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Voices of Duranguito: A Barrio Under Siege

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Abstract

Duranguito, the historic first neighborhood of El Paso, Texas, is on the verge of being destroyed. Through the use of oral histories, the experiences of the people who currently live there and those who protect it are captured to tell the unique history of a low income and mostly immigrant elderly community. At this time of turmoil, it is important to capture oral histories in order to highlight the sense of community felt among the residents before those memories are lost. Over one-third of the residents have been displaced already and many others are under threat of being displaced over the next few years. The city government voted to demolish the neighborhood for an arena in 2016. Since then, resistance from the residents and community supporters has further strengthened.

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Voices of Duranguito: A Barrio Under Siege

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Research Keywords: oral history, borderland history, digital humanities, gender, displacement, memory

In October 2016, news spread quickly that the neighborhood of Duranguito in El Paso, Texas would be demolished to make way for a sports arena. Barrio Durango, also known as Barrio Duranguito, is located within the Union Plaza District of Downtown El Paso and was first settled in the late 1850s. The area was part of the Juan Ponce de Leon Rancho, then located on the northern riverbank of the Rio Grande. The area would be the first platted neighborhood by Anson Mills. Barrio Duranguito was at the center of many of El Paso's early ethnic communities, housing Mexican, African American, and Chinese residents.¹ A neighborhood once filled with lively residents and vendors is now empty and wounded after an attempted demolition. To protect their roots and their homes, two elder women are those left of the Duranguito residents that stand at the center of the struggle between the El Paso City government and their barrio. They are supported by a large community of people who do not agree with the indirect, misleading, and secret tactics plotted by the El Paso City government to protect its pursuits

¹ David Stout, "Commissioner Pct. 2 - Resolution - Barrio Duranguito," www.epcounty.com/agenda, February 13, 2017, <http://epcounty.com/agenda/CoverSheet.aspx?ItemID=24178&MeetingID=599>.

towards urban renewal in the area. According to Mindy Fullilove in *Root Shock*, the term “urban renewal” is used generically to refer to an improvement in cities.² Progress meant the displacement of the underserved population to revamp and allocate the land for new purposes. Therefore, the City argues that those who seek to maintain the old city as is are standing in the way of progress being made. However, despite the City’s false views towards Duranguito and what they have perceived to be a lack of progress in the neighborhood, significant progress had already been made in Duranguito and continues to be made by the community.



Figure 1: Map of Duranguito Powered by ESRI on ArcGIS, created by Oral Histories Arguilez, Ligia. Paso del Sur member, interviewed, El Paso, Texas, November 2017.

A current resident of Duranguito, Antonia (Toñita) Morales has lived in the downtown El Paso area for many years. At a young age, she moved from Juárez, Chihuahua, a city in México to El Segundo Barrio located in South El Paso between downtown and the Rio Grande. In 1965, she and her husband relocated to Barrio Duranguito where she has lived ever since. At that time, Toñita’s husband had a small business building rock walls. He hired contract labor as needed to increase the scope of his business. Their main motivation to settle in the Duranguito area was its proximity to Juárez, where many of his employees lived.³ For current Duranguito resident and

² Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and what we can do about It*, (2016). Page 57.

³ Antonia Morales, interviewed by, October 2017. El Paso, TX. Original in Spanish: "viví en el Segundo barrio, muchos años y aquí a Duranguito me vine en el '65. Es que mi esposo trabajaba en, hacia bardas de piedra, entonces él ocupaba a gente de Juárez."

homeowner, her migration to the barrio was a little different. Romelia Mendoza bought her home in the late 1970's. Romelia and her mother shopped around looking for the perfect home for their family after migrating from México to the United States. They also decided on a home nestled between Juárez and the shops and markets of downtown El Paso. The convenience of being close to both communities made day to day travel easy for the family especially without the availability of a vehicle.⁴

Mindy Fullilove defines "root shock" as the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem. A person's emotional ecosystem is tied to their individual chosen path in life. This emotional ecosystem includes living in harmony with family and neighbors.⁵ Both Romelia and Toñita, surely suffering from root shock, shared their fond memories of moving to Duranguito. They are both distressed at the thought of having to leave their homes and at the possibility of the barrio being demolished afterward. Both women used to be surrounded by a network of neighbors they had befriended and could depend on. Although those connections have been lost, they now have a new support system in place comprised of surrounding neighbors, and community supporters. Neither one of the longtime Duranguito residents were ever informed of the plans to demolish barrio Duranguito for a sports arena prior to October 2016. Yet the "Downtown 2015 Plan" which specifically included the demolition of Duranguito, was introduced to City Council in 2006.⁶ According to Geoffrey Cubitt, we all know what it feels like to have a memory of something, to strive to remember, to be aware of having forgotten, and we regard these experiences as ones that are at once part of the common human condition and yet intimate, for each of us, in our existence as separate and self-conscious individual beings.⁷ Therefore, the demolition of barrio Duranguito would be an act of forced forgetting of the cultural memories tied to the region.

This historic first neighborhood of El Paso, Texas is on the verge of being destroyed and its residents are being displaced. Using oral histories, this paper captures the experiences of two community elders who live in Duranguito and refuse to leave. Along with their narrative, an interview with a representative of the organization who protects the barrio is also included. The examination of oral history interviews through memory and trauma are infused to capture the unique history of a low income, mostly immigrant and elder community. It is at this time of turmoil, that it is of utmost importance to capture oral histories before those memories are lost to displacement. The historical memories of Toñita and Romelia are important to the history of El Paso because their shared experiences of oppression by the El Paso City government do not begin and end with Barrio Duranguito. It is a systemic problem affecting many residents in neighboring barrios and in marginalized low-income communities in the downtown El Paso area. This paper documents the history of the people of Barrio Duranguito while examining the intended plan to destroy it and highlighting the community supporters who have vowed to

⁴ Romelia Mendoza, interview by, December 2017. El Paso, TX. Original in Spanish: "también mi mama que andábamos buscando. Cuando queríamos comprar una casa se nos hico algo bien cómodo porque estamos muy cercas de aquí el centro. Si algunas veces le gustaría a uno ir a Juárez pues está muy cerquitas."

⁵ Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and what we can do about It*, 2016). Page 11.

⁶ SMWM, "2015 Downtown Plan." <https://www.elpasotexas.gov/planning-and-inspections/planning/master-plans>. PowerPoint. November 2006.

⁷ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Page 66.

protect it. Over one-third of the residents have been displaced already and the others are under threat of being displaced over the next few years. The City government voted to demolish Barrio Duranguito for a sports arena in 2016. Since then, resistance from the residents and community supporters has been ongoing.

The Downtown Plan

The Paso del Norte Group, a private El Paso-based organization comprised of powerful men who are business leaders, elected officials and other influential members of the community, created the “Downtown 2015 Plan” in 2006 and are pushing for a sports arena in downtown El Paso. To initiate the “Downtown 2015 Plan” an ordinance ordering a bond election to be held in El Paso, Texas on November 6, 2012, was passed and approved by the City in August 2012. The museum, cultural, performing arts, and library facilities proposition that was open to a vote from the public read:

The issuance of \$228,250,000 general obligation bonds for a museum, cultural, multi-purpose performing arts and entertainment and library facilities improvements, including new children’s museum, cultural heritage center, and interactive digital wall.⁸

The Quality of Life bond was the first public step towards the demolition of Duranguito. However, the words “downtown” to reference location and “sports” as the intended use, never appeared on the ballot. Making the wording tricky for voters to interpret. After the bond was passed, on October 13, 2016, the El Paso City Council announced that the proposed arena would be built in the Union Plaza area which included barrio Duranguito. An *El Paso Times* article reads:

City officials are recommending an area south of the Judson F. Williams Convention Center as the site for the \$180 million Downtown indoor arena — the largest project in the 2012 Quality of Life Bond. The targeted area is bounded by West San Antonio Avenue, South Santa Fe Street, West Paisano Drive, and Leon Street. Forty-one parcels will be impacted if the City Council agrees to proceed with the land acquisition process, which could take a year, said City Attorney Sylvia Borunda Firth. The area includes the Greyhound bus station, some apartment complexes, a convenience store, a fire station, and Firefighters Memorial Park. The proposed area does not have buildings with a historical designation, Borunda Firth said.⁹

Missing from this assessment and most correspondence on Barrio Duranguito is the inclusion of the residents who lived there for decades.

⁸ Ordinance no. 017849, El Paso, Texas.

⁹ Flores, Aileen B. 2016. "City Picks Site for \$180 Million Downtown Arena." *El Paso Times*, October 13 <http://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/local/community/2016/10/13/city-proposes-site-downtown-arena/92004332/>.

At the time, the El Paso City government had yet to speak to the residents who faced displacement. Romelia was never approached by the City, she says. Instead, she heard the news over a phone call with a friend who told her that she would have to move soon. They asked her, "What will you do? And, where will you go?" Romelia recalls being in utter shock. She did not have an answer to the caller at that time. Shortly after, she made the decision to stay and fight for her home, despite her initial shock.¹⁰ Toñita became aware that the City planned to demolish her home when community organizers knocked on her door and invited her to discuss a plan for activism against the demolition. "So, I went, and they told me to look here is the map showing that they want to demolish our homes. I (Romelia) said, why? Why do they want to demolish our homes? And I started to learn more."¹¹ Similar to Romelia, Toñita was in disbelief that someone would take away their home and neighborhood so easily.

On November 14, 2016, for the first time representatives from the El Paso City government held a meeting at Fire Station #11 about the demolition site. According to the *El Paso Times*, "about 50 people filled the seats the city reserved for those whose properties would be acquired or were tenants in the area that would undoubtedly have to move so that the city could build the new facility."¹² A protest would ensue outside the fire station. In *Root Shock*, Fullilove describes that the motivation behind an organized movement, "in the pain of upheaval, there is the unremitting effort of the oppressed to shake off the agony of unequal treatment. It is that effort that calls us, tells us not to be afraid of the truth, but to join the movement toward a more equitable future."¹³ The motivating factor behind the protest against the demolition of Barrio Duranguito has always been and continues to be its residents.

As protests continued, the City sought a court hearing in the Travis County District Court in Austin Texas, over 500 miles from El Paso and Duranguito, to validate its desire to demolish Duranguito and build a multipurpose arena. On August 7, 2017, the Austin 201 Civil District Court Judge, Amy Clark Meachum, ruled in her final judgment that, "the city may not lawfully expend proceeds generated from the sale of the bonds to design, construct, improve, renovate or equip the facility in Downtown El Paso to be suitable for a sports arena."¹⁴ This meant that the City would be forced to comply with the wording in the original Quality of Life Bond denoting that the multipurpose arena could be built, however, it could not be used for sports. The victory would be short lived for the residents of Duranguito and its supporters.

On the morning of September 12, 2017, at approximately 7:50 a.m., a demolition team arrived in Duranguito and the devastating "hit and run demolitions" occurred fast and strategically. Ligia Arguilez member of "Paso del Sur", a grassroots organization working to protect the rights of residents in the El Paso area, states: "the city and the property owners sent bulldozers into the

¹⁰ Mendoza, interview.

¹¹ Morales, interview.

¹² Perez, Elida S. 2016b. "Downtown Arena Community Meeting Sparks Protest." *El Paso Times*, November 14. <http://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/local/2016/11/14/downtown-arena-community-meeting-sparks-protest/93664156/>

¹³ Fullilove, *Root Shock*. Page 5.

¹⁴ Perez, Elida S. 2017t. "Judge: Multipurpose Center Can Host Sporting Events, but Not be Built as 'Sports Arena'." *El Paso Times*, August 7. www.usatoday.com/story/news/local/2017/08/07/downtown-arena-judgment-says-city-cannot-build-arena-accommodate-sports/538639001/.

barrio even though there was an injunction against any demolitions. A bobcat damaged only the corners of seven buildings and only did enough damage to destabilize each building as much as possible in as short a time as possible.”¹⁵ The buildings involved in the hit and run demolitions had already been vacated. Three of the buildings were businesses and the other four were previously used as apartments.

The homes of Romelia and Toñita were not damaged during this attempted demolition. Romelia was out of town that day visiting her daughter. She was surprised and upset to hear the news after having just celebrated the win. With a knot in her throat, she described how much the memories of that event affected her. It is an emotional pain she expresses.¹⁶ Toñita was home; she stood outside watching as the bobcat attacked her neighborhood. There is no doubt that she is filled with sadness, yet her statements remain strong and unwavering. She says, “Why must we always be the stepping stone for the rich to get richer? Our representatives do not know how to represent or defend us. They grab the cake and eat their piece.”¹⁷ Fullilove connects root shock to the rips of emotional connections in one part of the globe that sets in motion small changes that spread out across the world and shifting the direction of all interpersonal connections.¹⁸ As a reaction to this root shock, a large community connection would be set in motion due to those emotional rips to protect Duranguito and its residents from further damages.

Capturing Oral Histories

“¡Duranguito no se vende! ¡Se defiende!”¹⁹

I was introduced to *la lucha de Duranguito*,²⁰ via social media in 2016. The outcry from the elder residents impacted me profoundly as it did many others within the El Paso, Texas community. In September of 2017, I attended a panel discussion on Duranguito at The University of Texas at El Paso in which Romelia and Toñita spoke about their experiences and the recent “hit and run” demolitions. Shortly after, I began conducting oral histories via one on one interviews of both women to hear their memories and to learn about their struggle for their barrio. In *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Sherna Gluck, and Daphne Patai state that the telling of the story can be empowering, by validating the importance of the speaker’s life experience.²¹ In this shared experience, the women elders were able to tell their story to an enthusiastic audience.

In a resolution prepared by David Stout, he describes Barrio Duranguito as, “a close-knit neighborhood that shares and practices values of dignity and respect for their neighbors and holds a strong sense of community. It remains clear that Barrio Duranguito and the Union Plaza District, along with the people, community, buildings, structures, and sites within the neighborhood, are indeed significant to the social, political, economic, and historical makeup of

¹⁵ Ligia Arguilez, interviewed by, El Paso, Texas, November 2017.

¹⁶ Mendoza, interview.

¹⁷ Morales. Interview.

¹⁸ Fullilove, *Root Shock*. Page 17.

¹⁹ Protest chant. Translated from Spanish: Duranguito will not be sold! It will be defended!

²⁰ Translated from Spanish: The fight for Duranguito

²¹ Berger Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (Gale, Cengage Learning, 2013), 190.

El Paso County and warrant immediate attention before they are forever lost."²²Romelia and Toñita are now the only remaining residents who have not been displaced who can share those examples of the community with the public.

Toñita may be Duranguito's oldest resident currently at 90 years old, but her presence is powerful. Toñita lives alone and rents a small one-bedroom apartment in Duranguito. The interior of her home is freshly painted and well maintained. Her living room, although small, is comfortable and inviting. The décor consists of Catholic saints, red furniture and beautiful artificial roses throughout. Toñita worked for many years and in many different places. For twelve years she worked for a grocery distributor in a warehouse in the egg department earning \$2.75 an hour with no vacation time. The last job she had was with Sierra Hospital where she worked for nine years in the laboratory washing the instruments that the chemists used.²³ Her work ethic did not stop at the jobs she held during her years of employment. She worked just as hard towards the betterment of her barrio in the community cleanup efforts. In an essay in *Women Words*, Kathryn Anderson states that if we want to know how women feel about their lives, then we must allow them to talk about their feelings as well as their activities.²⁴ Thankfully, Toñita spoke about her feelings and activities without reluctance, she was ready and willing to share her stories.

Toñita states that one of her biggest achievements was the community clean-up during the Bill Clinton administration in the 1990s. She remembers the neighborhood being very dirty, there was a lot of prostitution, a lot of drugs, a lot of theft, and a lot of thugs.²⁵ There used to be no lights in the alleys and there were only a few lights in the streets. Nonetheless, the neighborhood was full of children of all ages. Due to the environment of the area, neighborhood mothers did not let their children go outside or into the alleys, especially young teenage girls in high school, because the men soliciting prostitution would often approach them. Toñita was very uncomfortable with what was happening in the barrio and she knew it was wrong. It was imperative that something had to be done. She remembers hearing President Clinton on the news urge the communities of the United States to work with the police to create a clean and safe community for themselves.²⁶ Toñita wasted no time to reach out to the police to initiate community cleanup efforts in Duranguito. In an archeological survey conducted for the Sun Metro Transit Authority, it mentions the community cleanup and Toñita stating:

Things eventually got so bad that a neighborhood citizen's group, affiliated with EPISO, formed to combat drugs and prostitution. Antonia Morales was one of the leaders of this group that was quite successful in ridding the neighborhood of the worst aspects of the vice scene. The community activists were able to get the City of El Paso to install new lights and signs, and they

²² David Stout, "Commissioner Pct. 2 - Resolution - Barrio Duranguito," [Www.epcounty.com/agenda](http://www.epcounty.com/agenda), February 13, 2017.

²³ Morales, interview.

²⁴ Berger Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Cengage Learning, 2013), 190.

²⁵ Morales, interview.

²⁶ Morales, interview.

painted tar on benches and other areas where the prostitutes sat. They also called the police repeatedly to report illegal activities.²⁷

Toñita's motivation for the community cleanup project was the children that were a part of her neighborhood. She saw that these children were prisoners confined to their homes and she was distraught that they were seeing such horrible things whenever they left their homes. Despite never having her own children, she wanted the children of her community to grow up in a safe and healthy place. Mindy Fullilove discusses in the *Undoing of Kindness*; urban ghettos have been vilified as places of shame and dysfunction. They are filled with the poor, prostitution, con men and robbers, the residents in those neighborhoods created places where people shared with one another.²⁸ The people Fullilove describes in the neighborhoods of her book *Root Shock*, share common experiences of crime and poverty with the residents of Duranguito who also created those shared spaces with one another. Therefore, the community cleanup was a shared experience of progress for Barrio Duranguito and its residents. Toñita along with other residents of Duranguito continued to clean the barrio after all those years. Toñita states, "They do not care about all the work we did to clean up the neighborhood and the work we still do to keep it clean. Even if we worked with the police and the City. And I do not agree with a group of millionaires who want to put up an arena, and that they have the right to decide where we live. Who benefits? It benefits the millionaires! So why do we have to leave?"²⁹

In the essay, *Women's Words*, Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis examines approaches to the oral histories told by women of color. She states that the act of giving an oral narrative offers a unique and provocative means of gathering information central to understanding women's lives and viewpoints. When applied to women of color, it assumes added significance as a powerful instrument for the rediscovery of womanhood so often overlooked and/or neglected in history and literature alike.³⁰ Romelia and Toñita were both born in México, they migrated with their families to the United States and became residents.³¹ Therefore, their unique history and insight as women of color add a powerful narrative to the history of Duranguito as present activists and community defenders.

Romelia is currently Barrio Duranguito's only remaining homeowner and has lived in her home for about forty years now. She bought the home when her father was still alive, and he helped her with the down payment. She worked for many years sewing in the garment industry to be able to pay off her home. Referencing historical memories, Geoffrey Cubitt states that when we remember we draw on cultural resources that we have access to as members of particular groups or societies and that permits us to articulate our memories in forms that are comprehensible to others with a similar cultural endowment.³² Cubitt's statement relates to

²⁷ Stephen Mbutu and John A. Peterson, *Union Plaza Downtown El Paso Development Archaeological Project: Overview, Inventory, and Recommendations*. ARC Archaeological Technical Report No. 17, Sun Metro Transit Authority, El Paso Texas, 1998. Page 215.

²⁸ Fullilove, *Root Shock*. Page, 121.

²⁹ Morales, interview.

³⁰ Berger Sherna Gluck, and Daphne Patai, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. Gale, Cengage Learning, 2013), 190.

³¹ Mendoza and Morales, interviews.

³² Cubitt, *History and Memory*.

Duranguito and Romelia because her home is said to sit in the exact location of the Juan Ponce de Leon Rancho, the first neighborhood in El Paso, Texas. Barrio Duranguito, along with its buildings and structures, are also inextricably linked to the Mexican Revolution. This area was used as a staging area to plot tactics during the war to include a stash house used by Pancho Villa, a Mexican revolutionary, to hide his valuables, according to David Stout's resolution.³³

Romelia states that although she was aware that the land was historic, she admitted she was unaware of the historical relevance. Instead, her personal historical memory is more impactful because it reminds her of her family.³⁴ She struggles with the thought of losing her home as she recalls the many years of memories she has created in her home. Romelia's only question is "why do the rich get to take any place they like on the backs of the poor?" She is still upset by what she perceives to be the City making a mockery of its residents.³⁵ Despite this, Romelia remains faithful that she and other Duranguito residents will eventually be allowed to remain in their barrio and in their homes.

The previous residents of the barrio have all been displaced. Romelia remembers her friend and neighbor Emily Gardea, whom she had known for almost forty years. Romelia states that Mrs. Gardea's property owner told her she had to move because the City offered him money to sell his property. Mrs. Gardea cried, and say that she did not want to leave her home. The property owner harassed her relentlessly to move until she finally gave in and left with a small settlement that the El Paso City government had offered her. Now, Romelia says that her friend and other previous residents are suffering the consequence of mismanagement of money and are becoming desperate because their rent is very expensive. Romelia states that she understands that they left because the money was convenient at the time; however, she also knows that money only lasts for so long.³⁶ This historic first neighborhood of El Paso, Texas is still on the verge of being destroyed and its remaining residents continue to be threatened by displacement. The oral history interviews conducted through this research have captured the history and experiences of Romelia and Toñita who currently live in Duranguito. Though they have shared their most beloved memories of moving to Duranguito, it is impossible to ignore the current overwhelming state of duress. Suffering a root shock, the neighborhood and its people are surrounded by a network of supporters, and the resistance is still ongoing. Mindy Fullilove defines root shock as, the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem. A person's emotional ecosystem is tied to their individual chosen path in life. To include living in harmony with family and neighbors.³⁷ Although some connections have been lost as friends and family have been displaced, there is now a new emotional ecosystem in place comprised of the surrounding neighbors, in this case, current and past Duranguito residents and community supporters.

³³ David Stout, "Commissioner Pct. 2 - Resolution - Barrio Duranguito," www.epcounty.com/agenda, February 13, 2017.

³⁴ Mendoza, interview.

³⁵ Mendoza, interview.

³⁶ Mendoza, interview.

³⁷ Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and what we can do about It*, (2016). Page 11.

In October 2016, the longtime Duranguito residents, to include many others, became aware of the plans to demolish Barrio Duranguito for an arena. Geoffrey Cubitt describes historical memory when he states, "we all know what it feels like to have a memory of something, to strive to remember, to be aware of having forgotten, and we regard these experiences as ones that are at once part of the common human condition and yet intimate, for each of us, in our existence as separate and self-conscious individual beings."³⁸ As a community, we must change our views on urban renewal to protect those who are most vulnerable to it. The demolition of Barrio Duranguito and the forced displacement of its residents is an act of forced forgetting of cultural memories tied to the region.

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- Figure 1: Map of Duranguito Powered by ESRI on ArcGIS, created by Oral Histories Arguilez, Ligia. Paso del Sur member, interviewed, El Paso, Texas, November 2017. County of El Paso Agenda Items
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³⁸ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, 2007). Page 66.

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Johanna Lopez is a Ph.D. student at the University of Iowa's Graduate School of History and a recipient of the Lulu Merle Johnson Fellowship. She earned a B.A. with a double major in Chicano Studies and History at The University of Texas at El Paso. Her current research interests include borderland history through the examination of marginalized people and focused on community impacts of displacement through a lens of gender. Through the Digital Humanities certificate offered at the University of Iowa, Johanna hopes to incorporate oral history and cinematography towards her dissertation.