

PROPOSAL DRAFT (October 2019)

Title: Seeing Like the U.S.-Mexico Border: Archival Border Practices

Exhibition Date: June 2020. Organized by Jorge Rodríguez with LACA

Collaborators: *rivulet press*, Tara Plath, Los Angeles Contemporary Archive.

“Seeing Like the U.S.-Mexico Border: Archival Border Practices” is an exhibition at the Los Angeles Contemporary Archive that will explore archives and contemporary practices of archiving in border spaces and border communities in the U.S.-Mexico border. During the Trump administration, the U.S.-Mexico border has intensified its role as a theater for manifestations of state power and violence: the ongoing, bureaucratic denial of asylum claims by Central Americans, the promise of self-contained nationalist isolation embodied in the calls to build walls across First Nations lands and federally-protected territories, the militarization and securitization of spaces of transit such as Land Ports of Entry, among others. On the one hand, the history of this border makes clear the continuous and long-term efforts of the U.S. and Mexico to make the border into a space of state abandonment, persecution, and visceral unaccountability; on the other hand, this history points to the strategies and infrastructures of resistance and life that people at the border employ and create in response to the “cramped space” (Povinelli 2018) that state power forces them into.

The exhibition will investigate how archives and contemporary archival practices are deployed in the U.S.-Mexico border. It will investigate how archives become infrastructures “from below”/ “of common experiences,” which people employ in a space where documenting or, indeed, acting politically (Cowen 2009: “Containing Insecurity”) are often illegalized actions and conceived as “security” threats to the mantle of state power. Some key conceptual notions that underpin this exhibition are:

- a) AbdouMalik Simone’s notion of “People as Infrastructure” (2004). Through this notion, Simone describes those infrastructures “capable of facilitating the intersection of socialities so that expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means.” The exhibition will explore how social media-generated archives in the U.S.-Mexico border are a form of “people as infrastructure,” one that recognizes a lack of and pessimism towards existing venues of documentary and reporting and which is created as an alternative. This notion of “people as infrastructure” will guide the creation of an archival platform described in *Border Archive from Digital Ephemera in Tijuana-San Ysidro*.
- b) “Counter-Mapping.” Where mapping has often been used as a colonial tool to ground territorial claims, the absence of maps can also be a way of maintaining lack of public access, visibility, and accountability in border enforcement. Counter-mapping in the U.S.-Mexico border creates representations of contested space with archival sensitivity towards fluidity, mobility, and migration. It is a way of challenging the settler colonial myth of *terra nullius* (legally, “uninhabited land”), which works as a moral alibi to Border Patrol in the Arizona-Mexico border, where thousands of migrants “disappear” yearly.

- c) *Decolonizing the border, from the archive*. Archives have historically been associated with and tied to practices and spaces of representation that reinforce, legitimate, deposit, and disseminate prevailing structures of knowledge. If the archive remains inextricably tied to the nationalist ambitions of cultural institutions, *decolonizing the archive* is also a way of *decolonizing the border*. This concept, then, is also a question: how does one *decolonize the border, from the archive*?

Content and Format

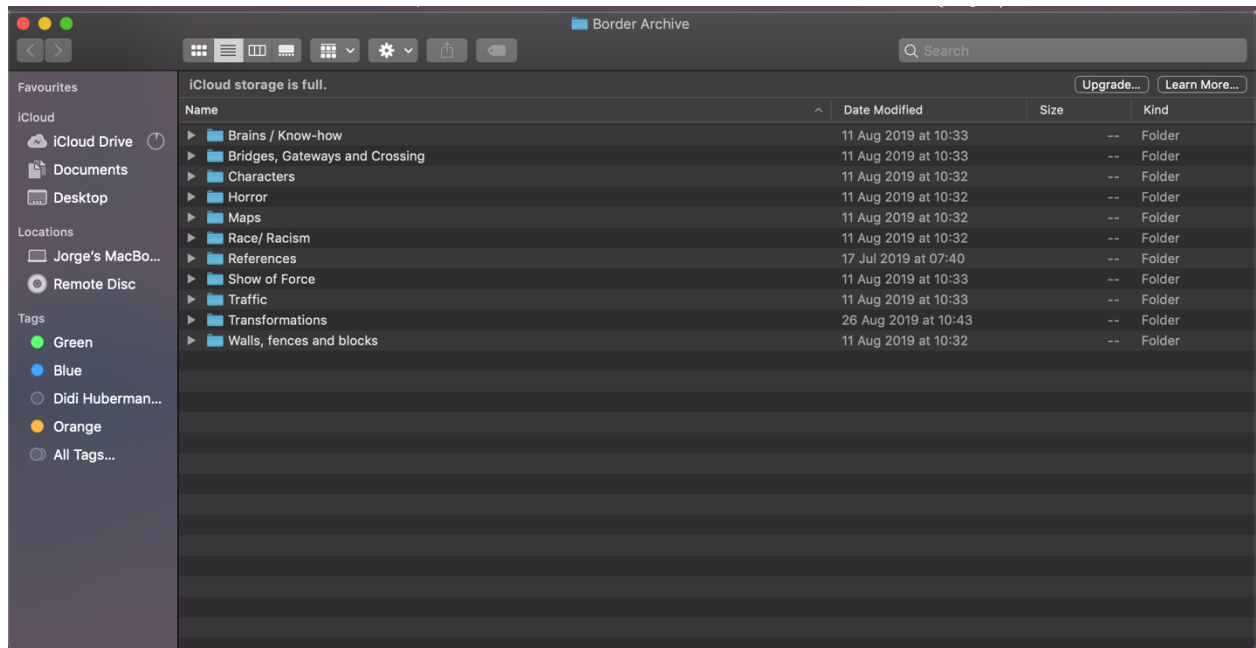


Image 1. Early draft of border archive from digital ephemera.

- 1) *Border Archive from Digital Ephemera in Tijuana-San Ysidro*. The automobile disaster of Southern California sprawl reaches all the way down to Tijuana and other parts of Northern Mexico, encompassing “both sides of the border.” Some years ago, a number of Facebook groups emerged as commuters, the majority of them Latinos, began to report on traffic conditions in the California-Mexico border roadways and U.S. ports of entry while they waited in traffic. These social media groups are incredible, if unnoticed, archives where people in transit engage in the daily generation of networked, Latino social life and produce archival knowledge about borders, immigration authorities, social critiques of state power, and reportage of evolving political conditions in the U.S.-Mexico border. Unsurprisingly, it was in these groups that the first images of the Central American Migrant Caravan encampment outside of the San Ysidro-Tijuana port of entry were shot and circulated. In the exhibition, there will be two computer monitors available. In one of them, users will be able to browse these groups’ activities, in real time. The content in these groups is vast and, thus, obliges one to think about the categorical difficulty of archiving rapidly growing, user-generated content. In the second monitor, a fully navigable archival platform, with media taken from these social media groups, that seriously takes on using digital ephemera as the basis for an archive and the study of the U.S.-Mexico border. This will be accompanied by a “How-to” website or essay that addresses the technicalities of navigation but also critically reflects on the process of creating such an archive.

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Image 2. “When they start the line/ when they cross it” meme. Screen capture from “Cómo está la linea en Tijuana?” Facebook Group, archived under folder “Transformations.” The idea of concealing oneself and “becoming another” is pervasive in much humor relating to border crossings in the U.S.-Mexico border.



Image 3. “San Ysidro Checkpoint.” Screen capture from “Cómo está la linea en Tijuana” Facebook Group, archived under folder “Bridges, Gateways and Crossings.” Much footage of carceral spaces in the U.S.-Mexico border ports of entry, where prolonged waiting and racialized inspection procedures are the norm, is uploaded in transit, as page users update each other on estimated waiting times to cross to “the other side.”



Image 4. “Pacas de a kilo.” Screen capture from “Cómo está la linea en Tijuana” Facebook Group, archived under folder, “Conspicuous Traffic.” Drug-trade related profit can be abundant in the U.S.-Mexico land ports of entry, as these are some of the primary venues where drugs enter the U.S. Much like the *corridos* of Norteño music groups, this image lionizes the sudden wealth generated if a load (*paca*) is delivered across the border successfully, simultaneously mocking law enforcement and drug-interdiction efforts carried out by the U.S. and Mexico.

- 2) *Map of Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona.* Produced through collaborative mapping methods with *No más muertes* and members of the Hia’ced O’odham and Tohono O’odham First Nations. The Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the Fish and Wildlife Refuge of the U.S. Department of the Interior, has few maps available to the public, though the land is publicly accessible for rustic camping and road trips. The maps that do exist are sparse in details. The refuge has been central to the ongoing criminalization of humanitarian aid by *No más muertes*, as many recent arrests of volunteers have occurred on this land or near it. It is also the location of dozens of migrant fatalities in recent years. The maps by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuge of the area are rudimentary. The land features only two public access roads which are widely used in border enforcement, and much of it can only be navigated by foot. Volunteers for *No más muertes* often rely on these maps in their efforts to hide water along frequently-traveled migrant routes and in their searches for missing persons and human remains. The Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge is a place of ongoing settler colonialism, as it is located in the ancestral lands of the Tohono O’odham and the unrecognized Hia’Ced O’odham peoples, First Nations that have been split by U.S. border walls. Tara Plath, a graduate from Forensic Architecture and researcher, will produce a map, to be mounted on a wall or a large scale take-away that explores: (1) the violence and complexities inherent in the act of mapping itself (mapping as colonial violence); (2) counter-mapping as

an archival practice that centers Indigenous geographies and “speaks back” against state technologies of surveillance that place limitations on the movement of Indigenous people and that of illegalized migrants.



Image 5. Surveying Maps of the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge. Photograph by Tara Plath. 2019.

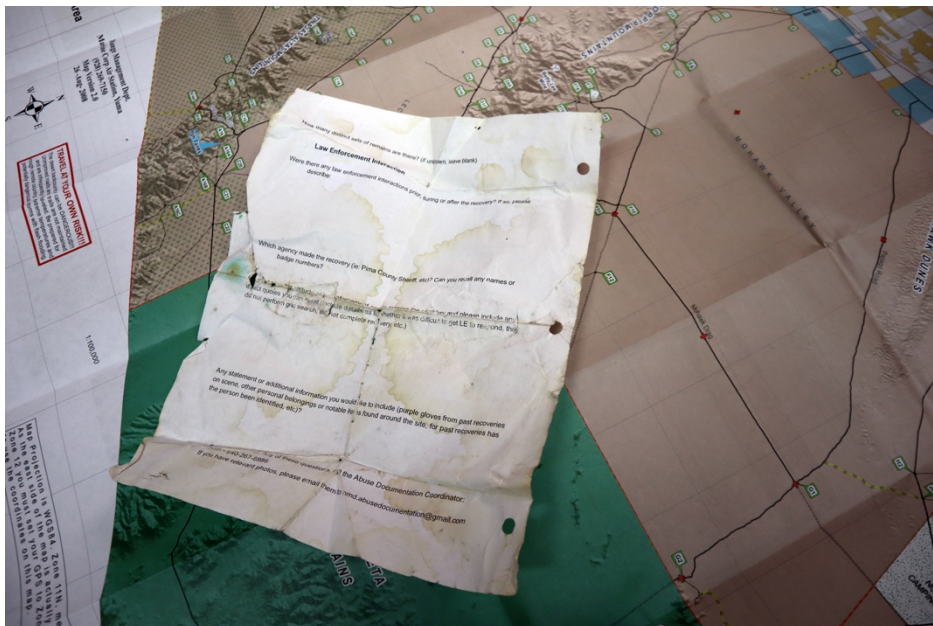


Image 6. Law Enforcement Interaction Form. Photograph by Tara Plath. 2019.



Image 8. Asylum claims processing facilities. Laredo, TX. Personal Archive. Earlier this summer, DHS began to erect a dozen of anonymous looking tents in the northern bank of the Rio Grande, between two international bridges in the Laredo Land Port of Entry. In September, of this year, as part of Trump's RMM policy, asylum procedures began to be conducted in these tents on the American side, as U.S. judges tuned in to adjudicate asylum claims remotely, and, often, ill-prepared. Asylum seekers would cross from Mexico, where they are forced to "remain," to attend their trials while judges across the country appeared on giant TV screens.

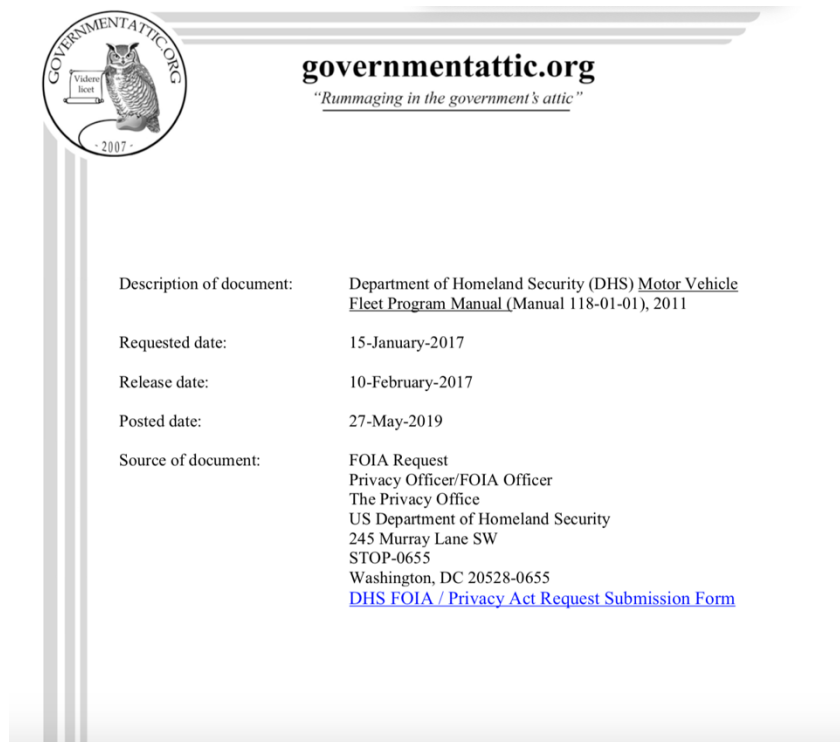


Image 9. FOIA, Department of Homeland Security "Motor Vehicle Fleet Program Manual." 2017. Personal Archive. The archive includes U.S. government documents relating to border governance initiatives and modernization projects by GSA in the Laredo Land Port of Entry, press on traffic jams, road violence, disappearances, and the Central American Caravan "crisis," as well as hundreds of critical essays in the fields of border studies, migration, anthropology of mobility and infrastructure, visual material of border checkpoints, etc..

- 4) Publication of exhibition produced by *rivulet press* which will include essays on contributions, photographs, select archival materials, and interviews.

Components

- 1) Two computer monitors. In one of them, users will be able to browse real-time social media updates on Facebook groups where traffic conditions, social commentary, tags, memes, and critique are shared by navigators of the California-Mexico border roadways. The second monitor will display a fully navigable web platform, with archived content, that explores the use and dissemination of digital ephemera as archival production. In this second monitor, there will also be a readable document or website that explains the functionalities of the archival platform and offers theoretical speculation on the creation of such an archive.
- 2) One or two glass-display cases for exhibition of archival materials that people will be able to observe as they walk around the space.
- 3) Wall space for the exhibition of maps of the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge produced by Tara Plath, or wall-mounts that can be used to display these vertically.