

Brief But Spectacular PBS July 19, 2023

Tanya Aguiñiga is a Los Angeles-based artist, designer, and activist who grew up as a binational citizen of Mexico and the U.S. Much of her work is centered on her dual identity and tells the larger and often invisible stories of her transnational community.

Tanya Aguiñiga, Artist:

I, along with millions of people along the U.S.-Mexico border, grew up crossing the border every single day to go to school in the U.S.

I would go with my dad at like 3:30 in the morning to get to school by 8:00 because the border crossing is that long. I would have to take two buses to the border to wait in line, walk across the border, then take a trolley to take the train to the town where my high school was or my junior high, and then take a bus from there over to school.

The majority of us that live in the borderlands on the Mexican side know that crossing the border and getting a job on the U.S. side is a necessity to be able to survive. Crossing the border, it's such a stigmatizing experience, and most of us don't really talk about it. A lot of us are U.S. citizens. A lot of people have green cards. Most people are paying taxes.

But we don't usually express our needs. In a lot of those difficult times, I would have liked for someone to just check in on me and ask if I was OK. So I started AMBOS, which stands for Art Made Between Opposite Sides, in 2016.

The AMBOS project came out of me just wanting to check in on people. I wanted to come back to the border and do work specifically using the border space as a place of dialogue. One of the biggest projects that we did with the AMBOS project was the Border Quipu.

A quipu is an Andean, a pre-Colombian organizational system. I came up with using the quipu as a way to record our daily migrations to the north. We went car to car and gave people these postcards and asked people to write a small reflection of what their thoughts were when they crossed the border.

And the postcards had two strings on them and asked them to please make an emotional knot that represented any of their emotions. And then through the joining of these knots, we would be able to see ourselves in connection with our larger community and that we would understand that we're not alone in this.

We ended up taking three years and traveling across the entirety of the U.S.-Mexico border, and we engaged over 310,000 people. I hope that, when people see my work, they feel like there's space within the work for them to see themselves mirrored in it and that they find some type of little home within it for themselves and for their own perspectives.

My name is Tanya Aguiñiga, and this is my Brief But Spectacular take on using craft to push back on injustice.