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MAX TOLLESON

HOW ZOE LEONARD REMIXES THE RIVER

Here in Texas, I am frequently reminded by news outlets that there is a compound of humanitarian and ecological crises at the US / Mexico border: growing numbers of migrants seeking asylum in the US; drug and human trafficking; surveillance and policing of militaristic proportions; degradation of the environment and wildlife habitats. Around the border, it seems, a confluence of urgent concerns swirls like a maelstrom out of which no clear path seems visible. If I listen to these stories too closely, I can sometimes forget that the border they speak of is a fairly new and modern construction—still “under construction” and thus malleable—that has only existed since 1848 when, in the aftermath of the Mexican–American War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo designated the Río Bravo / Rio Grande the new boundary line between Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos and the United States of America. The river, which took to the channel it runs today around 430,000 years ago, had no name for 99.99 percent of its life and only became a part of human history around 12,000 years ago.¹ How might today’s border look from the river’s perspective? Perhaps it would register as a frenzy of development that has sprung up around it seemingly overnight and has included the creation of roads, dams, levees, irrigation trenches, bridges, checkpoints, pipelines, and detention centers, all of which, as the poet Tim Johnson has observed, is designed to control the flow of water, the passage of goods, and the movement of people.² As historian C. J. Alvarez reminds us, “The river is old. When it was young it looked different, and so did the world around it.”³ I allude to the long history of the river not to avoid the modern problems associated with the border, but to suggest an approach to them situated outside the humanist tradition.⁴ I am also proposing, by imagining the border from the river’s perspective, a poetical way of thinking that attempts to momentarily unmake the modern border, to peel back its temporal layers and see what other approaches to the river have been and could still be possible.⁵

Zoe Leonard’s *Al río / To the River* (2016–2022), a photographic project the artist recently undertook, advances this poetical approach to the river. In *Al río*, Leonard appears to confront Texas’s border with Mexico as a modern construction only to then dissolve its monumental binarism into the geologic formations of the river itself. Leonard depicts practices of control and surveillance, leisure and agriculture, damming water flows and land scraping and tracking alongside images of plants, animals, and land formations found throughout the riparian corridor as though they form interlocking layers of geologic strata. Despite the river’s enduring presence as Leonard’s main subject, there is no dominant theme, no central message. A pictorial rhetoric reminiscent of genres like landscape photography or photojournalism occasionally seems to be at play; however, the language of photography in Leonard’s work is made diffuse through conjunctions that complicate these genres and the tropes that

accompany them. When groups of the approximately 500 photographs are viewed together, in series, they suggest that the river is not just one thing but rather a constellation of relations—both natural and man-made—with distinct yet coexisting temporalities that stitch together like a patchwork design that continues to grow and change. Just as the situation around the river can change from peaceful to tense depending on which section and which side of the river one occupies, *Al río* does not offer a vision of unified coherence; there are few, if any, “iconic” (meaning cliché) photographs. Instead, in *Al río*, photographs of and around the river come across as fragile, circumstantial, and embodied by Leonard, who chose to forgo all telescopic



FIG. 1

Zoe Leonard, *Al río / To the River*
(detail), 2016–2022. Gelatin silver
prints, C-prints and inkjet prints.
© Zoe Leonard. Courtesy the artist,
Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne and
Hauser & Wirth.

lenses in favor of photographing her subjects from close by.⁶ Leonard's presence, by way of her relational approach, can be detected in the photographs, which leads one to wonder about Leonard's relationship to the place she is photographing.

Leonard has consistently spent time in West Texas since about 2006.⁷ Ever aware of the history of photography and the role it has played in establishing a mythology of "the West" as well as proprietary claims to land for settlers, Leonard did not take any photographs of the area until she began making *Al río*. One important precursor to the project, however, is *100 North Nevill Street* (2013), a camera obscura the artist installed in a former industrial ice factory, a building managed by the Chinati Foundation on Nevill street in Marfa, Texas. By entirely covering the street-facing windows with plywood, except for a small aperture where Leonard installed a lens, the artist made the entire building into a pinhole camera. Visitors to the Ice Plant could enter the camera obscura and feel and see the outside world projected upon and around them, albeit upside down. This outside world was never fixed like a photograph but given to continuous change as the clouds and sun changed position and trains flew by on the adjacent railroad. With *100 North Nevill Street*, Leonard not only emphasized the spatial and situational conditions of photography but suggested that seeing the world photographically may have less to do with a camera than it does with an embodied and relational way of looking. By situating the work in a former factory near the railroad, Leonard also coupled the history of photographic looking with the history of westward expansion, manifest destiny, and nineteenth-century industrial developments.

In 2016, during the runup to the US presidential election, the border and its security intensified as political rallying points of national interest and concern. Having spent years around the border in both Mexico and the US, Leonard realized that to observe the river is to observe a cross-section of the US and its variegated interests—from oil and gas concerns to agriculture, to small town life and urban development, to water and land regulation, not to mention international economic relations—each visually manifest along the river.⁸ The photographs of *Al río* tell a story of a 1,200-mile journey Leonard took from El Paso and Ciudad Juárez to the Gulf of Mexico with stops and starts over a five-year period as she photographed from both sides of the river the shifts in terrain and various social practices endemic to different locations. With one eye on the river and the other on the social world that exists around it, Leonard's photographs evoke what art historian George Baker has called a hetero-chronic condition, a temporal schism between an essentially modern sense of time (like the clock time of surveillance images) and anachronistic forms of keeping time that correspond with the farmer's almanac, geologic time scales or analogue photography.⁹ To make this body of photographs using analogue photographic processes at a moment in which digital photography—and its specious promise of instantaneous and direct access to reality—dominates, is to slow time down, to make it seem thick and tactile. I am thinking here of the photographs that form what Leonard has called the prologue to the the project, wherein close-up shots of the river follow one after another in sequence in a way that makes the fluid and flowing water appear sculptural (fig. 1). Without a horizon line or other people or objects

FIGS. 2-6

Zoe Leonard, *Al río / To the River*
(detail), 2016–2022. Gelatin silver
prints, C-prints and inkjet prints.
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FIG. 7

Installation view, 'Zoe Leonard.
Al río / To the River', MAM Musée
d'art moderne de Paris, 2022.

Photo: Pierre Antoine.



to indicate scale or distance, the river appears to exist beyond modern notions of time, as if devoid of the centuries of accumulated human interventions. In a way, these photographs emphasize the river as a river, not a border, while simultaneously giving it new shape and texture as a chromogenic print.

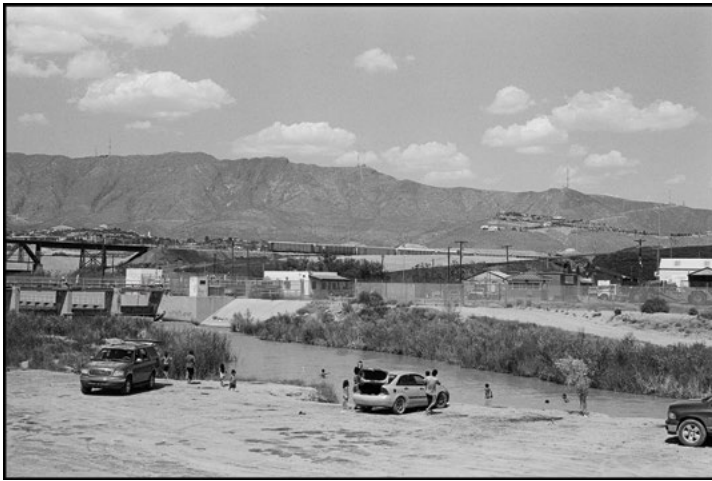
Situated, as I am, in Houston, Texas, certain photographs from *Al río* cannot help but remind me of the chopped and screwed method invented by the late, legendary, Houston-based DJ Screw. When Screw went to work on a song like Anita Ward's 1979 disco hit "Ring My Bell" in the 1990s, he not only revived a song no longer in vogue but reinvented it with a "slowed and throwed" swagger that brought a new and significantly personal perspective to the song. On the track one can hear Screw (or is it E.S.G.? or Al-D?) give shout-outs to people he knows and can feel his hand on the record as he makes it stutter and skip to a new beat. Screw's process of making time feel thick involved chopping choice moments from older songs and "screwing" them by stretching them out, either through repetition or by reducing the beats per minute: an old song multiplies into new versions of its former self. To my eye, Leonard makes manifest time's thickness when she presents what I would call a burst, which occurs at least ten times within *Al río*. By dividing a single scenario into a sequence of three or more individual photographs, Leonard made what otherwise might appear as one moment in time blink and breathe (figs. 2–6). Time is no longer felt to be continuous in such cases, but chopped into moments that hang together in a spaced-out configuration. (When *Al río* is displayed in museums and galleries, empty wall space is often left between each "passage"—the term Leonard uses to designate unique clusters of photographs; this gives each installation pockets of breathing room) (fig. 7). In many of the bursts, one can sense Leonard's feet planted on the ground but her upper body swiveling in a panoramic motion, all the while pressing the shutter at different intervals as she photographs a motorized border patrol boat racing across the river or a *vaquero* riding his horse alongside it or a bus passing under a bridge. Unlike the cold and distanced sensibility common to conceptual photography, these examples emphasize the physicality of photographic looking, Leonard's own embodied and thus circumstantial precarity, as she traversed both sides of the river on foot.

In other words, these photographs do not try to represent or speak for the river, but to it, from its banks and bridges and nearby roads and from the position of their maker. Forming an example of what Baker has called "indexicality in excess," these photographs convey an affinity for the river that emphasizes Leonard's relational experience beyond and in addition to what the photographs document.¹⁰ For example, Leonard embraces the black border around each of these photographs—a sign of the contact sheet from which it has been enlarged—which serves as a reminder of each photograph's analogue origins and the embodied physicality of not only seeing but producing the photograph. Like a shout-out over a remixed song, Leonard's black border seems to say, this was produced live at a particular moment in time. Visible signs of the artist's presence, whether it be in the studio or behind the camera, however, seem less about drawing attention to the artist than about deconstructing the notion of authorship altogether. The sheer volume of photographs and diversity of subject matter speak to a river

that is singular plural, with many points of view and many meandering tributaries, both literal and conceptual. In its manifestation as an exhibition as well as a book, Leonard decided to omit captions and wall texts to avoid what she describes as the troublesome or perhaps simply distracting reproduction of received knowledge and authority implicit in those formats.¹¹ If, to continue with a musical analogy, Leonard has remixed the river, in doing so she draws attention to the constructed nature of photographic looking and the many others—like governments and industries—who have for decades put their own spin on the river and attempted to turn nature into cultural content as a political football or resource worthy of protection or extraction.

Al río has already been on view in Luxembourg, New York, Paris, and Sydney but it is worth noting that the project first came together as a book.¹² Closer in form to an artist's book than a traditional catalogue, the book does not simply contain the photographs but mirrors the structure and methodology of the project in its form. While the first volume displays photographs, the second volume comprises a collection of mostly textual contributions in English, Spanish, and French by twenty-six contributors, almost none of whom refers to Leonard's work; instead, many chose to focus on the river and then meander away from it in their own circuitous and at times personal direction, as if each contribution, including Leonard's photographic one, writes a letter or sings a *corrido* to the river. The diversity of approaches to the river found in the book includes a meander map, poetry, essays, songs, dialogues, and a legal document, indicating the multitude of voices, beyond Leonard's own, that have rallied around this river as an urgent topic of concern. National borders are ubiquitous and thus a relatable global phenomenon; however, each voice in *Al río* piles onto the dualistic concept in its own personal way, causing the idea of the border to buckle and break until the river emerges from beneath like a resurrected protagonist.

In the first sentence of "Unlearning the Origins of Photography," which was published in *Al río*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay proposes a poetical question with far-reaching potential: "Imagine that the origins of photography go back to 1492. What would this mean?"¹³ One implication is that it would inscribe photography with a new ontology, one no longer attached to the nineteenth-century camera as an apparatus or one siloed within a history of technological or artistic innovation. Instead, as Azoulay suggests, photography would be first and foremost a relational way of looking at the world that is inseparable from colonialism and the age of Global Racial Empire.¹⁴ But what would this photographic way of looking look like? In the essay that follows, Azoulay explains that photography has been used since the advent of the camera as an instrument of the state not only to describe, objectify, and make accessible the world to those in power, but to justify and naturalize the conquest of territories, subjugation of people, and expropriation of resources and sacred objects. Azoulay's argument "is about questioning the political formations that made it possible to proclaim—and institutionalize the idea—that certain sets of practices, used as part of large-scale campaigns of imperial violence, are separate from this violence and unrelated to it, to an extent that they can even account for it from the outside."¹⁵ In a conversation with curator Suzanne Cotter, Leonard explained that she was curious to see if she could uncouple photography from its latent colonial tendencies while



FIGS. 8-9

Zoe Leonard, *Al río / To the River*
(detail), 2016–2022. Gelatin silver
prints, C-prints and inkjet prints.
© Zoe Leonard. Courtesy the artist,
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FIGS. 10–11

Zoe Leonard, *Al río / To the River*

(detail), 2016–2022. Gelatin silver prints, C-prints and inkjet prints.

© Zoe Leonard. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne and Hauser & Wirth.

nevertheless continuing to make photographs.¹⁶ Leonard's emphasis, in other words, was not on photography per se, but on how the world is constructed photographically.

Just as the river changes course, overflows, and empties out despite centuries of human imposition, *Al río* resists entrapment within the disciplinary codes of photographic looking canonized within the long history of photography Azoulay describes. Leonard knew that if her photographs of the borderlands were devoid of people she would be reinforcing colonialist tropes of the area as an unpopulated frontier ready for conquest but she also wanted to avoid exposing the identity of individuals.¹⁷ Thus, Leonard's approach involved photographing people from a distance with no close-up shots of faces or license plates of cars, a way to emphasize social practices or institutions rather than specific actors (fig. 8). While reflecting on her experience of making *Al río*, Leonard remarked that she is not a photojournalist, she is an artist.¹⁸ In this role, she believed that the only thing that made her camera any different from the multitude of other cameras continuously surveying the border was that she was the one holding it. She decided that she would not seek special access or privileges beyond those already accorded to her as an American citizen who is perceived as white, nor would she "embed" herself within any group in exchange for access, whether that be private landowners or border patrol agents. Instead, Leonard's camera records her own relational experience, which often comes across as humble but intensely curious as she observes and depicts the interlocking contradictions and temporal a-synchrony of the area. Similar in form to what Esther Gabara has called "errant modernism," *Al río* critically fails to spectacularize or mythologize the river as certain modernist photographers, like Ansel Adams, once did.¹⁹ Roland Barthes described myth, whether imagistic or rhetorical, as that which transforms history into nature by naturalizing what is otherwise a social construction.²⁰ *Al río*

forms a counter-myth of the river by presenting it as a messy and manifold confluence of historical forces and competing projections (fig. 9). This dialectical display returns poetically to the origins of both the river and photography, not as final destination but as a place of untapped potential for reorienting contemporary relations to both subjects.

Leonard has described *Al río* as a kind of epic, not simply because of the project's enormous scale but because of the literary genre's association with a protagonist who leaves home only to find it harder and harder to find their way back.²¹ Although the 2016 US election was one catalyst for Leonard's project and inspired her to look closely at her home country, which was in the process of a major political upheaval, *Al río* was not the first of Leonard's projects to consider the idea of home. Made between 1998 and 2009, *Analogue* photographically documented the vanishing mom-and-pop stores that dotted Leonard's neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and then followed the circulation of their recycled goods to markets in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. During the making of *Analogue*, Leonard traced the trajectory of these second-hand goods all



the way to places like Poland, her maternal ancestors' homeland, where used televisions, radios, and shoes were sold on a global secondary market.²² *Analogue* presented the concept of home as that which can be nostalgically longed for but never returned to in its ideal state; however, nostalgic desire became a driving force that propelled Leonard's journey onward and outward into the machinations of the global rag-trade. Like the second-hand stores of *Analogue*, the river in *Al río* appears on the verge of disappearing, maybe not literally but cognitively, potentially eclipsed by growing political turmoil. Yet, this too is part of its story, which Leonard incorporates in her own meandering fashion. Leonard's interest in analogue photography or the camera obscura could similarly be described as a nostalgic return, this time to the origins of photography; however, Baker would argue that we should think of this as a critical nostalgia that does not linger indefinitely on an idealized past but treats desire for the lost object like fuel for future as-yet-unknown configurations—in short, a way of confronting loss by getting lost.²³ Leonard's lateness—by way of using analogue processes that are obviously out of sync with the digital present—opens space for new reflections on what Baker calls the "afterlife" of photography.

Fred Moten has described Leonard as a "philosopher of the sequence out of sync," and to my eye *Al río* presents a river that is out of sync with the version of itself popularized in the mainstream media.²⁴ While certain passages of *Al río* depict a border fence under construction or border patrol officers surveying the land, other passages veer toward the lyrical and the beautiful as a flowering cactus is chromogenically rendered in juicy magenta (fig. 10) or birds are caught mid-flight as they fly over a borderland farm. The final photograph

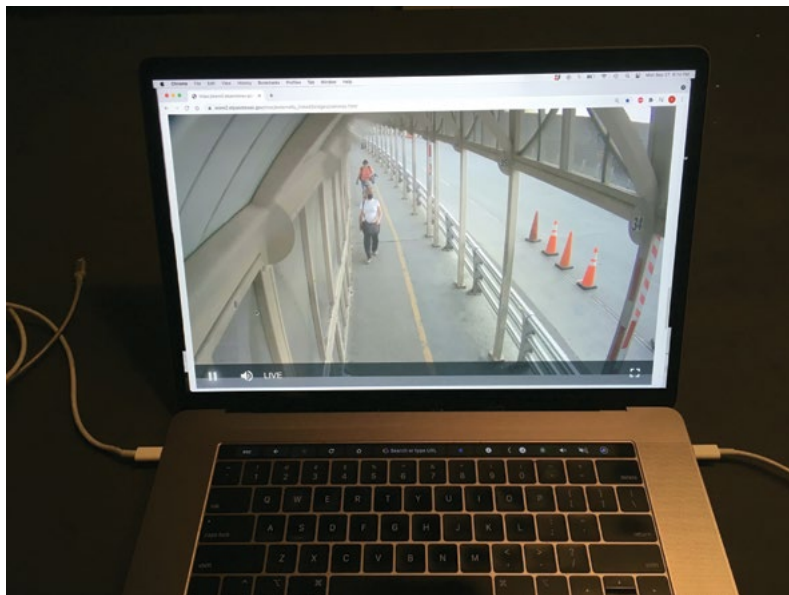


FIG. 12

Zoe Leonard, *Al río / To the River* (detail), 2016–2022. Gelatin silver prints, C-prints and inkjet prints.
© Zoe Leonard. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne and Hauser & Wirth.

of the penultimate passage is no less satisfying as Leonard's journey from West Texas appears to end with waves from the Gulf of Mexico breaking on the seashore near Matamoros, like a metaphor of all-consuming closure (fig. 11). But Leonard does not let the journey conclude on such a romantic view. I have not yet addressed what Leonard calls the coda—a single passage of photographs that brings the viewer all the way back to a border-crossing checkpoint in El Paso, but this time from Leonard's iPhone camera which she used to photograph livestreamed footage of border crossers on her glowing laptop screen and in what appears to be a darkened apartment (fig. 12).²⁵

The coda introduces digital photography to an otherwise analogue project, setting up yet another out-of-sync juxtaposition that brings into focus the pitfalls of the digital era. Ostensibly administered by the US government to allow border crossers to determine the least congested time to cross, this 24/7 live-streamed footage is accessible to anyone anywhere with internet access. The coda implies that everything Leonard has conveyed throughout *Al río* can and will infiltrate the spaces of private life, no matter how distant, by way of a digital interconnectedness and that there is no place to stand that is outside or apart from the concerns that surround the river. The coda also raises new issues within the project such as the role of the surveillance state and the deterioration of the right to privacy beyond the proximity of the US / Mexico border. Just as *Analogue* drew a connection between the decline of the middle class in the US and the rise of the global rag trade, in this final passage of *Al río* issues that may seem local to Texas, Mexico or US politics are rendered as matters of global concern.

Throughout my life, I have been led to believe that the river is a border, which is both true and untrue. For the border, unlike the river, is a concept with recent historical beginnings whose validity requires defending. Rivers, however, are not concepts but bodies of water; they flex and flow and sometimes they don't. *Al río* presents the river and the border as examples of two incompatible systems that are themselves out of sync with one another. Abstract concepts can sometimes be helpful; they make the world, which is vast and chaotic, appear more manageable. Unfortunately, they also tend to simplify the world into exclusionary categories. Walter Mignolo has suggested that people try and see the world from a dichotomous position instead of ordering the world into dichotomies,²⁶ and Gloria Anzaldúa has encouraged people to consider the border as an inhabited place and not just a line in the sand, its own center rather than a periphery in relation to someplace else.²⁷ These theorists of border thinking, among whom one could include Leonard, emphasize the importance of embodied and relational looking, how situational complexities cannot help but reveal the shortcomings of binary approaches to the world. After all, history is messy, and rivers never follow a straight line.

¹ C. J. Alvarez, "A Brief History of the River," in *Zoe Leonard. Al río / To the River, Volume II* (Luxembourg and Berlin: Mudam Luxembourg—Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2022), 21.

² Tim Johnson, "Editor's Notes," in *Zoe Leonard. Al río / To the River, Volume II* (Luxembourg and Berlin: Mudam Luxembourg—Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2022), 16.

³ Alvarez, "A Brief History of the River," 21.

⁴ According to cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter, the idea of humanism is founded on an episteme of colonial difference that has universalized the experience of Man at the expense of other living organisms, including racially marginalized humans. See Walter D. Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?" in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 118.

⁵ According to Tim Johnson, "Poetics, for me, signifies the interplay of making and unmaking, and applies to the temporal character in the formal structure of any work of art... Building, learning, and mapping are terms commonly associated with poetics, though unbuilding, unlearning, and unmapping are also terms that, taken together, relate to poetics in this comprehensive way." See Tim Johnson, "Editor's Notes," 17.

⁶ As noted by Zoe Leonard in an email communication to the author on October 10, 2023.

⁷ As noted by Zoe Leonard in an email communication to the author on October 21, 2023.

⁸ "Zoe Leonard in conversation with Suzanne Cotter, curator of the exhibition 'Al río / To the River,'" MUDAM Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-duc Jean, February 24, 2022, accessed November 2, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zlkN3hrEt0&t=2207s>.

⁹ George Baker, *Lateness and Longing: On the Afterlife of Photography* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹¹ "Zoe Leonard in conversation with Suzanne Cotter, curator of the exhibition 'Al río / To the River.'"

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, "Unlearning the Origins of Photography," in *Zoe Leonard. Al río / To the River, Volume II* (Luxembourg and Berlin: Mudam Luxembourg—Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2022), 69; also published September 6, 2018 in the series *Unlearning Decisive Moments of Photography*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/series/unlearning-decisive-moments-of-photography/>.

¹⁴ For more on the history of Global Racial Empire see Olúfémi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁵ Azoulay, "Unlearning the Origins of Photography," 69.

¹⁶ "Artist in Conversation: Zoe Leonard & Suzanne Cotter." Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, August 12, 2023, accessed November 2, 2023, <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/zoe-leonard-al-rio-to-the-river/exhibition-guide/#video>.

¹⁷ "Rouse Visiting Artist Lecture: Zoe Leonard with José Esparza Chong Cuy," Harvard Graduate School of Design, accessed November 2, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eytCYvFLNI>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See Esther Gabara, *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008). In a separate though not unrelated discussion of errantry Édouard Glissant writes, "Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it." Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 20–21.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noon Day Press, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1972), 128.

²¹ "Zoe Leonard in conversation with Suzanne Cotter, curator of the exhibition 'Al río / To the River.'"

²² Baker, *Lateness and Longing*, 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴ Fred Moten, "Photopos: film, book, archive, music, sculpture," in *Zoe Leonard: Survey* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and DelMonico Books, 2018), 145.

²⁵ "Zoe Leonard in conversation with Suzanne Cotter, curator of the exhibition 'Al río / To the River.'"

²⁶ Walter D. Mignolo, "Border Thinking and the Colonial Difference," in *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 84–85.

²⁷ See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987).