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## Border and Becoming as Sites of Theory

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Border & Becoming as Sites of Theory

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*With eager grapnels I sounded my pocket, and brought up a few wrinkled dollars. I replaced them and paced the streets with uncertain steps. Go on, I said at last. So, on I went. By instincts I followed streets that took me southward.*<sup>1</sup>

This paper travels backwards, imagining impossibly a particular time and place in the past to consider how the Texas-Mexico border helps make sense of our own becomings as teachers, scholars, and persons. Drawing on St. Pierre's (2008) notion of the past as a site of theory, we ruminate on the Rio Grande Valley as "the literal ground of our consciousness" (Conway, 1989, p. 198). We explore, nostalgically, the persons we might become in a Valley long past -- an openness now increasingly restricted -- and ways of (re)imagining becoming, of refusing narratives that foreclose hope. We think through our nostalgia for the Valley, the adopted homespace and shared grounds of our consciousness as teachers, scholars, and people in a disruptive re-turning, like stones in a river, of once essentialized narratives.

"...Highway 77, is equally dismal in vistas, but parallels the coastline of the Gulf of Mexico. That route slices through the largest nonfunctioning ranch in Texas, the King

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<sup>1</sup> Putting this piece together, it was immediately apparent that the project is deeply heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1975). For [the second author] and I, the Valley and our experiences there on the Border have always been richly contextualized by storytelling. The works of McCarthy (1985, 1993, 1994) shaped our vision of the space before we ever arrived; Casares (2003) and Martinez (2012) proffered insider guidebooks of sorts, discovered in the midst of our time in Brownsville; while St. Pierre (2008), Deleuze (1988, 1993), and others provided lenses through which we might look back on our time. Rather than fold the voices of our guides into our own – and rather than fold our two experiences into one – we format this piece to emphasize the polyvocal nature of becoming. Italicized portions represent reflective writing done by the first author throughout the fall of 2012. A compilation of excerpted fiction, memoir, and theory are quoted at length and given room to bring context to the contemporary words of the two authors (individualized when necessary), as well as to importantly bring our personal experiences into conversation with other voices speaking of the Valley and their experiences of becoming.. We take up this work with consideration of the entwined subjectivities of becoming, and as such we recognize that meaning and identity are not so much out there to be found, but rather made and reproduced (St. Pierre, 2005). Through this piece, words of experience, memory, the literary, and the theoretical tumble against one another, not so much smoothing narrative as reorienting facets.

Ranch, one of the oldest ranches in Texas and with the bloodiest history. It's been out of full operation for years, producing only a dismal percentage of what it did in its heyday, but its continued existence has little to do with cattle ranching. The King Ranch provides the real border between Mexico and Texas: 200 miles of uncrossable, wretched, and sun-drenched land. Before the Patriot Act, back in the 1980s, there were two U.S. customs checkpoints blocking the migration of drugs, fruit, people, reptiles, and parrots on the roads between the United States and Mexico – both about 100 miles north of the Mexican border at highway choke points. The station on Highway 77, in Sarita, is the busier and better financed. It boasts the newest in anti-immigration technology, full staffing, and a huge billboard with the creepy propagandist image of “the good border patrol agent” and his militant German Shepherd.” (Martinez, 2012, p. 126)

Somewhere on that long stretch of US-77 just north of Raymondville, Texas lies the unmarked threshold to the Rio Grande Valley. Mesquite introduces palms. The air smells of salt and citrus. Birdsong. Opposite the border checkpoint, two pneumatic tubes to count southbound vehicles, aided by a camera on a post. The Harlingen interchange – veer right into the Upper Valley, or continue, straight on to Brownsville. Silos and mill towers. Freddy Fender. A water tower painted to look like an enormous golf ball. Sportsplex's gleaming bleachers towering over the dusty lots of La Pulga. The GPS reads “Alton Glur” – in our case, loosely translated, *home*.

“The ‘local has its own epistemology’ writes Stewart, (1996, p. 5), and I believe the forces in certain places provide especially fertile conditions, exquisitely dynamic intensities, that make us ‘available to a transformation of who we are, a contestation which compels us to re-think ourselves, a reconfiguration of our ‘place’ and our

‘ground’ (Butler, 1995, p. 131). If we wish to practice identity improvisation, attention to places may be required.” (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 122)

First author: I first made this trip as a 22-year-old, recent college graduate. I had imagined, on and off, becoming a teacher since my youth. An English major at a small, Midwestern, Catholic university, the reality of teaching materialized quickly as I was accepted to an affiliated alternative certification program and informed that I would spend two years teaching middle school in a place called Brownsville. I hadn’t heard of it and had to ask the person sitting next to me precisely where I would be going. A native Texan, she held up her left hand, thumb extended outward, index, and middle fingers held together, pointing to the ceiling, ring and little fingers pressed to the palm, and she indicated her wrist bone, just before it disappeared beneath her sleeve. “On the border, by the sea.”

A few months later I resettled in a small, brutalist house on the outskirts of Brownsville with seven other teachers-in-becoming, one of them my coauthor. We sat back-to-back in a crowded, nearly windowless home office, often thinking through ELA lesson plans with no idea that this shared becoming would extend into our experience as scholars. Even now, as we recall an experience seven years past, the Valley holds significant power over our collective becoming.

“This risky business, ‘homework’ (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 101), the disturbance of the saturation of identity in places, may create an overflow that produces those tiny explosions of the self that refuse to repeat the same I—great, shattering revolutions, in fact.” (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 123)

“There was only one season in South Texas, and that was Hot, the Hot season, with a capital “H.” Christmas landed in the Hot season, as did Easter (boy, did Easter ever), as did Thanksgiving, my birthday, the Victory at the Alamo, summer, Charro Days, winter,

and... come to think of it, so did my siblings' birthdays, and well, most of the rest of the year... There are no seasons there, so there's no time to measure." (Martinez, 2012, p. 72-73)

The RGV is steeped in a deep and vibrant history, one as often glossed over as it is misread. As with most of the spaces and matter and people along the US-Mexico border, The Valley is most typically viewed through the lens of deficit. Brownsville took center-stage in the summer of 2018, the involuntary setting for the Trump administration's "zero-tolerance" separation of families at the border. The Casa Padre immigration shelter for separated or unaccompanied minors -- a converted Wal-Mart with presidential utterances of freedom ironically adorning the walls opposite row-upon-row of chain link cells -- grew into a small city, and a political carnival ensued (Miller et al., 2018). Immigration policy debates typically metonymize Brownsville as little more than a mascot for the issue. Pundits and pols today invoke 'high poverty rates' and 'rapid population growth' to characterize the area, with Brownsville frequently cited as one of the three poorest cities in America (the others being McAllen and Harlingen, both further north in the RGV) (Kolson Hurley, 2014); while 'Zika' and 'cartel violence' dominated the headlines in their own times. This collective canon so often defines a place for many who have never set foot there.

"We don't get hurricanes every year, but if you lived through Beulah in '67, you know what they can do. It did most of its damage right here and in Matamoros. Trees were ripped out of the ground, phone lines got knocked over, just about every part of the city flooded, the electricity was out for almost a week. All the food and milk in the refrigerator went bad. Forget about clean water. I lost two trees in the backyard. The wind had that poor grapefruit tree twisting around like a pair of underwear hanging on the

clothesline. The mesquite split right down the middle. We heard the wood cracking all the way inside the house and I felt a part of me was also being ripped up. The biggest branch fell on the fence and made it into an accordion. And what happened here is nothing compared to what those poor people went through on the other side of the river. Nobody wanted to have that experience again.” (Casares, 2003, p. 33)

The colonized history of Brownsville begins in 1781, but perched at the intersection of the Rio Grande/Bravo and the Gulf of Mexico the southern edge of the river valley was peopled by indigenous groups far earlier. The city has since been a site of contention in transnational conflicts, opened diverse economic roles, become a gateway to the cosmos and a hotbed for competitive chess. This is, of course, a far too simple view of the city, and it is too often in these simplifications that we come to characterize the places that we find ourselves. Only in the exploration of multiplicitous stories can we come close to understanding the possibilities of a space, following Deleuze (1993), both past and future.

This piece then unravels a cartography of becoming by describing the entangled journeys of two young men as they navigate the interstices of identity – those of youth and adulthood, teacher and learner – there on the extreme edge of two nations. What follows is at once a journey over time and a journey through time, imagining both past and future in the present sense of becoming. It is a singular project and a collection of projects in parallel - turning to self-stories and other Valley narratives to take up this work – a discursive process of (re)making and unmaking the self.

### **Becoming Teachers**

*Presently I came to a low, wide building, which stood invitingly open. It had a carefree look. It was an odd little place, with a courtyard shaded by a tin roof. The heaving structure of corrugated sheets and rusting I-beams all leaned back against what seemed to be a now abandoned motel. A sign advertised vacancy and low rates, even through the murky windows of the main office. There had only been eight rooms, their doors showing a brassy number tacked into the wood.*

*I dragged my hand along the exterior and was shocked to find that the walls were made up of glossy bricks – each the color of a newly offered Robin’s egg. The whole place seemed to have been built with lustrous stones.*

“I dread the idea of leaving [my school], think it couldn’t possibly happen. [My school] is old, tactile, made of red brick, and built in the 1940s with a large auditorium and wooden hallways. It’s one of the very rare things in Brownsville that is old, has history. My father went to elementary school there, it’s so old. It’s our area’s own little Oxford. There are trees all around it, paths and hidden trails, with a snack bar run by an old woman from her house next door.” (Martinez, 2012, p. 28)

“They travelled down Paredes, Coffeeport Road, Fourteenth Street, 802, Central, and Boca Chica. Going everywhere and nowhere at the same time. People were in a hurry to get places, but [they] were taking their time. On Palm Boulevard, they passed the big, expensive houses with trimmed lawns and turned left at the first light. They drove another block and stopped in a parking lot across the street from the zoo... all he could hear were the birds on the phone lines and a dog barking in the distance.” (Casares, 2003, p. 64)



Second author: Just past those expensive houses on Palm Boulevard: Valley Catholic. Like [First author] I came to this border town to begin my career as a teacher, after studying literature in the same buildings at that Catholic university thousands of miles northward, better known for its vaunted football history than for the teachers it produced. A year prior. As it turns out we even took the same courses: Modern American Poetry, American Film, Fiction Writing. Though I entered the Valley before him and had, by the time he arrived, borne the brunt of a first year teaching: a messiness marked by failures if nothing else, ones typical and also perhaps the point. A native of Dallas, I'd vacationed on nearby South Padre Island as a kid but what I knew of the border was what everyone beyond it believed: undeveloped, I was sure; "at-risk", as my mother would say; remote, rudimentary, politically-charged; and letting my imagination go: extravagantly violent.

VC was nothing like this. The high school had a catalogue quality to its vistas, classrooms opening to palm-lined courtyards. *Resacas* delineating sports fields. With more architectural spending it could've been a small college at Stanford. Tuition was \$10,000 a year, more than the cost of the tony prep school I'd attended in Dallas five years prior. I'd perhaps assumed but hadn't fully considered how bicultural it would be. Nearly all of my students were Mexican or Mexican American. Save for a handful of refugees relocated from Tampico, all were fluently bilingual. A "pillar in the community", as the expression goes, the school taught generations of Brownsville's politicians, business owners, heads of the most prominent families and their fortunate progeny. Moreover the school had long depended on the patronage of elites from nearby Matamoros, just across the river, who saw in Valley Catholic a chance to provide their children with an American education.

“When he set out across the valley to the south the grass was golden in the morning sun. Antelope were grazing on the plain a half mile to the east...steadfast and doglike and in this fashion [he] crossed sometime near noon the international boundary line into Mexico, state of Sonora, undifferentiated in its terrain from the country they quit and yet wholly alien and wholly strange. To the east he could see one of the concrete obelisks that stood for a boundary marker. In that desert waste it had the look of some monument to a lost expedition.” (McCarthy, 1994, p. 74)

First Author: Nuestra Señora del Valle is a baby-blue middle school about a mile from the bridge. Not quite Southmost, not quite Gladys Porter, the building sits in the shadow of the expressway. NSDV can seem a world apart from Valley Catholic. Every classroom has two parallel windows, spanning the entire length of the space. Those on the southeast face of the building are warm to the touch, just fending off the heat of the South Texas sun. Those on the northwest side open out onto the courtyard, a flat slab of asphalt covered by a tin roof that echoes when the rains come. I taught in room 2, right between the principal’s office and the bathrooms. An old priest lived next door with 17 small dogs. When the soccer team would kick a ball over his fence it was lost forever in a myriad of yipes audible in the adjacent cafeteria, even over the din of birthday celebrations. This cramped, noisy school serves 90 students, grades six through eight, and despite being a Catholic school, does so free of tuition. To accomplish this feat, Nuestra Señora necessarily asks her teachers to moonlight as grant-writers and volunteers for the development office.

“School, I had noticed, was considered ‘my time,’ which meant I couldn’t be pressed into labor by my father or grandmother for fear of government involvement. So I learned to take advantage of this.” (Martinez, 2012, p. 180)

First Author: In my short preparation to re-enter the world of schooling “across the desk” as a young teacher, I recognize that the bulk of my training was focused around recapitulation, what Deleuze might call the repetition of perceived generalities (Deleuze, 1993). Content knowledge was secondary to models of classroom management espoused by neoliberal pedagogical snake-oil salesmen. These techniques were layered opaquely atop the grammar of schools as I had experienced it in my own education. I was pushed to consider exemplary teachers through my personal enjoyment of their work and to mimic their moves in my own performance. All of this I was to align with the curriculum and standards that my placement had assigned. This recapitulation is one I fear all too common in teacher preparation programs.

“The minute I got on the bus in the morning, it was showtime: I would be there all week. I still managed my academia to the extent I could – I was the top student, a good athlete, and well-liked by teachers, students, and administrators – but I was also well-respected by the farm kids, who didn’t buy into this American ‘upward mobility’ thing, this ‘education,’ who might have otherwise picked on me, thought me soft. I spoke their language, after all.” (Martinez, 2012, p. 34-35)

First Author: Shattering this recapitulation, my instructor in English methods was a tall man who would plop down on the floor of his classroom while we were working. He, intentionally or otherwise, taught us to question the teacher as an authority of knowledge, taught us to look around the room for ideas and discourse, not merely to the podium or teacher’s desk. I took this with me into my own classroom. In just my second week of student teaching, I set my students on a short writing project, circulated, then found a spot in the back corner of the room where I could crouch and wait for questions. Time passed, the students were engaged in their writing. Music was playing softly enough that one had to strain to hear the words. Suddenly, a head

began to pivot, slowly at first, then rather quickly. “Where is [first author]!?! Is he okay?!?” (intoned with fear, as I had disappeared without a trace). This moment meant a lot, knowing that they (at least one) really cared that I was there with them.

“I thought briefly of the man from El Salvador and wondered how the news of his death might have arrived to his family, floating in the air like a corpse in black water...I wondered if his body was still being driven to make good for the life he had seen blink out in the swift currents of the canal. I wondered if thought of his body as a tool for destruction or as one of safekeeping. I wondered, too, about my body, about what sort of tool it was becoming.” (Cantú, 2018, p. 19)

My experience as a teacher in the Valley did not occur “behind the desk.” I taught on Sundays, sitting in open garages where brassy huapangos would slide from the radio and the juices of the barbeque loosened my poor Spanish. I taught nights, ranging between the tables of Brownsville society with a tray of drinks and a quick pitch to continue giving to the little blue school on Lincoln Street. I taught beneath a steel cage, soon hefted skyward with a hoop attached for free-throw contests at the fall carnival. I taught at 5 miles per hour, keeping our school’s Charro Days Parade float steady while my students threw candy to the crowd. I taught on the soccer pitch, the chess board, the stage – only once with a jug of water poured over my head. I taught through student elections, through paper snowflakes hung from the cafeteria ceiling for the Snow Ball on a 78-degree December evening. I taught spider-sniffing and how to keep a canoe from going over the edge.

Second author: I took from the tall man a penchant for the creative, what I have since come to make sense of as a centering of the literary aspects of teaching literature--an approach not as intuitive as it might seem. This was no easy task and accompanied by its own failures, but

even those were rarely discouraging, merely signs of the unfulfilled promise of the work. Forsaking SWBATs and performance assessments and the behaviorist techniques I'd been given by most of my teacher educators -- a whole year planned and aligned in a monstrous Excel spreadsheet, each month and every day, unit and lesson and test, before I'd even met a soul at VC -- forsaking all of that, I taught with poetry, constantly, exhausting the best poems from my own education, clipping what moved me in *The New Yorker* and the books I began to order in bunches, the contemporary and experimental and story collections and more than a few classics I hadn't myself made time for in school. I made time, then, with the intention of teaching with it all. I taught music, everything I was listening to and much of what my students were. I taught my most cherished novels, the ones hazed in the most gauzy nostalgia. In this way teaching came to reflect my self, important in that it represented a divergence from the reproduction of teacher prep, and yet the teaching also became an encounter with my students for the persons they were (becoming). This encounter was often a lot of silliness, a lot of, for example, Luis reciting Kanye and Jay-Z lyrics ("sorry I'm in my PJ's but I just got off the PJ") to explain his tardiness. Yet it was also an encounter with the profoundly humbling. Teaching McCarthy's *The Road* I asked students about violence, tried to academicize it and found instead that many already knew more of the subject and more intimately than I could imagine. How to talk about violence as a literary theme in a room where more than one students' relatives had been kidnapped and ransomed?

### **Becoming Scholars**

*As I continued to trace my way along, there was a sudden change beneath my fingertips as the smooth bricks crackled into a kaleidoscopic bouquet of muted mosaic tiles. I found the width of the frieze – about four feet across – and pulled one of the shirts from my pack. With broad strokes I gently uncovered the ceramic shards. The tiles melted together into a perfect*

*likeness of a hooded woman – perhaps a queen or countess or warrior, folding her hands in peaceful sleep. Perhaps I could write about her. I settled beneath the tessellated woman and looked around her court.*

“It was like Sesame Street there. We coexisted happily, and every three days there was something called “bilingual education” and the kids who had trouble with English would be taken into a different class and helped along while the rest of us – all the white kids and me – would work on different projects, usually a book we’d all read together or a fun word problem. It was blissful learning like that. Every few months, the Mexican kids would take a reading test from a counselor to determine their ability in English comprehension and whether they could be relieved from the “bilingual” status, as it had an air of dishonor to it. I was never “bilingual.” I did my best to forget Spanish from the start.” (Martinez, 2012, p. 29)

First Author: At some point in my first year I learned the vital lesson that there are multiple curricula working in each classroom and that one was not necessarily more important than the others. We were working through discussions that involved each student possessing a small strip of paper. Somewhere in the midst of my 90-minute block, the entirety of 7B, the self-proclaimed “loud class”, gasped and hoisted up their hands. “Hold on, please. Let’s just finish this idea.” The hands stayed up. The smallest boy in the class fizzled with energy. His hand was somehow extending his whole body up toward the ceiling. “Okay, what’s up?” “Sir, the paper fell off of my desk, and it landed standing perfectly on its side. We gotta take a photo.” My thoughts flipped to what-if scenarios. What if my principal walks in and sees us taking a photograph of a slip of paper? What if... By now the students on the far side of the room were craning their necks. They too wanted to see the wonder of such a perfect landing. “Guys, careful. Sir, please,

we have to.” At this rate I knew I’d never get them back but for entertaining the idea. “You have 25 seconds. I’ll take ONE photo. If you want to be in it, walk over quietly, and quickly.” A flurry of movement. 17 seventh graders posed around the slip of paper wordlessly. All smiles, we recorded the moment. In another beat we were back to our marks, as if nothing had happened.

This occurrence, albeit a rather silly one – thankfully captured and revisited – has become one of those strangely wistful instances that elbows past the others from my stint at NSDV. At the time I supposed that the excitement surrounding such a phenomenon made this instance stand out, but as I continued on in the classroom I came to recognize this moment as one of theorization, in which I began to engage in scholarly inquiry about systemic programs of power, accountability, wonder, and the everyday practices of schooling, and the ways that these systems influenced my own experience in the classroom. Nostalgically, I see this moment as one in which becoming a scholar was occurring quite explicitly, wherein I began to abstract the concrete. There are plenty of these moments, a whole carousel of memories, but much like this one they are not mere fixtures of foreshadowing, they remain particularly contextualized. Such contextualized theorizing remains apparent in the work that I strive to do now. I dread the sorts of projects that seek to make wholly distinct subject and object, that valorize generalization as power.

“I will tell you how Mexico was. How it was and how it will be again.” (McCarthy, 1993, p. 226)

Second Author: I answered the questions I’d encountered by writing about them -- this is what I learned it meant to become a scholar. In this way I found resonant Richardson’s (1997) notion of writing as thinking itself, as the site and process of thought, of theorizing, and also as doing the

work of constructing a life. In attempting to make sense of the intersection of my students' lives and the texts we read, I found that:

the truth you come to will set you free. First it will break your heart, yes, but the truth is what counts, accepting that the truths the class gets closest to will often be heartbreaking. To avoid this fact, to elide it, is to do a disservice to the strength of the community that is possible in our classrooms, our students, ourselves.” (Author, 2015, p. 93).

I wrote lives into a life.

### **Becoming Persons**

*After stumbling upon this secret retreat, I spent my days there, picking obscure bits of jade and glassy Heineken beads from some of the overgrown crabgrass. I didn't want any lawnmower to spit the sharp chips back out and scratch the walls, or heaven forbid, the mosaic. After filling several empty coffee cans with the rich globules, I began to trim the coarse lawn surrounding the asphalt with a pair of barber's clippers that had been woven among the weeds at the fence. I realized my disdain for those that owned – or ever hoped to own – their own lawnmower, and I clipped away with a measured snip, until all that remained was a perfectly green military flattop.*

First author: We had been in the Valley for about two weeks when the older cohort sent us out to experience some of the neighborhoods that we might otherwise not encounter. Just as the sun was setting, we drove along Hwy. 281 toward the west side of town, where Brownsville will likely continue to trace its way up the river in decades to come. Tracts of new subdivisions spring up, block after block. Past these homes we wound our way through a neighborhood called *La Galaxia*, with *Calles Cometa*, *Planeta*, *Pluton*, and *Terrestre*. Now, the sky dark but for a few buzzing street lights, we three climbed out of the car, and padded through a vacant lot on *Calle*



*Espacito* about 75 feet to the shadow on the horizon. This was the first we'd seen of the fence, the first steadfast reminder that we had reached the edge of permissible progress.

“The U.S-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture...Borders are set up to define the spaces that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25)

There where the Rio Grande/Bravo churns suddenly into the Gulf, in the grating tumble of comparison, I lived briefly between two lives, and in this place more than most, I was highly conscious of my ever-fluid becoming. Notions of youth and adulthood commingled as teacher-educators would resoundingly note, “*you* are the adult in the classroom” before fellow faculty would remind me that I was young enough to be their (grand)son. Meanwhile the roles of teacher and learner, once so distinct, lost definition as Sunday mornings writing lesson plans for my sixth-grade class would slip into Sunday afternoons writing reflections for a developmental psychology course. Perhaps most of all, life on the border accentuated the grating opposition of normalized and oppressive whiteness, reorienting my own cultural maturation in the light of those I taught. Beyond Anzaldúa’s (1987) cultural hemorrhaging, for me Brownsville staged the bleeding together of selves, as the physical embodiment of unnatural bounds in becoming.

Second author: Similarly I felt the wonderful disorientation of my moments there and then tied inextricably throughout to the becomings of others and my collisions with their respective trajectories. Looking back it was crucial I assumed from the start that I needed to actually *like* (Greteman & Burke, 2017) the students I taught, all of them, in such a way that gave

them space to become who they would. As any teacher knows this is an immensely demanding project (and one too often abandoned) but it makes all the difference in the work of pedagogy; and, more importantly, it made all the difference to me in becoming a person. Squinting over and over again at ill-formed arguments in “broken” English in order to find something worth praising, I am convinced now, is one small example of the good work of teaching and living, of what it means to learn to be in the world with others (Garrett, 2017), over and against the difficulties of professional obligation, political difference, or the vagaries of dissatisfaction, prejudice, even loneliness. Becoming a teacher and scholar, there, then, became a practice in affirming life as it came to me, of asserting to students and colleagues, the others in my midst, that “we have some history together that hasn’t happened yet.” (Egan, 2010, p. 345). Which is all to say: I found myself asking myself some semblance of Bingham & Sidorkin’s (2004) question, with the selfsame sentiment: “Why do schools remain if not for meeting?” (p. 5). It makes more sense to speak of *becomings*, I think, locating my own within so many teeming, tangled multitudes, as *what* I lived was bound up inextricably not so much with *how* as *who*.

### **Imagining a Valley Long Past**

The most common reaction to arrival in the Valley was the immediate lamentation of timing. “If only you’d been here even five or six years ago, everything was so different.”

“I remember it being a different neighborhood back then. Everybody knew everybody, and people left their doors unlocked at night. You didn’t worry about people stealing shit you didn’t lock up. I’m talking about more than twenty years ago now... this was before Pete Zuniga was riding his brand-new ten-speed from Western Auto and, next to the Friendship Garden, saw a white dude who’d been knifed a couple of dozen times and was floating in the green water of the resaca. Before some crazy woman hired a curandera to

put a spell on her daughter's ex-boyfriend, which really meant hiring a couple of hitmen from Matamoros to do a drive-by. Before the cops ever had to show up at El Disco de Oro Tortillería. Like holding up a 7-Eleven was getting old, right? You know, when you could sit down at the Brownsville Coffee Shop #1 and not worry about getting it in the back while you ate your menudo. When you didn't have to put an alarm *and* the club on your car so it wouldn't end up in Reynosa. Before my father had to put iron bars on the windows and doors because some future convict from the junior high was always breaking into the house. And before my father had to put a fence in the front because, in his words, I'm sick and tired of all those damn dogs making poo in my yard. I guess what I'm trying to say is, things were different back then." (Casares, 2003, p. 158)

Fixated on the Valley as it once had been, tales turned to the bygone accessibility of Matamoros, our faculty crossing the bridge to hold staff gatherings at Garcia's restaurant, spending Saturdays in the public square. Others, old-timers and winter-Texans from way back would tell of the island as it once was and the rumor of Brownsville's old street-car system, drawn by mules. There was so often a sense that Brownsville was a space empty of identity in the present. People either longed for the past (openness mostly) or what was to come (economically). Yet, we found affect and space for becoming in exactly what it was at the time.

"The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others." (McCarthy, 1985, p. 245 )

“When I crossed it was to see something I couldn’t find in Brownsville, maybe it was the restaurants and bars, but maybe also because when you grow up here, on the border, at least part of your life and memories exist on that other side. You remember your dad taking you across for your first haircut, buying a case of Joyas and hearing the soda bottles clinking all the way home inside the trunk of the Oldsmobile, attending a wedding in Brownsville and then crossing over for the reception in Matamoros...” (Casares, 2018)

Second author: Being and becoming a teacher, a professional and adult along the border disrupted the common stories we’d heard about the Valley because living there--anywhere, but for us, there, then--we encountered a plurality of stories telling us otherwise. Indeed in that fluid space of bordercrossing, juggling our first years teaching, we hardly had time to sort it at all. Certainly along with the difficult, the traumatic and violent we heard no shortage of ordinary joys. Now, given time, we refuse, in writing and practice, narratives that foreclose hope for the Valley or the people within it. It is not a backwater. Its citizens are not “drug dealers and racists” despite the cruelty of our national rhetoric. This is a stance which reflects a world we hope to see, one less a choice than a becoming. What I mean is: I don’t see our refusal as a decision to be made over and against the evidence but rather what emerged (and continues to) from our time there, what became then and continues to become, still.

“Carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon.” (McCarthy, 2005, p. 305)

I grew up in Dallas where Beto O’Rourke is now surprisingly popular, Democrat that he is, and I’ve heard the nastier things conservative family and friends have said, mocking the name (“You know, he’s not even Mexican”), and I think of the dozen Betos I taught: Humbertos, Albertos, Gilbertos, Dagobertos. The thing about becoming through encounter, or about the first group of

students you taught, is that you don't forget and you never lose the attachment and you carry it with you. That's our refusal, and a hope.

### **Leaving the Valley**

So often in the process of teacher preparation we frame pre-service teachers' experience of growth according to the momentarily accumulated reflection of standards, as a process of developing a way of being. This is apparent in the modes of assessment used when our instructors visited us in Texas twice each semester, wherein teacher identity was a final product to be assembled piece by piece, but was examined only in moments of summative finality. Little attention was given to the affect and difference produced in this assembly process. In the ongoing becoming. Our experience in the Valley reflects, rather, a removed sense of becoming. A strong sense of difference -- from our students and neighbors certainly, but more importantly, from the teachers, scholars, and people we had been upon our arrival -- was apparent in our daily experience. Far-removed from the incremental development of skills, our becoming was measured in playful spirals of self-making, co-constructed within that cramped office. Brownsville, for us, was a place of surrender to processes of becoming, again and again and again.

“We maintain the myth of eventual return—to home, to our true selves from which we are alienated—when the time is right. We want to stay for a time and play in this other place where we are not known as we are at home. We feel free away from home. We suspect that if we return, we may find that we've become the Other, that we've abandoned the staged origin—it was shattered with other foundations—it was never even there.” (St. Pierre, 2008, pp. 120-121)

“Pensamos, he said, que somos las víctimas del tiempo. En realidad la vía del mundo no es fijada en ningún lugar. Cómo sería posible? Nosotros mismos somos nuestra propia jornada. Y por eso somos el tiempo también. Somos lo mismo. Fugitivo. Inescrutable.”

(McCarthy, 1994, pp. 413-414)

We can say this: Brownsville was the place we became teachers and scholars and persons, less by what we brought to it and more by what and who we encountered there, and here we're tempted to get sentimental: about starry nights listening to Drake's *Take Care* driving past Corpus Christi and the moments-in-amber that were ad-hoc classroom congregations after the day's last bell, about coaching soccer con los güeyes, and blossoming first loves coextensive with that whole last year, and saying goodbye, ushering in different lives in Chicago and Michigan, ones perhaps more typical. But nostalgia is not the point; what we'd rather say is that becoming was less professional than personal, though the distinction between those two necessarily blurs considered this way. What's become more difficult is not dwelling too long in that formative past, even if that lingering rests upon affection. Following St. Pierre (2008), we both found that:

the point about attachment to places, and our histories in them, is that [this or any] home is not a haven; identity can never be a refuge. A consolation derived from an authentic, stable essence is no more possible in places than in subjectivities. (p. 120).

Here we've tried building theories of education and research through memories and texts.

Histórias y ficciones. We engaged experiences in the past, our own and others', in formative moments and spaces as a way of understanding and envisioning forward conceptual trajectories to follow. “You existed to me” writes Tracy K. Smith (2011), “You were a theory.” The border,

the Valley, is a space of crossing, but returning to that crossing may yet be valuable, an effort at circling back to the site of becoming and lingering there, becoming again, anew.

### Epilogue

Leaving the Valley by car can be a halting experience. The border checkpoint outside of Sarita sneaks up on you the first time. That low building appears on the horizon, stretching across the road, temporarily halting northward flow to ask for status, to shine a flashlight across the back seat and glance beneath the wheel wells, and in a moment more the threshold is crossed. “Lot’s wife”, writes Vonnegut (1969/2005; and I wouldn’t draw on him here except that I taught *Slaughterhouse-Five* then, there):

was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt. So it goes. (p. 28).

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