

The Transborder Immigrant Tool: Violence, Solidarity and Hope in Post-NAFTA Circuits of Bodies Electr(on)/ic

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ABSTRACT

This polyvocal, collectively authored paper describes the Transborder Immigrant Tool, a border disturbance art project developed by the Electronic Disturbance Theater. The paper outlines the motivations behind the tool and elaborates a notion of Science of the Oppressed as a methodology for developing locative media projects in solidarity with social movements. A shift is identified from Tactical Media to Tactical Biopolitics in contemporary media art. Walkingtools.net is also introduced as a platform for sharing technical information about locative media projects in order to create an ecology of projects. Poetic sustenance, part of the Transborder Immigrant Tool's functioning, is discussed in a context of Inter-American Transcendentalism.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5.h. [Computer Applications]: Arts and Humanities – performing arts.

General Terms

Documentation, Performance, Design, Economics, Reliability, Experimentation, Security, Human Factors, Languages, Theory

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locative media, immigration, migration, disturbance, poetry, trans, transgender, transcendentalism, tactical, biopolitics

1.BORDER CONTEXT, WALKING, DEATHS

Consider the incommensurability of the following two re/presentations of walking: The first from Henry David Thoreau's essay "Walking" (1862)¹, while pleasant enough to contemplate, hardwires an ironic Orientalism into its infrastructural mandates: I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going à la sainte terre"—to the holy land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a sainte-terror", a saunterer—a holy-lander. They who never go to the holy land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds, but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in

Urrea's new- journalism-meets-visceral-realism, *The Devil's Highway* (2004), demonstrates the seemingly irreconcilable distance between walking as art/philosophy and walking as migratory necessity at the twenty-first century's violent crossroads of labor, location, subjectivity, subjugation:

Most walkers die a relatively short distance from salvation. Some walkers fall in the canals and drown. It seems to be one of the cruel tricks of the Desolation spirits, but it makes brutal sense. Most walkers are fresh and strong at the start of the journey. After a day of baking in the sun, they start to get disoriented. They drink too much water. They're dizzy and weak. By the second or third days, when they need their wits and strength about them, they are near death. And they drop, often reported with sad irony in the press, a few miles, or yards, or feet, from water, a home, a road, or a Border Patrol outpost.

The contrast replicates a divide that Electronic Disturbance Theatre has been tracking for some time between literal and databodies. It "re/pings" the question of disposability, anchoring the trans- of any post-contemporary *transcendentalist* thinking to crossing as re/orientation, affixing the dis- as a prefix to the emergent canon of locative media. The U.S.-Mexico border has rewritten and been rewritten by the imaginative geographies of the literal continental corridor. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands / La Frontera*: "The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture." A deep archive and repertoire of suspect movement choreographs American -isms that hyperextend/hypertext beyond the United States to cast shadows of negative value on certain bodies, directional flows, and cognitive/head maps. To add injury to insult, vertiginous ecologies and narco-reterritorializations compound the dangers of contemplating border landscapes as continuity (versus contingency). Immigrant bodies moving north are criminalized, scrutinized, hunted, commodified while immigrant bodies moving south, unless under the influence of an alleged muse's tow, barely register on the radar screen. As Urrea and so many note, countless people have died navigating the mirage of the U.S./Mexico border in the name of the "American dream;" their demises, at best, keyed as "sad ironies."

For background, allow us to discuss the context of violence in the US/Mexico borderlands a bit. To understand the violence present in this landscape, perhaps a simple comparison is useful. When the Berlin Wall fell, official estimates were that 98 people had died trying to cross from East to West Berlin, while victims' groups claim that the number is over 200 deaths. In comparison, the numbers of people dying while attempting to cross from the US into Mexico are horrifying, and their darkness defies attempts to

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the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere.

In contrast or perhaps in subversive conjunction, Luis Alberto

solidly conceptualize them. No Mas Muertes / No More Deaths, a faith based humanitarian group says that as of 2004 “more than 2000 men, women, and children have died trying to cross the Mexican border into the United States since 1998”² These statistics are similar to those of the US Border Patrol. The LA Times claims that 460 people died trying to cross in 2004.³ PBS claims that 500 died trying to cross in 2005⁴ and in 2007 the Arizona Department of Health Services stated that these numbers grossly underestimate the actual number of deaths.⁵ The Border Patrol reported that the remains of 128 people were found in the period from Oct. 1, 2008, and March 31, 2009.⁶ In interviews with the Border Angels, a San Diego / Tijuana based humanitarian aid group, they estimate that the actual number of deaths is double that of official estimates, roughly 10,000 deaths, because the Border Patrol does not search for bodies, they merely report bodies found on their usual patrols, while Border Angels regularly travel through the desert depositing water in aid caches.

What sort of language is appropriate for this scale of violence? What words are used to describe thousands or tens of thousands of deaths as a result of the actions of governments? Tragedy? War? Massacre? Part of the motivation of the Transborder Immigrant Tool is to shift the dialog about migration across the US/Mexico border to focus on the humanitarian crisis occurring in this region.

2. THE TOOL

The Transborder Immigrant Tool is a project by the Electronic Disturbance Theater with the aim of reappropriating widely available technology to be used as a form of humanitarian aid. The tool consists of an inexpensive cell phone, with a Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) chip, and a custom piece of software. The software will direct the user of the phone toward the nearest aid site, be that water, first aid or law enforcement, along with other contextual navigational information. This is accomplished by a Java based application written by Brett Stalbaum which accesses the phone's ability to receive GPS information without needing to send out data which may allow the user to be located and without needing phone service.

In the recent book “Emotional Cartography – Technologies of the Self”, Christian Nold writes about the concept of “performative technology”, in speaking about his Bio Mapping Tool, in which the technology “shoulders the burden of having to hold the public's attention”. With our project, while I would never suggest that we can begin to shoulder the burdens of transborder travelers, I do find this concept to be useful in that the attention that the device attracts serves to deflect the attention paid to the border crosser. The imaginative possibilities opened up by the tool can serve as a nexus of desire and an unveiling of the logics with which borders are dealt with. Perhaps this can serve as a tactical intervention of distraction and disturbance in the supposed order of transnational corridors. Brett Stalbaum has also written on the concept of “Paradigmatic Performance”, where data and database is central to the performativity of a piece, which can also be seen as reflected in the Transborder Immigrant Tool's map of waypoints. These two approaches offer approaches to broadening the concept of performance art, which can be seen as far back as Lygia Clark's performative therapeutic objects.

The Transborder Immigrant Tool can be seen as part of a larger shift from Tactical Media to Tactical Biopolitics. While media artists of the late nineties and early two thousands were often concerned with the political potentials opened up by cheaper access to media technologies, we are interested in the political potential opened up by technologies which can serve to improve people's lives directly, including medical technologies and safety devices such as GPS tools. The upcoming Digital Art and Culture conference's title “after media” sums up well the contemporary

media artist's desire to take their work off of the screen and back into the world. Biopolitics can be thought of as resistance to control over our daily lives, and as such we see the shift embodied in the Transborder Immigrant Tool away from media and towards public interventions which seek to change the very conditions of life and death which are created by biopower. Achille Mbembe has written on the notion of Necropolitics, shifting the focus from the state's promise of providing life to the state's promise of insuring death to unwanted groups, conjuring images of terrorists to justify deadly force. The Transborder Immigrant Tool, as a humanitarian safety device, can be seen as engaging tactically in the post-contemporary desert of Necropolitics.

3. SCIENCE OF THE OPPRESSED, WORKING IN SOLIDARITY WITH SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The phone uses a custom map that we created, consisting of waypoints, or coordinate data, of known aid locations. As we are still in the alpha testing stages of the tool, the map currently points to water caches which are maintained by the Border Angels. To create this map, we discussed our project with the Border Angels and our desire to provide humanitarian aid to people dying while attempting to cross the treacherous desert terrain. We joined the Border Angels on a number of trips into the desert in which they refill their water caches.

The Brazilian artist Augusto Boal developed the Theater of the Oppressed as a way of using our bodies directly to break out of routine habits of thinking by finding novel ways of moving. His idea was that political challenges could be overcome collectively by finding new ways of thinking about them, thinking through the body and that if we can move in new ways perhaps we can think in new ways. The Transborder Immigrant Tool can also be seen as a kind of thinking which has emerged from a practice of walking art. The Electronic Disturbance Theater has proposed a model of “Science of the Oppressed”, echoing a term used earlier by Monique Wittig along with Chela Sandoval's Methodology of the Oppressed. Sandoval writes in “Methodology of the Oppressed” a poignant passage about Frederic Jameson's essay “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capital” which elucidates questions of mapping: “If, as Jameson argues, the formerly centered and legitimated bourgeois citizen-subject of the first world (once anchored in a secure haven of self) is set adrift under the imperatives of late-capitalist conditions, if such citizen subjects have become anchorless, disoriented, *incapable of mapping* their relative positions inside multinational capitalism, lost in the reverberating endings of colonial expansionism... then the first world subject enters the kind of psychic terrain formerly inhabited by the historically decentered citizen-subject: the colonized, the outsider, the queer, the subaltern, the marginalized. So too, not only are the “psychopathologies,” but also the survival skills, theories, methods, and the utopian visions of the marginal made, not just useful but imperative to all citizen-subjects.”⁷ [emphasis mine]

Here Sandoval underscores a fundamental element of Science of the Oppressed, that subject positions which have been historically excluded from institutions of knowledge production can offer unique, relevant, critically important contributions to our understanding of the contemporary world thanks in part to their different lived experiences.

Another major part of the project of Science of the Oppressed is to reimagine knowledge production and research in the service of oppressed communities and in concert with social movements. It is necessary to consider how the institutions of research, such as Calit2, are shaped by the demands of funders, parent institutions

and corporate technology transfer. Part of this project is to reflect upon the structures of research and how they create the conditions of possibility which decide what questions are legitimate subjects of study and therefore shape the domain of possible outcomes. With the Transborder Immigrant Tool we are beginning from a desire to work in solidarity with social movements and shape our research methods and outcomes according to the needs of the communities we are working with. In this case, the movements are specifically the immigrant rights movement and the movement of people daily crossing the US/Mexico border. Our model of public intervention is to work in solidarity with these movements to provide a humanitarian tool that may prevent deaths that are occurring whether we choose to intervene or not. We seek to amplify and aid the actions of already engaged political actors.

4. POETIC, TEMPORAL

In addition to the navigational capabilities of the Tool, we have recently added another module to the software in order shift the dialog further towards one of hospitality. As the user walks with the tool, after a given temporal interval, a few lines of poetry will begin to play. With this gesture we can provide a bit of poetic sustenance, to enact a space of hospitality and to welcome the traveler into a new space. The journey across the US/Mexico border is deadly because of the vertiginous geography, but also because of the length of the journey. Reports have been made of people walking for days or weeks due to getting lost in the desert geography. With these temporally triggered poetic interventions, we can attempt to reflect on the time of crossing and also attempt to alleviate some of this difficulty. The durational performance is a significant part of the history of performance art and with the shifting roles of performer and audience in post-conceptual art work, one can see the trip across the border as a durational walking art piece. Considering the issues of public culture and intervention, the topography of artist and audience becomes fractalized, folding into a multiplicity with multiple axes as the roles of political actor, social movement and technological devices are added into the performative matrix. At this point, I would like to play a recording of one of these poems...

5. WALKINGTOOLS.NET

In this Science of the Oppressed, part of the strength of the artist/researcher and the community research initiative is that it can serve as a form of "rehearsal-lab", as a way of testing out and developing new trajectories of thought and of technology. The Transborder Immigrant Tool is such a space of rehearsal, allowing for the exploration of models of public intervention as well as technological models for locative media.

Brett Stalbaum has recently begun a new website, Walkingtools.net, with the aim of sharing frameworks and practices among locative media artists. Here, the Transborder Immigrant Tool is one example of this model that includes a Base Layer XML Schema, an API, an Authoring Layer and a Project Layer. At the Authoring Layer are tools such as the Transborder Deployer, which will allow organizations we collaborate with to install our software on their own phones. Our hope for the project is that it may enable groups we are working with to be able to access these inexpensive phones and install our software themselves. In the case of Border Angels, this could facilitate the ease of handing a new volunteer a cell phone with our software on it and they could refill the water caches themselves, allowing many more volunteers to participate in the humanitarian effort. Brett's hope for Walkingtools.net is that it will allow locative media artists to expand their practices in new directions instead of needing to reinvent the wheel or make the plumbing for every

project they embark on.

6. TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

The Transborder Immigrant Tool, a work-in-progress, is ready to move from alpha stage software design to beta testing in Fall 2009. These devices learn from and redeploy the logics of distributed geospatial information systems (such as the Goggle Earth Project) to develop a virtual immigrant algorithm (for the mathematicians of yesteryear, recall: an algorithm is a sequence of finite instructions for completely a task). They are intended as safety net tools for those landlocked between Mexico and the United States. But, they also remember a lengthening history of walking and earth art, of border disturbance, of dislocative media, what we are coming to call "inter-American transcendental -isms." Poetic gestures from their inception (in other worlds, routing around the false binary of the database versus narration), the cracked Motorola i455 phones **are** poems for psychic consultation, spoken words, compasses, and *geographia* (where the graphia of geography is outed and rerouted) of encouragement and welcome (in the mindset of Audre Lorde's sentiment that "poetry is not a luxury"). Layered as a wish for a post-neoliberal geopolitics (e.g., they "speak" on the lower frequencies of the iconic, the sonic, the vibratory, the concrete, the performative, the poetic), the tool's algorithm will aid users in tracking sustainable routes, new Nazca lines-of-flight/arco-irises across literal and imaginative post-NAFTA borders. All who utilize this technology will in a sense participate in a larger landscape of the para/literary/aesthetic. In this regard, they will keystone, build a bridge between Thoreau's foundational fictions: his "Walden pondering" and "civil disobedience" to transcend self-/collective reliance.

As the Tool is still a work in progress, there are a number of challenges we have considered and are still developing solutions for, including the encryption of map data to prevent malicious parties from finding aid sites, power usage and battery life issues and translation into English, Spanish and Indigenous languages. In addition, through our testing the issue of GPS almanacs has been raised. Without phone service the almanac doesn't get updated and GPS chips rely on calendars to know where the satellites are, as the GPS signals themselves are very weak, less than the background radiation of the sky.

7. TRANS, CROSSING, HOPE, SOLIDARITY

In the sense of a rehearsal-lab, EDT is staging the future of borders and resistance to borders as technology advances. While this project may be seen in the light of avant-garde new media art, one can easily imagine a future in which GPS technology is ubiquitously available and every border crosser is equipped with not only a GPS, but other technological enhancements: night vision, anti-infrared clothing, Bio-Nano Hyperhydration fluids or high jumping prostheses. In such a situation, the obsolescence of physical border enforcement becomes clear.

While "transcendentalism" as a word conjures schools of thought like fish (German philosopher Immanuel Kant, punctual as a pocketwatch, maintaining a relationship between the appearance of a thing and its apprehension by a beholder, in his conceptualization of "transcendental idealism"⁹, G. W. Hegel and Karl Marx standing on his shoulders, Buddhist transcendence of self via meditation practice), in the context of the United States, yet another "spirituality" burrowed into "the house that race built," a "homing device" finding embodiment in the pragmatism of Thoreau and Emerson. We draw upon the latter's legacies even as we remember that in the multiverse of mathematics (indeed of the database), transcendental numbers have been classified as

“uncountably infinite,” as “never rational” (with the important qualification that not all “irrational numbers are transcendental”). As of late, many, re/marking on the critical creative work of Deleuze and Guattari, have registered the “transversal logic of the World Wide Web”¹⁰ even as activists and theorists of gender and sexuality have utilized the transience of the prefix “trans-” to signify literal and conceptual practices of crossing “fences and rivers.” In the context of the Transborder Immigrant Tool, we invite you to imagine seeking solace in the transience of the transcendental, we insist on virtual and literal accountability to the uncountable and the anonymous, we imagine circuitous circuits of an inter-American-becoming-global body politic, electr(*on*)ic.

Postscript by Micha Cardenas: The trans in transborder and transgender can signify a crossing, but also a hope and a bravery in crossing. As a trans person, I am familiar with the hope of crossing over to a new place, the place of a new body. I think that this is something I share with those who hope to find a better life by moving their bodies into a new place, across an international border. I also know that many people cross daily in the hopes of becoming something else, becoming a good parent, able to financially support their children, becoming a professional, or even finding new freedoms from gender based oppression. In a way this hope is always a hope for the unknown, for one can never know what the result of the crossing will be, a better life, a new body, death or life. It is my desire that this project can be a gesture of transborder solidarity which can help prevent needless deaths of people whose only crime is hope.

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