

# Embodiment Against Borders: Discourses of Crisis and Collaborative Performance Art on the U.S.-Mexico Border Wall

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**Resumen:** Me aproximo al muro existente de 700 millas entre los Estados Unidos y México como el eje y como la materialización de prácticas más amplias de vigilancia antiinmigrante en ambos países. Al trazar la retórica de crisis generada por el estado, que construye a los migrantes como una amenaza nacional, identifico una crisis de afecto subyacente, que funciona para distanciar emocionalmente a los ciudadanos estadounidenses de los impactos humanos de la violencia estatal perpetuada contra los migrantes. Basándome en una historia del arte de performance fronterizo, delinee una nueva épica de performance concentrada en el sitio específico del muro, que responde a la hipervisibilidad de la retórica anti-inmigratoria. Demuestro las formas en que tres performances recientes colaborativas y binacionales realizan protestas y generan solidaridad transnacional a través de un repertorio afectivo de alegría, juego, vulnerabilidad, dignidad e intimidad. Analizo *Borrando la frontera* (2012, 2015) de Ana Teresa Fernández, que consistió en el acto de pintar azul secciones del muro de Tijuana-San Diego y Nogales; *Boundless Across Borders* (2017), en el que las mujeres de Ciudad Juárez y El Paso se trenzaron el cabello en una cadena humana durante la inauguración presidencial; y *Teeter-Totter Wall* (2019), creado por Ronald Rael y Virginia San Fratello. Al involucrar la imaginación, la participación directa de co-creadores y la intimidad transnacional, estas performances simultáneamente revelan la violencia del muro y trabajan para desarmarlo, desafiando la percepción social de la migración como crisis.

**Palabras clave:** la frontera mexicana-estadounidense, muro fronterizo, performance, transnacional, colaboración

**Abstract:** In this article, I approach the existing 700-miles of wall between the United States and Mexico as an axis and materialization of broader practices of anti-immigrant policing throughout both countries. By tracing the state-generated rhetoric of crisis, which constructs migrants as a national threat, I identify an underlying crisis of affect, which functions to emotionally distance U.S. citizens from the human impacts of state violence perpetrated against migrants. Drawing on a history of border performance art, I delineate a new era of site-specific performance that responds to the hypervisibility of anti-immigration rhetoric. I demonstrate the ways in which three recent collaborative, binational performances enact protest and transnational solidarity through an affective repertoire of joy, play, vulnerability, dignity, and intimacy. I analyze Ana Teresa Fernández's *Borrando la frontera* (2012, 2015) which involved painting sections of Tijuana-San Diego and Nogales wall sky blue; *Boundless Across Borders* (2017), through which Ciudad Juárez and El Paso women braided their hair together in a human chain across the border during the presidential inauguration; and *Teeter-Totter Wall* (2019), created by Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello. By engaging the imagination, directly involving co-creators, and generating transnational intimacy, these performances simultaneously reveal the violence of the wall's existence and work to disarm it, challenging the perception of migration as crisis.

**Keywords:** U.S.-Mexico border, border wall, performance, transnational, collaboration

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The headlines are designed to alarm. Media and political outlets tie immigration inextricably to the language of crisis and invasion, describing, time and again, “a crisis years in the making” (Jervis). This discourse, crafted to portray migration as a threat to U.S. sovereignty, drives immigration legislation. The human costs of the resulting policies and practices are not invisible. Reports circulate of “toddlers without diapers” alone in crowded detention facilities (Dickerson, “There is a Stench”). Images of the freezing, filthy conditions at the refugee camps established in northern Mexico due to the Remain in Mexico Program are widely available (Sieff).<sup>1</sup> The humanitarian crisis at the border manifests as lived experiences of trauma and potentially fatal conditions for many migrants. Many U.S. citizens, numbed and distanced from this reality, consume this information and imagery without emotionally processing it, demanding change, or taking action. In June 2019, a devastating photograph of the drowned bodies of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his nearly two-year-old daughter Valeria, first published in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* circulated widely through social media and U.S. news sources. The image depicts their bodies face-down on the bank of the Rio Grande in Matamoros, where they were found after trying to cross the river to Brownsville. Even then, the public’s outrage was momentary; their recognition of and response to the migrants’ loss insufficient.

In this article, I first assess the U.S.-Mexico border as a site of discursive and material crisis, and then examine the production of solidarity through border performance. By tracing the state-generated rhetoric of crisis, which constructs racialized migrants as a national threat, I identify an underlying crisis of affect, which functions to emotionally distance many U.S. citizens from the human impacts of violence perpetrated against migrants. I show how the language of crisis, weaponized to re-inscribe white supremacy, also functions as a means of profit. Under capitalism, state and corporate actors manufacture a distinct temporality of crisis as an ongoing, operative reality. I approach the existing 700 miles of border wall as an axis and materialization of these discourses of crisis. I then delineate a new era of site-specific performance that responds to the hypervisibility of immigration-as-crisis rhetoric centered on the border wall. I argue that performance as a genre offers a unique mode of survival from within the temporality of perpetual crisis.

In the second section of this article, I examine the ways in which three collaborative performances that take place on the U.S.-Mexico border wall enact transnational solidarity. These works respond to the ongoing material attack on migrants' bodies through an affective repertoire of mutual vulnerability, intimacy, and joy. I analyze Ana Teresa Fernández's *Borrando la frontera* (2011-2016) which involved painting sections of the border wall blue; *Trenzando Fronteras* (2017), through which a coalition of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso women braided their hair together in a human chain across the border; and *Teeter-Totter Wall* (2019), a playful interactive installation created by Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello. By engaging the imagination, directly involving co-creators, and generating intimacy, these performances simultaneously reveal the violence of the wall's existence and work to disarm it, challenging the construction of migration as crisis and proposing communities of solidarity.

## Discourses of Crisis

Migration is neither a crisis nor an aberration, but rather a constant throughout human history. Border theorist Thomas Nail urges readers to question the normalization of stasis as the condition for belonging and participating in society. He proposes reframing the migrant as human history's central character, and migration as a generative force key to humanity's development, or "the structural necessity of the historical conditions of social reproduction" (Nail 12). Migrants, who have existed since the beginning of civilization, are catalysts of progress, growth, and new networks of communication. While human movement

across geopolitical borders is not a crisis, many make the decision to migrate due to state-produced crises at home.

The unlivable conditions that refugees flee are often the product of U.S. intervention in their home countries. Juan González traces the intimate relationship between Latino migrant flows and "the growth of U.S. empire" (xiv). He examines the expansion of U.S. power through the exploitation of Latin American territories beginning in the early nineteenth century, and argues that Central American asylum requests in particular are regularly results of disasters generated by the U.S. government (xv). The migrants now accused of bringing a crisis to the border are often, in fact, fleeing crises originating from action on the part of the U.S. abroad.

Political rhetoric responding to demographic changes in the U.S. often criminalizes migrants by constructing them as a threat to U.S. security. The vocabulary of crisis deployed against migrants in the U.S. has always been racialized, and translates into lived consequences for targeted populations. The framing of migration as invasion utilizes a concern with safety and economic stability as a mask to justify the defense of white sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> Historian Miguel Levorio traces the processes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through which "Mexican residents on both sides of the border were classified as subject 'others' and designated as a threat to Anglo security and national sovereignty" (13). This racialized construction of difference has historical roots which have long worked to deindividualize and dehumanize migrants.

While the criminalization of migration is widespread in media and political discourse today, the most explicit and visible example of migrant-as-crisis rhetoric comes from the highest office in the nation.

In his January 8, 2019 address from the Oval Office to make a case for border wall funding, President Trump sought to establish Latino migrants' criminal nature, citing "100,000 assaults, 30,000 sex crimes," and "thousands of Americans brutally killed" by "aliens" over the past two years ("Full Transcripts"). He uses the language of crisis to frame the need to protect citizens from the violent threat of migration as an urgent moral duty: "This is a crisis of the heart, and a crisis of the soul" ("Full Transcripts").<sup>3</sup> His manufacturing of immigration as an emergency circulates widely via Twitter, where the words "crisis" and "invasion" appear, capitalized, in almost every tweet about immigration that he publishes. His comment "if you really want to fix the Crisis at the Southern Border, tell migrants not to come into our country" received over 20,000 retweets, while his post "More troops being sent to the Southern Border to stop the attempted Invasion of Illegals," was liked almost 100,000 times (@realDonaldTrump). The President's narrative of migration as invasion, which echoes through public networks of communication, works to obscure the individuality and dignity of actual migrants, and to justify state and interpersonal violence against them.

By declaring a crisis, the state gains a more compliant public. Governments declare crises, even when none are present, in order to enact a state of exception. Many citizens, alarmed, tolerate the suspension of rights as a temporary measure to weather an emergency. In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein explores the exploitation of real or invented crises by corporate and governmental actors, in order to implement controversial policies while the public is too fearful and distracted by disaster to resist. By

framing the natural phenomenon of human migration as an emergency, the state rationalizes the intensification of violence and surveillance.

The structural dissolution of migrant protections demonstrates the state's manufacturing of crisis as a perpetual state rather than a temporary emergency. Practices including ICE raids, family separation, and indefinite detention have become institutionalized as responses to undocumented immigration, fueling a continual state of fear.<sup>4</sup> Within this framework, crisis is not a provisional suspension of procedures with a linear end point, but rather a cyclical, operative state of continuing shock. This temporality of ongoing crisis is a modality crucial to capitalism's continual operation. The experience of constant emergency corresponds with the emergence of neoliberalism. Perpetually, the fear generated through crisis rhetoric consolidates power and produces profit.

The construction of barriers and the maintenance of apparatuses of surveillance and detention are global, high-profit industries, which rely on the continual manufacturing of crisis to justify their existence. ICE spent 3.1 billion dollars apprehending migrants in 2018, holding them in centers that make up the world's largest immigrant detention system, 70% of which are run by private corporations ("How the US").<sup>5</sup> The U.S.-Mexico border wall, a physical manifestation of crisis rhetoric, is a profitable enterprise generating hundreds of millions of dollars in federal contracts.<sup>6</sup> In January 2019 and February 2020, Trump declared national emergencies in order to categorize migration as an urgent security threat and redirect defense spending for wall construction (Booker).<sup>7</sup> Before the Trump presidency, the border wall was already one of the largest-scale, least impeded infrastructure projects

the U.S. has ever seen, amplified by the 2006 Secure Fence Act, which allowed construction regardless of existing laws protecting native land or the environment.

Over 700 miles of border walls currently exist, covering more than 1/3 of the border. After the 1994 implementation of NAFTA, U.S. food products entered the Mexican market, undercutting Mexican prices and forcing many farmers into the U.S. to seek work. The physical wall at the border was constructed as a response to this post-NAFTA wave of migration. Under Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, the United States Congress dramatically increased the budget of Immigration and Naturalization Service, the number of Border Patrol agents, and the amount of fencing and underground sensors. These measures were enormously extended with the post-9/11 creation of ICE in 2003 and the 2005 passing of HR 4437, the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act, which explicitly linked the language of criminality, terrorism, and immigration.<sup>8</sup> As policy-makers increasingly depicted migration as a threat, legislators passed more bills to intensify the material infrastructure to solidify the boundary between nations.

The architecture of the border wall makes crisis rhetoric material. It gives concrete form to nationalistic discourse of separateness, threat, and invasion. Designed to perform the myth of the nation as a fortress capable of being sealed, the wall reshapes flows of people, animals, and water, and weaponizes the landscape by pushing migrants to cross through the deadliest areas of the desert. The proliferation of patrol agents, drones, vehicles, helicopters, flood lights, fortified barriers, infrared and night vision surveillance technology, and checkpoints on major freeways seeks to make impenetrable

that which is ultimately always permeable. The implementation of these measures in the border's vast territory is a perpetually incomplete project. Edward Casey maintains that despite state efforts at containment, "[th]e daunting metallic wall with a thick and deep concrete base that has now cost upwards of seven billion dollars is in fact a leaking vessel" (24). Sophisticated new ways to transport drugs, arms, money, and people across the border emerge constantly, confirming the absolute permeability of the boundary between nations.<sup>9</sup> Its efficacy as an actual boundary or migration deterrent disproved repeatedly, the border wall instead operates as a performance of force, a monument to fear and the fiction of the impenetrable nation.

As the axis of migration-as-crisis rhetoric and the centerpiece of Trump's platform, the border wall distracts from the expansive strategies that police migrants' mobility and belonging beyond the border region. Highly visible in the social imaginary and physical landscape, the wall operates as the locus of the discursive storm constructing migration as a crisis, and as a lived site of trauma for many migrants. The logic of the wall and continuation of the crisis it represents, though, extend throughout the U.S. and Mexico, through less visible structures and policies. These include the network of unmarked buildings in the U.S. utilized to hold migrants detained by ICE (Najmabadi). Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's deployment of Mexican National Guard members between Mexico and Guatemala has weaponized the territory of Mexico as an extension of the wall. The February 2020 deployment of the specially trained tactical unit BORTAC, typically used to confront smugglers on the border, into ten sanctuary cities shows the northward extension of the border wall

project (Dickerson and Kanno-Youngs). The use of officers trained in high-risk confrontation to carry out immigration arrests—or the exercise of military force in a civilian context—demonstrates the material effects of immigration-as-crisis discourse far beyond the wall. For the populations targeted by these practices, the terrifying lived experience of crisis does not end upon crossing the border, but rather becomes an operative, continual reality.

Migrants, the people constructed through crisis discourse as a threat to U.S. sovereignty and safety, are paradoxically often the ones experiencing true circumstances of crisis, beginning with the U.S.-produced emergencies frequently driving the decision to leave home. Migrants increasingly face physical experiences of trauma on their journeys northward, as governments become more hostile and border infrastructure drives them into the most severe, dangerous areas of the desert. The immigration activist group No More Deaths calculates that more than 5,000 migrants' bodies have been found dead in the borderland deserts since Operation Gatekeeper began (Regan 162).<sup>10</sup> The physically unlivable conditions of this humanitarian crisis contrast sharply with the state's manufactured discourse of invasion.

Even for those who cross safely, the lived experience of crisis does not end, perpetually harming migrants' psychological state. Customs and Border Patrol's failure to meet detained migrants' basic needs leads to an extended experience of trauma for many. In her investigation of an overcrowded facility in Clint, Texas, Caitlin Dickerson found hundreds of children without access to basic hygiene items, "as young as 7 and 8, many of them wearing clothes caked with snot and tears, caring for infants they've just met." In August 2019, the Trump administration paved the way for the indefinite detention

of migrant families by announcing the end of the Flores Settlement, a federal court agreement that limited how long migrant families with children could be detained (Naylor). The American Psychological Association issued a statement criticizing the new rule, arguing that "the longer they are held in detention, the more likely their mental health will continue to suffer" (Naylor). The logic justifying the ongoing trauma of indefinite detention is the same as that invested in manufacturing immigration as a crisis without end. This prolonged state of precarity extends beyond detention facilities, characterizing life for many migrants who perpetually experience threats to their survival, mobility, and belonging, entering the temporality of continual crisis. Living in a persistent state of emergency has long-lasting mental and physical health implications, as studied by Joseph Boscarino in his work on the psychological trauma of disasters, which he frames as a public health issue (370). Migrants' ongoing bodily and psychological experiences of crisis are the lived results of the dehumanizing official discourses that construct migration as an invasion.

These xenophobic structures, policies, and narratives limit political leaders' and dominant U.S. society's ability to recognize the humanity of migrant populations and the harm enacted upon them. Provoked by manufactured discourses of crisis into a constant state of alarm, many citizens display a numbness, or an inability to fully perceive or actively respond to the human reality of migrants' experiences. Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life*, examines the processes through which people of color are imagined by dominant groups as outside of "culturally viable notions of the human" (33). She calls this derealization, and argues that any further violence

perpetrated against the derealized does not register as harm. “If someone is lost, and that person is not someone,” she asks, “what and where is the loss, how does mourning take place?” (32).<sup>11</sup> In response to this loss of the apprehension of loss, Butler proposes that mourning, rituals of grief that acknowledge loss and our collective vulnerability to it, can be a basis for political community. In the border’s territory of incompletely mourned, unidentified bodies and militarized infrastructure, this collective vulnerability as a basis for solidarity appears impossible. The real crisis at the border is as much a humanitarian one—of bodies and minds under continual onslaught—as it is a crisis of affect, a failure on the part of many citizens to fully register emotion, which negates migrants’ humanity and grievability.

### *Performance against Crisis*

In a context in which migrants’ bodies become discursively abstracted into an invading mass, performance art offers a mode of communication particularly suited to disarming crisis rhetoric. Performance, as theorized by Diana Taylor, is a dynamic, embodied social practice, an affective action that centers knowledge production and transmission in the body. Performance re-activates gestures and behaviors in unfamiliar ways. It is ephemeral, but also leaves traces, and can enact lasting changes. It is not artificial or in opposition to the real. Rather, as Taylor states, “Performance moves between the AS IF and the IS, between pretend and new constructions of the ‘real’” (6). Where border infrastructure operates according to a logic of fixity and containment, performance moves, affectively and physically; it shifts and provokes. Performers co-imagine and

co-construct; they act socially, on and with an audience. This cooperative, fluid practice runs counter to the rigid boundaries of crisis discourse.

In contrast to the dominant narratives through which governmental actors unilaterally frame migration as a crisis, performance opens routes for less sanctioned communication. Performance values gesture and nuance that cannot be captured by official narratives. It proposes a riskier epistemology of intimate listening and touch, of proximity over objectivity. Dwight Conquergood celebrates performance for its “embrace of different ways of knowing,” which “is radical because it cuts to the root of how knowledge is organized” (146). He contrasts the “objective knowledge consolidated in texts,” with “local know-how that circulates on the ground within a community of memory and practice,” or what Donna Haraway terms the distanced and authoritative “view from above” in opposition to the “view from the body,” a perspective that allows viewers to *feel* what the written record misses: the tacit, improvised “meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context” (Haraway 196; Conquergood 146). Performance communicates through codes potentially illegible or undecipherable to the state. The affective knowledge facilitated by performance’s bodily communication provides a basis for emotional connection and communities of solidarity. The unpredictable mobility of performance functions as a powerful tool for undermining the rigidity of the border wall, which favors linear forms and an orderly control of bodies. Perhaps for this reason, performance is a modality of expression that particularly characterizes border art.

The production of border art corresponds to the rise of state interest in sealing the boundary and critical interest

in the border as an object of study. The genre became formalized as a category through the 1984 establishment of the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo, which initially focused on site-specific interventions in the Tijuana/San Diego border zone. Ila Sheren traces the trajectory of U.S.-Mexico border performance's "shift from site-specificity to border-portability," or the process through which performance about borders since the 1980s has disengaged from the physical, geographical boundary to instead globally export the border as a conceptual terrain (21). This extrication from the physical site, which Sheren argues allowed artists to reinterpret the border for other regions and audiences, corresponds to the globalization of the field of border studies itself (22). However, border performance is increasingly returning to the site-specific materiality of the border, in response to the heightened visibility of the border as an axis of crisis.<sup>12</sup> The exacerbation of political rhetoric and policy focused on the wall has produced a resurgence of site-specific border interventions that respond directly to the architecture and symbol of the wall.<sup>13</sup>

While the vocabulary of crisis distances people from bodies, performance restores corporeal immediacy. Discourses of crisis, by design, abstract and deindividualize the bodies of those constructed as a threat, and numb the public to the physical realities of those enduring lived circumstances of crisis. Performance communicates and discovers through the body, centering its vulnerability, the mutual recognition of bodies' potential to be harmed, as a potential basis for collective action and solidarity. It offers an embodied response to disappearance and brutalization. The physical action of performance situates the body as a site of struggle, knowledge, and authority. By centering the body, the three performances I analyze demonstrate the corporeal stakes of the ongoing attacks on migrants.

Ana Teresa Fernández's *Borrando la frontera* (2011-2016); Xochitl R. Nicholson, Sandra Paola López, and the community coalition Boundless Across Borders' *Braiding Borders/Trenzando Fronteras* (2017); and Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello's *Teeter-Totter Wall* (2019) provide exemplary cases of site-specific, locally situated, embodied, transnational, collaborative border performances which challenge immigration-as-crisis discourse in surprising and effective ways. Through collaboration, the works elucidate possibilities of the border as a space of co-creation, intimacy, and solidarity. While presenting critiques of border militarization, the performers choose affective alternatives to anger. They opt for a language that does not compute with the logic of the wall, generating new communities of affective relationality that highlight the interconnectedness of life spanning the border.

### *Borrando la Frontera*

On a cloudy Tuesday on a beach in Tijuana, against the border fence, a woman in a black cocktail dress places one stiletto heel in front of the other in the sand. Armed with a brush, the woman climbs a ladder and begins to paint the border blue, transforming the barrier alongside San Diego's Border Field Park into a fantasy of sky. In her 2011 performance *Borrando la Frontera*, Tampico-born artist Ana Teresa Fernández creates the illusion of a gap in the border fence, making the permeability of the border patrol infrastructure visible. The embodied action of her work, her reframing of recognizable gestures of femininity and labor, provoke feeling and social engagement, and operate as a foil that both points out the structural fixity of the border machinery and points beyond it. She makes the border security



apparatus' rigidity and current gaps visible, and at the same time engages the imagination to envision a trajectory through the barrier, a potential future in which the border is no longer a space of crisis.

Fernández reimagined the performance with a second, collective iteration in Nogales. In October 2015, she enrolled U.S. students and Mexican residents and migrants in a collective act of painting, making the action social and explicitly transnational. Over the course of six hours, Fernández worked on and with volunteers from Arizona and Sonora, as they painted a 50-foot stretch of the southern side of the wall a striking blue. Her most recent and collaborative iteration of the work took place in April 2016, when she worked with local residents in Mexicali, Baja California; Agua Prieta, Sonora, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua to simultaneously paint three sections of the wall to match the sky.

By visually dematerializing the wall—the physical manifestation of crisis discourse—Fernández denaturalizes its presence. This act asserts the actual porousness of the current border, declaring the reality of interconnected trans-border exchange and the actual inefficacy and penetrability of the wall's infrastructure. And yet, the protest embedded in her performance communicates its own futility. A review of the work notes, "The task is hopeless: One person could no more paint the entire fence than resolve the issues that led to its construction" (Shepter). The contrast of sky blue next to rusted metal and the scope of her act against the hundreds of miles of wall make the impossibility of her task clear even as she envisions an alternative to current reality:

These tracks stand vertically next to each other, like prison bars across the sand and into the ocean, dividing

land, sea, and sky. In my ideal world I wanted to topple them. The only way I knew how was through my own weapon: paint. (Fernández)<sup>14</sup>

*Her performance makes her ideal world symbolically present.* She critically engages viewers' imaginations to showcase the physical reality of restriction, while at the same time making a more mobile reality imaginable. Performance is this space of interplay in which reality and imagination move together. It defamiliarizes and provokes spectators into seeing what is—the metal barrier and the border machinery that accompanies it—while simultaneously playing with what could be—a world that does not construct migration as a crisis.

Performance exteriorizes the imagination. It transforms the world by giving form and body to interior life. Fantasy both defines the boundaries of the real and operates to make different realities conceivable, by acting them out. Performance shows viewers what is not, and by contrast, what is, but also enables them to imagine what could be. *Borrando la frontera* shows an imaginary gap in the wall, which both highlights the current severity of the border infrastructure and suggests the possibility of a future without it. "Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere" (Butler, *Undoing* 29). The performance of fantasy operates not as a retreat from a grim reality, but as a drawing board for what could come next, a space to rehearse otherwise unimaginable forms of movement. Imagination functions here as a strategy that makes the struggle against crisis rhetoric and the resulting de-realization of migrants possible. It facilitates the creation of new discursive spaces and modes of being. While discourses of crisis

trap people in a perpetual temporality of ongoing emergency, the alternatives offered by imagination suggest a distinct possible future, an exit from continual crisis. The sky's extension to earth, its quiet obliteration of the wall's machinery, is a proposal of utopic potentiality.

Fernández's project emphasizes not only the transformation from fence to sky, but also the physicality of this process, her body moving dynamically as she climbs the ladder and applies paint. Her work is as much about the illusion of the gap in the wall as the physical performance of gender and of the labor enacted through her gestures. She positions her body, and particularly her body in movement, and in relationship to the wall, as key to this fantasy that also lays bare reality. Her body is primary, too, in her documentation of the performance. Fernández created a series of oil paintings that reimagine *Borrando la frontera*. Her "Entre" series features fragmented elements of her body in relationship to the wall. The erasure of the border happens here less through blue paint and more through the insertion of her body leaning against its bars. In these paintings, she disarms the wall by making it into an aesthetic prop for her luminous form and gestures.

She performs hyperbolized femininity through her formal attire, *which is* at odds with her task. Her tube top dress and black pumps infuse an incongruent code of glamour into the stark reality of the border. In performance, the act of reframing, or placing an identifiable image or behavior outside of its familiar context, is an intervention that asks viewers to examine what they think they know. Here, the costume of exaggerated femininity functions as a displaced referent that interrupts the border landscape. Viewers expect this outfit elsewhere. It evokes the

impeded mobility of women navigating restrictive gender norms. Audrey Goodman notes that over the course of the project, Fernández shifts from her dress into black shorts and a t-shirt, "to demonstrate her power to cross freely and transcend the gender expectations of both Mexican and US culture" (47). The act of performing this site-specific work in these particular clothes illuminates the parallels between multiple systems that restrict movement, and Fernández's relative freedom to move within them.

Fernández frames her work on the border within an understanding of the economic demands of neoliberalism. A review featured on the artist's website notes that her migration into the U.S. was an economic move:

Crossing the Tijuana-San Diego border to study and build her career—mirrors the route taken by millions of women who have come from southern and central Mexico to work in the maquiladoras. . . . The border wall is an aggressive reminder of the violent subjugation of Mexico through the instruments of NAFTA. (Holslin)

While distinguishing between distinct class contexts, she connects the geography of the artist's journey with that of many others who travel north for work. Fernández evokes the flows of labor and capital that are fundamentally linked to human journeys across the border. In her larger body of work, Fernández positions the female migrant body at work as a site of physical and economic struggle.<sup>15</sup> By dematerializing the wall, Fernández interrupts the crisis designed to drive profit, thus questioning the need for federal construction contracts.

The rhetoric of crisis, as manufactured by the state, prioritizes the individual over the collective. Acts of collaboration, then, propose an anti-capitalist ethos, by offering a counternarrative to individual protectionism and pursuit of profit. The collaborative, subsequent versions of *Borrando la frontera*, in generating a cooperative community, begin to materialize the possibilities proposed by the initial performance, replacing the individual scope of the task of border erasure with the possibility of an activated multitude. Photos of the 2015 Nogales performance, which Fernández calls a “social sculpture,” show Mexican and U.S. residents holding ladders stable for each other, passing paint receptacles, smiling, and building new alliances with people that they otherwise would likely not have met. Innovative forms of shared agency emerge, through the formation of a transnational alliance of participants. The third rendition of *Borrando la Frontera*, which took place simultaneously at three sites—Mexicali, Agua Prieta, and Juárez—was the most extensively collaborative version of the performance. Each site hosted various border organizations, schools, and local community members. This embodied art practice suggests the possibility of future solidarity between participants, envisioned as collective action and a willingness to take mutual risks for one another.

This potentiality disrupts the architecture, logic, and temporality of crisis, by suggesting that there is a future under construction, through collaborative practice and new forms of relationality. The works invited further collaboration through the virtual life they took on after the original performance. Fernández’s audience grew exponentially when images from the performance went viral on social media

before the 2016 election. This expansive transnational community replicated and co-created the border erasure in ways that reached participants far beyond the original act, further imagining a community beyond crisis.<sup>16</sup>

### *Trenzando Fronteras*

Quietly, exchanging smiles and clasping hands, fifty-two women make their way onto the Paso del Norte International Bridge between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso on a sunny January morning. The women, residents of both cities, line up back to back, as organizers braid each pair’s hair together, forming a human chain spanning the international bridge.<sup>17</sup> The performance, called *Braiding Borders/Trenzando Fronteras*, took place during the 2017 presidential inauguration, at the same time as the Women’s March protests deployed messages of hope and outrage globally. Organized by the transnational coalition Boundless Across Borders, the project was a collaboration between the artists and community organizers Xochitl R. Nicholson and Sandra Paola López, designed to respond to Trump’s rhetoric against immigrants and women with “a sign of peaceful resistance, strength and solidarity” (Curran). A short bilingual film documenting the event, shot and edited by Laura Bustillos Jáquez and Angie Reza Tures, captures participants’ strong shared emotions, as they sing, embrace, beam, and weep while braiding their hair together. Momentum from the collective action led the organizers to establish Transfronteriza, a grassroots, women-led coalition of organizations from both sides of the border dedicated to community development and the creation of performances that reflect border residents’ diverse experiences.

While crisis discourse constructs the border as a site of perpetually heightened alarm, the simple ritual of grooming hair, made public and social, infuses the border with a sense of the normality of ordinary life. Instead of a site of ongoing trauma, it claims the bridge as an everyday community space, framing the ongoing exchange between the two cities as routine. Crisis distances and numbs people to the reality of others' experiences. *Trenzando fronteras* counters this separation with corporeal immediacy. Through the radical bodily dependence of physically weaving themselves together, participants present direct embodied touch as a striking protest of the border machinery's violence. Where walls separate, touch creates relationality. The slow, soothing gesture of brushing and braiding hair together has a calming effect, in opposition to the state of shock provoked by crisis rhetoric. The act of braiding each other's hair, and the gentleness with which the women must move when physically intertwined by their roots, enact an ethics of mutual caretaking, which counters the individualist mindset of crisis.

The transnational intimacy of this performance highlights existing bonds between the two cities and generates new networks of connection. The deeply collaborative intervention showcases the interconnectedness and existing relationships between women in the two cities, while also braiding together co-creators who had not previously met. The collective reveals an intertwined ecology of bonds that already exist, and those that could be. In the video documentation of the performance, a participant emphasizes the intimate bonds between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez:

Queríamos demostrar los enlaces que tenemos con nuestra ciudad hermana y con nuestras hermanas

juarenses, demostrando que somos realmente una sola ciudad, una sola gente. (Bustillos Jáquez)

Through the weaving together of women on the bridge, their distinguishing features and national allegiances blend to form a collective sense of solidarity. The collective formed through this human chain enacts a non-lucrative exchange of touch and feeling, asserting each participant's value beyond their labor or potential for profit. The scale and proximity of their intimacy, situated in a space characterized by the international flow of goods and capital, proposes an alternative ethics to that of capitalist gain. Through the production of a physically intertwined collective, *Trenzando fronteras* proposes the restoration of mutual empathy and expression of new relational affects.

Participants express the intimacy of this cross-border relationship building with quiet, emotionally charged dignity. Immigration-as-crisis rhetoric bombards with velocity. It traffics in fear. In contrast with the reactionary alarm and anger sparked by the language of emergency, the women move slowly, with intention and, at times, with joy at their communion. While outrage is justified, they opt for a different affective modality. The performance creates a possible space of healing on the international bridge, by reclaiming the expression and exchange of emotion. A review emphasizes the affective dimension of López's work, which "allows us to feel our way to a future without borders" (Curran). In opening themselves to the experience of mutual touch and collaborative feeling, participants cultivate an intimate alliance grounded in vulnerability.

Vulnerability implies neither passivity nor victimization; it does not seek paternalistic assistance. Rather, Butler defines

vulnerability “as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance . . . as part of the very meaning or action of resistance itself” (*Vulnerability* 1). She identifies the potential for political community in the acknowledgement of collective vulnerability to loss. The recognition of this shared human condition across difference generates mutual empathy, providing a basis for solidarity and collective action. Organizer Xochitl Nicholson describes the women’s interwoven hair as a symbol of solidarity:

Mantenemos los lazos solidarios, mantenemos este tejido de nuestros cabellos, donde tejemos también nuestros pensamientos, nuestros sentires comunes y nuestra solidaridad para mantener la hermandad entre El Paso y Ciudad Juárez. (Bustillos Juárez)

The participants in *Trenzando fronteras*, bound together by the strands of their hair, cannot help but perceive each other’s vulnerability to harm. Reframing vulnerability as a potential mode of resistance, they generate a collective through their willingness to openly feel together.

By bringing a ritual of touch and quiet collaboration into a space of policing and rushed transit, the participants seem to enter a distinct temporality. Time slows down as they hold and weave themselves together. Within the continual manufacturing of crisis, they occupy space and relate to one another differently. In contrast to the perpetual panic and rigidity of a crisis framework, *Trenzando fronteras* highlights existing and possible coalitions and the interwoven nature of border life, proposing new emotional, political, aesthetic, and ethical possibilities of collective action.

## Teeter-Totter Wall

His heart pounding, a man strides toward the metal slats of the border wall between Puerto de Anapra and Sunland Park, holding a bright pink teeter totter. Without asking permission, he positions the playground equipment using the wall as a fulcrum. Within minutes, residents from both communities straddle the banana seats, grasp the handles, and begin to play. This intervention, which took place on July 28, 2019, was carried out by UC Berkeley architect Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello, Associate Professor of Design at San José State University, who first came up with the concept 10 years before its enactment. They worked with a team of collaborators, including members of the Juárez-based artist collective Colectivo Chopeke and metal artisans from Juárez’s Taller Herrería. The event took place without advance coordination of participants, and was documented by Chris Gauthier, whom Rael invited to take photos. *Teeter-Totter Wall* was the realization of a design proposed in Rael’s 2017 book *Borderwall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*. The book, which frames architecture as a vehicle for challenging the politics of border security, proposes designs that “rethink the existing wall by redesigning it into something that would exceed its sole purpose as security infrastructure” (Rael 3). By moving the project from conceptual proposal to a physical change in the built environment, the collaborators facilitated an embodied performance featuring joyful cross-border interactions.

While the original event was locally situated, it quickly acquired an expansive virtual life and community beyond the site. The rapid escalation of attention and enormous circulation of the performance’s

images speaks to the emotional resonance of the intervention. Reactions proliferated into various political cartoons; headlines in languages including German, Vietnamese, French, and Italian; parody articles; a Bill Maher interview, and thousands of social media messages to the creators. The reactions culminated in *Teeter-Totter Wall's* selection as one of 2019's Best Public Artworks by international curators through the online platform Artsy.

Despite the generally celebratory tone of this publicity, some harsh critiques emerged. In online discussions, critics shared a concern that the work depicts a false harmony and obscures the actual violence of the militarized border. Rita Harris describes the work as "tone-deaf and misguided," while for Kimberly Sheperd, "It's revolting. A macabre form of 'let's pretend'" (Facebook). A heavily reposted Facebook comment by Staci Jordan Shelton maintains that the performance exploits the participation of children as a political statement without their understanding or consent:

I keep thinking about why I hate that seesaw at the border . . . These are REAL babies using this. These children aren't activists who are consciously resisting. They're pawns. What is it normalizing? What is it telling these children about the world and themselves?. (Facebook)

Viewers far from the border may have the privilege of seeing only the celebration of the interaction, superficially glossing over the militarized infrastructure. Local residents participating in the intervention, however, run no risk of overlooking the violent imposition of the wall. Through a moment of play, they reclaim the site as community space, and fleetingly disarm the wall by

relating in a counter-language. While the children did not opt in to the work's publicity, I believe that showcasing the joy of children at play is a more ethical and effective strategy of challenging border security than the media's common showcasing of migrant children's suffering. Children's laughter runs counter to the discursive repertoire of crisis, unlike publicized images of them weeping after a parent's detention or huddling on concrete under foil blankets. The work's power lies in the fact that its participants are not necessarily activists. There is political potential in simply living one's life, within or despite oppressive structures.

Rather than normalizing the violence of border security, the participants, in enjoying an ordinary moment of play, demonumentalize it by operating outside the signifiers of crisis. Rael's 2017 book proposes ways to conceptually dismantle the wall, by bringing everyday life into the militarized zone. Through design, he imagines trans-border interactions such as sharing books, eating burritos, and playing volleyball. *Teeter-Totter Wall*, like these activities, symbolically renders the wall impotent, by refusing to perpetuate the fear, separation, and alarm that it is designed to foment. Participants destabilize the wall when, in the face of its material representation of crisis, they refuse to panic, and opt instead for relationality, for the possibility of empathy and shared ordinary experiences. Rael playfully summarizes this ephemeral demonumentalization via social media with the hashtag #seesawdownthewall, and describes the scene in an interview:

Women and children completely disempowered this wall for a moment, for 40 minutes. There was a kind of sanctuary hovering over this event. (Brice)

The duration of *Teeter-Totter Wall* offers a blip of levity in the temporality of crisis. The affective lightheartedness of the event does not obscure the violence of the border, but rather co-exists within it. Noam Chomsky highlights the cruelty of the structure: “The U.S.-Mexico border, like most borders, was established by violence—and its architecture is the architecture of violence” (qtd. in Rael 17). The deeply rooted violence of the wall does not disappear into the revelry. Its rigidity instead becomes starker, in contrast to the scene of mobility and joy. For those familiar with the context of violence in the region, the shade of pink immediately evokes the pink crosses mounted across Ciudad Juárez at the sites of women’s murders, as a sign of mourning and protest of femicide. The hue is at once cheerful and macabre, much like the juxtaposition of playground equipment and border security infrastructure. In an Instagram post, Rael expresses the true affective range of the project: “Design can convey horror and joy simultaneously” (@rrael). The happy laughter resulting from the design’s activation momentarily undermines the discourse of crisis, through its incompatibility with panic and numbness.

The act of bringing ordinary affect and public activity to the wall reclaims the site as community territory. The inviting horizontal lines of the teeter-totters assert residents’ right to approach and engage with the infrastructure. This affirmation of human mobility undermines the incursion of military personnel and architecture. In an online post, Rael declares:

If there is any question that the border is a public space, the intent of *Teeter Totter Wall* was to reinforce the important concept that our borderlands

need to remain accessible to the public and not an inaccessible militarized zone. (@rrael)

The performance’s leisure activity contrasts sharply with the privatization of the border wall construction contracts. The act of transforming the border into an experimental platform for public participation reframes the space from private or state property, run according to the logic of crisis and profitability, to non-lucrative, collaborative public space. The project, originally imagined in *Borderwall as Architecture* as a visualization of the U.S. and Mexico’s economic interdependency becomes, as embodied performance, a joyful affirmation of trans-border exchange “that does not defer to forces of capitalism, neo-liberal agendas, or xenophobia” (Rael 105, @rrael). The collaborators, rising and falling on either side of the border while they ride the teeter-totters, demonstrate an interconnected cross-border balance, in which bodies and actions in one nation impact outcomes elsewhere. The playful performance of this balance allows viewers to imagine a future transnational community of people actively and empathetically in touch with one another.

## Conclusion

Construction continues. In October 2019, the Trump administration announced the installation of walls along the border where none had previously existed (Sands). Agents are currently detonating explosives, uprooting saguaros, and plowing through sacred Tohono O’odham territory to clear the way for the structure (McFarland, Hennessey-Fiske, Nañez). Along with the wall, state and corporate actors continuously manufacture discourses of disaster

and invasion. Within this perpetual temporality of crisis, however, communities continue to imagine new ways of moving and connecting. Rebecca Solnit highlights the creativity of a community in crisis: “Inside the word *emergency* is *emerge*; from an emergency new things come forth” (13). Performance, as an embodied and social medium, offers the possibility of emerging from crisis, through creative means of destabilizing and transforming these violent structures.

The performances examined here, which are representative of the recent resurgence of site-specific border interventions, bring everyday life, moments of touch and collaboration, into the contested site of the border. They naturalize migration by denaturalizing the wall. They generate emotional responses and forms of human connection that operate outside the language of crisis. Turning to vulnerability and joy as sources of relationality and resistance, they envision new networks of solidarity. The emotions generated through these performances offer a framework beyond resistance, a means of survival, rebirth, and vital connection even within structures of crisis. The outcomes of these new political possibilities are not immediately obvious or easily measurable. However, Diana Taylor reminds readers that “large or small, visible or invisible, performances create change” (10). Performance is action, not separate from the reality in which it intervenes. The affective strength of these works may yet lead to humanitarian solutions or legislative change, or to co-creators’ internal resilience. While the performances themselves are fleeting, their traces continue. Images from *Teeter-Totter Wall* continue to circulate online. Women who met during *Trenzando Fronteras* are still talking regularly. In places, the blue paint from

*Borrando la Frontera* remains, continuing to imagine a future mobility beyond the current crisis.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The legislation requiring refugees to return to Mexico to await the outcome of their asylum cases, put into effect in early 2019, is inexplicably called the Migrant Protection Protocols.

<sup>2</sup> The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act utilized a racial discourse of danger to the nation in order to bar Chinese immigrants from naturalization, establishing the U.S. as a gatekeeper nation (Lee 38).

<sup>3</sup> During the President’s January 8, 2019 address to the nation, in which Trump appealed to Congress for \$5.7 billion in border wall funding, activists stood outside the White House displaying a giant, lit-up sign that read “FAKE CRISIS” (Queally).

<sup>4</sup> More than 5,400 migrant children have been separated from their parents between January 2017 and January 2020. In February 2020, the Trump administration announced the end of a federal court agreement that limits how long migrant families with children can be detained (Naylor).

<sup>5</sup> In a report on the privatization of the immigrant detention system, Emily Kassie writes: “Billions of American taxpayer dollars are now allocated to support a system where for-profit companies hold the vast majority of immigrants. In fiscal year 2018, private prison companies like CoreCivic and GEO Group derived 25% and 20% of their profits respectively from ICE, which is now their biggest client. ICE spent over \$250 million on contracts with GEO Group and another \$60 million with CoreCivic.”

<sup>6</sup> In 2018, Montana-based Barnard Construction Co signed a \$172 million contract to build 32 miles of wall in Arizona, while Galveston contractor SLSCO signed contracts for \$166.8 and \$145 million for border-security projects (Reklaitis).

<sup>7</sup> On February 13, 2020, the Trump administration notified Congress that it plans to divert \$3.8 billion from the Defense Department’s



budget to build the border wall, in addition to more than \$11 billion directed to construct more than 500 miles of new barriers (Booker).

<sup>8</sup> For more information about the changes to immigration policy as a reaction to 9/11, see Edward Alden's *The Closing of the American Border: Terrorism, Immigration, and Security Since 9/11*.

<sup>9</sup> Alice Driver maintains that "the wall is just a symbol. It is a physical monument to the idea of returning to a more homogenous white past—a past that ignores the contributions of undocumented migrants . . . Narcos, who are consummate businessmen, will thank Trump for this distraction of a border wall while flying the drones and building the submarines that will fuel our drug-filled dreams."

<sup>10</sup> This is a conservative estimate, as within the jurisdiction of Pima County, Arizona alone, the organization Humane Borders has mapped the location of over 3,000 deceased migrants since January of 2001 ("Arizona Open GIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants").

<sup>11</sup> The implications of derealization can be quite literal, as seen in the February 2020 Supreme Court ruling that Border Patrol agents who shoot foreign nationals cannot be sued (Romo).

<sup>12</sup> This occurs alongside the continued exportation of border art. Recent examples include Guillermo Galindo and Richard Misrach's collaboration *Border Cantos* (2016) and Alejandro González Inárritu's immersive virtual reality experience *Carne y Arena* (2018).

<sup>13</sup> Notable recent border interventions that utilize new technologies of communication to invent alternative aesthetics of representation in response to crisis include French public artist JR's massive 2017 installation of a child peering over the fence into the U.S.; Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer interactive light and sound installation "Border Tuner;" indigenous artists Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade Twist's 2015 *Repellent Fence*; light graffiti projections by Artcollectivist and Witness at the Border; *The Transborder Immigrant Tool*, created in 2007 by Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0/b.a.n.g.

lab; and John Craig Freeman's virtual augmentation project *Border Memorial: Frontera de los Muertos* (2012).

<sup>14</sup> The wall in this area is made of used train track rails set vertically, tools of mobility repurposed as obstacles.

<sup>15</sup> Her paintings include images of herself performing work such as mopping a floor with her hair, dancing a tango with a vacuum cleaner on the sidewalk in front of a section of the border wall, and attempting to sweep away the sand of the Tijuana beach, a task similarly ceaseless to that of painting the border (Dickinson 6).

<sup>16</sup> Michelle Wallace notes that Fernández organized the 2016 version of the work in response to widespread interest and the exacerbation of anti-immigrant discourse and laws: "as news of her work began to snowball, so did demand."

<sup>17</sup> Women with shorter hair tied scarves around their heads, which were then braided into their partners' hair. In this way, the organizers included women of any gender expression.

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