

Ana-Teresa Fernández

The New York Times

POTENT IMAGES CAPTURE THE STOLEN MOMENTS OF FAMILIES SPLIT BY MIGRATION

For 15 years, Maria Teresa Fernandez has photographed the brief reunions of families and lovers, who meet to talk and embrace through the border fence between the U.S. and Mexico

ROJA HEYDARPOUR, 10.06.15



As Republican U.S. presidential candidates ramp up immigration rhetoric in an attempt to galvanize votes, migrants continue to meet on the Mexican border in a last-ditch effort to see family members. These divided families meet at the barrier between San Diego and Tijuana, where layers of fencing, mesh and metal beams replace the Plexiglas of real prison visits, turning the border into a massive outdoor visitation space.

While Donald Trump throws out ideas about re-enforcing and extending the barrier between Mexico and the US, there has been a wall growing every which way for decades now, even extending out into the ocean.

“I see the fence as a living object. It was born, it was growing in height and length, it was reproducing: one fence, two and in some places three fences,” said Maria Teresa Fernandez, a photographer who has been documenting the barrier for nearly 25 years. “And I hope some day it will die.”



Fernandez has been obsessively photographing these visits every Sunday since the late 1990s, having moved from Mexico to San Diego with her husband and four children. She has only exhibited her work a few times and mostly just gifts the images to family members at the border as souvenirs. She has met elderly people in wheelchairs who have crossed the country to visit the barrier. "It's reaching a place you want to reach, like hiking Mt. Kilimanjaro," said Fernandez.

Whereas she used to document more men on the American side visiting their wives and children on the Mexican side, the roles seem to have reversed through the years, with the men of the household often stuck on the Mexican side after bringing their families over. In either direction, years apart have caused schisms in families as they naturally adjust to living in different countries.

The barrier at this particular location was first erected in the early 1990s out of scrap metal from landing mats once used for aircraft carriers in the Vietnam War. Parts of it were later reinforced with discarded railroad tracks, which were made into vertical bars, and in 2007, it was once again reinforced. In 2011, metal mesh was added, making it even more difficult for people to see – and touch – one another. The barbed wire that used to delineate the border in the 1970s has become far more solid.



“You throw the ball over the fence and you ring the neighbors. This is the fence that will never throw the ball back,” said [Ana Teresa Fernandez](#), Maria’s daughter and a performance artist. Inspired by her mother’s work throughout her childhood, Ana attempted to erase the wall in 2012 as part of one of her pieces. In a black cocktail dress and heels, she went to the Mexican side of the barrier and [camouflaged it by painting the sky and landscape](#) behind it. This month, she plans to do it again as part of an artist residency at Arizona State University.

The wall itself has become a canvas. From artists to activists to ordinary people who scribble messages for their loved ones, the barrier is covered with text and images. To be fair, there is a concerted effort to keep this particular segment of the divider peaceful. On the American side, Friendship Park provides a space where community activists and border patrol work together to create events for families and allow them to visit with one another on Sundays between 10am and 2pm.

“If you ask any other border patrol agent in the country, they would be shocked this is going on,” said Agent Francisco Alvarado from his vehicle as he patrolled the area one weekend. They open up the area for Mother’s Day events, for the Day of the Dead, for religious ceremonies. Families are, of course, not allowed to cross the border, but it has become a place for picnics, albeit divided, as well as other communal activities. In 2008, there was even a mass yoga class on both sides. On a busy weekend, anywhere between 150 and 200 people visit Friendship Park.



That said, it is still a barrier. (Not to be mistaken with a wall. Across the globe, advocates for border barriers make a point of calling these obstructions “fences,” while opponents often invoke the word “wall.”)

“The building of walls has not been shown in any way to actually deter people from coming into the country illegally or without proper documentation,” said David Shirk, the director of political science and international relations at the University of San Diego.

“The same time we were opening up and everyone talked about globalization and we were tearing down trade barriers with Mexico, we’re using this 14th century technology to try and protect ourselves from the supposed threat of immigration and drug trafficking.”

All those involved in documenting, protecting or studying the barrier do seem to agree that it is an apt symbol of U.S. foreign policy today. As borders seemingly disintegrate because of the surge in communication across the globe, this tangible construction is a reminder of fear and separation, and a hot spot for deep, visceral emotion.

“It’s a bittersweet moment for them,” said Maria. “They haven’t seen their family for a very long time, so the first reaction is tears of happiness. Then they start sharing moments and by the time they start saying good bye, it’s tears again, but tears of sadness.”

<https://www.gallerywendinorris.com/news-reviews/2015/10/6/potent-images-capture-the-stolen-moments-of-families-split-by-migration>