

Counter-Cartographic Currents in Nicole Antebi's *Rebel Waters / Aguas Rebeldes*
Dr. Jennifer Saracino

To meander, as a verb, means to wander aimlessly, stroll, or drift. In geographic terms, a meander designates a curve in a river's form, shaped by the continual erosion caused by the river's fluctuating flows. Meander maps, somewhat paradoxically, intend to visually fix the ever-evolving record of a river's shifting course into a two-dimensional image. (Figure 1) In one such map made by Army Corps of Engineers cartographer and geologist Harold Fisk in 1944, his representation of the Lower Mississippi shows the river's various meanders over time, shaded with vibrant hues. The effect is dazzling. The layered multitude of brightly colored sinuous forms enliven the surface of the map like a psychedelic hallucination, as if it is impossible to paint an honest portrait of a river's flow without capturing its inherent dynamism. Visual artist Nicole Antebi glimpsed this very map in a USGS store in California, planting the seed for many of the conceptual ideas explored in her exhibition *Rebel Waters/Agua Rebeldes*. It is these dizzying visual and metaphorical conundrums created by the uneasy tension between rivers, borders, and maps that attempt to record them, that visual artist Nicole Antebi beckons us to explore and contemplate with her.

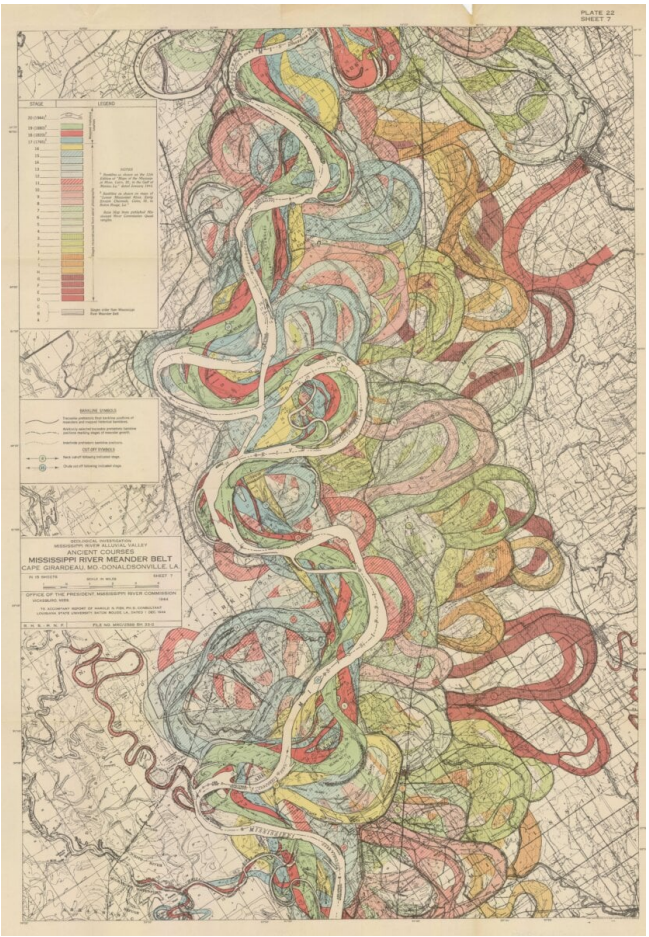


Figure 1: Harold Fisk, Meander Map of the Lower Mississippi

In *Rebel Waters/Agua Rebeldes*, cartographic symbols and forms come alive through sculpture, installation, video, and animation, as if we are walking into one all-consuming, living, and deconstructed meander map. Although initially inspired by Fisk's map of the Lower Mississippi, Antebi's works instead focus on a river that runs through her childhood hometown of El Paso, Texas and its neighboring sister city Ciudad Júarez that abuts El Paso across the border. The works in *Rebel Waters/Aguas Rebeldes* focus on and explore both conceptual ideas and lived experiences on and around the border and its surrounding lands. Known as the Rio Grande in the United States and the Río Bravo to our neighbors south of the river, this river of two names exposes just one of the many psycho-geographical conundrums engendered by various actors' historic and ongoing attempts to tame, name, and control this river and its surround. As Antebi has remarked, "To me, the story of the river of two names has always belied the idea that two neighboring countries can ever really be fully separated – much less that the passage of people in between them can be controlled." The Rio Grande became officially recognized by the U.S. government as the boundary between the United States and Mexico with the signing of the Treaty of

Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, an agreement that ended the U.S.-Mexico war and resulted in Mexico ceding fifty-five percent of its territory, including the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming.[1] However, as Antebi's work poignantly underscores, time and again, rivers, unlike borders, are never fixed. Their constant movement, shifting meanders, and fluctuations render fixity impossible. In *Rebel Waters/Aguas Rebeldes,* Antebi continually invites us to consider where the abstract becomes real and to ruminate on these implications. Her work pushes us to see the irony and tragedy inherent in drawing an imaginary line across a landscape to impose an arbitrary national border that crosses communities.

A natural starting point for Antebi's work is the historic event that marked one of the earliest attempts to concretize the U.S.-Mexico border, that is, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. A collection of Antebi's work centers on this so-called *Treaty of Friendship*, a reference to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo's alternate descriptor, "The Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits, and Settlement." In the visual essay *Meander Story,* Antebi juxtaposes and remixes animations, memories, conversations, and experiences at the Río Grande/Bravo collected from both her personal journeys as well as from her collaborators, resulting in a multivocal sonic and visual homage to this fraught place. The video footage includes barricaded concrete riverbanks, dreamlike vignettes of the river's subtle movements, and quiet moments of joy and resistance as people wade into gentle riverwaters or slide down the concrete banks on makeshift cardboard sleds. The meander in this visual essay serves as a visual metaphor for Antebi and her collaborators who are like the river "remembering where it used to be."

Single cells within Antebi's animations are framed within invented map cartouches, echoing the aesthetic of Enlightenment-era civic maps made with positivist pretensions of "progress" and "objectivity." These artistic choices confront the viewer with the illusory and deceptive nature of maps head on, prompting us to think about how maps have been historically wielded as tools of imperial and governmental control. Cartouches, those decorative frames that often encased a map's title or textual information regarding its purpose and intent, often lent maps an aura of authority, authenticity, and professionalism. In addition, the text inscribed within these cartouches helped shape the ideological message and ensure the map's intended agenda was communicated explicitly to the viewer. By bringing the cartouche to the center and replacing authorial text with a

[1] https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/treaty-of-guadalupe-hidalgo

dreamlike montage of image and sound, Antebi's visual essays destabilize and challenge the attempted authorial control of historic maps of the border.

Moreover, the individual frames of the visual essays are not just encased within these cartouches, but each frame is also overlaid onto a piece of *amate* paper. Made from a species of fig tree native to Mexico, *amate* paper recalls an ancestral and Indigenous practice of manuscript making in Mexico. In this tradition, writer-scribes, called *tlahcuilohque* (s. *tlahcuiloh*) in Nahuatl, created pictorial representations that were central to community identity. These manuscripts often depicted community history, documented through representations of births, deaths, marriages, or important historic events like battles or migrations. Just as the cartouches in Antebi's work recall the implicit hegemonic forces that have historically dictated the placement of borders and maps that reinforce them, the *amate* paper brings to the forefront the ancestral practices of map-making and centuries of belonging that were disrupted by the colonial and state-sponsored implementation of new imaginary lines across the landscape.

In *100 Partially Obscured Views/100 Vistas Parcialmente Oscurecidas,* Antebi stitches together historical postcard views of the Río Grande and its surrounding lands and neighborhoods. She animates these views, interspersing them with video footage and diaristic memoirs of personal experiences and historic events that bring this area to life through multiple experiential lenses, both her own and others, crafting a film that communicates the border's complex layers of making and meaning. *100 Partially Obscured Views/100 Vistas Parcialmente Oscurecidas* takes as its historic focal point the Chamizal land exchange, a transfer that, for some, "resolved" a 100-year border dispute between the United States and Mexico over 600 acres in El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Júarez. Prompted by a massive flood in 1864 that changed the course of the Rio Grande, the 600-acre tract known as El Chamizal, a historically Mexican territory, suddenly shifted onto the US side of the river. As part of the treaty, the two nations agreed to share the cost of erecting a concrete canal for the river along the agreed upon boundary between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Although the two national governments saw the treaty as successful and mutually beneficial, it bore the devastating impact of forcing the relocation of roughly 5,000 El Paso residents (largely working-class Mexican Americans) and numerous businesses, resulting in the erasure of several neighborhoods. For Antebi, it marked another moment that served to fix the border in place.

Antebi's use of cartographical elements is a theme that courses throughout all of her work but is perhaps the most blatantly invoked in her playful and subversive sculptures in *Overstory*. Pieces of cottonwood collected throughout the borderlands focus our attention

on the land as a living archive. What are these places crossed by imaginary lines, and how do they record the centuries of human crossing and dwelling as well as pain and suffering? The driftwood is adorned with fluorescent-colored vinyl clay sculptures that recall map lines, legends, symbols, and texts, bringing map and land into a playful tension. The sculptures abound with contradictions and contrasts. Fluorescent, synthetic clap wraps around the brown, organic material of the cottonwood. Sculpted teeth and hands vivify these cartographic elements, conveying that while these sculptures may seem playful, the cartographic elements upon which they are based have violent implications.

Cartographic elements are repeatedly animated and playfully subverted throughout *Rebel Waters/Agua Rebeldes* in a way that conveys a deeply counter-cartographic approach. Counter-cartography, or counter-mapping, is a theory- or practice-based approach to studying and/or making maps with the understanding that maps are visual presentations of power and that mapmaking is a historically colonial technique.[2] Antebi brings the visual discourse of cartography to the foreground and reinscribes this language with visual essays, sculptures, collage, and time-based work that make explicit the ramifications of maps and borders on people, their communities, their livelihoods, and their surrounding environment. However, Antebi's work does not only explore their historical and present-day impacts and effects, but *Rebel Waters/Agua Rebeldes* simultaneously holds space for care, reconciliation, and a cautious hope for an alternative future where we reclaim the distance across historically entrenched ruptures through reparative action.

In works like "Animating the World," Antebi takes two cow skulls from either side of the U.S.-Mexico border and places them in balance atop a historic border marker monument that stands in as its fulcrum. Situated just in front of a newer, more imposing border construction, this work acts as a reverent memoriam to the lives - human, animal, plant - this border has crossed. In *Meander Story,* Antebi and her collaborators wade into the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, holding hands and splashing water. In another performance, Antebi and her collaborator partake in a vigorous handshake, engaging with one another via physical touch and direct eye contact. These conscious acts of connection, joy, reverence, and tenderness all read as fissures, resistance, and reclamation against an ideology imposed by metal barricades and concrete channels.

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[2] For more, see https://guides.library.stanford.edu/countermapping

American Studies from Tulane University. Her book *Mapping an Indigenous Future: The Uppsala Map of Colonial Mexico City* analyzes the earliest known map of Mexico City painted by Nahua artists after the Spanish invasion and will be published by the University of Texas Press in April 2027. This project has been supported with fellowships from the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, the Huntington Library, the John Carter Brown Library, the Newberry Library, and the American Society for Environmental History.

Her work has appeared in the academic journals *Imago Mundi* and *Artl@s Bulletin* as well as the edited volumes *Plantation Knowledge: Agricultural Colonization, Exploitation, and Exchange Since 1500* (SUNY Press, 2025), *Collective Creativity and Artistic Agency in Colonial Latin America* (University of Florida, 2023), and *Mapping Nature Across the Americas* (University of Chicago, 2021).