

Beyond the Wall: Borderland Identity through Puppets

[ANA DIAZ BARRIGA](#)

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

On November 2017, in the city of Nogales, Arizona/Sonora, binational festival Beyond the Wall / Más Allá del Muro took place, bringing 15-foot tall puppets to the US/Mexico border. This essay is a first attempt to bring an academic gaze to Jess Kaufman's and my activist pursuit, reflecting on how puppetry allowed us to deepen our conversation with community members and discover the true purpose of our artistic action. This paper will trace our journey from the conception of the performance as an attempt to reframe the politically-charged border wall, through the expansion of the festival via the inclusion of community leaders, to the actual event and performance with puppets built and operated by volunteers from various segments of the community. Exploring community-based theatre where puppets function as amplifiers of the stories and identities of community members, and suggesting the opalescent identity of the puppet as parallel to the identity of the borderlands, this essay uncovers and establishes new research

questions, to be explored through praxis as they shape the future of the project with the aim of investigating how to create activism with a lasting impact focused on our common ground by rooting it on voices from the community.

The first iteration of binational festival Beyond the Wall / Más Allá del Muro took place in November 2017 in the city of Nogales, Arizona/Sonora, bisected by the border between Mexico and the US. Originally conceived as a giant puppetry performance that would turn the politically charged “wall” into an object of play, the event expanded, through the inclusion of community leaders, into a two-day festival in celebration of the borderlands featuring an art exhibit, two block parties, a concert, and a performance at the border with 15-foot tall puppets built and operated by community members. This essay is a first attempt to bring an academic gaze to our activist pursuit by examining the history of the project, the decisions taken, and the discoveries made. New questions arose as our involvement with the community reshaped our understanding of their and our identities, as well as the purpose and impact of our activism at the border, culminating in the identification of key research inquiries for the next phase of the project.

WHERE WE COME FROM

On February 17, 2017, my future collaborator, Jess Kaufman, and I had a Skype meeting. Donald Trump had just been inaugurated as President of the United States and his proposed “border wall” was the subject of repeated news reports. Jess had an idea for an intervention at the border: during the meeting, she talked me through a proposal to use giant puppets of children to turn the wall into an object of play. I suggested we involve the community members that were being affected by the new immigration policies, inviting them to be the performers in hope that they could use the puppets as a means to redefine their relationship to the border. And thus, Beyond the Wall was born.

Trump’s announcement of intent to build a wall between the US-Mexico border in 2015 (Washington Post Staff, 2015), brought more attention to immigration issues and the aggressive rhetoric that was

being used to refer to those issues on both sides of the border (BBC News, 2017a; Karaim, 2016; Parker, Corasaniti, & Berenstein, 2016). Protests against the wall became a common occurrence (Althaus & Cordoba, 2016; Karaim, 2016; Leou, 2017) and, although some were carried out through positive action, the common thread among them was a rejection of the new policies to be implemented (BBC News, 2017b). Our observation was that these activist attempts were only getting limited results. We hoped to find an alternative approach, creating a call to action that had, at its core, the positive aspects of the borderlands. Jess and I intended to use scale to diminish the importance of the border wall and believed puppets could be a useful means to achieve this: we hoped to be able to build figures that were big enough to interact over the existing border fence, while keeping their intrinsic good-natured character. We wanted to inspire people to think of the wall in a playful way, using the puppets as tools for reversing the growing negative rhetoric around border politics. Our inkling was that life and the events at the border went far beyond what was being fed to us by the media.

I say inkling because neither of us is from the border. Jess is based in New York and I am from Mexico City, so, although we felt we could represent the respective views of our countries to an extent, we were also aliens to the borderlands. The organization of this event became a turning point in re-discovering and re-defining our own national and professional identities through our exploration of the possibilities and limitations of working in the borderlands and our engagement with the borderland identity.

In researching the legal viability of our project, Nogales was suggested to us by a state-level political organizer in Arizona due to its existing artistic scene as well as its geographic location: the city is divided by the border, existing simultaneously, in Sonora, Mexico and Arizona, United States. Over the next couple of months, we managed to contact leaders of the community¹—one in Arizona, and one in Sonora—who were excited by our project and proposed we incorporate our performance into existing events that sought to enhance the economy and promote local businesses on the Arizona side, and to bring cultural activities and provide spaces for local artists on the Sonora side. Raúl

¹ Persistence and a series of lucky coincidences (probably made possible by the heated political climate at the time) permitted this. Unfortunately, the length and scope of this paper does not allow me to delve into further detail.

Leyva, our collaborator in Sonora, told us that he had spent years seeking a partnership in Arizona to organize events, and we were glad to position ourselves as facilitators in the communication between people of these adjacent communities, along with building infrastructure through production duties to make these events a reality. Through these collaborations, our project rapidly expanded from a one-off performance at the border into a two-day binational festival.

We built the first prototype for our giant puppets during a residency in New York in July 2017 with guidance from kinetic sculpture artist Anne Clobberly. During this construction process we discovered the identity of our initial puppet and, in an unconscious gesture, named her Flor. It wasn't until Flor stood up in her full, 15-foot tall glory at the work-in-progress showing on the final day of our residency that we realized there were deeper questions about what we were doing. We confirmed that our puppet had a playful character and the potential to unite spectators through the mere desire to interact with it. But who was this character that we had created? Where was she from, and what was the significance of her belonging to a certain place? During the build, we interrogated the viability of having community members participate in the building and operating of the puppets during the festival, but on the last day we made the crucial leap to considering the implications of their participation. What would it mean to ask this of the people of Nogales?

WHERE WE WENT

In the two months leading up to the festival, we put out calls for artists to participate in the exhibition and concert, as well as call outs for community participants to build, decorate and operate the giants. Two weeks before the festival, Jess and I drove from New York to Arizona, transporting Flor and our building materials, without any participants signed up to be involved in the puppet construction. After four days of driving and dreading that no one in the community would want to partake in this activity, we arrived with our small team² in Nogales for the first time on Monday, November 20th.

Nogales became a city in the 1920s, but it was a village since the 1880s when a train station was built in the area, which had been a

² Our team included impromptu assistant Talya Chalef, our intern Michael Duncan, as well as documentary film-makers Derly Pérez and Andrés Arias.

migratory path and trade route since the 1770s (“The History of Nogales, Arizona,” n.d.), to promote commerce between Mexico and the US (H. Ayuntamiento de Nogales, n.d.). As the population increased, the benefits of having a city straddling both countries became apparent. Inhabitants crossed freely to obtain commodities that could be found on the other side until a temporary fence was built in 1916 followed by a permanent fence in 1918 (Burton, 2017). This division has undergone several reconstructions affected by political circumstances: in the mid-1990s, an existing chain-link fence was replaced by one of corrugated steel, and the bollard-style fence that stands today was built in 2011 (Medrano, 2011). Upon our arrival, Stephanie Bermudez, our local collaborator, gave us a tour of Nogales, Arizona. She showed us areas of the fence where a new mesh was being installed to keep people from passing objects through the border, prompting complaints from current citizens who, constrained by visa limitations, would take advantage of the permeable structure of the fence to have lunch with their family members (Zionts, 2017), and who are now being restricted by a solution that is supposed (but unlikely) to resolve smuggling issues that exist all along the US/Mexico border (Contreras, 2016).³ This brief overview of the history of Nogales highlights how the community, though divided by a national border, functions as a single entity: *Ambos Nogales*, so called by those who live there.

The border crossing point, however, portrayed the same belief as the media: we all, including those at the borderlands, must conform to the identities assigned to us by the frontiers that divide us. We “belong” to a nation. This was made clear by the long lines non-US citizens had to endure to go through passport control to enter into the US, while those with a US passport whizzed through the crossing point, without even having their belongings checked. To cross into Mexico, however, no one appeared to keep track of anyone’s comings and goings, with only an unused metal detector and a few agents securing the country’s entrance.

³ At the time of this writing, the mesh attached to the fence is approximately 8 feet high, leaving more than half of the existing bollard wall permeable above it. When we conducted a binational picnic encounter with high school students coming together on both sides of the border, agents instructed us to ensure the students did not reach up and pass objects through the fence above the mesh (J. Kaufman, personal communication, November 2, 2018).

On Tuesday, November 21st, Raúl gave us a tour of Nogales, Sonora before taking us to the Museo de Arte de Nogales, where we were offered space to work for the week leading up to the events. Though we spent the day building by ourselves, our fears about a lack of participants were short-lived. We had a few curious visitors and by Wednesday, word of our presence had spread, and we welcomed our first volunteers: a group of high school students from the Preparatoria Municipal accompanied by their teacher, Oscar Lancaster. Though they were reticent at the beginning, by the time night fell, they did not want to leave. Oscar told us that not a lot of people believed in these teenagers, who became eager when they realized we trusted them and appreciated the effort they were putting into these puppets. Eventually, they even engineered a new cushioning system for the puppets' backpacks. Over the next couple of days, more volunteer groups showed up, including a large group of student teachers from the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional; artist/activist single moms who allowed us to promote the festival on their radio station, and who brought their daughters along to help with the construction; a group from Arizona Equality, an LGBT organization; and a group of teenagers who were taking circus classes at a local community center, and who offered to stilt walk for the performance.

The building sessions offered an opportunity to talk with each of our volunteers, all from different parts of the community, but who nonetheless shared their love and hope for the advancement of Nogales. They told us about their day-to-day lives (which for some, consisted of a constant crossing back and forth between nations); about their projects (sometimes hindered by the changing border politics); and those who had been there longer told us how the border had drastically changed during their lifetime. The Nogalenses were more than simply Americans OR Mexicans: they each represented a myriad of different identities depending on which parts of the community they belonged to. Many factors were at play, including their birth country, which nation they resided in, where their family lived, how they chose to relate to the border, etc. Hearing these stories clarified the purpose of our trip. Neither Jess nor I could tell these people how to relate to a border that is such an intrinsic part of their lives; the best thing we could do with the puppets was to listen, and try to get others to do the same.

Our project acquired the characteristics of community-based

theatre as defined by Cohen-Cruz (2005), where we collaborated with people from the community who became the center of the performance due to a “shared primary identity” which is “fundamental to their sense of themselves” (p. 2). We felt our aim as artists was to amplify the stories we were hearing, believing, as exemplified by Playback Theatre practitioners, that “[o]ur narrative about ourselves and our society is key to our identity” (J. Fox, as cited in H. Fox, 2007, p. 93). Though we differ from traditions like Playback Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed in the centrality given to traditional narrative, we share the same values of deep listening and empathy, as well as a commitment to social justice (J. Fox, as cited in H. Fox, 2007).⁴ However, we consider ourselves ‘actors’ not in the sense of the ‘performer’, but rather, as those who are present, listening, and *acting* on what we hear.

Two days before the festival, we engaged our participants in a micro-workshop where we spoke about how their identities could be reflected in the decoration of the puppets. One notable moment in these conversations is the talk we had with the daughters of the single moms; they decided to decorate one puppet to look like Rosie the Riveter, demonstrating the reference they have for the women of their community and how they felt they should be represented. Getting our various groups of volunteers to talk about these themes while working on a joint task highlighted central aspects of their identities. This multiplicity, absorbed and condensed by the puppets, was portrayed as a single, diverse identity: the Nogalense. The process emphasized the fact that the Nogalense identity, due to the circumstances of the site where it exists, is transient, flexible, permeable, amorphous and ambiguous. The complexity within the borderland identity and the acknowledgment that its multiple components all belong to the community meant the puppets were invited to be “expressive of more than a monolithic belief system” (Cohen-Cruz, 2005, p. 6) in their portrayal, and their ability as good activists was brought to the forefront.

As demonstrated by Bread and Puppet Theater and their predecessors from the 1930s and before, giant puppets have an ability

⁴ While community-based theatre is the subject of an enormous, rich discourse, the scope of this paper only touches it lightly; Playback Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed have been chosen as examples of community-based practices that also have participant voices at their core. Further examination of where this work fits in this critical paradigm will be the subject of future research as this project evolves and develops.

to incite change (Bell, 2008). Interestingly, in the US, many of these practices arrived as traditions brought by immigrant groups (Bell, 2008). In their activist performances, Bread and Puppet invite volunteers to participate, utilizing their unique way of incorporating elements of puppet theatre using “simple materials, direct means, and a strong connection to community ... as a reflection and articulation of community conscience” (Bell, 2008, p. 210).

However, Bread and Puppet involves volunteers in performances that have been previously planned by the artists, taking advantage of the lack of ‘seriousness’ of puppet theater to address difficult, highly politicized topics (Bell, 2008). In contrast, we actively prioritized volunteers as the central actors of our work, allowing us to keep our celebratory intention at its core. As with Playback Theatre’s “conductor,” the puppets created “a safe, open, and inviting environment” (Fox, 2007, p. 100), and similar to Boal’s “joker,” they helped us “ensure that those who know a little more get a chance to explain it, and that those who dare a little, dare a little more and show what they are capable of” (Boal, 2002, p. 245). The giant puppets, which we initially hypothesized as a suitable form to blur the wall, functioned as an invitation that allowed different kinds of people to engage with the themes being proposed.⁵ Their “traditional exemption from seriousness” (Schumann, as cited in Bell, 2008, p. 193) served as a form that granted members from different sectors of the community access to discussions about the uniqueness of the borderland identity.

On the night of November 24, a binational exhibition at the Museo de Arte de Nogales featuring work by artists from both sides of the border marked the inauguration of the festival. The following morning, the festival continued with a block party on the Arizona side. At 3pm, two puppets, led by my collaborator and operated by participants, made their appearance, leading the block party attendees to the border. On the other side of the fence in Mexico, I waited with our volunteer stilt walkers and the rest of the puppets and volunteers. The puppets had a brief encounter by one of the pedestrian crossing points, where they greeted each other, rejoicing at the encounter through see-through panels that are part of the structure of the wall. We encouraged people to cross, since, after the parade, the event would continue with a concert and arts

⁵ I am grateful to Jess Kaufman for identifying this way of speaking about the function of puppetry in our work.

fair on the Sonora side. Then the parade began. Parades and street theatre use the spatial nature of the public-space (in our case, of the border wall) to re-appropriate it, and the use of puppets better exploits its theatrical potential (Bell, 2008). By using scale to challenge the idea of the hard divide, our puppets established the contentious zone between Mexico and the US as a new, liminal *Border-Land*. The parade moved through the streets adjacent to the border fence. Some of our volunteers improvised a marching band with a chair and a trumpet. The mood was celebratory as we headed to a predetermined location where Border Patrol and the Sonoran authorities had granted us permission to perform.⁶ All through the route, we saw the other giants tracing a parallel course on the other side.

A surprise occurred, however, when we arrived at our designated meeting point and realized that the fence was taller than we had estimated. Our puppets could not reach each other over it. Our volunteers were not deterred, and cherished the fact that they could see, laugh, and dance with those beyond by getting the puppets to interact through the bollard-style fence. In this way, the puppets amplified their voices and their stories, becoming a 15-foot tall manifestation of their desire to connect and their will to celebrate their culture, not just through their appearance, but also through their improvised action.⁷ Those who spent the week with us building these giants appeared deeply impacted by the potential of their creations and tried out different actions that the puppets could take to interact with one another.

We walked back to the Plaza Pesqueira in Mexico, where the concert and final part of the event was to take place, and eagerly awaited the crossing of our giant friends. After some quick disassembly and reassembly of the US-side giants, all the puppets were reunited in

⁶ A mention should be made here regarding our involvement with CBP. Working legally was a crucial tenet from the beginning; this included getting me an artist visa to work in the US, and obtaining all pertinent permits. The CBP officials expressed a desire to change the rhetoric at the border and challenge the negative reputation they have been given by the media; after all, many of them are also members of the community. It is interesting to note that framing our project as “not a protest, but a celebration” was key to catching their interest and getting consent.

⁷ The only predetermined aspects of our performance were the route and the fact that there would be an encounter by the fence at the agreed meeting points. The content of that encounter was for our volunteers to decide. Before the parade, our volunteers were trained in the basic actions they could perform with the puppets as a foundation to experiment further with their movement.

Mexico and further merriment ensued. The puppets circled the fountain in the center of the square and danced together. They were handed off from volunteer to volunteer, and everyone present who had been involved in their construction had a chance to operate them. Radio and television reporters, some of which had been following the event all week, approached. Valerie Lee James of the Huffington Post wrote, quoting one of our young volunteers: “‘We made these puppets to celebrate Nogales,’ she said proudly. Funny, she never said a thing about a wall” (2017). The puppets had begun to change the media portrayal of the border, allowing the local community to challenge the narrative around their identity.

The lack of precision in the images created by puppetry leaves space for contemplation, allowing strong convictions to be expressed without forcing their adoption, inviting the audience to interpret them and relate to them on their own terms (Bell, 2008). It was through this ambiguity that our puppets were able to portray the nebulous identity of the borderlands. Unlike human actors, who cannot portray truly generalized human beings due to their own inherent individuality, puppets can represent the everyman figure (Obraztsov, as cited in Jurkowski, 2013). Their status as objects allows them to depict a more respectful representation of “the other” by embodying identities through the integrity of the objects and the ways in which they are operated (Bell, 2008). In this way, puppets can represent everyone, without making anyone feel excluded from their activist pursuit. But given the nature of this project’s need to highlight the specificity of the singular identity of the Nogalense, a question arose regarding how the puppets’ inclusive potential could be honed to illustrate the uniquely blended identity of the border.

Though we are each composed of the multiple identities imbued by the various roles, spaces, and cultures we embody, this multiplicity is more evident for the people at the border. The unique site they inhabit is politicized in a way that attempts to force them into the mold of a single identity: their political nationality. The challenge they face when shifting from one identity (political) to another (cultural) could be considered akin to the shifts in identity that puppets undergo. It is through their animation that puppets transform from inanimate objects into living beings; this shift of perception—Jurkowski’s (2013) “opalization” or Tillis’ (1992) “double-vision”—has been explored in studies considering whether

audience members are aware of both identities of the puppet—alive/not-alive—simultaneously, or whether they oscillate rapidly from one perception to the other.

Puppets exist in a borderland of identity: it is interesting to consider whether this parallel oscillation is what makes puppets suitable representatives and vehicles for the amplification of our volunteers' stories. Are they Nogalenses Mexican *and* American? And what else? Is their identity oscillating or does it exist in “double-vision”? Is its essence the opalescence that allows them to belong to both places at once? These are some of the questions that will be explored in future praxis as the project moves forward.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

The end of the concert marked the end of the festival and of our time there. We arranged for three puppets to stay with the community members for future use should they so desire.⁸ But we knew we were not saying goodbye for long. Before we left Nogales, many of our community partners and volunteers had invited us to return, and it was clear that this had been the pilot of a recurring event.

As we began planning the next iteration of the festival, we questioned how we could make it more relevant to the community. We do not want the festival to occupy one weekend and disappear, but rather to have a deep and expanding impact that seeps further into the community while radiating to adjacent sister cities at the border and beyond. The way this activity at the border explored the union of identity poses questions about how to ensure activism does not further segregate vulnerable and/or minority communities by placing them in a spotlight. How can we ensure that their voices are attended for reasons beyond the fact that they belong to an unheard minority?

In our attempt to achieve these aims, we have begun a pen-pal program with high school students from Ambos Nogales, inviting them to explore the borderland spaces where they coexist. The material the students are generating, as well as their proposed future participation in the festival, will inform the decisions made in curating the second iteration of the event, for which we are hoping to involve a larger segment

⁸ Since we left, they have made appearances at several school and community events, independently of our involvement.

of the community. In the long term, we hope that Beyond the Wall will establish a positive purpose in Nogales and that local partners will take over its organization, allowing us to expand its impact by involving other borderland sites and creating sister festivals. We are driven by the question of how we can ensure that activism brings us together and creates a lasting impact, without emphasizing the vulnerability of and further marginalizing those involved. Instead, we seek to highlight the bond between the human beings who take part in a joint activity which invites both participants and facilitators into a mindset where the identity construct is simultaneously celebrated and transcended.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Besides those previously mentioned, I wish to acknowledge the contributions of the activists, artists, and organizers that made this event possible including (but not limited to): Colectivo Taco de Perro, India Aubry, Voices from the Border, Lazlo Kantor, Cristina Pierce, Cindy Rodriguez, Public Works Department, Governor's Island Trust, Fractured Atlas, Materials for the Arts, Movimiento Teatro por la Dignidad, Southwest Folklife Alliance, Love Glasses Revolution, Jacksubeli González, Zulema Rodriguez, and Elena Vega.

For more information, visit [Beyond the Wall](#).

SUGGESTED CITATION

Diaz Barriga, A. (2019). Beyond the wall: Borderland identity through puppets. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 144-157.

REFERENCES

- Althaus, D., & Cordoba, J. (2016, February 10). World news: Pope to stand with migrants on border—Francis' trip to Mexico will include Mass on Texas border, a zone of campaign contention. *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*; New York, p. A.8.
- BBC News. (2017a, February 7). [Former Mexico president Vicente Fox: "Go to hell Trump."](#) Retrieved October 24, 2018.

- BBC News. (2017b, February 18). [Protest against Mexico border wall](#). Retrieved October 24, 2018.
- Bell, J. (2008). *American puppet modernism: Essays on the material world in performance* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boal, A. (2002). *Games for actors and non-actors* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Burton, T. (2017, February 23). [No wall necessary: The USA-Mexico border at Nogales in 1915 | Geo-Mexico, the geography of Mexico](#). Retrieved November 3, 2018.
- Cohen-Cruz, J. (2005). *Local Acts Community-Based Performance in the United States*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Contreras, R. (2016, July 18). [Poll: US-Mexico border residents feel ignored, oppose wall](#). *San Diego Union Tribune*. Retrieved October 27, 2018.
- Fox, H. (2007). [Playback theatre: Inciting dialogue and building community through personal story](#). *TDR/The Drama Review*, 51 (4), 89–105.
- H. Ayuntamiento de Nogales. (n.d.). [Sonora-Nogales](#). Retrieved November 3, 2018.
- James, V. L. (2017, December 1). [Wise imagination: Mischief and mirth at the wall](#). *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved October 31, 2018.
- Jurkowski, H. (2013). *Aspects of puppet theatre* (P. Francis, Ed.) (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karaim, R. (2016, September 2). [U.S.-Mexico relations](#). *CQ Researcher*, 26, 697-720. Retrieved October 24, 2018.
- Leou, R. (2017, February 2). UCLA students protest against immigration ban, US-Mexico border wall. *UWIRE Text*, p. 1.
- Medrano, L. (2011, June 30). [Evolution of a border crossing: US to tout fortified fence in Nogales](#). *Christian Science Monitor*.
- Parker, A., Corasaniti, N., & Berenstein, E. (2016, August 3). [Voices from Donald Trump's rallies, uncensored](#). *The New York Times*.
- Tillis, S. (1992). *Toward an aesthetics of the puppet: Puppetry as a theatrical art*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- The Washington Post*. (2015, June 16). [Donald Trump announces a presidential bid](#). Retrieved October 24, 2018.
- Zionts, A. (2017, November 1). [Border mesh to extend 700 feet along West International Street](#). *Nogales International*. Retrieved November 3, 2018.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

[Ana Diaz Barriga](#) is a Mexican theatre artist focused on international collaborative performance and specialized in puppetry. Ana has performed in festivals including the Edinburgh Free Fringe (UK, 2011), Sprint Festival (London, UK, 2015), and the Prague Quadrennial (CZ, 2015). She has trained in puppetry with PIP (CZ), Yael Rasooly (IL), Improbable (UK), and Gyre & Gymbly (UK), among others. She has an MA from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (London), and is currently working towards an Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama at Northwestern University researching puppetry and kinesthetic empathy.