

# LA GENTE DE AGUA: INTERSECTIONAL METAPHORS OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Berre: “Nombre, pinche Americana, no sabe!” And I didn’t know, because it had taken a long time not to be mad at not being able to pronounce words properly or using my translanguaging skills to create words in Spanish. Playing with cousins in Mexico was fun but challenging. They weren’t always the kindest or showed compassion. It was I who was living in the U.S. after all. The expectation was not to speak Spanglish. The idea that Spanish should be pure and learned properly kept being yelled at me when I didn’t understand the double-meanings and certain humor.

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## **THE SPACE WITHIN: DEFINING GEOGRAPHICAL AND IDENTITY BORDERS**

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Can’t say this didn’t happen on the other side of the border. Throughout my schooling, I was also constantly monitored for a Spanish accent or for revelations of my immigration status. Once again, I was reminded that I wasn’t one of them. I grew up knowing that they (students) wanted to make me different. Pointing out my clothes, my skin color, my choice of words. I didn’t fit in. I wasn’t assimilated. Maybe it was the reminder of where they came from but wanting to forget or a bad memory pushed to their core of the pain their ancestors felt. How could they not see we were the same? Only thing separating us was a piece of paper (citizenship).

Couldn’t they see that we all were part of the river,

That we all were flowing together,

That whatever the world thought and taught, we were not filtered into different bottles.

Here at the Rio Grande Valley, the border for us, is the river. Every time you cross the bridge – halfway through – there is a plaque that highlights the dividing imaginary line between Mexico and the U.S. If walking, I’d often stand there and stare at it... it is an overwhelming sensation... a reminder of our histories... colonization/ imperialism/ indigeneity/ genocide/ dispossession/ war/ boundaries/ identity/ immigration ... a river carrying stories... each story a waterdrop...

## **WATER BOTTLE: TAKING IN MY IDENTITY AND MAKING IT PALPABLE FOR THE MASSES**

Water, they say, washes away so many things... blood, sweat, tears... but never the memories or the passing of time. Water carries ... our history, the lives of our ancestors fighting for our sacred tribal lands, the Braceros who gave their lives, and the undocumented U.S. Veterans that were deported after their service. The water carries... our hope, the opportunity to make better wages, and to reunite with our family and the land that we once so freely crossed without protest. The water carries... our joy of the environment, the bathing and laughter of family celebrations along the river, but it also carries our fear... fear of being shot by Minutemen/vigilantes... Border Patrol... cartels. As the border became a war zone (created by U.S. policies), immigration became a crime. But the river’s water still reminds us of where we once were and where we could be...

Water, after all, has the power to destroy anything in its path, but also to be flexible, calm, and life-giving. The ability to gracefully change the landscape of its inhabitants (all species) overtime and over great areas of land. Water makes up the human body. Water molds itself through where it travels and to where it is held. As immigrants, we must be flexible/ fluid to change like the river does as it moves from place to place or be forced into a container for containment, consumption, and evaluation.

...Forgetting at times that flowing water is living and water that is contained mostly dies... (and kills as well). Environmental scientists have learned that water-dams, if not provided with flow, will become dead zones for all that inhabit it. It kills the fish and the ecosystem reliant on the source. The water dies and provides no sustenance for the weary.

As immigrants, we are the water. We are often forced into these identity containers/ plastic bottles, where we must explain where and what we stand for...

But aren't we like the river, flowing through spaces? Fluid...

A flow that is a life journey...

A run that lasts until we reach the ocean...

An experience that ties us to time... to the before and after...

A flow that merges together walking beings, ancestors, and successors.

But we are still contained... only our holding is made up of layers of containment. We, like the river, hold our physical containment... The boundary between two countries. Like water, we are also contained by our labels and laws that identify what labels can cross its boundary. Are we not labeled like water bottles? ... to know which is "acceptable" to be exported or imported, provided with value and acceptance or quite the contrary, rejected, and displaced. In this particular border crossing, we are told that we must be identified and assessed. The U.S. Government creates these labels and has done so over the years. They decide where the boundary is along the U.S.-Mexico Border. They define who, when and how it can be crossed. They decide if we are to get benefits or how long we can stay. Our indigenous ancestors lived on this land without borders, and now we hold a history of destruction: Texas Rangers, the Minutemen, the U.S. Border Patrol, and the Border Wall.

As a child, most border checkpoint crossings involved a light conversation with the Custom agents, who focused on questions about bringing in illegal plants and food. Years later, we see the river as a sphere of contention, where crossing without "papers" has become a crime. As you cross through the river's path along the U.S.-Mexico bridges, we pass this invisible demarcation of time and space that seems surreal at times. We step from a place where we are hard workers, family-oriented, spiritual people to a place that often labels us as criminals, lazy, and immoral. These labels affect our livelihood, our daily lived experiences, and our existence. As immigrants, we are labeled like plastic water bottles (to be easily discarded after use) ... With the right label (documents), we are granted access to travel across the borders. But if we are labeled incorrectly, we lose the ability to reach our destinations... Instead, we remain in the same place, often in the sun, becoming more and more polluted as the plastic around us merges with the water... That is why it is so important that we are labeled as consumable. For many immigrants with the wrong label, crossing becomes a life-or-death experience. One where you must reach your destination by swimming across the river or walking through a desert and rough terrain. They risk it all because staying would mean death by cartel violence, or the daily struggle for survival with the almost non-existent exploitive wages brought on by long days working at local maquiladoras.

This didn't start recently, in 1848 Mexico lost the war and lost much of their land under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to the United States. It was during this time that border Mexicans on the

northern side of the river were given an ultimatum, you either stay with your land and become an “American” or leave with just your life. But as with many of the genocidal incidents that make up U.S. history (treaties with indigenous people were never honored), Mexicans were killed on the spot (beaten, scalped, lynched, shot), forced to leave their lands, and stripped of their wealth. I think this is why we are not taught this in school because even with compliance, you can’t trust the U.S. government to honor their word (land, life, and liberty).

For me, I think the easiest way to visualize my identity is through the confinement of the water in a plastic bottle. Containment/confinement has been a way for the U.S. to place us in a more palpable package for the white bourgeoisie who have exploited their way to the top through manifest destiny propaganda and label-making. They have sold us an “American” dream of assimilation and hard work. They sell the propaganda freely through every facet of advertising (news, media, movies, ads, etc.). They sell white settler colonialism... white supremacy. So, in that sense, I had unknowingly internalized this shame. I hid. I wanted to blend into the system because I hated to be ridiculed. I didn’t want to be associated with the characteristics or stereotypes they said I was because of where I came from. Who likes to be called “wetback” or *mojada* as a kindergartener? Certainly not I.

The teacher asked the class, where we were born. I remember I was so happy to share, I shouted, “I was born in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico!” It was heart-breaking to hear my peers calling me, “Roñosa... Mugrosa ...” because of where I was born. My little peers saw the city and myself as lower and dirty. As a border town, it was hard to appreciate, but for me, it was home. It was where my family grew up and shared beautiful memories. With two jobs each, our parents were able to take care of us, working, living, studying on one side yet taking us to Mexico if we were sick. Doctors could help us for low prices. My mom would say, “Bueno, Bonito y Barato.”

I made many memories listening to my mom talking with other patients while we waited to see a doctor... Learning about life and having our own version of talk therapy. It was how we learned of other reliable doctors, specialists, and things to consider when someone was ill (on a budget). It was our network.

As a child, I was given allowances for not knowing how to speak Spanish very well, but my mom did not... “Debes enseñarle” they’d say. Like a plastic water bottle, there were expectations in being a member of the international community... perceived value. How could I be a good representative of our people if I did not know the language? How could I be permitted to hold this label of Mexican and not be able to hold a conversation in Spanish without interjecting English throughout. Maybe it was the reminder that Spanish was not valued in the eyes of the U.S. How ironic that we focus on which colonizer’s language we should perfect. We should be grieving the loss of our indigenous languages, medicinal knowledge, and customs.

So how would this appear in the consumption of water? I’d have to say it would be a bottle of soda. Imagine, in most areas, a plastic bottle of soda is more expensive than a plastic bottle of water... but it comes at a great price. We must add chemicals, toxic amounts of sugar, and other preservatives to change. In the U.S.A, to be valued, assimilation is constantly pushed onto the

community. In this case, soda would represent those who had assimilated into society. They had to change who they were, their values, their symbols, language, and their traditions to fit in.

I can remember in so many ways, especially as a student, my teachers, school, and peers wanted me to pronounce words, behave, speak, and represent the classroom differently than our bilingual class peers. In their minds, it was what made “us” different from “them.” It was assimilated vs. non-assimilated. It was model minority examples vs. who you should not want to be like. They were in the same grade, but learning at a slower pace. But they exploited them just the same. The schools were receiving money for each bilingual student and the more students they identified as bilingual, the more the school would earn. However, what the students received during this time was anything but beneficial. They were labeled, held to lower educational expectations, and treated badly by peers.

When I was in the 5th grade, my mom was a parent volunteer, and helped a kinder classroom. One day, I ran into my mother outside in the courtyard of our elementary. We began to talk. My mother knew some English but spoke mostly Spanish. The teacher who she was working with approached us and was shocked to hear me speaking Spanish.

“Are you speaking Spanish, Arlett?!” the teacher asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“I have never heard you say a single word in Spanish before!”

She was stunned. I hid in plain sight by avoiding talking in Spanish and not divulging where I was born after the kinder incident. This takes a toll, with a loss of opportunities to celebrate and rejoice in one’s own identity.

By the time I turned 15 my skin had grown thicker, but the border was harder to cross. You needed to have your “papers/ papeles” with you now. Before the late 1990s, I only needed a verbal declaration in English, but now you had to show documentation (passport, visa, etc.). When it was time for my quinceañera celebration, we decided to have the church ceremony in Reynosa and the reception in Edinburg. It was a way of celebrating who I was at the time... my roots in both, Reynosa and Edinburg. This also let those family members and friends who could not cross respectively, the opportunity to celebrate with me. They are, after all, the drops that make up my existence. They have helped shape me. But now, instead of being a bottle with free water, it needed (more) documentation at an extra cost, it was as if they charged for transportation and distribution.

### **WHAT’S VALUED MORE: SPRING OR PURIFIED? IT DOESN’T MATTER IF YOU POLLUTE IT WITH HATRED.**

As the bell rings, it is lunch time. A comer! We would say as we were heading to the cafeteria fooling around. I remember sitting with a big group of peers in high school. Each seat was filled and sometimes shared. Our lunch trays turned sideways to allow for more people to sit together. You’d think conversations would be safe, but they weren’t... “Nombre, esos Mexicanos...,” “Pinches Mojados,” “Que bola de...” What do you say to people surrounding you saying things indirectly about you, your family, their families... it’s devastating and shameful. How could they unknowingly hate themselves? I would look around and watch them say things. My only reaction

was a stare down, but not much else. It was elementary all over again. However, this time, I wasn't shocked. I was just disgusted. It turns into a cycle... each time losing yourself a bit more; each incident becoming a drop falling/spilling to the ground.

### **WE'RE POWERFUL TOGETHER. RIVERS CUT THROUGH MOUNTAINS.**

Throughout my years in college, I continued to hear the same comments again and again. But something new also appeared... moments of celebration, of insights as to who we are and our indigenous Chicana history. I was grateful for race, ethnic and gender studies during my doctoral program. We learned that there were people out there who wanted to talk about community and individual agency, counter narratives, social justice, and networks of knowledge we could reach out to (especially recognizing our family as networks of knowledge).

It was a whole new way of valuing my community and shining a light on my identity. I emptied the bottle full of "hate-o-raid" and re-filled it again when I got home. I realized the only way we create an opportunity for refilling our bottle with drinking water was by allowing for Nopantla spaces, where we could be ourselves, have deep conversations about what was happening in our sociopolitical environments and build social networks, celebrating our culture, and making changes to be more inclusive.

But I can't help but consider, I was so focused on not being seen as bad (Dirty? Mexican? Mojada? Wetback?), or as the foreign other, that I failed to learn about my indigenous history. What we did learn was that we were inferior and that we were criminals by default. We did not learn that we had an advanced civilization before Europe. That we had dominated math calculations and built complex gorgeous structures. I did not learn where we came from, or if we were part indigenous... the focus had been with not being seen as outsiders, and maybe that's the point (of the lack of education) ... if we are so focused on assimilation, we don't get to find out if we are indigenous, and that they, the real foreigners, are the settler colonizers. I have seen our own people police our communities to fall in line and assimilate. The act keeps our minds preoccupied with things that don't matter. It's like an invisible brainwashing ideology that wants you to fight each other for resources. I decided I need to regain my own focus.

So now, I'm focused on other things, like learning/discovering my identity, our history, my family's history, and practicing the use of our own voices to fight for the community. Gone are the days where the goal was to stay hidden and go unnoticed. Here are the days of moving towards fighting against discriminatory stereotypes with our counter narratives. I want to share this new journey with others who'd like to do the same and help those who follow. Maybe with this new focus, we can all get our bottles recycled and return to the flowing waters of the river; being united (and living). They say rivers cut through mountains... let's see what we can do together.

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