

## XVII. Transborder Matters

2020/1, año 9, n° 17, 207 pp.

Editora: **Romana Radlwimmer**

DOI: 10.23692/iMex.17

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### Segundo de Febrero in San Antonio, Texas

(pp. 180-199; DOI: 10.23692/iMex.17.12)

**Laura Varela**

**Abstract:** El Paso Native Laura Varela discusses her work as a filmmaker and artist. Her first person essay examines the influences and awareness of the world when growing up on the U.S.-Mexican border. *Segundo de Febrero* is a short documentary she directed from her home base in San Antonio, TX. It was filmed in 2017 at Christ the King Church, a historic Catholic parish deep in the West Side of San Antonio, a historic and predominantly Mexican American area of the city. Native and Mexican spiritual and cultural traditions continue to find a way. There is a unique *mezcla*, a mixture of cultures that emerges from populations resisting the mainstream narrative and returning or retaining traditional practices. The heart and soul of this city, of this region, derives from those who have crossed borders and who continue to cross them on a material and spiritual level. Mexican American culture has created a confluence of cultures and has shaped who we are to create something new. Following is a photo essay presenting some of the essential images of the documentary, presenting part of the film's transcript together with the photos.

**Keywords:** Documentary film, Spirituality, Bordercrossing, Tradition



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Website:

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## **Segundo de Febrero in San Antonio, Texas**

**Laura Varela**  
**(San Antonio, Texas)**

As a filmmaker and artist my work is shaped by the influences and awareness of growing up on the U.S./Mexico border. My work crosses cultural, linguistic and physical borders through the use of documentary film and contemporary art installations; challenging iconography and discourse of popular culture. I identify as a Xicana filmmaker whose work is in service to her community, striving for a deeper understanding of her history and culture.

My goal with everything I create is to connect it to a larger movement for social change and liberation within Xicana and indigenous communities. Through subject matter and my insider lens I feel that my work subverts the mainstream narrative. My projects provide a glimpse of those whose roots have been part of the Americas for hundreds if not thousands of years; nevertheless, our stories have been omitted from mainstream literature, films, and television. It is a digital resistance; where I get to re-write our histories back into the 'books' and psyche of those willing to bear witness. It allows us to heal, recover, and remember.

I experienced a recovery and remembering for myself while a student at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) in the early 1990s. At that time, I only knew one place, and that was the US/Mexican border of El Paso/Ciudad Juárez. When I arrived at UT, my invisibility was a source of pain when I came to the harsh realization that the history of my community had purposefully been omitted, or maligned from my public education. What added to that pain was the few Latinos at the University of Texas in the early 1990s; even fewer from El Paso. Now, through film, I have transmuted this pain into something beautiful, tangible, and permanent.

My film and art work aims to transcend borders and to heal the spiritual wounds of my invisibility as a Xicana in US mainstream, and the invisibility of countless others. Although the notion of Mexican-American culture permeates Texas, stories of families and women who resemble me, who 'are' me, are devoid from Texan popular culture. Our histories and contributions have been systematically obscured, unappreciated, and distorted. The stories that connect our humanity to the world around us are nearly impossible to find, as they have been deliberately hidden in the crevices of society where they are the barely noticeable. This lack of visibility serves as the impetus for my life's work and dedication to telling those stories that serve as the medicine of our generational and contemporary wounds – which are, with no doubt, rooted in colonization and patriarchy. It is up to me to heal myself; in doing so I heal the

generational trauma from seven generations back and seven generations forward. Indigenous people from the north and south of the border see seven as a sacred number.

Growing up along the US-Mexican border, two languages, two countries, and two identities were one and the same. The union of this duality permeated every aspect of my youth. The border constantly crossed my world through language and culture. The food I ate every day reflected the constant crossing. It was (and is) essential to speak Spanish to navigate the life in a border city. However, just as other members of the Mexican American community, I was well aware of the fact that I needed English to succeed in the US, the country I lived in. I was also cognizant of the discrimination generations of Mexican Americans have faced since 1848.

My father, who grew up in segregated El Paso, Texas, and his maternal family from New Mexico insisted on teaching me English as soon as possible to prevent any discrimination as they were made to suffer speaking Spanish. They made sure I entered school with all the language skills they thought I needed to succeed. As the youngest of five children and an avid consumer of American TV, I picked English up rather quickly. My mother was born in Durango, Mexico, as well as both of her parents' families. However, Trinidad Breceda, my maternal grandmother, was born in the state of Wyoming – before her family returned to settle back in Durango. We could only surmise that it was the migrant stream or railroad that took her family up north. My Grandmother Trini left Durango with her husband, my grandfather Fermin Valdez, to Ciudad Juárez; after they split, she ended up in El Paso, TX. My mother was left behind in Durango at one years old when her parents moved up north to Ciudad Juárez; she was raised by her paternal grandmother. At sixteen years of age she insisted on returning to her mother and family when an aunt was going to Ciudad Juárez. Once there she was crossed by her aunt into the United States through the international bridge; she did it by wearing make-up and practicing the words 'American' which were all one needed to declare to cross the border in the early 1960s. Identification was rarely requested if one was a US citizen. She joined my grandmother, now remarried, and her siblings whom she had never met, in El Paso, TX. My grandmother quickly petitioned for her citizenship, because she was born an American citizen in Wyoming. Like many before me, my place in the United States of America was grounded and established in indigenous, Spanish colonial, Mexican, and American History.

When growing up in El Paso, racism, its privileges and exclusions were constant issues. Even though I was the 'lightest' of all my siblings, I suffered from bullying and threats of violence like many other young people; the darkest skinned children and those with heavy Spanish accents were even more affected. The well-established need in US society to differentiate, to be better, like American Exceptionalism, crept into the attitudes of our

community which, at the same time, was dealing with internalized racism and identity confusion. The elementary, middle and high schools I attended in El Paso were populated by 99% Mexican American students. Our neighborhood, elementary and middle school property fence lined the Border Highway, with the Rio Grande running parallel. Our excursions into Ciudad Juárez were usually on the weekends when we visited relatives and shopped; we were always grateful to return to the US side. We were kids. Even as children we knew we were the same, but somehow different. Our US citizenship was used as a weapon of differentiation against those that recently arrived in the school ground. Intergenerational trauma manifested in ways that I did not fully comprehend as a child. As an adult I have reflected on the violence in my community and neighborhood, and it all makes sense.

The realities of our home life contradicted all playground rules and attitudes of the 'other'. In the school yard the 'other' was usually someone who was physically different or had just settled in El Paso from Mexico. However, in our home in particular, we always had a family member from Mexico who was staying with us, getting, as they said, their life in order and preparing for life in the US. El Paso was the first step after they had crossed the border. Many times, my mother helped prepare them for their next journey; more than likely to California or Chicago. The constant back and forth through the *frontera*, throughout the generations, created a network of family on both sides of the US-Mexican border. Before it was militarized and before border enforcement grew to today's levels, the border was just a physical barrier which needed to be crossed, easily, to continue one's life's journey. For generations, my family members had been crossing north, to establish their own families and new generations of US citizens. Unfortunately, deep wounds prevented my mother from returning home regularly; despite my father's love of visiting Mexico, she rarely made the return trip, fourteen hours by car, to Durango, Mexico. She was (and is) happy to forget the poverty she grew up in; however, her *mexicanidad* is reflected in the way she communicates, nurtures and views the world. For this I am eternally grateful.

In the early 1990s, during my college years at the University of Texas at Austin, I took my first classes in Chicano History, Literature, and Meso-American Anthropology. I started to realize that our own history or our contributions to this land had not been taught in high school. This history was quickly forgotten, while the 'heroic defenders of the Alamo', the narrative describing Anglos as heroes and Mexican as villains, was imposed on the mainstream Texan narrative. My public school education completely ignored the Chicano Civil Rights movement and the cultural and scientific contributions of our indigenous and Mexican ancestors.

My understanding of what was lost and now recovered has led me to work on projects that I consider medicine stories. Stories of communities preserving and/or recovering culture and traditions. The current political climate in the US has radicalized a whole new generation of LatinX about the need to return to indigeneity; it is important that everyone understands the need to protect the water and the environment, and to preserve sacred sites. Decolonization also includes defending the rights of nature. The survival of all living beings on Mother Earth depends on us.

### ***Segundo de Febrero: The documentary***

*Segundo de Febrero* is a short documentary I directed in San Antonio, TX.<sup>1</sup> It was filmed in 2017 at Christ the King Church, a historic Catholic parish deep in the West Side of San Antonio, a historic and predominantly Mexican American area of the city. The following photo essay presents some of the essential shots of the documentary, presenting part of the film's transcript together with the photos.

February second is a unique Mexican American celebration commemorating the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the U.S.-Mexican War. The date is also considered to be the 'birth' of the Mexican American. It merges the commemoration of the Treaty of Guadalupe with el *Día de la Candelaria* and with the day indigenous communities celebrate the Blessing of the Seeds. *Día de la Candelaria*, a holiday celebrated annually on February second, is also known as the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, which marks forty days after Jesus Christ was born, and the supposed day when Mary and Joseph presented Baby Jesus to the Temple.

The idea of capturing this communal celebration on film intrigued me because I had long wanted to shoot something that shows the complexity and beauty of Chicano spirituality. For me, Grupo Xinachtli represented a return to our indigenous identity and millennial traditions of *conocimiento*. They perform particular traditions from central Mexico. The group calls themselves a Grupo de Danza Mexica Azteca Xinachtli, and their ceremonies and tradition use the Concha, the armadillo shell guitar like instrument, drums, rattles and singing along with dance. They are a purely ceremonial group; they are also known as Concheros. The 2017 mass which I filmed was a commemoration of the first celebrations at the church thirty-five years ago and brought Grupo Xinachtli back to Christ the King.

February 2017 was also a time of awakening in the Mexican American community; many were reconnecting with their indigenous blood and supporting the movement in Standing Rock.

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<sup>1</sup> To view and learn more about the film please see Varela (2019).

Many different indigenous groups and Xicanx communities were sending resources and people; supporting the information campaign and boycotting companies like Wells Fargo that supported the Dakota Access Pipeline and its parent company Energy Transfer Partners. I felt the need to create work that was in support of the water protectors in Standing Rock.<sup>2</sup> During the time of production, I was part of an informal network supporting my nephew Victor Jiménez and other water protectors who traveled to North Dakota to be on the front lines of the protests at the Standing Rock reservation. Indigenous activists and allies were protecting the water from the Dakota Access Pipeline, which was eventually built under the Missouri River on tribal land and a Sacred Site. This all was in our consciousness at the time, and as a filmmaker I wanted to be of service to my community in every project that I created; making sure I was able to weave messages of solidarity. Everyone drinks water. Everyone is impacted. Even my family was forced to pull together networks and resources when my nephew felt compelled to go and be of service to this movement protecting the rights of nature and indigenous treaty rights. The ceremony on Segundo de Febrero mentioned the water as crucial element to our community.

The film was made possible by Carlos González, a dear friend who makes a short appearance on my feature documentary *As Long as I Remember: American Veteranos* (2010).<sup>3</sup> Knowing it's cultural significance, Carlos asked me to film the mass. He forms part of the Segundo de Febrero Committee in San Antonio, TX, which is dedicated to keeping an archive of events in the cities of San Antonio, Denver and Tucson. Filming this ceremony and mass meant I could capture their lived interpretation of mestizaje.

Carlos González and Richard Jasso had both attended Our Lady of the Lake University and the Raza Unida State Conference in Lubbock, Texas, in 1977, where the Chicano/Mexican American Commemoration Day, also known as Segundo de Febrero, grew out of a resolution. Segundo was born towards the end of the Chicano Movement in an effort to keep the spirit of the *movimiento* alive. The name was born because many of the students and members of Raza Unida were educated in the United States, they did not even realize that the correct way to say the date in Spanish was 'el dos de febrero'.

The parish at Christ the King is a mixture of families who have been in San Antonio for several generations as well as new immigrants who have just crossed the border. Father Mike Horan has a mission in El Salvador, and hints of Liberation Theology are evident on the murals in the church entrance (Img. 1). Father Horan also hosts an *intercambio* with parish teens who join him on his yearly trips to El Salvador where his parish has built a school and a church.

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<sup>2</sup> To review the debates on 'Standing Rock', see for example Chief Arvol Looking Horse (2018).

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see Varela (2014).

The ceremony is special because the *tradición de conocimiento* that Grupo Xinatchli practices, which is featured in the film and in the photo essay, originated in Mexico before colonization and Catholicism. Danza Mexica Azteca was lost in the United States until *maestro* Andres Segura brought it to the United States and created three groups in the 1970s. The groups sprouted in Southern California, Albuquerque, New Mexico and Austin/San Antonio, Texas. For the film I interviewed the Capitán del Grupo, Jose Peregrino Flores, of Austin, TX. We also interviewed two other members of the Grupo, Joleen Garcia, a community organizer in San Antonio, along with Diana Abrego, one of the founders of Casa de Colores in the border town Del Rio, TX. Both women are very active in their respective communities. We also interviewed a parish member, Sylvia Garza, who is part of the Guadalupanas, a prayer group dedicated to the Virgen de Guadalupe, at Christ the King Church. Mrs. Garza recalled her life as a child in Michoacan, Mexico as a *danzante* during her childhood years. Our final interview is with Rogelio Smiley Rojas, who was one of the original members of Grupo Xinachtli that participated in the first Blessing of the Seeds ceremony at Christ the King thirty-five years ago.

The film premiered one year later, on February second, 2018, in the parish hall at Our Lady of the Lake University for their Segundo de Febrero programming. The following Sunday we presented the film at Christ the King Parish Hall. San Antonio celebrated its Tricentennial in 2018. This celebration more than ever shows the unique spiritual culture that is created when territories change governance and borders are created. Spirituality and cultural traditions continue to find a way. There is a unique *mezcla*, a mixture of cultures that emerges from populations that are resisting the mainstream narrative and returning or retaining traditional practices. The heart and soul of this city, of this region, derives from those who have crossed borders and who continue to cross them on a material and spiritual level. Mexican American culture has created a confluence of cultures that has shaped who we are to create something new.

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**Segundo de Febrero: A Photo Essay**

Img. 1: San Antonio, TX



Img. 2: Christ the King Church



Img. 3: José Flores: "Gracias a Dios y los espíritus guardianes de este lugar sagrado. Es un lugar sagrado porque la gente aquí viene a rezar. Todos vienen con la misma idea y voluntariamente a acercarse con el gran espíritu".



Img. 4: Conchas



Img. 5: Greeting each other in the morning



Img. 6: Preparing flower petals for the ceremony



Img. 7: Keli Rosa Cabunoc and Xelina Flores collecting flower petals



Img. 8: Smiley Riojas blessing his Concha with tobacco smoke



Img. 9: José Flores, Capitán Grupo Xinachtli: "El dos de febrero es el empezar de una nueva vida, aunque sella una nueva vida que crece plantita, o crece un maíz o te crece el espíritu, el entendimiento, y la conciencia. Todo eso significa, en una manera, este día aquí en esta iglesia.

Y también, no sé si por casualidad o una forma poética, el dos de febrero es cuando se firma el tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo en 1848, y para nosotros también es una forma de nueva vida. Se siembra la identidad del Mexicano Americano. The Mexican American".



Img. 10: Father Mike Horan: "Este día vamos a reconocer nuestra historia y adorar nuestras tradiciones y lo bello de nuestras culturas. La Candelaria es la levantada de Jesús. Recordamos también es cuando se firma el tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo hace 169 años. Con favor de dar la bienvenida al Grupo Azteca Xinachtli."



Img. 11: Diana Abrego: "Venimos a bendecir las semillas; pero lo importante es que la comunidad mexicana chicana indígena está, es un lugar sagrado para ellos. Entonces esta reunión para venir a la iglesia a volverse a conectar con sus raíces, y Xinachtli combina eso con la iglesia".

Jolleen Garcia: "We have to understand who we are and where we came from, and when we do that, we are a force that can't be stopped. We are so powerful, that's why I feel understanding your indigenous roots helps you remember the symbols, remember the balance, remember the wisdom that is taught throughout the ceremonies".



Img. 12: Jose Flores: "I think that everybody, como los indigenas, but also our young people, they need to have that spiritual identity, because the spiritual identity is what begins to nurture that which you think is good, and that which you think is bad. Maestro Seguro siempre nos decía que la danza es para definirte. Taking care of our resources and our water that are not only sacred but required to live".



Img. 13: Sra. Sylvia Garza: "Yo soy de una provincia en el Estado de Hidalgo, y yo en mi pueblo, yo empecé a danzar desde los seis años hasta la edad de catorce años".



Img. 14: Sra. Sylvia Garza: "Y el dos de febrero, allá en la parroquia, danzabamos también. Y yo, esa tradición la tengo desde mi niñez".



Img. 15: Father Mike: "Todos somos hijos y hijas de Dios. Muchas culturas indígenas conocían estos días un buen tiempo para bendecir sus semillas que iban a plantar. Hace treinta y cinco años, ese mismo grupo Xinachtli participó con nosotros en una misa para reconocer el Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo".



Img. 16.



Img. 17: Jose Flores: "Este es el día de la nueva vida, o sea, la nueva vida de los cuarenta días, que sale Jesucristo, hoy también empieza el año agrícola del plantar, febrero dos, el tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo también plantó una semilla muy especial. La semilla que nosotros somos mexicanos americanos y somos orgullosos de nuestra tradición, que somos orgullosos de nuestra cultura. Siempre para en frente, no importa lo que dice el gobierno en estos días, seguimos enfrente en nuestra fe en nuestra cultura porque si no, se nos puede secar nuestro jardín".



Img. 18: Smiley Rojas: "In 1982 was the first time we had the ceremony here at Christ the King for the Blessing of the Seeds, and we came back five years ago to continue the ceremony. But the good thing is that here in the congregation we always find señoritas that were *matachines* or *danzantes* in their earlier years".



Img. 19: Diane Abrego: "Los cantos para mí, yo los entiendo que son rezos, cada paso que damos es un rezo".



Img. 20: Joleen Garcia: "The female energy is present, it is also balanced by male energy in different forms; so you have the fire you have the water, you also have the earth and you have the sun".



Img. 21: Bendición Diana Abrego: "Las sahumadoras, la malinche que lleva el sahumador, es la que va protegiendo el grupo sahumando el camino; bendiciendo con los humos, y protegiendo y a la misma vez limpiando, es el vereda que lleva cuando empiezan las ceremonias. So we have a responsibility to human beings not only spiritually, but como madres y mujeres to educate our community, and if we could do it por medios como la ceremonia que reconoce lo más importante, algo tan importante como es las agua".



Img. 22: Drinking the water. Joleen Garcia: "The water is with us throughout the ceremony, it carries a glass of it throughout; and in that glass is a rock, it's an obsidian which carries the energy of our ceremony and at the end we create a circle and each one of us drinks from that water".



Img. 23: The Petals. Joleen Garcia: "The petals, with their different colors, represent different energies and the balance, and you see that we all come together at the center. It's part of the mestizaje that we talk about being indigenous people in this land."



Img. 24: Father Mike: "Dios, te pedimos que bendigas estas semillas que van a florecer, que van a crecer, que van a dar gloria tu nombre, que van a dar a todos a todo el mundo, que van a admirar los que van a ver a estas semillas, que pronto van a ser plantas; el poder de Dios para nosotros. Que nosotros también vamos a sembrar sus palabras en nuestros corazones. En el nombre."



Img. 25: Grupo Xinachtli: Song. Call: "Gracias al buen Señor que alabo su gran poder". Response: "Gracias al buen Señor que alabo su gran poder."



Img. 26.



Img. 27: Joleen Garcia: "We came together as families, now we are products of Spanish and indigenous peoples and our traditions also reflect we have always felt that we wanted to create a relationship that was respectful, and much closer so we can connect communities, and also to be able to say 'Don't forget your indigenous roots'".



Img. 28: Jose Flores: "Pedimos que la luz y la paz y el dador de la vida esta con nosotros siempre".

Congregation: "Ahora y siempre".

Jose Flores: "El es Dios".

END