



Photograph by Monica Lozano/courtesy of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

## A Family on the Border, of the Border

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**I see a wall as tantamount to rejection: to create a physical barrier is to reject the possibility of familiarity.**

In November of 2019, an art installation called the [Border Tuner](https://www.bordertuner.net) (<https://www.bordertuner.net>) beamed “bridges of light” across the steel mesh fence dividing El Paso and Juárez. The light beams opened channels of communication between six interactive stations: three in El Paso, three in Juárez. At each station, the participants

turned the dial, activating nearby searchlights that followed the dial's movement. When the light beams intersected, a channel of sound opened. People then spoke to each other across the border.

On the website, the artist, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, says that the Border Tuner is designed to “make visible the relationships that are already in place: magnifying existing relationships, conversations, and culture.” Over the course of its twelve-day run, people on either side of the border stood in line and aimed their beams into the night sky. The beauty was in forging a connection with someone across the border whom you had never met.

But in imagining how I would have used the Border Tuner, I found myself confronting my father. The Border Tuner is meant to forge connection over a physical divide, but sometimes I think I would need the distance a physical border provides if I were to ever speak honestly to my father. I would stand at Station 6 in Juárez, and he would stand at Station 3 in El Paso. When our light beams intersected, perhaps I would be able to speak to him instead of crying.



Photograph by Monica Lozano/courtesy of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

My Anglo father left my Mexican mother when I was three. He never said why. He didn't leave abruptly. First, he would stay late at his office, working. Then he started sleeping there. He took longer and longer business trips. When he would return for clothes, my mother would follow him into the bedroom, screaming at him, sobbing and begging him to tell her what had changed. He would always leave again. One day, he never returned.

Years passed. My brother and I grew up seeing our dad occasionally. He came over on birthdays, on Christmas. I spoke only Spanish when I was very small, so my mother served as translator. My younger brother, still in diapers, would stare at our visitor, fascinated. When we were older, my father would come by in his silver pickup truck and take us for Happy Meals at McDonald's. He asked us about school and whether we helped our mom around the house. I remember feeling shy and uncomfortable during these outings—even as a child, I understood that the man who had permission to take us out was someone I could never really know.

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I had started asking questions about my father's life and history the year my first-grade class made Father's Day cards; it was in hearing other children's plans to give their cards to their father that I understood I was missing out. I wanted the familiarity other children had with their fathers and felt I could have it, if only I knew how to ask. But I never found a way to speak across the distance between us. As I grew older, I came to know my father by a compilation of details: He was a man who always wore blue jeans and a silver-and-turquoise bracelet, who kept a small bag of almonds in his truck, who never ordered anything for himself at McDonald's, whose visits were always quick but not quick enough.

When I was sixteen, my mother finally told me why my father only ever came to our house or took us to McDonald's. I had never met my father's parents, or visited him in his home, or met my half-sister. By then, my mother had already revealed to me that my father had been married before he met my mom, and had another daughter. For years, I had wanted to know her name and age, whether she knew about me. My mother was always evasive or quick to change the subject. I now realize she was waiting until she thought I was old enough to hear the truth.

"When your father and I were dating, I asked him why he hadn't introduced me to his parents," my mom said. "He said it was because they wouldn't approve of him being with a Mexican woman."

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'how silly.' I thought they would change their minds with time, especially after I became pregnant with you. But I'm not sure they know about you. I've never spoken to them."

I learned that my father had refused to give my brother and me his last name. My mother says she accepted this because my father talked of plans for the future. He planned to marry my mother, buy a house, have children together. My mother believed him.

I could have forgiven the fact that he kept my brother and me apart from his other daughter and his parents. The irregular and infrequent visits, too, could be remedied. It was in learning that my father denied our connection to him by refusing to give us his last name that I felt the deepest sting of rejection.

My mother knew my shock and hurt would take years to evolve into anger. At first, I tried to downplay my father's actions. Then I tried to put distance between us by ignoring his questions, but I now realize he probably attributed this behavior to teenage rebellion. My mother always encouraged me to "keep the ties"—I don't know if it is our culture's commitment to family, or a practical reason, or a mix of both that led her to believe I should carry on communicating with my father. By then, the two of them barely spoke. She had long since lost hope that he would return and build the life they had once dreamed of together.



In my community, we have a term that describes our movement across the US-Mexico border: *fronterizx*. We are a people on the border, of the border, always crossing back and forth. When we meet each other outside the borderlands, we talk about and bond over this propensity for movement. Most of our stories, even the mundane ones about going to get a haircut, involve crossing the border.

My *fronterizx* identity is a gift from my ancestors. In the 1910s, my great-grandparents sold burritos as Pancho Villa's army of *campesinos* fought wealthy landowners for their right to live in this desert. After the official end of the Mexican Revolution, in 1920, my *abuelita* and her siblings crossed the border—a wooden bridge stretching across a free-flowing Rio Grande—looking for work. This was the decade that border officials began spraying Mexican immigrants with Zyklon B (<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/zyklon-b-us-border/>) before they'd let them cross, believing them to carry lice.

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Perhaps the Border Tuner appeals to me because it makes physical the distance my father created when he refused to give us his name. A name is a gift, and refusing to name is to refuse to acknowledge existence.

The few times I attempted to ask him about his parents, in my early twenties, he changed the subject or gave vague answers. It is because of his continued rejection of me and my brother that I would place him at Station 3 in El Paso, close to the hotels on which rooftops Anglos once paid to sip lemonade and watch as Mexican revolutionaries, my great-grandparents among them, lived and fought and died on dusty Juárez streets.

My ancestors' fight to live with dignity, to be recognized as worthy, is part of my inheritance, and why I would stand at Station 6 in Juárez. I would beam my light toward my father's, make it intersect with his. I don't know if the opening of the sound channels would let me

say what I need to say—if my words carried across a light beam would be enough to dissolve the knot in my throat each time I try to summon the courage to say that his rejection has made me doubt my own worth—but maybe I would find strength thinking of my family members who have long defied the border.



The author's grandmother and great-grandmother in El Paso, c. 1940/courtesy of the author

Three months before the Border Turner went up, a white supremacist arrived in El Paso to kill anyone he read as Mexican. He entered the Walmart where my cousin regularly shops. When I called my cousin, afraid for her, she said she didn't know what was happening, but would start calling our family members. I spent the next three hours refreshing *The El Paso Times* webpage, reloading my Twitter feed, and texting relatives and friends.

After the shooting, Latinx people throughout the US spoke to journalists and tweeted about feeling hunted (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/us/el-paso-shooting-latino-anxiety.html>). The shooter's manifesto, which propagated the theory of a "Hispanic invasion of Texas" and praised Trump's efforts to halt immigration, forced Latinx people to reorient ourselves in society. Events of the recent past now felt like precursors to the shooting. East of the Walmart, journalists had recently discovered a Customs and Border Patrol holding facility that was filled beyond capacity with people deemed to be crossing the border illegally. On the international bridges, CBP officials continued to reject asylum seekers, leaving them vulnerable to kidnappers and extortionists in Juárez. Latinx friends began texting me to tell me they were afraid to go to work and to school. My husband and I decided to keep our son home from his Spanish immersion preschool, worried it could be a target for a copycat shooter.

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Peacemaking will become possible only after the physical border wall comes down. But I fear that people intent on preserving whiteness will fortify it through their silence and their violence. I see a wall as tantamount to rejection: to create a physical barrier between two countries is to reject the possibility of familiarity. It's not lost on me that "family," or "familia," forms the basis of this important word; this word that implies awareness, knowledge.

What I want is to know my father, and for him to know me.

He visits me and my family occasionally. We have an unspoken agreement to “keep the ties” even as he keeps his personal history and life a secret from me. As much as I hope to have important and painful conversations, I realize he may never be ready. I suspect his eventual funeral is where I will learn the most about his life, the other people he has loved. I don’t know if anyone will notify me when he has died. I am afraid to ask him if he wants me present at the end of his life. I don’t want to feel the humiliation of his rejection, of his distance.

The evening after the shooting at Walmart, an image circulated on social media: Juarenses gathered before the border fence, keeping vigil for the victims and their families. Seeing the people confronting the wall, I thought of the century of violence this place has suffered. There is a notion that El Paso is the safer, and therefore the superior, sister city. The truth is that a wall runs through these cities so often described in familial terms, forcing them to live apart when they should be able to breathe and work together. That night, our sister city raised dozens of candles against a fence, illuminating the space between us, but reaching across it as well.

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