

GROWN WITHOUT WATER

by Xochitl Rodriguez

Grown Without Water is a collective oral history/film project that explores how the U.S./México border between El Paso/Cd. Juárez marks and defines perseverance on a 21st century border. The project documents and translates into digital media the stories of real women who are between the ages of 28 and 38. These women are the last generation raised without the connectivity of the digital age and are becoming or supporting mothers in a binational community where a line in dirt separates worlds.

The project includes two phases from 2019 to 2020. In the first phase, “Cuentos de Cocina” (“Cuentos”) documents and archives intergenerational conversations among women, unguarded and recorded while cooking and sharing meals together. This phase links female advocates and survivors to one another across intricate differences to sew a collective story with common threads of resilience. In its final phase, the project leaves the kitchen and nurtures discourse in communities on and beyond the border, via a 5-7 minute abstract and ethnoautobiographical documentary, distributed in three ways:

- 1) digitally with a network of home screening locations around the world
- 2) mobilized by bicycle via projector and pedaled into neighborhoods in El Paso to screen on the outside walls of the homes where “Cuentos” were gathered
- 3) through submission to film festivals and showcases

The documentary will be downloadable with a distribution toolkit and used as a mobile springboard for discourse through an organized network of hosts in communities from the border to Kansas City, MO, to Oslo, Norway. As the project’s director and a mother myself, I will narrate the film through a poem that reflects on my family’s life and the stories I’ve gathered in the project’s process. Randy Maguire, sound engineer and composer, will record and mix the narrated poem with material from “Cuentos” and field recordings to create a layered soundscape for the documentary. Riley Engemoen, cinematographer, will shoot the documentary and edit it to unfold somewhere within what appears to be a dream. Of course, dreams are real at the zipper of two worlds. Echoes of my past, jolting moments in my present and mysterious foretellings will flicker as I weave worlds to understand where I come from and how it will shape the way my daughter sees the world. The tension is tangible as the documentary connects the trauma of a catastrophic accident in my family to the myriad traumas brown-skinned people perpetually survive in their daily lives. The documentary memorializes the things built in brown skin, generations in the making and invisibly unfolding and persevering around us.

From “Cuentos de Cocina” to distribution, *Grown Without Water* creates spaces to exercise storytelling as a tool for democracy and community empowerment. Confronting tragedy and magic at once, the project removes fabricated stigma to reframe border lives and give voice to the complex privilege of brown-skinned women who live on the American side of a line. The world has much to learn from the scar that grows in that line.