






The Idea of the Border in the Digital Age
INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER







About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com 
Indexed by	Scopus  Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)  DOAJ 
Journal Metrics	CiteScore 2020: 0.2 SJR 2020: 0.162 SNIP 2020: 0.193 JCI 2020: 0.50

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 14, Number 3, 2022
Guest Editors	Ranjeeva Ranjan ¹ & Mala Shikha ²
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Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n3
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v14n3.php 

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Title	The Idea of the Border in the Digital Age	
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Author ID	² 0000-0002-6146-5069 	
Funding	No funding received. Published free of any charge.	
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n3.07	Pages: 1-16
Abstract	https://rupkatha.com/v14n307 	
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V14/n3/v14n307.pdf 	
Article History	First Published: 29 September 2022	
Article Impact	Check Dynamic Impact 	
Copyright	Aesthetics Media Services 	
Licensing	Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 	

The Idea of the Border in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Our history of border wars and entrenched positions has given us officially drawn lines, that notwithstanding their obvious irrationality, are so deeply embedded in our psyches that we no longer even register them. At the same time, during the digital age, the rise of different ways of looking at the borders in Mexico and South Asia has explicit and implicit relations to these brutal histories, defining ways we continue to negotiate national and transnational identities and ideological projects. This contribution looks at theoretical and artistic examples from both continents to ask about the effects of new media on our experiences of our bodies and our sense of human agency.

Keywords: Border, Digital Age, Mexico, South Asia

Introduction

Avijit Halder moves back and forth between Kolkata and New York City, living for large stretches of time in each location. An NYU film school graduate, his thesis film, "Before the Sun" brings together his various borders in a beautiful, cryptic story set in the Jackson Heights area of Queens, New York, involving the everyday lives of three immigrants: an old Russian man, a Bangladeshi woman, and a young Mexican man. These characters intersect without ever speaking to each other, while their lives gradually shape themselves around such aleatory encounters, in this sense defining both the space of immigration and a transnational border experience from a haunting psychologically-tinged perspective. He also has a film credit as production intern in the Dan Baron film about genetically modified rice, *Basmati Blues* (2016), and has made a name for himself as a photographer and installation artist. Still Halder's name is still most familiar to us from a particular local reference: his participation in the documentary, *Born into Brothels* (Briski, 2004), where already at age 12 he stood out among the other Sonagachhi children featured in that film, for his precocious photographic eye and sense of composition; since that time, he has been largely supported by sales of his early photographs through the Kids with Cameras project.

As if in belated response to the controversy that swirled around Zana Briski's earlier film, Halder scripted a short film on life in the brothels (Ghosal), something his Instagram site, as well as his Facebook page, his YouTube and Vimeo channels help document. He is, in some sense, a perfect figure of the border artist in the digital age—highly visible despite his modest beginnings, fluid in the border-hopping strategies of the postnational cosmopolitan migrant, an able user of Web 2.0 social media and interactive technology, confidently bringing together immigrant Mexican and

expat South Asian experiences—and yet, of course, he can never not be from Sonagachhi. Inevitably trailing with him the implications of that precise location, for good or ill.

In earlier times, our most familiar images of the border, and of border crossers were both more distanced, and more shot through with familiar stereotypes. We can easily see the workings of these familiar clichés in commercial cinema from Hollywood or Bollywood like *Amar rahe yeh pyar* (1961) and *Gadar* (2001) on the one hand, or *Touch of Evil* (1958) and *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996) on the other, where a very brief shorthand of expected images and emotions serves to sketch the border experience. Likewise, from the other side of the Indo/Pakistan, US/Mexican borders, we might cite films like *Espaldas mojadas* (1955) or *Kartar Singh* (1959); *El infierno* (2010) or *Zinda Bhaag* (2013)—from the mid-twentieth century to the present, certain familiar tropes have hardly seemed to have any evolution, at best becoming easily identifiable images for pathos or satire. In these commercial products we can see how the trailing effects of the 100-year past Mexican American War, like the history of Partition of 1947 and its subsequent human displacement on vast scales (which has not ceased yet), have influenced our concepts of nation, border, and post-colonial history in such profound ways that there seems hardly any other way of looking at these issues. The officially drawn lines, notwithstanding their obvious irrationality, have entrenched themselves so deeply that they continue to appear in many socio-cultural and political discourses, often in ways we no longer even register. The constructions of the 'Other' contingent upon these historical events can be traced back to now ritualized evocations that shape media spectacles and circumscribe everyday reality. At the same time, rise of different, and often violently performed, political ideologies has explicit and implicit relations to these brutal histories, defining ways we continue to negotiate national and transnational identities and ideological projects.

Theorists of new media technologies like Brian Rotman (2008), Friedrich Kittler (1999), Lisa Nakamura (2008), and Henry Jenkins (2013) have long been studying the effects of new media on our experiences of our bodies and our sense of human agency. N. Katherine Hayles, for instance, sees human and computer moving ever closer together in Kittlerian fashion (Hayles, 2005, p. 7) through media effects, resulting in a formation she famously has called "posthuman," in which humans and machines interpenetrate in novel and surprising ways. Most recently, she has argued that the material semiotics of this changing environment gives rise to a "new kind of subjectivity characterized by distributed cognition, networked agency that includes human and non-human actors, and fluid boundaries dispersed over actual and virtual locations" (Hayles, 2008, p. 37). Rotman, for his part, finds that the confrontation of text and image is being reconfigured as well "with the result that technologies of parallel computing and those of a pluri-dimensional visualization are inculcating modes of thought and self, and facilitating imaginings of agency, whose parallelisms are directly antagonistic to the intransigent monadism, linear coding, and intense seriality inseparable from alphabetic writing" (Rotman, 2008, p. 3). The important question in this context, Rotman suggests, is not about the "who" of the emergent self, but rather "what and how is this self?" (Rotman, 2008, p. 81), since "not only is thinking always social, culturally situated, and technologically mediated, but that only by being these things can it happen in the first place" (Rotman, 2008, p. 91). To this perception, Katerina Diamandaki would add the crucial questions: "In what sense, then, is virtual ethnicity different and novel? What are its defining characteristics? How can virtual ethnicities exist in a world of personalized media and communication? To provide some pointers to these questions one has to consider the unique

'grammar' of the Internet as medium," a grammar that promotes transnational exchange, ambiguously disconnecting communication from transportation and creating novel digital nations and virtual ethnicities (Diamandaki, 2003).

Citizen by VPN

The proliferation of geo-tracking and specificities of IP addresses in the internet system could pin down a user to a certain geographical location or country. The need for identifying and locating an internet user to a specific nation and culture has started assuming important role for commercial and other purposes. The digital citizenship must ensure connectedness to a culture or state for the convenience of the state and the commercial enterprises as they are more eager to know the habits, choices and needs of the individual within certain cultural and geographical contexts. The specificity of an individual in terms of culture and space, ironically, has become imperative within the 'globalised' fluidity of the digital world and its anonymity. The availability of portals and internet services within a state boundary comes with certain culture-specific markers and the respective state control. The individual is subjected to such control and cultural specificities on the internet, where the citizenship and digital citizenship converge in an 'ideal' situation. But when the physical border-crossing happens and the individual wants to retain her cultural specificities, or when the individual doesn't want to retain her cultural identity within a state, she may resort to VPN (Virtual Private Network) where one may choose 'citizenship' from an available long list of countries to get or evade certain identity and its consequences.

Virtual nationalism

In the optimistic dream of the digital age, connectedness obliterates all distance lying in between vast geographic and geopolitical divides; it provides belongingness and a sense of identity. Of course, this identity needs continuous reiteration, a recurrent display of relationships with some objectively defined space, as alienation resides in the distance, an experience of losing home space. This space, as it now stands, does not need to be a physical one. It may be a concept or wish, a construction of convenience. Thus, we privilege social media, chat groups, online live video communication (e.g. *Skype, Zoom, Google chat*) that offer personal, familial bonding for people living abroad, giving us access to an embodied presence in a virtually created personal space at no apparent charge to the user.

In this context, especially since the shift to the more interactive Web 2.0 and the coming of what has been called the "postinternet" era,ⁱ the idea of mass participation, collaborations, and access as against any state or ideological control and constraint have become significant. Yet whether we are talking about the seemingly innocuous interface of Skype or the ideological state control over internet, point of access is only part of the story, though an important part. Increasingly, video scholars have been highlighting the specific qualities of computer-assisted production that challenge our understanding of the visual medium itself and its workings. Michael Conner notes, for instance: "it no longer makes sense for artists to attempt to come to terms with 'internet culture,' because now 'internet culture' is increasingly just 'culture.' In other words, the term 'postinternet' suggests that the focus of a good deal of artistic and critical discourse has shifted from 'internet culture' as a discrete entity to the reconfiguration of *all* culture by the internet, or by internet-enabled neoliberal capitalism." His final observation is crucial: culture is being

reconfigured invisibly by new forms of capitalism, enabled by internet platform interfaces and widespread use of cookies to track our browsing habits (Connor, 2013).

Lisa Nakamura contributes to the discussion a perspective on how racial understandings continue to play a prominent role in these electronically mediated identities. "Simply put, race and racism don't disappear when bodies become virtual," she argues, and she gives this recognition of racism's continuing relevance a historical point of origin: "It was only after the digital bloom was off the dot.com rose [around the turn of the 21st century] that it became possible to discuss cyberspace as anything other than a site of exception from identity, especially racial identity" (Nakamura, 2008, p. 1677). Nowadays, she argues, questions about representation and technology cannot ignore the role of racialized bodies in producing the information society, whether in constructing computer parts or taking apart discarded devices, or in another context, working in virtual sweatshops performing outsourced jobs.

As Nakamura writes: "In contrast with the Internet's early claims to transform and eliminate both race and labor, digital communication technologies today racialize labor, employing 'virtual migrants' who perform tasks such as help-line staffing" (Nakamura 2008, p. 1678). The proliferation of Indian IT and service sector companies initiated a new culture in the job market; American etiquette replaced Indian cultural practices in such offices premises. Call center workers in India do not just live in American-accented bubbles with a strange time shift, but (as has been amply documented in recent studies), also find their invented US identities bleeding over into preferences about food and music, clothes and social mores. It seemed as if such office spaces turn into miniscule Americas, and the employees, mostly young men and women who never had any personal experience of Partition, embodied a 'global' culture. Even the state-owned television *Doordarshan*, which had hitherto broadcast heavily-monitored news and some old Bollywood and regional movies, started to air MTV in its prime evening slots. Coca Cola and Pepsi made a fresh re-entry into the Indian market after ages. Events such as these brought a proverbial 'paradigm shift' to Indian life, and the earlier Indian notions about the 'world' (a synecdoche for the USA and Europe).

In a parallel manner, social networking sites promote the creation of micro and macro communities, and even, in the vast and increasing body avatars populating the MMORPGs--Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games--with their many permutations of body type, we can image a virtual non-human ethnic affiliation. These sites cross many boundaries, or create new ones: they erase the border, perform it, turn it into a spectacle, or a permanent site of protest and play. Social media has also become in its own right a new site of conflict and violence. Thus, for instance, some Bangladeshi bloggers and members of social networking groups have been killed by orthodox and fundamentalist Islamic groups; Mexican bloggers and online journalists have been targeted by drug cartels; young people everywhere have been driven to suicide by social media; undocumented workers have been targeted for exportation from the US through analysis of their facebook posts.

Still, on the ground, there is no denying that the border-crossing possibilities of social media have been crucial for community organizing and mutual support efforts. Since the turn of the millennium, Latinos became the largest minority in the U.S., with Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans representing two-thirds of the Latino population (according to the 2020

census, an estimated total of 62.1 million Latinos or 18.7% of the total US population). Strikingly, remittances are Mexico's third-largest source of income overall, and in the states of Zacatecas and Michoacán, as well as in much of rural Mexico, they exceed local and state budgets. Thus, it is totally unsurprising that the burgeoning transnational grassroots organizations—called hometown associations or HTAs—have a real potential to shape communities' understanding of their relation to their root culture, and even to influence politics in the region and country of origin. According to sociologist Xochitl Bada:

Mexican HTAs have a long history — the most prominent were established in the 1950s. In recent years, many additional small HTAs have emerged under the leadership of local immigrant leaders. In the last decade, these HTAs have received financial and technical support from the Mexican government through its consular offices. The growing profile of Mexican HTAs in Chicago is reflective of the steady increase of these organizations. Metropolitan Chicago has the second largest Mexican immigrant community in the United States, following Los Angeles. Current estimates place the area's Mexican and Mexican-ancestry population at between 800,000 and 1,000,000 people, of whom two-thirds were born in Mexico. The states of Guerrero, Jalisco, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, and Michoacán encompass nearly 80% of all Mexican migrants in the Chicago metropolitan area. The number of Chicago-based HTAs for these five states alone quintupled from about 20 to over 100 during the 1994 to 2002 period. There are currently more than 600 Mexican hometown clubs and associations registered in 30 cities in the United States. In Los Angeles alone, there are 218 Mexican HTAs (Bada, 2003).

Alex Rivera's well-received 27-minute documentary on a New York area Mexican hometown association, "The Sixth Section" (Rivera, 2003) is written from precisely this background of political activism around issues of globalization and transnationalism. As he writes on that medium-length documentary's website: "In the story of Grupo Unión we see a small Mexican town behaving like a transnational corporation- reversed."



Offices of Grupo Unión, from Alex Rivera's website

Likewise, the presence of an Indian community can be traced almost in every country, and India is the second largest (after Mexico) contributor to international migration with 490 thousand emigrants during 2000-2010. The largest number of international migrants reside in the United States of America: with nearly 4.7 million people. Thus, as immigration from Latin America to the USA stalls, immigration from South Asia (as well as East Asia, in third place) has continued to grow, and these numbers suggest a coming demographic turnover in the USA where the majority population will be brown or black rather than white. These figures, of course can only track legal migration, while uncharted illegal migration might be several times more than this official record.

This huge mass of Indian migrants, particularly residing in "developed" countries, are called NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) and are always considered assets to the nation of origin as they earn "hard" foreign currency. Indian banks are more than willing to cater to them with more privileges and attractive offers. The Indian Government is also willing to provide them dual citizenship with all constitutional rights. There is no dearth of formal 'connectedness', and the Indian diaspora, though spatially separated from India have all the more claim to their 'Indianness'. But all these facilities are more readily available to Indian immigrants residing and established in developed countries, than the poor Indian laborers working in the countries like the UAE, who are often exploited and forced to work like slaves in inhuman conditions.

The connectedness to India for the Indian diasporic community, or to Mexico for immigrants from that country, is essential as it provides them identity and memory in an alien culture where there is every risk of attenuation. This is not enough to sustain identity internally; one needs to display it through different performances in a publicly spectacular way. The Internet is one of convenient ways of achieving this, besides organizing cultural programmes, bringing artists from India or Mexico to London or Los Angeles, the release and promotion of Indian and Mexican movies abroad, hosting felicitation programmes for dignitaries and politicians, and so on and so forth. All these events and activities are held to be acts of 'nationalism'.

The Indian Government, on the other hand, reciprocates with observing "Pravasi Bharatiya Divas" ([Non-Resident Indian](#) Day) on 9 February every year and introducing the "Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award" (PBSA) (Overseas Indian Honour/Award). This award is given to Non-Resident Indians, Persons of Indian Origin or an organization or institution established and run by Non-Resident Indians or Persons of Indian Origin for "better understanding abroad of India" and enhancing "India's prestige in the [foreign] country." Therefore, there remains a mutual reciprocity and recognition for both the participants: NRIs and the India State. However, the NRIs neither pay taxes in India, nor do they have any mandatory responsibility towards the country. They remain relatively free of Indian political and social obligations and their engagement with the nation state is voluntary.

Benedict Anderson in the early 1990s called this phenomenon 'diasporic nationalism' or 'e-mail nationalism' (Anderson, 1992). Already, even before the explosion of Web. 2.0 and interactive social media, he warned:

"Today we have the long-distance nationalism of those who live in other countries and don't feel they are members of a fully accepted minority in their host nations. They often try to compensate with an exaggerated sense of pride for the country they come from. Mass communication has made this much easier than it once was. People can listen to the

radio stations of their home countries, watch DVDs, make telephone calls home, use cheap flights to visit regularly and so on. . . . These people often want to participate in the politics of their countries of origin but don't have to obey the laws or pay the taxes. In a way they're free agents. People who engage in long-distance politics don't have to assume responsibility for its consequences" (Anderson, 1992).

Thus, while India celebrates the benefits its immigrants bring to the home country by way of remittances, it is understandably nervous about their potential political influence:



Website by NRIs objectifying India through some stereotypes discouraging further Indian migration to USA

Likewise, Mexico, a country where im/migration has been deeply imbedded in the national psyche since the end of the 19th century, and has long been in tense conversations with the USA about the 'right to immigrate' is now promoting a series of cultural and economic initiatives under the rubric of 'right to stay home' ("derecho a no migrar"), picking up on a new rallying cry that has become increasingly unavoidable in the hard-hit communities in the most poverty-stricken parts of the country.

Borderhack

We might argue that in general, the State as an entity depends less on penetration and more on isolation, where a stronger sense of 'self' and 'other' makes a state 'sovereign'. The 'border' ensures and marks this essential distinction in publicly perceptible ways (for instance, when 'border' is turned into a spectacular performance as in Wagah). A digital culture appears to work against this isolation and distinction and it seems to put the concept of the border under a lot of strain. But this does not mean that digital culture can make the border (a precondition for sovereign statehood) disappear. It only means that de-territorialisation of cyber space has re-established and re-stated the border and the State in new terms. This reestablishment

necessitates conceptual readjustment of many related issues like displacement, migration, and memory. The State, which is always reluctant to release its control over space and culture, has devised ways to negotiate such new developments. New cultural objects with their implicit and explicit messages are coming up every day to insist on neo-nationalism, and as strategies towards governmentality. Identifying these cultural objects and deciphering their myths are very important to understand 'border' and 'displacement' in the present context.

A set of innovative artists, writers, and scholars have recognized the incoherencies in State imaginaries, and have proposed what in the Mexico/Tijuana area have been called "borderhacks" address them. For example, the Electronic Disturbance Theater continues to make use of core tactics developed over twenty years ago, when they began the denial of service attacks against the Mexican government, often under the auspices of Stalbaum's conceptual net.art project, "Zapatista Tactical Floodnet." One of their most famous actions, for instance, was a denial of service attack on Mexican government servers that overwhelmed the site, and in consequence replaced the standard '404 website not found' message with '404 democracy not found' ("democracia no encontrada.") There was a similar call for participation via the thing.net blog for a Spring 2014 e-graffiti solidarity action in response to the assassination of Zapatista comandante Galeano.ⁱⁱ Taking their inspiration from media theorist Friedrich Kittler, who said in a memorable 1998 talk, "Only art history still knows that the famed geniuses of the Renaissance did not just create paintings and buildings, but calculated fortresses and constructed war machines" (Stalbaum, 2010), the artist/hactivists (Domínguez sometimes uses the term "activists") of the Electronic Disturbance Theater collectively contribute to non-violent civil disobedience protest art pieces through the aesthetics of the denial of service attack, and invite other collaborators to their art projects, by making readily available for downloading the html code that will turn their computer into a virtual anti-war machine.

Tijuana writer and activist Heriberto Yepes, for his part, takes into account that Tijuana is not just a border city, but what he considers a downscale sci-fi tourist destination, one that plays on its own clichés, creating originality out of other folks' recycled garbage. Particularly since the heyday of the mid-1990s cultural movement, outsiders have come to do their own version of Michel de Certeau's walking in the city: exercise as theoretical praxis brushes up against streetwalkers and their clients. And, says Yepes, in strolling around Tijuana, these postmodern Certeaus incongruously attempt to elevate tourism to phenomenology: "strolling around Tijuana, Mexican intellectuals behave the same as Japanese videotourists. They want to get to the heart of things, but they end up getting the same things as everyone else" (Yepes, 2012). These tourists, Yepes continues, always want locals to prove they're exotic, and, he responds, the locals are happy to collaborate: why not play to the audience? (Yepes, 2012) It has entertainment value and is good for business. Caveat emptor: it is not Yepes' fault if the strollers forget "that informants or tourist guides are less trustworthy than auto salesmen" (Yepes, 2012).

Fellow Tijuanan Fran Ilich's nighttime bi-national urban sprawl is the city as appropriated by impassioned youth who challenge themselves and their realities between the two imperfectly porous geopolitical borders framing Mexico on both its north and south extremities, working at the fugitive pace of the graffiti artist or the internet hacker, especially in the historical moment of the 1990s, when Tijuana became trendy as the postmodern city par excellence.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, nothing better captures Ilich's metaphysical thrust, the interstitial transitoriness of his work than the

fleeting traces of light and dark on a computer screen, the daring, impermanent defiance of the graffiti tag, the lost beauty of the street art murals.

As Ilich writes in one of his reflective pieces,

Growing up in Baja California, was for me often more than I could manage. Just think for a moment what it is to grow up two and a half hours away from Disneyland, just five minutes to sunny California, but also to live the experience of the third world. (Ilich, 2008)

For Ilich, Tijuana is an almost surreal interactive space where US visitors to Mexico are “tourists” and Mexican visitors to the USA are “aliens” (“Delete the border!”). It is, nonetheless, a third world site with sufficient access to bandwidth so as to allow for digital citizenship and digital cultural production, one in which technically savvy young Mexicans can make their presence felt, playing off their second-hand, rascuache, recycled hactivist credentials.

Living with his city, his back to the physical border wall and faced with a suspected cybernetic firewall, Ilich reflects back on his hactivist past, his conviction that borderhacking, whether or not unauthorized physical movement or unauthorized cyberactivism, has served the purpose of social mobilization:

If in the cyberspace of the internet, we as users are always located in some fiber optic cable or server domain whether .com, .net, .org, .edu to which we belong as a person, institution, or corporation: Where do we locate public space, since it is so hard to find it in the streets of our cities? Do the concepts of land and liberty apply to digital terrain, to an electronic, cyberspatial domain where multiplying space is as easy as adding new hard drives, new routers, more fiber optic cable to the network? Does it make sense to propose that another world is possible from the confines of the internet if it runs the risk of existing only as a parallel world. Is a virtual world possible?

Y si en el ciberespacio de internet como usuarios siempre estamos en algún cable de fibra óptica o servidor con dominio .com, .net, .org, .edu, que pertenece ya sea a una persona, institución o corporación, ¿dónde se encuentra el espacio público, si incluso en las calles de las ciudades es difícil encontrarlo? ¿Pueden aplicarse los conceptos de tierra y libertad, en una tierra digital, electrónica, ciberespacial, donde multiplicar el espacio es tan simple como añadir nuevos discos duros, routers, fibra óptica a la red? ¿Tiene sentido plantear otro mundo posible desde los confines de internet si éste corre el riesgo de terminar existiendo apenas como un mundo paralelo? ¿Un mundo virtual es posible? (Ilich, 2008)

More importantly, from the State perspective: Is a virtual world desirable? Or should it be strictly policed and circumscribed?

As a barbed wire fence or a militarized wall supposedly ensures the safety of the nation by regulating movements across borders (India has one of the largest contingents, consisting of some 400,000 personnel, to guard its land borders; the US has 20,000 border patrol agents), there would be notionally also be state-monitored firewalls to block and filter any ‘suspect’ internet traffic. The ‘Great Firewall of China’ has become proverbial in the sphere of internet censorship. India does not admit, at least officially, the existence of such a ‘wall’ for Indians, but some recent developments (like the banning of pornographic sites) tell another story. The need for a ‘Great Indian Fire Wall’ is stressed for the same reason which rationalizes barbed wire at borders: national

security. The only difference, for a change this time, is that the 'Great Indian Fire Wall' is needed for China and not for Pakistan (most of the narratives about the 'infiltration' across the border in India happen to be about Pakistan). The necessity for a Fire Wall often comes on media as a popular demand, a demand for security from Chinese hackers. For instance, here is a headline from *The Times of India*, a leading Indian newspaper along with its sarcastic conclusion for the lack of proper fire wall in India against Chinese hackers (the Hindi expression 'Cheeni zyada' in the headline literary means 'too much sugar', though 'cheeni' is also the Hindi word for 'Chinese'):

THE TIMES OF INDIA

The Great Indian Firewall: It keeps us safe from intruders, even if it's Cheeni zyada in the hacker's virtual world

Jun 1, 2013, 12.00 AM IST

... ..

That's courtesy the Great Indian Fire-wall. For those who bemoan our virtual shakiness, take heart, for we have an unshakeable fire-wall which is the great Indian summer! This, at 45 degrees plus, drives away the most intrepid intruders from anywhere. So, chill, folks — every heatwave has a silver lining keeping us cool in the real world, giving online chors only virtual reality to hack at.

Border Games

As we noted above, the 'border' is turned into a spectacular performance in Wagah every day just before sunset, in what at least one reporter (Michael Palin) has called a display of "carefully choreographed contempt." It's hard to say how we can comprehend the most popular offering at the indigenous-run ecotouristic park, EcoAlberto in rural Mexico. The members of the Hña Hñu community live in the midst of hot springs and a gorgeous deep canyon. What they do not have is arable land, and up until very recently as many as 90% of them report having worked as migrant laborers in the USA for some period of time. With support from the Mexican national government program for Alternative Tourism in Indigenous Zones, they created a ecotourism park as a source of alternative income. The novel project, and their most famous offering since 2004, is the "Night Walk," something that looks like an innocuous, if perhaps slightly arduous trek in which one is promised to "experience an illegal border crossing" ("experimentar la travesía de un ilegal").

On any given night, 70-80 locals take on various roles associated with their own experience of crossing the border into the USA and bring 20-200 tourist-migrants across four or five hours of very rough land in an extremely sparsely lit (only a few flashlights, only on occasion) adventure: one of the locals plays the unreliable guide; others represent US border patrol agents or vigilantes; some are planted in the trekking group to be singled out for simulated mistreatment along the path. Thus, the locals re-enact their own personal experiences and represent roles they have lived or seen, including mistreating "migrants" in harsh English. Participants in this "adventure" are

more often middle class Mexicans, but the trek has become increasingly well known internationally, such that many US and European tourists also travel to the ecotouristic site to take part. The Hña Hñu leaders insist that the project is educational in purpose, to raise consciousness about the challenges their youth face in risking their lives in the struggle to find a better life; it is certainly a novel way for indigenous people to participate in what is often an exoticizing project of selling their identity to tourists by performing their local traditions. In this case, they are not selling the nostalgic product of ancient traditions, but rather the much more recent knowledge garnered from the harsh experience of recent migration to the USA.

Another border art project, the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT a collective project of Ricardo Domínguez, Micha Cardenas, Amy Carroll and other collaborators in b.a.n.g lab's Electronic Disturbance Theater), was conceived in 2011 in the shadow of the US government's extensive use of motion sensors, drones, and other high tech surveillance mechanisms at the US-Mexican border, and forcibly questions what it means to do/create art in the 21st century. The creators of this project grapple with the issue of the use value of art for a very specific public—the Mexican or Central American would-be immigrant to the USA, who is often illiterate, may speak no western languages, and has no access to any media technologies—and they embed their analysis of this work in a concern about their own ethical position with respect to these international contrasts of privilege and access. This immigrant public is indeed at some level interpolated into a highly technologized system through the ubiquitous mediation of US border patrol forces, but could hardly be defined in any existential sense by this mediation. In essence, the TBT is an inexpensive cell phone with GPS capability that delivers a double product to its users/audience: bilingual poetry and the location of water drops in the border area between the U.S. and Mexico.

Domínguez and his collaborators in the San Diego based b.a.n.g lab are academics as well as artists and activists, so it is not surprising that they have published extensively, both online and in print works, on their projects and the theoretical underpinnings that support them. Domínguez's theoretical work^{iv} ranges dramatically in style, from more conventional academic writing, to works very much in the Mark Amerika style like "The Ante-Chamber of Revolution: A Prelude to a Theory of Resistance and Maps." In general, he defines the work of the Electronic Disturbance Theater as defined by a "politics of rehearsal" and an "aesthetic of minor signals and lower frequencies." He inserts his work within the larger history of net.art, and cites as important co-thinkers novelist William Gibson, the Wachowski siblings (especially their *Matrix* film series), European theorists Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Rancière, alongside artist and remix theorist Eduardo Navas and Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (Dominguez 2011a, 2011b). For her part, poet and collaborator Amy Sara Carroll adds Caribbean American writer, poet, and activist Audre Lourde, and the 19th century U.S. thinker Henry David Thoreau, whose essay on civil disobedience is central to her work, to the group of crucial theorists serving as their dialogue partners (Carroll, 2011).

GPS is fundamental to the artistic undertaking, both in its theoretical and practical applications. As Domínguez reminds us, GPS was originally conceived and operated as a U.S. military surveillance system, was made available to the general public in 2004, and now "has free global coverage, courtesy of the United States government" (Bird). The TBT project has been facilitated by the ever-lower prices of disposable cell phones requiring neither a SIM card nor cell service to access GPS, and, following their general practice with other works, the creators have made the

code for the project readily available for download, with the explicit hope that other groups will adopt the technology for other border circumstances: "We imagine TBT's code and gesture as open to use on multiple borders and that it is not bound to the Mexico/U.S. border" (Bird, 2011). For the U.S. government, as well as the conservative press, the water drops have been, of course, the controversial element, and they are highlighted on the homepage of the project:

Transborder Immigrant Tool Project
 JASON NAJARRO, Cognitive Science, UCSD RICARDO DOMINGUEZ, Visual Arts, UCSD BRETT STALBAUM, ICAM MICHA CARDENAS, Visual Arts, UCSD

Background
 Each year, thousands of people attempt to traverse the unrelenting desert terrain that makes up the United States-Mexico border. Hundreds of those migrants lose their lives to the elements due to the inability to discern where they are in relation to where they have been and which direction they need to go.

Migrant Deaths Along U.S.-Mexico Border
 San Diego Union-Tribune (July 22, 2006): Border deaths on record pace

Objective
 The goal of the project is to help reduce the number of deaths along the border by developing a common cell phone device into a navigation tool that will help migrants locate life saving resources in the desert such as water caches and safety beacons.

Motorola 1455
 > GPS Enabled
 > Inexpensive (\$40)
 > Supports J2ME Applications
 > No service required for GPS functionality

Research
Understanding the Context of Usage
 In order to save lives, the tool must prove operable in hands of users who are inexperienced with mobile devices, in the context of extreme weather conditions and a tense social environment. Significant time was spent researching the context of usage to help guide the design for a cell phone software application. Here is some of what was learned:
 > The non-literate rate among migrant population is high.
 > Not all speak Spanish but also various Indigenous languages.
 > Device most likely to be used at night.
 > Humanitarian groups want to keep their water stations protected.
 > Border patrol will arrest those who they suspect of being guides

Design Inspiration
 "Dowsing, or water witching, refers to practices which some people claim enables them to detect hidden water, metals, or other objects, usually obstructed by land. The movement or vibrations of the apparatus, such as a Y-shaped twig, are used in the practice."
 Dowsing.
 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/index.php?title=Dowsing&oldid=6155841709 (last visited Sep. 10, 2007).

Design Advantages
 > Provides user with greater situational awareness.
 > Dowsing paradigm better maps to users' preconceived notions of how GPS technology functions.
 > Depth of menu navigation is reduced, a major benefit for non-literate users.
 > While traveling, tactile feedback frees user from phone display interface, allowing user to concentrate on the surrounding environment.

Figure 1: <http://bang.calit2.net/xborder/>



Figure 2:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transborder_Immigrant_Tool_Concept_showing_working_tool_and_screenshot_from_Nokia_e71.jpg

Military surveillance is an important conceptual metaphor guiding the aesthetic impulse behind TBT, as well as a mechanism and a lived reality for collaborators on the project. As Peter Andreas notes, the U.S. government and U.S.-based media frequently use metaphors of war, invasion, and natural disaster to speak about immigration from Latin America (Andreas, 2000, p. x) on the increasingly barricaded border, rationalizing this rhetoric by reference to the “drug war” and the “war on terror.”^v Boots on the ground in the San Diego/Tijuana border region are supplemented by an ever-growing panoply of technological assistance, including a sophisticated “virtual fence” of cameras and motion sensors, and a physical barrier that includes surplus steel panels used to build landing strips during the Vietnam War.

Yet, as Andreas perceptively reminds us, this military metaphor has parallels in the “game” metaphor as well; “border policing has some of the features of a ritualized spectator sport” (Andreas, 2000, p. x), or a staged performance: “what makes the border a particularly challenging stage is that the actors are involved in a double performance, having to assure some of the audience that the border is open (to legal flows) while reassuring the rest of the audience that the border is being sufficiently closed (to illegal flows)” (Andreas, 2000, p. 10). By and large, then, for U.S. policy makers, “projecting a ‘winning image’. . . has so far provided a politically viable alternative to actually winning the game” (111). In this way, he concludes, “stupid policies can be smart politics” (Andreas, 2000, p. 148). Through Electronic Civil Disobedience and Electronic Disturbance Theater, the San Diego based artists and activists take hold of this rich substrata of demagoguery, increasing physical barriers, and heightened border surveillance to craft responses that are often more complexly theorized than their actions may at first appear on the surface.

Finally, if the TBT is a game, and conceivably we can view it as one, although not in the trivializing way the word is often used, then it is also important to think briefly about the players. Scholar-performers like Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal have long since theorized the relation among thought, performance, and audience action, whether in epic theater (Brecht) or theater of the oppressed (Boal), encouraging in each of their cases a form that sponsors critical reflection rather than catharsis. Just as Andreas conceives of border surveillance as a kind of theater, with audiences treated differentially, simulating a perfect scenario for such reflection, so too the TBT creates gamers by providing border crossers with access to these equipped cell phones, hence creating a new kind of immigrant. In a more technologically-framed theoretical vein, Rotman speaks of the way the self emerges differently when not patterned on a literate, linear, serial organization of knowledge, but rather on the fluid multiplicities of information-bearing visual images such as maps, schematics, wire-frame renderings, scans, etc. (Rotman 2008, p. 95). The immigrants, in unfamiliar landscapes whose clues they are unable to read, follow the poems and the GPS and the compass to trace their way through the not-yet-here of the desert and toward the scattered, life-saving water stops. This is gaming with serious material and cultural consequences; it is playing a game of life and death in the most literal sense. In this traversal of space by cell phone, the immigrants become LARPerS, participating in a new kind of public culture, where the choices they have made as game players determine future paths of their lives, and where they are captive audiences to the poetic performances that take them from water stop to water stop.

More recent bordercrossing video games include Beth LaPensée’s award winning side-scrolling 2017 game, “Thunderbird Strike.” The game takes its name from a powerful Native American spirit

that brings life to the land and symbolizes power and protection. In the game, the player controls the thunderbird, attempting to destroy international oil pipelines while reviving wildlife:



Figure 3: Game play image, Thunderbird Strike

In this way, along with gameplay, LaPensée asks her players to think about environmental degradation and human-caused climate catastrophe in the context of international commerce and the free, transborder movement of nonhuman as well as human beings.

Brian Rotman argues that “not only is thinking always social, culturally situated, and technologically mediated, but that only by being these things can it happen in the first place” (Rotman, 2008, p. 91). Accordingly, if we locate “the public” within the context of theorists like Rotman, the self is postulated as the evolving posthuman entity, essentially a media effect, and he sees the horizon of theoretical imagining as a techno-cultural artifact. He builds explicitly on previous work such as that by N. Katherine Hayles, arguing, in Lenoir’s summary, that human consciousness in its choice of “metaphors, narrative, and other interpretative linguistic modes we use for human sense making of the world around us do the work of conditioning us to behave as if we and the world were digital” (Lenoir 2008, p. xi). This “as if” is crucial to the projection of the emergent, leaky self at this juncture: “perhaps the first question to ask about the psyche in a technologized milieu is not really one of identity and persona, of ‘who’ the emergent self is, but *what* and *how* is the self. How is it assembled and transformed by machinic processes, ubiquitous mediation, and ever smarter, more interactive, techno-systems?” (Rotman, 2008, p. 81).

Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

No funding has been received for the publication of this article. It is published free of any charge.

Notes

ⁱ Web 2.0 describes a modular, recombinatory, flexible platform, often relying on a bottom-up, crowdsourcing model of building information. In Michael Conner's succinct definition: "'Web 2.0,' a term used to describe the increasing use of centralized services rather than independent websites to share and access content online. ... In broad strokes, these changes meant that many more people were making and sharing content online, and they were doing so through a smaller number of channels. . . Making art 'after' the internet" in 2006, then, involved being a participant-observer of an emerging internet culture." It is worth reminding ourselves that Wikipedia went online in 2001, YouTube had launched in 2005, and social networking sites were growing in popularity after facebook's 2006 expansion to anyone thirteen and older with an email address. The iPhone would be released in 2007, signaling the beginning of the smartphone era of constant connectivity.

ⁱⁱ In summer 2014, former subcomandante Marcos formally took on the name Galeano in recognition and homage to his fallen comrade.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, García Canclini's much-quoted discussion in *Culturas híbridas*. In that book he wrote that Tijuana, along with New York City, represents "uno de los mayores laboratorios de la posmodernidad" (293 "one of the biggest laboratories of postmodernity"[233]). He has long since disavowed this early notion.

^{iv} This has always been a collective project; however, as editor of thing.net and the target of the most vitriolic attacks, Domínguez has been converted in de facto lightning rod and often spokesperson for the group

^v Of course, smuggling goes both ways: Andreas sees the U.S. as the world's largest smuggling target (of drugs and migrants) as well as the world's largest smuggler (of weapons, stolen cars, money, etc. 2011, p.16).

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