



# Giving into

# *Nepantla*

*Speaking with Adriana Yvette Monsalve about living in Laredo, a town on the Texas-Mexico border, and co-founding Homie House Press.*

**Kimi Hanauer:** What is your relationship to cultural passage or immigration?

**Adriana Yvette Monsalve:** I'm not an immigrant; I'm immigrant-adjacent. My parents migrated here as children, and that has informed everything in my world, like the spaces I grew up in and my overall perspective. I've always felt unsure of what exactly is home to me. We grew up in an area where we were the only ones who were speaking Spanish; when my parents sent me to school, I didn't know English and just learned there. I just felt like I didn't belong since I was young. So, I think it all starts there.

**Valentina Cabezas:** That is something I think we need to come to terms with: being able to find comfort in the in-between spaces we are in.

**KH:** Could you share with us more about your recent publication project, *Femme Frontera*?

Basically, I moved to the Texas-Mexico border in 2015. I went because I had just finished grad school in London where I studied photojournalism, and I couldn't get a visa to stay. I just felt like I really wanted to be in a border space. All of my life I've felt like I've been in the middle of things, in multiple spaces at once, but I've never literally been in the landscape of a border.

So when I got kicked out of London, I came back and got in my car and left. When I got there, I was waitressing and then I was teaching as well. In my first year of teaching at the university, I was doing my work self-funded, I was focusing on this frontera life; what does it look like to have this trans-fronteriza life? And how does it manifest in us, in descendents and immigrant-adjacent individuals who have these feelings that linger on forever? And then I also had students I was teaching storytelling and photojournalism to. After a year of being there, we [Arlene Mejorado and I] found out about this grant that funded a mentorship art project. So we discussed it and then applied. When we got it, we knew exactly what we wanted to do together. So that's kind of how this project was able to come into this form and become a

parallel story with Ari, who does have a Mexican background and is a lot more directly related to that specific frontera.

I am related but in a different way, because yeah, I'm Colombian. I feel like I've been living in a border my whole life, in the sense that I don't fit in one category ethnically, racially, spiritually, sexually, health-wise, like everything—I've just always been in so many spaces. When people asked me why I was doing this, I wouldn't tell them that I needed to understand my own personal narrative, that this is why I moved to the physical border, to the land in between. I would share that I was working on immigration stories. I wasn't telling people the real reason because I didn't want to be that sensitive thug. [laughs]

**KH:** Your new nickname.

I have been surrounded by all different kinds of Latinx communities my whole life, but being in an only-Mexican community for so long, I learned a lot. In the book we talk about *nepantla*. *Nepantla* literally means "land in-between," but it's been used and reclaimed over the past 20 and 30 years. Do you know Gloria Anzaldúa's work? She is this badass queer feminist Xicanx and she's from the Texas border. She used this word—it's an indigenous word—but she used it to talk about other things like her identity and how there are people who have more than one identity. When you are a person who has *nepantla*, that means that your life is going to be lived with a lot of tension—especially if you don't give into the *nepantla*—because otherwise it will destroy you. People that live with *nepantla*, it can be really scary, or it can be something that guides you. I didn't know this word before I moved to Laredo, but about a year before I moved there is probably when I started giving into this thing, before I knew it had a name. So moving to Laredo was a very literal action of me giving into *nepantla*. When you give a word to something it gives it so much power. When I learned that word, I knew it was real. It gave me a lot of agency to know that I can create from this space and this space has power.

**KH:** Was your personal understanding with *nepantla* one of the things that made you an insider to a community you were otherwise an outsider to?

As an artist who works in a photojournalistic way, I've done a lot of immersing myself in spaces and communities. That's just something I do naturally. And I think it gets easier—it used to scare me a lot—but the more I place myself in different spaces it gets easier. And it's not something I always do intentionally, it's just organic. In Laredo, I got a job as a waitress. And that's the best thing ever because you meet so many people. But there's levels to that too; like I'm a very light-skinned Latina with this curly hair, and like, indigenous people don't have this hair! So everyone was going in on me, asking around, like, "Is she Jewish? Is she Italian?" Like, "Italians don't have hair like that either? So, she's Brazilian?" It drove me a little crazy, like, can I just be? So, even though I immersed myself in this space, there's still a lot of guarding I have to do in order to be there. For example, if they find out that I have a master's degree, they are going to block me out because they will see I am privileged in all these ways. That community is 97 percent Catholic and it's very conservative; anything that's different is going to make people curious for a little bit, but then it's going to make them mad. So I have to navigate that a bit in a way where I am still being me, but I have to be protective. I have to remember that I am there for work, not just to party and have fun. Even though I would never go there to party because there isn't really a big QTPOC community.

At the end of the day, I think I am sincere and I do my work in love. I'd be lying if I said I'm not trying to get something from the people I shoot—I want to share your story. Because it's such a conservative and Christian space, if I am trying to be people's friend, they automatically want to marry me off. And I've never been in that kind of space where I had to protect myself from those things. At first, people were really interested because I was like an anomaly, but then they just thought I was this weird girl. After a certain point, we couldn't hang out anymore because I think they realized they couldn't get what they wanted from me.

Juanito's kids. 35mm digital image, Laredo, TX, 2017, by Adriana Monsalve.



**KH: Is the absence of a public queer community something that pushed the direction of *Femme Frontera* to talk about gender fluidity?**

It's something so not talked about there. I mean, obviously there are queer people there, but it's not out in the open. If you look at my part of *Femme Frontera*, everyone who is featured in it is queer, even if it wasn't overt, it was just people who I was kindred to. A lot of the people I was really lucky to be around were teenagers, and as an older kid I was able to see these things and see myself in the people I worked with. But still, I would get in trouble, like, people would want me to marry their brother!

**KH: What did you say to people when you left?**

I left with school ending in the summer break, so I did tell my students I was leaving. They get me on another level; I can be a little more transparent with them. I think most of them knew I was queer, I didn't shy away from that, which I think was possibly weird for them. But those are the people I have the most relationship with, they always hit me up about printing stuff with Homie House, and I'm like yes please! And that's the thing, there's so many creative kids out there but they don't have the space to talk about the things they want to, so as soon as you create that space, you form really special bonds. I'm really grateful for that.

By the time two years was up, all my neighbors and the community I felt I had cultivated, all thought I was weird. They would say really offensive things, like, "You are actually pretty, you should have a boyfriend," and stuff like that. So with that, I just told them I was leaving and people really didn't understand why. Sometimes they hit me up on Facebook and they are like, "Where are you and what are you doing?"

**KH: What about people in the book?**

The women who were doing the nightlife in Laredo, like the one queer night club in Laredo, they are my homies and they still check on me. They are an older community in their 40s to 60s, and there

aren't a lot of them; they are really sweet and we keep in contact. Before Laredo, I didn't have enough of an understanding of drag, and when I was hanging out with a lot of these women, they talk about it as something they've always been but haven't always been able to do. And I realized that what drag is to them is what *nepantla* is to me. Those ladies were all so awesome.

**KH: What are they like?**

A lot of their stories are really heartbreaking. They are all pretty much poverty-level and they have to go through so much stuff just to be able to perform and live their life in a place that is so conservative ... but it's all about the resilience.

**VC: Being bombarded with those questions about marriage, how do you maintain your mental psyche and not let it get to you?**

First, the direct answer to that is Linko, my dog. I got him three months after I got to Laredo. I've always loved animals, but I never had my own animal as an adult. But what I would do a lot before I got Linko, I would go to the animal shelter and just volunteer. The whole human-dog-connect, I'm all the way here for it. Linko is my homie, totally. So Linko helped a lot. If there was a day where I wasn't teaching or shooting or doing anything like that, me and Linko would just kick it all day. Because it's such a lawless place, nobody cares if me and Linko go grocery shopping together. Linko, for me, has been the best medicine for my anxiety. That's the number one thing.

And number two, and this is definitely a privilege, I am someone who gets so much adrenaline and endorphins from making my art, that I am just a really happy person. I know it's rare, but I've never really dealt with depression in my life. I'm really just content when I am able to make my work. I'm the most me when I am connecting with others and shooting. If I'm not doing the work, then I become dangerous.

**VC: What is the relationship between you and those who you shoot and**

involve in the work?

I feel like, when people say yes and allow me to spend time with them with my camera, I know it might take me to another place in our relationship and then to another place from there. So it's very long-term thinking. When I meet someone and I think it's going to be really good—we have great chemistry, they have such a great story—and then I ask if they want to be part of the project, sometimes people are like “Hell no.” Sometimes it's my fault because I ask too early. And sometimes people feel like it's too dangerous to let someone else in. Sometimes people don't trust me, and that's fair. Most of the time you get used to rejection, but for the few people that let you in, it's worth everything.

**KH:** People popping in and out of spaces to superficially facilitate projects under the guise of “art” is such a common thing; it feels significant that you dedicated so much of yourself to learn from others and contribute to the community you were becoming a part of.

**VC:** When did Homie House Press start?

It officially started in December 2016, so we are just a baby.

**KH:** When we first met, I remember you were telling me the media outlets you worked with as a photojournalist were not really open to publishing the more in-depth work you were doing. You mentioned they mostly wanted more surface images and one-liners and how that motivated you to start Homie House Press as a way to tell the stories you needed to tell.

Yeah, me and Caterina Ragg [co-organizer of Homie House Press] both went to photojournalism school, so we do have access to that world sometimes. But those outlets just take what you make and make [it] into white male gaze. I think the thing is, if you are a traditional photojournalist, you are supposed to be unbiased. But as a brown kid documenting brown things, I can't take myself out of it because I am so much a part of the story. But these traditional photojournalists, they are all mostly white men, and they

Luchando. 35mm digital image, Laredo, TX, 2016, by Adriana Monsalve.



Hermanitxs Fronterizxs. 35mm digital image, Laredo, TX, 2017, by Adriana Monsalve.



can do that because they have no connection to what they are photographing and they don't care to. And everyone is taught to just get the photo and get out, don't form any relationship. And I just really can't do that at all, I think it's really hard to do. But that's super new-school thinking. That's what we are here for.

**KH:** Yeah. I think, also, there is bias in a white man's perspective, it's just that it's a white man's perspective in a mostly white man's field, where that perspective is the norm. So it's not recognized as bias.

I think the thing is that any individual could potentially take photos in the way that I take them if they just cared. I don't think you have to be the same, I think you just have to care. I've had plenty of shoots where I document things where I assumed I had no connection, but because of me being obsessed with identity, I am always looking for myself in things. So even when I am shooting something I thought had nothing to do with me, I find out I'm wrong and I can find myself in it. It's because I am just always trying to connect.

**KH:** It feels like you're also talking about the limitations of the categories that are placed on us. For example, with nationality, you are not Mexican, but that doesn't mean you didn't form real relationships in Laredo. There is more to that community than just a nationality, and if you care to do the work, you can find a way to connect and create meaning with others.

Since the book has come out, most people that have bought this book are Mexican. And it makes me a little sad sometimes. I'm not Mexican and I never say the word Mexican anywhere in this book. I feel like people just assume that when you talk about an immigrant you are talking about Mexicans. And I'm like, well what about all of us? Is there not room for us in the narrative of immigration?

**KH:** The way we internalize the stereotypes also limits us from breaking out of the problems we face. For example, if someone doesn't see themselves as an immigrant simply because of their ethnicity or race, will

*Dos trenzas, una nena.* 35mm digital image, Laredo, TX, 2017, by Adriana Monsalve.



they support the efforts to fight against the injustices that immigrants face?

That is so parallel with racial identity too. I've been thinking about how so many Latinx people identify and sometimes check off "white" when asked on various forms. I think the system still wants to preserve white as the majority when in reality it's not. It's rare that I actually say I am Colombian, it's something people find out about me much later. I've always just felt kind of anti-nationalist in some way. And Colombia is seen in this specific way, like it's very "sexy, exotic." I'd much rather say I'm *caribe* or Latinx. I definitely shy away from saying I'm Colombian because as soon as you say it, people put all these things on you.

**KH:** What does sanctuary mean to you? Another term that is thrown around a lot and maybe means nothing at this point. Maybe it's not even the right word to use?

When you said the word sanctuary, I also thought of the word citizen. Citizen means that you belong in a place, that you are protected, that you have access to all the things you need. When I think about sanctuary, I see it as a space that I feel in that way, like a citizen. And I realize I don't feel that way often. I haven't felt that way until recently in my life. The places where I've felt that the most is when I am in intersectional art spaces, places where I can connect through all these different ways with people I didn't superficially seem like I could connect with. And in QTPOC spaces. Those are the most home I've ever felt, the most sanctuary, and literally where I belong. As an artist, I think that is where I find my citizenship.

Cover girl. 35mm digital image, Laredo, TX, 2017, by Adriana Monsalve.

