

# Re-reading the Borderland Imaginary from 2021

Dori Griffin

*This essay re-reads Margaret E. Dorsey and Miguel Diaz-Barriga's "Beyond surveillance and moonscapes: An alternative imaginary of the U.S.-Mexico border wall" (2010) from the position of a design educator engaged with horizontal co-design methods for social and disciplinary change. The essay brings Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga's ideas into conversation with a selection of relevant visual communication design outcomes and scholarship produced around the same time. It then rereads the value of that transdisciplinary conversation from within the present moment—one complicated, morally charged, and visually saturated by domestic immigration policy.*

## Introduction

I'm a design educator concerned with horizontal co-design for social and disciplinary change. In my research and teaching praxis, I operationalize historical enquiry and visual communication to empower design for equity within current scholarly, educational, and social frameworks. It's from this position that I read Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga's "Beyond surveillance and moonscapes: An alternative imaginary of the U.S.-Mexico border wall" (2010). In the essay that follows, I bring their ideas into conversation with visual communication design outcomes and scholarship produced around the same time. I then reread that conversation from within the complicated and morally charged landscape of domestic immigration policy in 2021. I write in the wake of the Trump presidency, at a moment (August 2021) when US President Joe Biden has been ordered by the US Supreme Court to reinstate his predecessor's "remain in Mexico" immigration policy. As a middle-class, invisibly disabled, cisgendered white woman born in the US, my own immigrant roots occupy a hazy and distant position within family memory, or perhaps more accurately, family imagination. Conversely, I experienced firsthand the automatic and unearned privilege of whiteness when I spent four years living in Phoenix, Arizona—a city and state with clear interests in anti-immigrant legislation. My clearest personal memory of this is the differential between my experience at a Border Patrol stop near the US/Mexico border in Ajo (Figure 1) and the physically nonviolent, yet markedly more intrusive experience I witnessed between officers and the Latino man in the car ahead of mine. His Arizona plates and state-issued ID didn't protect him from the figurative and ideological violence of institutionalized racism at the border. Thus, I read Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010)—and transliterate their insights into my/our context of visual communication design practice, research, and education—seeking to see, synthesize, and apply.

Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) "examine border residents' perceptions of the [US/Mexico border] wall in relation to national policy and popular renderings." They're concerned with the "politics

of representation” in visual landscapes, which typically “portray the border region as lifeless and desolate”—and dangerous (p. 128). They identify common visual tropes “circulating in the popular press” in 2010: the “nameless ‘illegal,’ desolate border town, brave Border Patrol genre, or a combination of the three” (p. 129). These tropes work together to “fetishize the US–Mexico border as an uninviting locale” (p. 129). The authors probe the “central role that visual culture plays in the imaginary of the border — and [the] implicit justification of the wall” (p. 129). They critique popular visual representations that perpetuate monolithic narratives. These center surveillance, poverty, militarization, and moonscape-like landscapes of desolation and emptiness (pp. 129–131). While such images capture verifiable physical circumstances in certain geographic and temporal locations, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) critiqued their omnipresence within the visual landscape. Limited and limiting, these tropes occlude alternative narratives of rich ecosystems, resilience in difficult circumstances, and cross-border collaboration demonstrated by local residents (pp. 132–135). Furthermore, these tropes persist in 2021 (Figure 2).

After contextualizing the visual landscape of mass media border narratives, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) turned their attention to the possibility of “an anthropological photo essay” (p. 133). Their essay deploys photographs not only as a methodological tool for documenting the fieldwork process, but also as a visual communication technology for producing and sharing knowledge (p. 133). This approach affords new (to outside viewers) ways of understanding the US/Mexico border, its landscapes, and its inhabitants. It also affords new (to many visual anthropologists) technologies of public-facing visual communication and new (to many designers) methods of contextualizing visual communication as research methodology and output. It’s these possibilities that excite me as I consider how “Beyond surveillance and moonscapes” might inform design research today.

## Interstitial, Interdisciplinary, Visual Conversations

Borders populate the American imagination, informing our concepts of national identity and the sovereignty of our nation-state. Even more emphatically than in 2010, the US/Mexico border looms large as a landscape of urgent social and political concern. The Trump presidency and its concomitant “big, beautiful wall”—itself largely an imaginary construct—focused the national consciousness of the US on this particular boundary (Business Insider, 2020). Immigration permeates contemporary discussions of border

politics. Negative stereotypes abound in popular news media and social media memes: abandoned children, gang violence, criminal trafficking, stolen jobs, abuse of the social safety net. Conservative political pundits interpreted (and continue to interpret) movement across the Mexican border into the US as a threat to national security and the national economy. Meanwhile, in 2019 the United Nations drew attention to the persistent and, in the words of the UN rights chief, “appalling” human rights violations inflicted on immigrants at the border (Tan, 2019). Though popular news sources still offer pejorative and limited visual narratives of the border within certain media bubbles, other mass media outlets complicated these visual and narrative stereotypes during Donald Trump’s presidency (*USA Today*, 2017).

Visualizations of immigration, and of the lived experiences of immigrants, play a significant role in understanding the importance of the US/Mexico border in the popular imagination. Portraiture and oral history—and, especially, the two in combination—have historically played an important role in deepening the understandings that US citizens hold around these issues. At the Mexican border, Works Progress Administration (WPA) photographer Dorothea Lange’s documentary series in El Paso, Texas, is perhaps the most famous canonical example (Sontag, 1977; Ulibarri, 2019). The black and white photos utilize the stark contrast and geometric composition common in much of Lange’s work, along with her focus on human figures within the landscape (Figure 3). Popular media accounts of her border series emphasize how Lange “not only established a visual standard for documentary work, but ethical considerations, as well—that photographers owe it to their subjects to not just look, but listen” (Palumbo, 2018). Lange demonstrated this in her commitment to captioning, asking that her captions be included whenever her photographs were published, though often they were not. By acknowledging participants’ narratives through a written text, Lange intended the caption to extend the attached visual narrative and contextualize it meaningfully for viewers.

Lange, and her fellow WPA photographers, continue to exercise strong visual and conceptual influence on the photographic vocabulary. Among many other examples, this can be seen in German photographer Max Böhme’s black and white image of the US/Mexico border along Tijuana/San Diego’s Pacific coast, taken in 2019 (Figure 4). The image entered the public sphere through the photo sharing site Unsplash without any context but its location. As Susan Sontag (1977) wrote in *On Photography*, Lange filtered both her visual and written vocabulary heavily and nonreflexively through her own experience and aesthetic priorities (p. 175). Clearly, twenty-first century images and image-makers aren’t exempt from the same pitfalls. As contemporary visual ethnographers, though, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) brought to the practice of photographic analysis a self-reflexive, critically engaged, multivocal language of thick description. The running text accompanying their briefly yet effectively

captioned photographs acknowledges positionality and complexity. In addition, the text acknowledges the spaces of exchange between photographer and photographed, between photograph and viewer, between caption and running text. The three elements (image, caption, running text) exist in dialogue with one another, and with authors and readers. In this sense, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) fulfilled goals Lange left unmet through a lack of critical tools to recognize her own positionality and/or through the mechanistic, sexist operations of the photojournalistic publishing systems of her time.

Though they fully embrace thick description in discussing their images within the text and captions of the essay, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) left unexplored other powerful options for visual communication. Their photo essay included nine landscape-oriented photographs and one portrait-oriented photograph. Five of the landscape images included people, as did the portrait image. The images' one- or two-sentence captions followed the design conventions of the journal in which the essay appears, *Visual Anthropology Review*. Two notable examples within visual communication design scholarship offer relevant counterpoints to this approach: *Crossing the BLVD* (Lehrer & Sloan, 2003) and "South of the border down Mexico way" (Rogal, 2000). Transdisciplinary patterns and questions emerge when reading "Beyond surveillance" in conversations with these two visual narratives of and about immigration and borderlands in the US. Neither specifically visits the US/Mexico border as such. Yet both offer insight on the limitations of the ethnographic photo essay as a visual-textual form and suggest meaningful opportunities for cross-disciplinary conversation. In particular, they exploit visual communication design strategies that would prove valuable for future investigations of US/Mexico borders that seek to complicate and de-homogenize our stereotypical visual narratives.

Scholars across the disciplines of design, photojournalism, anthropology, ethnography, and oral history reviewed *Crossing the BLVD*, a fully designed oral history in book form, eagerly received as "visionary in [its] approach" (Martin, 2004, p. 106). In it, designer Warren Lehrer and oral historian Judith Sloan told the stories of individual immigrant residents of Queens, New York. They used images taken on-site and transcribed words spoken by participants during interviews. Mexico notably appeared in two stories. "The other side of the road" (Lehrer & Sloan, 2003, pp. 196–213) told Miguel and Mariana's "story of forbidden love, migration, and survival as undocumented 'aliens'" (p. 199), and "No bull" incorporated six voices to tell the story of a locally famous bull who escaped from a Queens rodeo in 1999 (pp. 270–281). For reviewers, the authors demonstrated a "humanistic approach" by scholars "unafraid to create a beautiful work of art [via] arrangement and editing choices" (Martin, 106). The book is "for people who have so often been otherized, stereotyped, and misrepresented, [...] an exercise in authenticity." In it, "the true goal of oral history—to

make voices heard and preserved—is met with integrity” (Martin, 106). For designers, Lehrer and Sloan were early exemplars of how to visualize social sciences research via design.

In comparison to Lehrer and Sloan, who document individual and lived stories, Maria Rogal uses design to communicate the imaginary of the US/Mexico border. Her visual essay (2000) investigates the kitschy interstate rest stop at the North/South Carolina border. The stop is named “South of the Border” and is typified by its unapologetic deployment of Mexican cultural stereotypes. Rogal investigated it “as a uniquely American landmark, as a purveyor of ‘Mexican-ness,’ and as a creator of values which are evident in the words and images in space and have a relationship to what is occurring in the larger culture” (p. 145). Her focus on “words and images in space” resonates when juxtaposed with Dorsey and Dias-Barriga’s (2010) essay. Rogal’s (2000) deliberate use of space to suggest cross-border relationality informs how we read the text: “An analysis of South of the Border does not depend on the sequential ordering of codes. Rather, it is dependent on the relationship of parts to each other and to the whole”—as filtered through the lens of the individual viewer (p. 156). Putting the pieces together for oneself becomes part of what the text means, and this meaning changes relative to the viewer’s own position. Rogal (2000) positioned herself clearly and self-reflexively as one viewer, describing how and where, and through which cultural and experiential lenses, her documentation of South of the Border came to be. Visual relationships, and the reader-viewer’s translation of these, significantly impact the meaning of the work.

Like the decade it followed (2000–2009), the decade that Dorsey and Dias-Barriga’s essay opened (2010–2–19) proved a fertile space for visual and theoretical exploration of so-called marginal, peripheral, and/or interstitial landscapes. Fatimah Tuggar’s (2013) visual essay “Montage as a tool of political visual realignment” provided a final counterpoint to “Beyond surveillance.” Tuggar (2013) suggested that the very act of visual juxtaposition carries with it an imperative to question the act of looking and its politicized meanings for makers and readers of images. Tuggar (2013) specified that “Meaning for these works [of montage] primarily exists in between the elements brought together” (p. 375). She emphasized how the medium, and the strategies deployed by the image-maker(s), necessitate active translation and meaning-making by the viewer. The montage directs viewers’ attention, causing it to “strategically focus on deconstructing aspects of the image *as a method for challenging conventional perceptions and attachments to static ways of looking*” (p. 375, emphasis added). Tuggar (2013) described her strategy as one that dialogically creates meaning “through layering and compositing of multiple images, multiple viewpoints” (p. 375). To achieve this, she deployed a variety of formal compositional strategies. Images might be composed as panoramas, portrait- or

landscape-oriented images, or images in series. Tuggar (2013) manipulated scale, used cropping and silhouetting, and operationalized sequence. These formal strategies become part of the matrix of meaning-making. Tuggar's (2013) montages are polyphonic not only because text and image enter into conversation with each other, but because the viewer's reading of the montage is part of the work itself.

Visualizing polyphonic voice emerges as a primary consideration in the three works considered here. All three can be read as intentional, formally-designed visual ethnographies of people-in-place. The designers-writers accomplish this not through textual writing or "straight" photography, though both are components in their larger image-text strategies. Rather, they create meaning through visual juxtaposition and control of size, scale, placement, and typographic composition. In other words, though they utilize photography and text as elements, they rely on visual communication strategies beyond those of the documentary photograph and descriptive caption to achieve their visual-narrative goals. Notice how synthesizing these three counterparts to "Beyond surveillance" relies on the hyphen as a signal of hybridity: designers-writers, visual-narrative goals, image-text strategies. As with so many borders, the ones defining these research outcomes are porous and composite—hybrid. Contemporary right-wing dogma in the US frames such borders as dangerous, undesirable, and antithetical to American identity. Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) challenged this mindset in their content, though their visual strategy remains quite segregated in its approach to narrative. Images and text inhabit separate, singular spaces. They aren't hybridized. Visual communication design offers tools for moving a hybrid *conceptual* approach into a congruently hybrid *visible* landscape.

## Re-reading Disciplinary Significance in the Present

How might a close reading of "Beyond surveillance" inform design praxis and design research today? As the introduction mentioned, I'm an educator exploring co-design research methodologies for social change. This pedagogical orientation embraces hybridity, the co-creation of meaning, and deliberate de-homogenization. In Arturo Escobar's (2018) popular turn of phrase, it seeks pluriversal ways of seeing and understanding design. In its most basic sense, a pluriversal philosophy is one that embraces multiple ways of seeing, knowing, making, and being (multiple "realities") and in its construction of "reality" does not eliminate the possibility of such multiplicities. I'd argue that these values sit at the core of "Beyond surveillance" and

the three design-writing counterpoints against which I've read it here. In this context, "Beyond surveillance" becomes a case study in pluriversal visual communication, though its authors didn't originally frame it as such.

Case studies are valuable design research tools, particularly when we read them in conversation with one another. Co-created, de-homogenized, pluriversal, hybrid design spaces require consistent engagement. They demand a willingness to evolve—not just once, but continually. In seeking "alternative representations" in the plural (p. 128) and "producing visual knowledge[s]" through their ethnographic fieldwork (p. 132), Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) contributed to a hybrid, pluralistic, potentially *pluriversal* visual conversation located along the US/Mexico border. Seen this way, I'd argue their work becomes particularly valuable for designers because it models text (traditionally defined) in conversation with images to support deeply contextualized meanings. Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) exploited the content-oriented possibilities of captions and running text in ways that remain underutilized by some designers, though not those mentioned in this essay. Images, including those that embrace type-as-image, don't always say everything that must be said. In what ways, then, could or should images enter into dialogue with written texts? Readable (again, as traditionally defined) texts can help to frame polyphonic dialogues in useful ways, as "Beyond surveillance" demonstrates. Pluriversal design emerges "through dialogue across plural cultures and cosmovisions" and builds "a world in which other worlds are possible," as decolonial ethicist Robin Dunford (2017) puts it (p. 380). This rarely happens via images alone.

What else is possible? Design has been asking this question for quite some time. Our visual modes of methodological tools for answering it stand to benefit from an embrace of context particularized through thick description, polyphonic dialogues, and the co-production of pluralistic linguistic-visual knowledges. Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga's (2010) work doesn't provide comprehensive answers, if indeed there are any. But "Beyond surveillance" frames and models useful ways of asking the question.



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## Figures:

Figure 1. "Recalling the Imagined Border." Digital collage. Dori Griffin, 2021. A decade after visiting Ajo, Arizona, I remember my own border imaginary.

Figure 2. Photograph by Barbara Zandoval, February 2021. "Frontera Tijuana." <https://unsplash.com/photos/fhEkwsRgMNO>. The desolate, dangerous border remains a visual trope in 2021.

Figure 3. Photograph by Dorothea Lange, June 1938. "Mexicans entering the United States. United States immigration station, El Paso, Texas." LOC item 2017770683. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017770683/>. Lange's style and her documentary impulse continue to inform photography along the US/Mexico border.

Figure 4. Photograph by Max Böhme, June 2019. "Tijuana, Mexico." <https://unsplash.com/photos/0NWNW2jgY6k>. The formal vocabulary of photographic "truth" and compositional Modernism lingers in this contemporary photo, titled simply with its location.

## Author

Dori Griffin is an assistant professor in the School of Art + Art History at University of Florida where she teaches graphic design and design history. Much of her research centers around the visual rhetoric of popular print media during the early twentieth century, exploring the ways in which visual communication design participated in the construction of social identity relative to place and culture. She is currently at work on a visual history of the type specimen, a project which emerges from research conducted during her 2015 Cary Fellowship at the Rochester Institute of Technology's Cary Graphic Arts Collection. Intended for students, educators, and practitioners of graphic design, the forthcoming book (spring 2022) will contextualize the specimen as a visual form and a professional practice.