would make into, and beyond, the city.³ The iconographic focus will be on two NAFTA-era monuments, *El Umbral del Milenio* (Pedro Francisco Rodríguez, 2001) and the *Monumento a la mexicanidad* (Sebastián, 2013), as well as a precursor to the neoliberal era, the *Parque público federal el Chamizal* (Unknown, 1970).⁴ I will consider the monuments in question as they were meant to be seen along the Pan-American highway. Ultimately, this monumental grammar manifests both the optimism of global capitalism—in a massive, yellow door at the city's entrance—and the spot of its failure—a giant, red X at its exit into the United States. Whether or not this is intentional is up for debate.



Figure 1. Photo by the Author.

³ Ciudad Juárez-El Paso is one of three main entry points (Nogales-Nogales, Reynosa-McAllen) that asylum seekers take into the United States from Central America (Corchado 2014).

⁴ Sebastián is Enrique Carbajal's *nom de guerre*. Carbajal is an internationally renowned sculptor and native of Camargo in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Pedro Francisco Rodríguez is a Juarensé sculptor, known for his statue commemorating Pope Francis's visit to Ciudad Juárez on February 10, 2016. Rodríguez claims that the thirty-foot monument is the tallest sculpture of Pope Francis in the world to date (Aguilar 2016, Najera 2017). The *Parque público federal el Chamizal*, known in the U.S. as the Chamizal National Memorial (U.S. Congress, 1966), was officially recognized in 1970. The *Parque Chamizal* was created by President Adolfo López Mateos and developed by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz working in conjunction with officials at the state and local level.

On the road from Chihuahua City, one enters Juárez after passing a series of dried lakes, the Samalayuca dunes, and two checkpoints: military, then customs. Once the agent lifts the barrier, the traveler sees the one-hundred-foot *Umbral del Milenio* appear above a sign that reads: “Bienvenidos a la Heroica Ciudad Juárez”.

Inaugurated on May 23, 2001, the yellow steel door weighs sixty tons and is the work of the hometown artist Pedro Francisco Rodríguez.⁵ The monument’s impressive scale attracts attention. However, aesthetically it has not been well received. The *Umbral* is described in *Policía de Ciudad Juárez* (2012) by Miguel Ángel Chávez Díaz de León as “una escultura monumental que no tiene gracia. Es una puerta que parece de caricatura, mal hecha y chueca” (2012, 29). The cartoonish door stands idiosyncratically against the pale, bone-colored desert, compensating for its less than innovative placement as an entrance to a city. The door’s size captures the traveler’s attention, briefly. Then, the chain of mountains beckons one beyond the *Umbral*, into Juárez. Nevertheless, this threshold says so much more than “welcome.” Resisting the urge to continue onward, we would do well to contemplate this frame.

The *Umbral* is a passage and a limit, which conjures up Juárez’s previous name: Paso Del Norte (the North Pass). In Spanish, the word *umbral* means threshold, but the etymology of *umbral* is *lumbrar*, to light. The light of the Millennium. In Latin, *umbral* also means *límite*, the limit. The place where the Millennium begins or ends. Here, the *Umbral* contains its antonym, marking the yellow door at the city’s southernmost point as an exit for those traveling north out of Mexico—possibly in search of work—and an entrance into a space that rests in a negative balance as neither the U.S. nor Mexico. Itself a border, the *Umbral*’s reference to the Millennium establishes Juárez as a space of the future. However, as Derrida would put it, the irreducible relationality of genre urges us to recognize that the border between the U.S. and Mexico not only mediates the process of their separate identities as nations, but also reveals that both are contained within each other.⁶ This can be extended to incorporate the Millennium, problematizing the “progress” implicit in the *Umbral* and marking out the border as a future always infected by the past.

⁵ See “Reviven Color Del Umbral Del Milenio” in *El Diario* for details pertaining to the monument.

⁶ In “The Law of Genre,” Jacques Derrida states, “the whole enigma of genre springs perhaps most closely from within this limit between the two genres of genre which, *neither separable nor inseparable*, form an odd couple of one without the other in which each evenly serves the other a citation to appear in the figure of the other” (1980, 56. Emphasis added).

Until the 1940s, the northern border was relatively isolated from the rest of Mexico. In the case of Juárez, the local economy was nonindustrial and dependent on El Paso, Texas; however, after World War II this began to change. This economic and demographic shift can be traced through three programs: the so-called *Bracero* program in 1942, the *Programa de Industrialización Fronteriza* (PIF) in 1966, and the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) in 1994 (Esparza 2004, 123). In drawing migrant labor from all over Mexico, the northern cities became a staging area for those in search of work in plants along or across the border. Accordingly, each program set the stage for the ones that would follow. The *bracero* program, established in 1942, had a long and controversial run, with several iterations, and was finally terminated by the United States in 1964 (122). The concentration of unemployed migrant laborers that remained along the border prompted the Mexican government to implement the PIF. This project pushed to industrialize the border, by creating a twenty-kilometer-wide zone of development, providing incentives for corporations to relocate to the border, and establishing the “maquiladora plant program” that survives to this day.⁷ The third program, NAFTA, allowed capital to flow freely between Canada, Mexico, and the United States. By allowing U.S. and Canadian corporations to relocate across the border, Juarenses labor was integrated into the global market.⁸

It is due to this integration that NAFTA has had a profound impact on Juárez, which is reflected in the city’s iconography. For example, against the barren Chihuahuan desert, the size and style of the *Umbral* draws attention to itself as a new colossus, surpassing monuments that came before, itself a declaration of NAFTA’s modern formation. This contrast can be measured against the *Monumento a Don Benito Juárez* (Volpi, 1910), which at sixty-two feet was the tallest in the city until the *Umbral* was inaugurated. Emblematic of the Porfiriato’s opulent style, it incorporated marble and Italian bronze allegorical statues as part of a verticality that distances the spectator while endowing the illustrious Don Benito with paternalistic omnipotence.⁹ Furthermore, the link between the economic order in place—Porfirian capitalism, with its commitment

⁷ The *maquiladora* is the name used to refer specifically to the factories in northern Mexico. They are described primarily as “export processing plants” because they primarily focus on assembly (Marchand 2004, 90).

⁸ Recently, the U.S. executive branch pushed to rebrand NAFTA as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). Unfortunately, its dissent from the previous agreement’s policies is much more subtle than the radical name change suggests. One thing is for certain: USMCA is not as easy to make into a word (Kolhatkar 2018).

⁹ The “Porfiriato” refers to the time in Mexico’s history from 1876 to 1911 when General Porfirio Díaz ruled the country.

to clientelism, nationalism, and foreign investment—and the monument is a direct one: in 1909, Porfirio Díaz traveled to Ciudad Juárez to lay the first brick when construction began (Dios Olivas 2013; *Monumentos...* 2013). In contrast, the *Umbral* as the monumental link that connects Juárez to the new economic order, the globalized free-market capitalism of NAFTA, is not obvious; no head of state came to weld on the first panel. Instead, this connection has to be read into the *Umbral* itself and the values it exhibits.

Valuing private property, free markets, and free trade as its ultimate ideological objectives, a giant door is a fitting monument to NAFTA precisely because it is capable of expressing and masking the contradictions that result from mixing these values. The innocent threshold at the entrance to a city with a growing demand for migrant labor suggests a freedom of movement. However, while the *Umbral* masquerades as a welcome, it also cordons off: thresholds divide and parcel out private spaces, creating boundaries that should only be crossed by those authorized. On the one hand, free markets and free trade are thought of as expressions of liberty, while on the other hand, the conception of private property is a denial of the other's free access to lands once held in common. In its simplicity, the *Umbral* expresses these contradictions while encouraging us to pay attention to its hospitable grandeur.

However, like all things “monumental,” the *Umbral's* size hides something. After 2001, when the monument was finished, many *maquiladoras* were leaving the border for China (Forero 2003). It was then that Juárez looked and beheld the *Umbral del Milenio*, and in its wake followed the recession of 2007. From boom to collapse, the economic repercussions of crossing into the Millennium entailed a ratcheting up of violence directed at a population whose life-value was declining. This culminated in 2010, when Juárez took on the reputation of “murder capital of the world.” Homicides hit 3,057—an average of eight murders per day, accounting for eleven percent of all homicides in Mexico (Figueroa 2016; Pachico 2017).¹⁰ This is not to say that there was no bloodshed until that point. Cases of *femicidios* have been recorded in Juárez since 1993.¹¹ Despite a decrease in homicides in subsequent years, the drug cartel-related

¹⁰ In a SEDESOL (Secretaría de Desarrollo Social) census conducted in 2010, Ciudad Juárez has a total population of 1.3 million people (Secretaría 2010, 1). However, a census has not been conducted in Juárez since 2010. See *Geografía de la violencia en Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua* (2013) by Luis Ernesto Cervera Gómez and Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso for an analysis of homicides in the city between 2006-2010.

¹¹ See Lourdes Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada* (2001), Martha Patricia Castañeda Salgado's “Femicide in Mexico,” the *La Nota Roja* podcast, and the *Las hijas de su maquilera madre* collective (@hijasdesu_maquileramadre) for more information.

violence continues to devastate the population and economy. This violence can be conceived as the synergistic effect of a cartel war and the global recession. However, this allows said violence to be isolated geographically without taking into consideration Juárez as the most strategic access to Interstate 10. Running from California to Florida, I-10 intersects with the Pan American Highway, giving Juárez—via El Paso—access to both coasts of the drug trade’s most demanding customer. Oddly, when drugs are involved, the complicity that economic laws such as supply and demand play in violence seems to stop at the border. For NAFTA, international exchange and free trade mean sharing commodities, but not the violence that creates them.

In Juárez, this bloodshed has returned in an uncanny form to haunt the “Millennium” itself. As cultural formations, monuments absorb the responses from the public for which they were made. This makes reactions such as vandalism, arson, and theft part of their project and their logic. To the distant traveler, the *Umbral* appears to be pristine yellow. However, distance is too generous, and a closer examination betrays the micro-subversions that blemish its purity. Since 2007, the *Umbral* has been ransacked, defaced, and forgotten. Each name graffitied into the monument, every beer bottle, plastic bag, and tire strewn about the lot is the fragmented repossession of the millennium by the city’s population. The title of Rebolledo’s article speaks for itself: “En el olvido, El Umbral del Milenio”. The light of the Millennium has been smothered, not just by the current state of the *Umbral*, but also by its very illumination: twelve flood lights—bulbs, wiring, and every part of the lighting infrastructure—that were stolen in 2013 (Rebolledo 2019; Aguilar 2016). In this light, or lack thereof, the initial enthusiasm surrounding the *Umbral* is overly optimistic. Particularly when the differences between NAFTA’s proposed effects are reconciled with those actually felt at the border. There is nothing radical in saying that Juárez’s economy is a failure. However, it is not because of drug trafficking, cartel violence, or a backward economy. In fact, as Gareth Williams shows us, the cartels in Mexico and the violence they exert do not disagree with the existing order. On the contrary, they incarnate the principles of private property and the monopolization of wealth “in [their] most naked form” (Williams 2011, 154). Thus, what is most telling about Díaz de León’s critique of the *Umbral*’s size and lopsidedness is not that it predicted the border’s uneven economic development, but that the current state of Ciudad Juárez is precisely the future of global capitalism.

Paradoxically, since its implementation in 1994 (not to even speak of 2001), NAFTA has made legal immigration next to impossible. Goods flow freely, people do not. This sequestering of bodies is not a coincidence but inherent to neoliberalism,

which liberates everything but the working human being as such. The result of NAFTA is that Juárez and other border cities have become “entrenched as outposts of the global economy” (Esparza 2004, 123). This conjures up the image of Marx’s “reserve army of labor.”¹² This mass of value-producers is “on call” to fulfill the needs of the assembly plants in Juárez or ready to cross into the U.S. when summoned. However, without the possibility of free movement, Juárez becomes the choke point of these accumulated bodies, rendering them a labor pool on call for extraction.

Labor is a commodity, flowing across borders as value fixed in an object. Nonetheless, its specific commodity form is peculiar: for free movement to be possible, labor must dissociate itself from its human context, that is, the laborer. By distinguishing the two—labor, laborer—this army at the border becomes an ambivalent object. On one hand, it is desired as a source of value-production, and on the other, this mass of bodies is a threat, an invading army at the gates. This ambivalence keeps laborers available for the market while allowing them to be instrumentalized by a contradictory political discourse, against their free circulation. For example, during periods of economic crisis, anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States is amplified to clamp down at the border, to ostensibly protect local laborers. This was the case, towards the end of 2007, when the global recession began to affect the border. The market had choked off the flow of labor and migrants found themselves with no options, neither in Juárez nor in the United States.

At this point, “entrenchment” takes on another meaning. Peña Muñoz uses the term *atrapados* to describe the migrants who were trapped at the border without prospects of finding a job (2018, 86). The *Umbral* is complicit in the entrapment. Its welcome draws migrant labor northward toward another monument created in response to a previous case of territorial entrapment. Although constructed prior to NAFTA, the *Parque público federal el Chamizal* can be read in the same spirit: a monument to internationalism and one hundred years of diligent diplomacy—motivated by the specter of communism.

¹² According to Marx, technology evolves under capitalist production and renders the laborer superfluous. He states “It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates a mass of human material always ready for exploitation by capital in the interests of capital’s own changing valorization requirements” (1977, 784). Jesús Javier Peña Muñoz uses the term “precariedad laboral”. In my reading this term can be read as both precarious labor conditions as well as underemployment (Peña Muñoz 2018, 83).

Presently, El Pasoans understand the *Chamizal* more as an emblem of international relations than as a monument to a border that would not stay still.¹³ At first sight, natural borders offer a sound rationale for separating countries. After the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848) ended the Mexican War, it was decided that the Rio Grande would serve such a purpose. This makes perfect sense unless the river in question has a second name. The *Río Bravo del Norte*—as it is called in Mexico—can be translated into the ornery, or the wild, or the turbulent river of the north. It was so named due to its stubborn tendency to shift course. This occurred between 1852 and 1864 after a series of torrential downpours created a southward shift in the Rio Grande carving 600 acres into Mexico (Dios Olivas 2013). From one day to the next, Mexican ranchers awoke to find themselves on the opposite side of the river, or it on the opposite side of them (“50 Years...” 2014). Cline sums up the diplomatic complexity of the land dispute with this definition: “the Spanish word *Chamizal* means brush-patch, but internationally speaking ‘the Chamizal’ means a headache” (1963, 13).¹⁴ The dispute lasted about a century, from the time that President Benito Juárez first filed the grievance in 1866 until President Johnson returned the lands to President Díaz Ordaz on October 28, 1967 (Dios Olivas 2013). The condition for returning the land was that both countries would have to create an “international” national park. However, this promise of universality perverted the one already present.¹⁵

NAFTA recreated the U.S.-Mexico border in its own image. As a space of liminality and cultural exchange, the border falls in line with NAFTA’s politico-economic objectives and its purported union of national economies. While the *Parque Chamizal* was established long before the trade agreement went into effect, it does coincide with the onset of the neoliberal era. As a park that spans the border, the *Chamizal* appeals to the “international” links that these “sister cities” have had throughout history. However, the park manifests a paradoxical internationalism, one that is less “inter” and more of a parallel nationalism with clearly demarcated borders.

¹³ See the NPS.gov *Chamizal Memorial* website for a photo gallery of children’s artwork commemorating the site and describing what makes the *Chamizal* so special. The children’s depictions of the monument center upon clearly demarcated boundaries. The river in these works of art creates distance between Mexico and the U.S., instead of alluding to any international community (*What Makes...* 2015).

¹⁴ For more information see *The United States and Mexico* (1963) by Howard F. Cline, or Martín González de la Vara’s *Breve historia de Ciudad Juárez y su región* (2017).

¹⁵ On December 13, 1968, Presidents Johnson and Díaz Ordaz met on the Santa Fe Bridge to inaugurate a water channel honoring President López Mateos. A black box with two switches would be used to blow up the dammed channel together. The Secret Service did not allow this to take place (“A Little Black...” 2018).

Oddly, the establishment of the *Chamizal* marked a point where the cultural universality of these sister cities—El Paso and Juárez—was reterritorialized into political and economic particularity.



Figure 1. Photo by the Author.

One need only consider the difference in titles. The U.S. chose to venerate the site, calling it the Chamizal National Memorial, while in Mexico it is the *Parque Público Federal el Chamizal*. In the U.S., current perceptions of the memorial center around binational relations and successful diplomacy. Nevertheless, the commemorative aspect of the site remains unclear. After all, one tends to memorialize one's own loss, not the giving of something back. Thus, the question remains: what has been lost? In 1848, Mexico lost fifty-five percent of its surface territory to the United States (Brooks 2019). Of this land, the Chamizal is the only bit to have been returned. Perhaps we can go so far as to read this memorialization as the end of U.S. territorial expansion (at least formally).¹⁶ In 1973, we saw another sign of divergence when the international streetcar that had connected the cities' downtowns for nearly a century was blockaded on the

¹⁶ In 1962, President John F. Kennedy entered the round of negotiations with President Adolfo López Mateos that would begin the end of the Chamizal dispute. During negotiations, Kennedy's focus was primarily on Cold War politics and limiting the spread of Soviet influence ("Chamizal Convention..." 2015). This comes just two years after Kennedy's "The New Frontier" speech at the Democratic national convention. In the speech, Kennedy refers to the end of the American frontier and posits a "new frontier," no longer territorial but abstract. He refers specifically to space, markets, and even the mind as frontier to "compete against the single-minded advance of the Communist system" (Kennedy 1960, 7). American imperialism shifts from a formal territorial expansion to an abstract "informal" empire.

Mexican side due to “problems of labor” (Dawson 2009, 8). In *Street Railways of El Paso* (2009) Dawson explains that the Juarese government sought to curtail shopping in the U.S. and therefore discontinued the trolley line due to the economic threat one city posed to the other (8). A third sign of separation is what has been deemed the “El Paso Miracle.” Namely, while Juárez has ranked among the most dangerous cities in the world since 2004, El Paso has continuously ranked among the five safest cities in the U.S. (Shjarback and Manjarrez 2019). Therefore, the *Chamizal* simultaneously manifests conjunction and disjunction. It manifests conjunction by alluding to a river that dislodged itself and encroached upon a historically unified, but now divided, space. As for disjunction, the *Chamizal* points to a time when economic and social development at the border was partitioned and remotely incubated. Schulze points out that during the dispute, “the Chamizal remained in a curious state of limbo,” but this state “did not stop both the El Pasoans and Juarenses from building upon it” (2012, 310). In a sense, the short life of the Chamizal neighborhood was the last moment of non-NAFTA internationalism at the border. Since neither government took control of the space, the refusal to make the Chamizal into a neighborhood led to the displacement of nearly 5,000 inhabitants (Brooks 2019).¹⁷ Today, traveling through the *Chamizal* one would not see the remains of the neighborhood. However, one would see a park and a massive X straddling the very spot where the river once passed.

On May 23, 2013, the mayor of Juárez Héctor “Teto” Murguía, inaugurated Sebastián’s *Monumento a la mexicanidad*. Sebastián was not present. The mayor’s project took over nine years over two nonconsecutive terms to build it—from proposal to completion—and is estimated to have cost around \$5,857,575 USD (Dios Olivas 2013; Murguía 2013).¹⁸ Locally known as, “el caprichito de Teto”, the red, steel X weighs eighty tons and occupies 753,473 square feet (Reza 2013; Orquiz 2013).¹⁹ Doubling the *Umbral*’s height at 200 feet, it is visible on both sides of the border. Nonetheless, the most controversial aspect of the *Monumento a la mexicanidad* is neither its geographical placement nor the artist’s ambitious title. It is, in fact, its shape.

¹⁷ See the *Chamizal Oral History Project* for more information on those affected by the Chamizal Dispute.

¹⁸ 110 million Mexican pesos, according to historical exchange rates (Dios Olivas 2013).

¹⁹ See the 2013 article “Esperan repunte turismo con inauguración de la X; surgen pintas contra el monumento” from *El Diario* for an overview of the public opinion related to the monument.

The *Equis* (as it is colloquially known) can be read as an entire story told in a letter. In 1934, Xavier Icaza did so when he argued that the quest of Mexicanness is to decipher “nuestro enigma agorero, la dura y atormentada X de México” (1934, 49).²⁰ So what story does the *Monumento a la mexicanidad* tell us? A good place to start is Sebastián. How does the artist reconcile the quest for this “ominous enigma?”

Sebastián understood his own monument in the most banal terms possible. He appeals to the intersection between the pre-Columbian cultures of Mexico and the Spanish—that is, Mexico’s famous mestizo identity (Sebastián 2011).²¹ But the X is rife with a range of other interpretations. Capable of signification, the X is not a linguistic sign. It is a floating signifier, meaning that it is not a single concept but an intersection of many, all of which resist any singular or encompassing interpretation. The X creates a blank that must be filled in by the spectator. This variability defers the process of signification to the point of voiding the work of its autonomous meaning by provoking only questions. The various interpretations accentuate that when viewed independent of its “discourses of meaning” the *Monumento a la mexicanidad* and its proposed Mexicanness is lost in a web of *différance*. The X can represent an unknown quality such as a variable, as is the case in algebra. The X means money.²² The X marks the graves of the *sin nombres*. It can be a chromosome, a signature, a mistake, a cancellation, a mysterious person, thing or factor. It cuts through gender binaries, represents Christ, a kiss, Chronos the god of time, or the planet Saturn (Danesi 2009, 16).²³ The X replaces the letters “ex,” as in X-treme, X-travagant, and XXXtra hot.²⁴ XX is a beer. XXX is inherently dirty—not love, but sex. In Mexican popular speech, *equis* can mean mediocre or generic: “La fiesta fue bastante equis”, or “es una marca equis”. The X stands in for absence as seen in Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest: Adaptation for a Black Theatre* (1969), when Caliban states to his master, Prospero, “Call me X. That would be best. Like a man without a name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen” (2010). Similarly, Malcolm X describes his use of the X as a simultaneous loss and birth, making it a character that both commemorates the loss of his identity as well as the

²⁰ These are the closing lines to Xavier Icaza’s *La Revolución mexicana y la literatura: Conferencias del Palacio de bellas artes* (1934).

²¹ In an interview about the *Monumento a la mexicanidad*, Sebastián points out that the X pertains to the notion of mestizaje (Sebastián 2011).

²² U.S. Steel changed its name to USX. When the chairman of the board, James Roderick, was asked what the X meant, his response was “X stands for money” (Harvey 2005, 30).

²³ See Marcel Danesi’s *X-Rated! The Power of Mythic Symbolism in Popular Culture* (2009).

²⁴ As in the hot sauce, El Yucateco’s *salsa picante Kutbil-ik de Chile Habanero*, Mayan recipe.

birth of a new one.²⁵ In colonial illustrations such as the *Florentine Codex* (1540-1585), the so-called Malinche makes an X with her fingers to summon a meeting of caciques.²⁶ The X can also be a prohibition, a “do not pass,” or a warning to those *atrapados* who venture into the land of *el sueño americano*. And finally, apparently, the X can mean Mexicanness.

According to Roger Bartra, the concept of Mexicanness is an “accumulation of myths, codified over such a long period by Mexican intellectuals” (1992, 6).²⁷ In talking about the X, Sebastián makes such a mythological appeal: “Benito Juárez fue quien quitó la jota de la palabra México para poner la equis, fue Don Benito Juárez, y lo hizo, pues yo no sé si con consciencia de que somos un país mestizo” (2011). The veracity of the claim that Benito Juárez was the president who changed the J to an X is doubtful. In fact, Sebastián’s assertion is further complicated by Revilla who argues that Juárez—with respect to the *jotista* and *equisista* debate—had an affinity for the J.²⁸ Furthermore, Sebastián’s recodification of *mexicanidad* as specifically mestizo is a tired and problematic repetition of the national identity constructed during the nineteenth century. As Lund shows us, during the liberal republic Mexican intellectuals had already thought up “a newly racialized protagonist of national progress: the mestizo” (2012, 39).²⁹ If mestizo identity refers to the cross between the pre-Columbian cultures of Mexico and the Spanish, one must wonder how a two-hundred-foot red X fits into this equation. On the one hand, the X is capable of representing an intersection of cultures—it is, after all, an intersection of lines. But on the other hand, the X, as a representation of the indigenous people of Mexico, does not define itself clearly. The letter does not, in fact, amalgamate within Mexican identity. In the nation’s name, the X does not produce its own sound, for example a “sh.” It stands in for the J. That is, the presence of the X in the word *México* does not represent the presence of the *indio* in the mestizo state; instead, it is a specter that signals the absence of this community.

²⁵ Malcolm X states “[t]he Muslim’s ‘X’ symbolized the true African family name that he never could know. For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ‘Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears” (X 1965, 201).

²⁶ In the *Florentine Codex*, Doña Marina is seen as the mediator between the *mexica* and Hernado Cortés. She crosses her hands or fingers to summon a meeting.

²⁷ Much has been written about Mexicanness, from José Vasconcelos and Leopoldo Zea to Octavio Paz’s *Laberinto de la soledad* (1950), and the generations of responses to Paz, including Elena Garros’s *La culpa es de los Tlaxcaltecas* (1989), among others.

²⁸ For a discussion on the debate between the *Jotistas* and *Equisistas* see the essay *Por qué no escribo Mexico [sic] con J: cuestión filológico-histórica* (1911) by Manuel G. Revilla.

²⁹ See Joshua Lund, *The Mestizo State* (2012).

Accordingly, *mexicanidad* can be read as a form of exclusion. This exclusion becomes evident when we consider another aspect of *mexicanidad* that the monument proposes.

Sebastián links the composition of the X to the “*nabui ollin*,” a *mexica* (that is, Aztec) concept meaning “fourth movement.” He justifies his choice for the monument by stating, “¿Por qué es una equis? Porque está contenida en la composición el *nabui ollin*. ¿Saben qué es el *nabui ollin*? El *nabui ollin* es la tradición mexicana. Fíjense qué bonito, es la sangre derramada para enaltecer a la aurora en el sentido profundo de los antiguos aztecas” (Sebastián 2011). Sebastián prioritizes the letter—as a form or shape—when he states that the *nabui ollin* is contained within the X, not the other way around. While it is true that Sebastián’s X is similar to the composition of the *nabui ollin*—an X with an eye in the center—it does not necessarily follow that it is universally representative of *mexicanidad*. In short, to privilege the “antiguos aztecas” is to exclude local indigenous cultures such as the Rarámuri or the Yaqui, who might not identify with the *nabui ollin* at all. The post-Revolutionary *indigenismo* debates return to the border, offering a set of nostalgic tropes with a caveat. The *nabui ollin* is its subtle reference to sacrifice for the sake of “praising the dawn.” What that “dawn” is has yet to be determined. However, Sebastián does appear to refer to it as a greater good. If it is a reference to a “new era,” then that dawn has not arrived, and as recent events along the border have suggested, it will not be arriving anytime soon.³⁰ Sebastián’s signature color *rojo fuego* seems a cruel but accurate choice.³¹

Monuments do not function as intended. Once familiar, they are recontextualized, repurposed, and resignified. As Monsiváis writes, “[t]here is no country without a statue, and no statue without its corresponding sermon. However, and in no time at all, familiarity transforms these sculptures—whose message is extremely clear—into a dubious art form” (1989, 106).³² Here, Monsiváis refers to the inevitable reterritorialization of public art once it enters social space. The *Monumento a la mexicanidad* has undergone such repurposing. Since its inauguration, the X has been the site of weddings, parties, concerts, theater festivals, carnivals, a bike fest, break-

³⁰ I refer to the mass shooting on August 3, 2019, in El Paso, Texas that left twenty-two dead and twenty-four injured. Deemed the deadliest anti-Latino attack in modern U.S. history, this shooting was strategically directed at a Wal-Mart Supercenter near Cielo Vista shopping mall and near the Bridge of the Americas port of entry. Eight Mexican nationals were murdered in the attack. See *The Guardian* article from August 20, 2019: “Police thwarted at least seven mass shootings and white supremacist attacks since El Paso.”

³¹ See the article “Termina Sebastián monumento de la equis” by Araly Castañón (2013a) in *El Diario*.

³² See “On Civic Monuments and Their Spectators” in Helen Escobedo’s *Mexican Monuments: Strange Encounters*.

dancing competitions, as well as bloodshed (“La ‘X’...” 2014, “Balean a...” 2015).³³ There is no doubt that the space this sculpture occupies has been utilized, but the X is always external to the spectator. In photographs, it appears as the background of a selfie.³⁴ When foregrounded, it is a sentinel towering over the onlooker and gazing into the camera.

Recent depictions, such as *Juarez Rocks* (2019) by artist Jessie Gandarilla, reverse the gaze of the monument and show it peering across to the El Paso side of the border. In Kustom Kulture style, the X stands above a flaming desert, bearing its pierced tongue while its left arm is raised in the Gene Simmons hand gesture.³⁵ Here, the black oval at the center of the monument’s composition is a mouth. But the oval is also a gaze, giving it an aura of vigilance, and as some have proposed or lampooned, the *Equis* watches over the border as a superhero.³⁶ However, Teto had other aspirations. In his initial plan, the eye was supposed to be a lookout point and restaurant (Orquiz 2013).³⁷ Thus, the gaze would not be an eye keeping watch over the border but would instead be the eyes of hungry tourists suspended over two cities that seem to merge into one. This plan never came to fruition, as the plan for a restaurant was canceled just three months later. When asked, Teto confessed that they were having trouble attracting investors, “porque cualquier empresa que ponga un restaurante en un segundo piso tiende a fracasar” (Castañón 2013b).³⁸ As a result, Teto decided to make the eye into a lookout point. However, today, if a traveler took a stroll around the *Monumento a la mexicanidad* they would find that businesses—and lookout points—that never open always tend to fail.

A recent trip to the monument revealed that much of the 753,473 square-foot complex has been cordoned off. The wide expanses of grass have long since yellowed and receded revealing the dirt beneath. The derelict state of the climbing wall at Parque

³³ Note that in the article “La ‘X’, testigo de su amor”, the monument stands witness to a wedding.

³⁴ See #LaXdejuarez for images.

³⁵ @Jessiegandarilla is an El Paso artist whose recent work has influence from the Kustom Kulture style popular in El Paso, Texas. See @jessiegandarilla on Instagram for other work.

³⁶ The X has been lampooned on various occasions for its monumental size. Please see the *El Diario* article, “Será la ‘X’ escenario para nueva película de los X-Men” or the Facebook post, from December 2014, by local Juarese artist Edgar R. Luna “Malagradecidos! Con el tiempo ya verán si no quieren la equis”.

³⁷ See “Hasta con encubiertos resguardará Municipio inauguración de la X” by Jesús Salas in *El Diario*.

³⁸ See “Cancelan el proyecto de restaurante en la equis” in *El Diario* from August 8, 2013, for more information.

Xtreme, the graffiti, the chain link, and cracked earth give this once promising—and monetized—space a post-apocalyptic air. The paint on the X is visibly faded; access into the overlook is prohibited; and the two doors at the base of the monument are chained shut. A local groundskeeper, who wanted to remain anonymous, stated that neither the lookout nor the restaurant opened, ever. According to him, there have been recent attempts to repair the elevator, which lacks a piece that is made only in Europe, and to restore the monument’s “cheap” paint. However, it is difficult to say whether these attempts will eventually be fruitful. Ultimately, these findings reinforce the financial burden that this *Equis* has had on Juárez and undermines the economic boost that the monument once portended for the city.³⁹ The only section of the complex that continues to draw a crowd is the skating park, which was simply too large to fence in and monetize. X marks the spot of failure.

The idea that the *Monumento a la mexicanidad* would generate revenue has been abandoned. What’s more, so has its title. A local article published in 2018 addressing the current state of the X reveals a shift in its name. The mayor at the time, Armando Cabada Alvidrez, states, “[e]l Municipio está haciendo una revisión completa al monumento de la *Equis*” (Castañón 2018, emphasis added). Here, Mayor Alvidrez no longer refers to Sebastián’s monument as the *Monumento a la mexicanidad*. It is simply *Monumento de la Equis*. As an independent, this name change could be Mayor Alvidrez distancing himself from Teto and the PRI. However, upon further examination this name change is not coincidental, but confirmed: first, by the absence of the artist at the inauguration; and second, by *Sebastián: Half a Century of Artistic Creation* (2017), where the single photograph of the monument is titled *La X de Juárez* (Sebastián 2017, 159). This name change appears in the photo credits, where the monument is described as located in the *Plaza de la mexicanidad* (Sebastián 2017, 410). The simple description distances the monument from the cultural nationalism that was constructed around it in its first year. The abandoned X, as it is now, with its rotting *rojo fuego* paint, cloistered by chain link, gathers the purported economic effects of NAFTA, its neoliberal reforms, and its cultural nationalism into a grotesque bouquet. Furthermore, by referring to the monument as *La X de Juárez*, the gigantic letter becomes more enigmatic. The “ominous enigma” lies in the fact that there is no X in the spelling of Juárez the way there is an X in Mexico. But even the rumors that the X was part of a

³⁹ See the 2013 article “Esperan repunte turismo con inauguración de la X; surgen pintas contra el monumento” from *El Diario* for an overview of the projected financial impact that the monument would have on tourism and the city.

greater plan to spell out M-E-X-I-C-O in steel letters across the border is now used to explain to tourists why there is a giant letter between the two cities. Thus, the X is neither an expression of *mexicanidad* nor the beginnings of an international spelling bee, but simply an X that belongs to Juárez. Purchased property.

If the *Umbral* was built during a time of optimism about the border's economic promise, then the *Monumento a la mexicanidad* responds to its failure. Moreover, the cultural nationalism expressed in the monument is an attempt to recreate meaning in a world that is ever more uncertain. Brian Whitener's concept of the *Klingsor Paradox* might help us illuminate how the X went from an appeal to Mexican nationalism—against Ciudad Juárez's stigmatization—to just a giant letter at the border.⁴⁰ In *Crisis Culture* (2019), Whitener uses Jorge Volpi's *En busca de Klingsor* (1999) to show how Mexican literature tried to reengage with its national popular image in the 1990s.⁴¹ The “national popular” is a concept employed by Gareth Williams—and initially coined by Antonio Gramsci—to show how the fictive unity of a nation is managed through its representations; the “mestizo” is a prime example. There were, however, other socially and economically charged figures that emerged, such as “the poor,” “the housewife,” or “the worker.” We see now that the long economic decline affecting Mexico after the 1970s led to the destruction of these fictive identities. Keeping this in mind, the Klingsor paradox is the desire for determinism in a fully indeterminate world (Whitener 2019, 34). This desire is expressed in the attempt to instrumentalize an eighty-ton X to determine anew the national popular image—again—as the mestizo. But as we know with any national foundation, to base it solely on *mestizaje*—even in its compulsion to mix—is to construct a threshold between those who represent the nation and those who do not. Furthermore, building unity around popular images such as “the housewife” and “the worker” is increasingly impossible because those rendered economically superfluous in a place like Ciudad Juárez can be neither in actuality. National popular images are indeed fictive. In this context, the appeal to nationalism seems dated, or in poor taste for the sheer fact that the Mexicanness of the *Monumento*

⁴⁰ See the article “Inauguración de lujo en Plaza de la X” from *El Diario*. Comments made at the inauguration of the *Monumento a la mexicanidad* reference this stigmatization: Mexican singer Juan Gabriel is the first quoted in the article, “[t]uvimos una reunión binacional, y deseamos que nunca más se estigmatice a Ciudad Juárez. [...] Cuando llegó su turno, el gobernador del estado César Duarte mencionó que el monumento debe convertirse en un ícono que marque los nuevos tiempos de Juárez” [sic] (Camacho 2013).

⁴¹ The novel centers on two historical moments: the discovery of relativity and the end of the Nazi regime. The main character joins a military mission to track down Nazis. In his search he learns about a man named Klingsor who was in charge of secret Nazi programs. Nobody knows if Klingsor is real. The novel ends without them learning the truth.

a la mexicanidad has been dropped. Ultimately, the name change frees the monument from its cultural nationalist discourse and allows it to be reterritorialized as an enigmatic (un)welcome.

After looking over one's shoulder, the X is the last thing one sees upon exiting over the free bridge along the Pan-American Highway. Or it is the welcome one receives just before entering the U.S. However, for the *atrapado*, it is a prohibition: "you shall not pass." Furthermore, understanding the X as a(n) (un)welcome sign allows us to rethink the status of the *atrapados* caught within this iconographic parenthesis—giant door, giant X. When read in succession, or at least traced along following the South to North itinerary, Juárez's monumental grammar betrays it as a bottleneck for the global market. Within the choke point, these *atrapados* become not only a reserve army of labor but surplus humanity. If the ability to "potentially" sell its labor is what characterizes Marx's industrial reserve army, then what happens when this becomes impossible? This is precisely what Benanav and Clegg have shown us in their work with the Endnotes Collective. In "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," we understand that there is a moment when the industrial reserve army grows to the point of becoming absolutely redundant because neither urban nor agricultural industry can absorb the unemployable (Benanav and Clegg 2010, 41).⁴² Ciudad Juárez is no exception; without a wage, without employment, and especially without socioeconomic support we see these wageless workers turning to the informal economy for survival.⁴³ But what happens when "formal" employment is impossible and when this accumulation of *atrapados* manifests the social insecurity of the new economic order? X marks the spot of failure.

In Ciudad Juárez, and other cities across the global South, those who cannot be incorporated into the waged system of labor are "policed, warehoused, or exterminated" (Chen 2013, 218).⁴⁴ Contrary to what often characterizes neoliberalism (namely, that it is marked by the withdrawal of the state), we see that this is not the case. Typically, the state withdraws selectively and partially: first from shared social

⁴² This is evident in the explosive growth of slums throughout the Global South.

⁴³ Unemployable through no fault of their own. In fact, Benanav and Clegg show us that simple reproduction continually expels both capital and labor. This reaches a point where, in order to maximize profit, improvements in labor saving technology make it so that production can reincorporate neither capital nor labor, rendering them superfluous.

⁴⁴ See "Limit Point of Capitalist Equality" by Chris Chen, where he discusses the construction of race as essential to primitive accumulation. He also shows how the base, in Marxian political economy, refers specifically to white labor, as it was contrasted to chattel slavery.

risks, i.e., pensions, public healthcare, and welfare assistance, and then it intervenes to create a new market, shifting funds toward policing and incarceration.⁴⁵ In the case of Ciudad Juárez and the so-called “War on Drugs,” we see a dual effect. This withdrawal simultaneously founds a “carceral market” where these *atrapados* are managed through state or state-sanctioned violence. At the border, managing surplus humanity takes the form of disappearance. Specifically, the unwaged body or working-class women from the *maquiladoras*. In contrast to disappearances during the Dirty Wars, there are no clandestine torture sites run solely by the state.⁴⁶ Instead, the forces that disappear people are legion—state security, paramilitary forces, organized crime—while the disappeared themselves have been depoliticized. They are no longer labor organizers or political activists; they could be anyone at all. This is not to say that neoliberal disappearances are not political. However, any discourse related to class or race is overshadowed by purported delinquency or criminal involvement.

After 2007, the *atrapados*' lives lost value as they could no longer be instrumentalized in production. Without a wage, these bodies were voided of their productive potential and atomized into calculable, quantifiable, and objectifiable resources. One need only refer to González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto* (2002), Bolaño's *2666* (2004), or the newspaper *El Diario de Juárez* to see how these bodies are enumerated, isolated from their whole, and signified by the violence exerted upon them—instrumentalizing bare life.⁴⁷ In contrast to the *Umbral*, which lures the *atrapado* northward, the X completes the monumental equation by proscribing movement beyond the border. It prohibits the movement of the *atrapados*, choking off the flow of bodies.

⁴⁵ See “Mexican Disappearance, U.S. Incarceration” by Dawn Marie Paley, where she compares disappearances in Mexico to U.S. incarceration. Her argument is that the two serve as analogues for managing surplus humanity. Where the U.S. has the carceral apparatus to manage and maintain a growing number of incarcerated people, Mexico does not. For this reason, disappearance through state sanctioned violence operates as disappearance by incarceration.

⁴⁶ Paley describes two types of disappearance: Cold War and neoliberal. The former is tied to the Dirty War in Latin America, while the latter is related to the withdrawal of the welfare state, the rise of finance, and the privatization of the public sphere—i.e., the neoliberal era. For her, Cold War disappearances were used to intimidate political opponents or those with so-called subversive political projects. This form of disappearance involved state-run, clandestine torture for the sake of extracting information. Those figures disappeared or detained were union members, activists, or members of leftist groups. They could even be people merely related to these figures (Paley 2019).

⁴⁷ See *Each and Her* (2010) a book of poetry by Valerie Martínez dedicated to the murdered women of Juárez. In the poem titled “61” Martínez captures this enumeration by listing off three pages of murdered women named María (Martínez 2010, 61).

Recently, and since 1965, our conception of immigration has shifted from Ellis Island to the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Accordingly, this geographical shift has problematized the Statue of Liberty as the universal signifier of immigration and its implied relation to freedom. Recent stories about refugees from Central America reveal a contradiction between what Americans tell themselves about the immigrant experience and its reality. The scandal around containing and even caging asylum seekers at the border speaks for itself. In one case among thousands, U.S. Customs and Border Protection detained asylum seekers under a bridge on the El Paso side of the border in what the agents call “transitional shelters.”⁴⁸ This is further complicated by photos of *la migra* bullwhipping Haitian refugees at the border, as well as recent deaths linked to the opening of the Caballo and Elephant Butte Dams, which have instrumentalized the Rio Grande against asylum seekers as well.⁴⁹ Actions like these, and their systematization, problematize the hoary tale of the Statue of Liberty, Mother of Exiles, to say the least. Asylum seekers who enter at the U.S.-Mexico border are not only denied their freedom but their dignity. Recently, Stovall went as far as to say that the Statue of Liberty represents not simply innocent freedom, but more precisely, “White Freedom.” In other words, a freedom centered primarily on honoring the *descendants* of European immigrants, not the immigrants themselves, and certainly not current immigrants provoking fake border emergencies today.⁵⁰ This implicit exclusion suggests that the Statue of Liberty can neither make good on any universal notion of “liberty” conjured in its name, nor be the Mother of *all* Exiles—only some.

But what does a massive X at the border have to do with the Statue of Liberty? If we turn to Stovall’s argument, the Statue is a specifically European welcome because of its location; otherwise, there would be one in Miami, Nogales, or El Paso (2018, 26). In Juárez, these asylum seekers find something much more ambiguous. Their welcome ends twenty miles south, at the “threshold” of the city, before even reaching the U.S. checkpoint. These bodies are drawn northward by the *Umbral del Milenio*, stripped down to bare existence by the city, and admonished by a massive X. Thus, the *Equis* can be

⁴⁸ See the *LA Times* article titled “U.S. border authorities hold migrant families in a pen under an El Paso bridge” by Kate Linthicum, who describes the conditions as unsanitary and ill-equipped for the cold desert nights.

⁴⁹ The water flow in the Rio Grande is tightly managed by the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission. It does not flow all year around and depends on the levels of Caballo Lake and the Elephant Butte Dam. See “Advocates Fear Migrants Deaths on Rise in El Paso with Canal Drownings, I-10 Fatalities” in the *El Paso Times* for more information on the deaths of asylum seekers (Borunda 2019).

⁵⁰ See Stovall’s 2018 presidential address to the American Historical Association, “White Freedom and the Lady of Liberty.”

read as a portent, a monster warning those who have just arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border. It stands as a sentinel near the *Puente de las Americas* and will become part of the immigrants' imagination as the twenty-first century's Statue of (Neo)Liberty.⁵¹ As an edifice of neoliberalism, the once *Monumento a la mexicanidad* displaces the Statue of Liberty as the symbolic arbiter of the American Dream. It also seems to resonate with the "remain in Mexico" policies governing immigration and asylum at the border today.

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⁵¹ The Bridge of the Americas, or *puente libre*, passes through the center of the Chamizal.

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