



## A Spanglish Film By Emily Packer

Mythic motherhood on the US-Mexico border//Las madres míticas en la frontera entre EEUU-México

### Synopsis

A poetic non-fiction film about motherhood on the US-Mexico border. These figures (mythic and otherwise) manifest themselves at Friendship Park—a space where families on either side of la frontera can come together, but under extreme conditions of surveillance. Guided in part by conversations with the filmmaker's matrilineal family, the film concerns itself with relationships between bodies, space, and the shared land and history in the San Diego-Tijuana region.

La Frontierra Chingada is a poetic non-fiction piece that investigates San Diego's relationship to the wall that separates it from Tijuana. The film confuses orientation to the cities to point out the peculiarity of definitive separations in a living landscape. The film re-inscribes these landscapes with narratives of motherhood in the Mexican and Chican@ culture that emerged from the history of physical and cultural colonization, including the transformation of Tonāntzin into the Virgin Guadalupe, the creation of la Llorona and la Chingada. As landscapes have long been associated with women's bodies, celebrating the women through story reclamation extricates them from the landscape. The title confronts this association and considers the living body of the land that has been subject to scarring and domination. These archetypes also manifest in non-iconic situations, such as in women who have been deported, separated from their families, or who have lost their chil-

dren to border violence, as well as women who are oblivious to their implication in these stories.

#### Genre

Documentary; Non fiction, poetic, experimental, reflexive

The film takes place mainly at Friendship Park, a unique space on the border where families can come together, but under limited conditions of time/ability and severe surveillance by the border patrol. While there is opportunity to reunite semi-regularly and also at special events at the park, it is also a heavily politicized zone. Among the women, other characters at Friendship Park include the Border Patrol Agents, particularly the Latina/o Agents, who monitor the space and enforce regulations.

This hyper-surveillance is juxtaposed with the invisibilization of the wall by Anglo San Diego and the invisibilization of the community for whom the conditions at the wall are the most pertinent. When Anglos do visit the border, it is as tourists; taking pictures, and heightening the surveillance that is already so present. The film often returns to the apartments on Coronado Island, just 15 miles up the beach from Friendship Park. In this space, the film is guided by conversations with the filmmaker's matrilineal family members as they begin to orient themselves to the border.



## Director's Statement

I grew up in Northern California, and was fortunate enough to travel to San Diego to visit my grandparents at their seasonal home on Coronado island each year. After being drawn to studying borders in college, an interest that was rooted in my investment in the communities that I grew up around, I began to see inequitable divisions everywhere that carried the border

## Behind the scenes



wall with them. I saw them in the public education system of my hometown, in which I received a completely different education than others based on the gerrymandering of the school districts and the income and language of my classmates' parents. I saw it in the systemic gentrification of the city of San Francisco. I heard it in the fear in my parent's words when they warned me about driving to certain areas in Oakland alone. I felt it on my skin, and in the vibrations in my mouth as I twirled my "r"s even though white kids from the neighborhood over couldn't. It wasn't until I started studying the phenomenon of Friendship Park that I realized I could actually see the wall itself from my grandparents' windows. I had been so close, but I had the privilege of not needing to be aware, not needing to look. This visual implication was sickening to me at first, and was something I felt I needed to share. I felt like there was a lack of an exercised compassion and ability to see ourselves in one another when we are separated by these borders of culture, language, nationality, gender, or legality. It was my aim to bridge those gaps and make video art that unveils the empathy we have when we can relate to one another. With *La Frontierra Chingada* in particular, I struggled with creating those emotions while acknowledging the gaps in my own perspective and lived experience.

A huge part of my trepidation in making this film was about not wanting to presume to be able to make a relevant film about the border as an Anglo American filmmaker. But as I state in the film, I think it's incredibly important for white artists to make reflexive work about the border given that we are implicated in its existence, and that our understanding and perspective shift is necessary to improve the situation (which includes sys-

### Keywords

border, frontera, landscape, women, women's bodies, mothers, mythic figures, Tijuana, Mexico, San Diego, Coronado, Latinx\*, border patrol, border wall, el muro, colonialism



### Friendship Park

For more information about Friendship Park, please visit [www.friendshippark.org](http://www.friendshippark.org)

tematic death, dehumanization, and forced separation of family). At some point during the making of this, I gave myself permission to trust that I could make meaningful art about the border, and that the story I had to tell was important. It therefore seemed necessary to non-directly include my own positionality in the film, as I want to reveal the implications of other Anglo Americans and San Diegans who may not immediately understand their involvement in the wall or the dire situation there. However, it is not my intention to recenter myself as a driving force in the border story, nor to tell the story of this relationship from a “neutral” or “insider” perspective, as I cannot, and because the relationship between Anglo San Diego and the border must be further explored and better understood.

The political systems and community networks at work at Friendship Park/El Parque de la Amistad fascinated me. There was so much potential to study the manifestation of many theoretical frameworks that I was interested in, as well as get to know the amazing advocates for and regulars of the space during the seven months of production that I spent at the border. Ultimately, I was deeply touched by the people I encountered there, and want to pass on the stories that had been entrusted to me by way of conversation and observation. I framed these testimonies through storytelling, by using iconic mythic figures that were historically based and thematically relevant. I also placed these characters within an understanding of gender relation in urban development and a critical media analysis of the documentation of that relationship. Admittedly, I also come from a Jewish background and didn't grow up with the icons of the Virgin Guadalupe or Tonāntzin, the folklore of la Llorona, or the slang and character of la Chingada,

## Quotes

"[Packer] succeeds in creating a powerful visual essay that, in its eloquence and compassion, works towards building a culture of empathy."  
– Filmmaker Baba Hillman

"[A]n intense and unsettling work that opens viewers up to new structures of feeling. Packer's images invite the viewer to experience the perplexity of a San Diego woman who connects to the border by looking out the living room window into the far distance across the bay, or to feel the waves of grief and loss of a deported mother desperate but unable to touch her daughters through the iron mesh fence, to sense the anxiety of a mother waiting for a son who disappeared."  
– Artist and Activist Jill Holslin

"[The film] gives you the sense that there is something you ought to know that you don't know, if you don't have Spanglish. That experience of getting lost is important."  
– Associate Professor of Law and Ethnic  
Flavio Risech-Ozeguera

but I was able to study their cultural significance and historical intersections through the lens of Chican@ academics such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Octavio Paz. With this literary guidance, the grounding presence of the icons in the landscape, the inspiration of the art that I was seeing in the borderlands, and one subsequent epiphany in March of 2015 that brought it all together, I crafted a poetic narrative that is woven through La Frontierra Chingada that I hope will start conversations about the legitimacy of these figures as frameworks for understanding the historical context for real women at the border.

## Border Theory & Language

The frame of film itself creates a border, and there are many borders implicit to filmmaking. La Frontierra Chingada challenges these separations by engaging with them and using them as devices to reveal these otherwise invisible divisions. For example, the film utilizes various cinematographic techniques such as revealing borders and frames by including them in the framing, and redirecting attention by using reflections so that even if the camera technically looks away from the subject, the subject is still made present and impossible to ignore. The film also uses a combination of still and moving images to suggest a surprising expansion of what is known: from the stagnant frame to the moving image so as to expose the limitations of the still image.

The use of language in the film is also orchestrated in a way as to create borders and call attention to avenues of access within the content of the film. This may be disquieting to many english-speaking audiences, who





\* Marginal Gap Films acknowledges the use of "Latina/o", "Latin@", and "Latinx" (as used here) to include Latinx people of all gender identities

are used to being accommodated. Although some of the spoken Spanish is translated into English subtitles, and some of the spoken English into Spanish subtitles, there are many segments which remain untranslated. This is meant to emulate life on the border, where one language is not necessarily more dominant than the other, although some hierarchies of linguistics prevail. In this culture, and in the film, those who speak Spanglish, and are able to interpret both languages as well as the in-betweens, are at the greatest advantage. The frustration that some English-speaking audiences feel when listening to some of the longer, untranslated testimonies in Spanish creates a space of questioning and places the responsibility of understanding—and the desire to seek understanding—on the viewer. It also allows for a visceral experience of the testimony, in which the quality of the breaking voices of those interviewed conveys emotion—but not information—to the English viewer, which intensifies their desire to understand. Some of the written English text is not translated into Spanish, but gives a basic summary of what is said later in the testimonies, so the bare facts are transmitted but the challenge to listen without understanding is also shared across the language barrier. Filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha writes about the act of translation as an inherent fragmenting of language and dilution of meaning. In addition to carving out avenues of access, leaving some interviews untranslated preserves these testimonies in their true form. This divides the film uniquely in three, wherein different audiences experience the same material in a way that is tailored to their perspective.



## Audience & Impact



Because of Friendship Park's contentious history and construction as orchestrated by the political nature of the topic of US immigration, border art about the wall cannot be made without being politicized. However, this documentary film is not rooted in an argumentative position; its intention is not to lay out the details of a persuasive perspective. The film's main purpose is to help create a culture of empathy among white audiences who have never before considered themselves implicated or interested in the suffering that occurs as a result of the existence of the border wall.



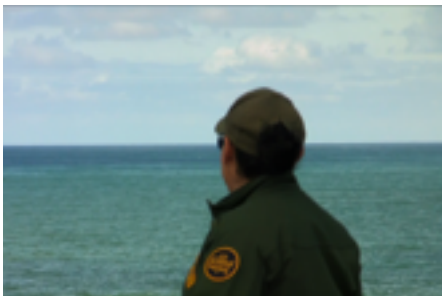
Due in part to the language split, there are three main audiences for whom the film has various impact. The first is an Anglo American audience who knows little to nothing about the border wall. Having not yet seen many depictions of the wall, in prescreenings this group has been struck by the visual of the wall at the ocean. This alone is a huge accomplishment for the film because it transports the space into the eyes of those who have never before considered it, or emotionally related to it. After paying witness to the absurdity of the wall, this group is emotionally affected by the piece, and becomes motivated to further their new understanding of the situation at Friendship Park and the wall in general. The second is a border-conscious audience made up of both Latinx and Anglo activists and academics who may not know about Friendship Park. This audience experiences the stories that are told in the film as a new perspective on the border, and as a case study for examining the personal narratives that are born from these historical situations and mythic analyses of those directly impacted by the border. The third is an artistically in-



clined audience who will appreciate studying the film for its above-mentioned application of border theory within formal elements and the visual and poetic language of the piece.

With all audiences, *La Frontera Chingada* provides a line of questioning for the various roles of women (specifically mothers) and landscapes divided by and impacted by the border, as well as introducing the unique space of Friendship Park. The conversations ignited by the film should manifest in complex, cross-cultural dialogues about responsibility and complacency when it comes to the border, and a self-reflection for both Americans who either are aware of the personal realities at the border and Americans who experience the wall as an abstract concept popularized recently by the immigration debate that has been enlivened by the 2016 general elections.

## Distribution & Goals



Ideally, this film will premiere at several small-scale film festivals internationally and in festivals that focus on Latin@ and women's interests. Then, the film will have a semi-theatrical release in cities along the US-Mexico border in the fall of 2016 through the distribution platform TUGG, which allows interested groups to host grassroots screenings as a way to spark conversation and also fundraise for their cause. Likely partners in this endeavor will be migrant rights activist groups, religious groups, and departments or clubs within universities and high schools. These events should also program border artists local to the screening venue to showcase their work and contextualize the film within the immediate community. After it's run in the film festival circuit





Marginal Gap Films is the personal and professional work of Emily Packer, a queer American artist based in Massachusetts.

#### Website

[www.marginalgapfilms.com](http://www.marginalgapfilms.com)

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and through TUGG, the film will be distributed to the educational marketplace through the requests of Chicana@, Latinx, and Women's Studies departments across the US, potentially in partnership with distributors such as Women Make Movies.

## About Marginal Gap Films

Marginal Gap Films strives to approach creative understandings of non fiction film, and varies in style from documentary to reflexive, experimental, and poetic. These films do not claim to present the Truth, but create and expose their own truths. The styles used are evolving to engage audiences into participation in the narrative, creating not just witnesses, but active members of the filmmaking process.

The subject matter and themes that Marginal Gap Films takes on deal with Border Cultures, Border Traumas, and Border Theory. Where two or more cultures are separated, there is opportunity for them to meet. With cinematographic intervention, these divisions and their kinetic potential for connectivity become clear, created, and destroyed through the power of the juxtaposed and moving image that inherently fragments and recreates space(s). This intervention allows for these borders to be reconsidered, and potentially initiate conversation to form and digest counter-narratives.

These projects rely on growing empathy, critical awareness, and an understanding of how the Self operates in the construction of the Other to use film as art that inspires action and constructive decoding of media and the borders around us.