

Xenotopia

A place
that unsettles
that is strangely familiar
that is intimate yet estranging
that provokes disquiet
that accommodates alterity

An image
that invites other readings

Texts and Images: Multiple Mobilities Research Cluster

Design: Gabriela Carnabuci

The Multiple Mobilities Research Cluster is an interdisciplinary working group at The New School, New York focused on the political, aesthetic, phenomenological, and spatial mechanisms that produce and disrupt the effects of bordering. Interests span supply chains, multispecies environments, labor politics, and categories of classification. Collective and individual field research trips by the group include China, France, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Morocco, Nepal, and the United States. Its members are Victoria Hattam, Laura Y. Liu, Radhika Subramaniam, Miriam Ticktin, and Rafi Youatt.

In January 2016, The Multiple Mobilities Research Cluster went to the US-Mexico border, starting in Brownsville, Texas. We went to an area that is well known as a birdwatching venue, a refuge called the Hidalgo Pump House which is bisected by the border wall. A local environmental activist accompanied us to discuss the intersecting politics of immigration and environmentalism, and how different things move with and against one another across walls and borders. As our group got up close to the wall, we saw something in the tall grass. We went over to look and saw a person—body—face down. The activist asked carefully, “Are you okay? Can you hear me?” After what seemed like an eternity, the person lifted her head, and in a fear-stricken voice said in Spanish, “Please don’t tell anyone that we are here!” We wanted to offer her and her companion water but realized we would put them in danger; to avoid unnecessary attention, we carefully shifted our location. Within 10 minutes, one of the bird-watchers — there in theory to admire the birds and the beauty of the landscape — spotted them. He made a beeline to Border Patrol and reported them. Within minutes, they were handcuffed, and led away.

Text: Miriam Ticktin

BIRDS ONLY
Beyond This
Sign



This sign, in Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Reserve in the Rio Grande Valley, sits in an endangered landscape. Trump's National Emergency Declaration, passed in early 2019, has given the US administration the power to override no-walls zones in protected areas. Warning people to stay away and not to cross, the sign appears to stand in uncomfortable sympathy with the politics of borders and divisions. But what if we read the injunction 'only' as a dare to follow birds, to imagine unexpected alliances and joint futures? Borders could become flyways, routes of passage where anyone and anything could stop and be welcome, until they wanted or were ready to move on.

Central Flyway, Tejas

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Text: Miriam Ticktin

Photo: Miriam Ticktin, 2016



Informal settlements of people-on-the move are growing on the streets and roundabouts of Paris. Should we call them camps? They function as spaces of quarantine, separating and containing the unwanted. Or are they spaces of freedom? They reclaim privatized space, enacting a slow and steady occupation — an assertion of presence against experiences of dispossession and inequality.

Imperial Collage of Algeria, Mali, Morocco, Senegal, and Syria

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Text: Miriam Ticktin

Photo: InfoMigrants, 2019



Tak Yuet Lau Police Post sits across the Ng Tung River from Lo Wu Station, the busiest migration control point in Hong Kong. Just north of the post, the Ng Tung joins the Sham Chun River which separates Hong Kong from Shenzhen, where the urban towers of the cityscape stand in stark contrast to the lush wetland landscape of the Frontier Closed Area. Established in 1951 in the midst of the Korean War, the green buffer was set up to prevent migrants, smuggled goods, and military encroachment from the mainland. Beginning in 2012, Hong Kong has been implementing a plan to reduce the total area from 2,800 hectares down to roughly 400, sparking fear of massive development and concern over protection of the wetlands, which fall within the East Asian-Australasian flyway.

Militarized Border Economic Zone:
View toward Frontier Closed Area from Lo Wu Station

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Text: Laura Y. Liu
Photo: Laura Y. Liu, 2015



Entering Hong Kong from Shenzhen at the Lo Wu border station (Luo Hu on the Shenzhen side), you walk along a covered footbridge from which you can see the metal fence along the Ng Tung River. Against this fence, people have parked their bicycles and stowed their suitcases, parcels, and hand carts while they daytrip into or out of Hong Kong. These are the conveyances of mobility scaled to the body. They sit, waiting to be emptied, filled, ridden, wheeled, or hauled into use for the next task at hand.

Militarized Border Economic Zone:
View from Lo Wu Station footbridge

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Text: Laura Y. Liu

Photo: Laura Y. Liu, 2015



Los Ebanos International Ferry — also known as Los Ebanos-Díaz Ordaz Ferry, or El Chalán — is the last hand-pulled ferry on the international US-Mexico border between Los Ebanos, Texas and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, Tamaulipas. The ferry, in place since 1950, spans the Rio Grande here at roughly 70 yards. The nearest bridge crossing is a 60-mile round trip to Rio Grande City. El Chalán is pulled by three to five men, six to ten hands. As a passenger, you can add your hands and join the pull. Or skip the pulling and be pulled. Pure manual labor and, in 2019, just \$1.25 gets you across (and your bicycle for \$2, motorcycle for \$3, or car for \$4). The original versions of the barge were made of wood and lasted a few years each. This one, in use since 1980, is made of steel. On the US side, an old Texas ebony tree (the trees for which Los Ebanos is named) stands firm on the bank of the Rio Grande, anchoring the ferry's main steel cable. Just up from the landing sits the US Customs and Border Patrol checkpoint run by the US Department of Homeland Security.

Militarized Border Economic Zone:

View from Los Ebanos toward Gustavo Díaz Ordaz

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Text: Laura Y. Liu

Photo: Laura Y. Liu, 2016



The wall along the southern border of the United States is fragmented by design. Wall segments obstruct mobility intermittently and ‘funnel’ undocumented crossers into ever more hostile terrain.

Borderplex I: Wall Fragment, outside McAllen, Texas

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Text: Victoria Hattam

Photo: Victoria Hattam, 2017



Multiple sovereignties exist in and among the Laguna mountains and adjacent valley. And yet, exclusionary politics dominate — enacted geologically by the weaponizing of terrain. Temperatures are extremely high in the summer months. No water, no shade, little vegetation. No border walls are needed in such steep and rocky ground where movement for many remains a precarious undertaking. Imperial City, Imperial Valley, located in Imperial County: many sovereignties claimed by one.

Borderplex II: Highway 8, California

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Text: Victoria Hattam

Photo: Victoria Hattam, 2013



Clear water, steep sides. The All American Canal is an 80-mile-long aqueduct built by the Imperial Irrigation Company to take water from the Colorado River into the Imperial Valley. Near Calexico, the canal runs alongside the US-Mexico border for several miles. When it was first built, water seepage was extensive. A waste in many eyes even as those living in the Mexicali Valley reclaimed the water for competing uses. To remedy the leakage, the canal was relined in 2009. The newly sealed sides had multiple effects: seepage was contained, Mexican water access limited, and drownings of undocumented border crossers greatly increased. Five hundred and fifty people have perished in the canal; the bodies usually are found at the hydroelectric drops. The steep slick sides make exit difficult. Hostile environments created by human hand. Border walls gone green, as John Hultgren perceptively claims.

Borderplex III: The All American Canal, near Calexico, California

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Text: Victoria Hattam

Photo: Victoria Hattam, 2013



Burn zones are ghostly spaces, windswept and sun-scorched, and charred to a near crisp; yet they also quietly brim with new life and with stark distillations of what came before. Setting the forests on fire to clear out the underbrush was once a common practice. Largely shunned by modernizing America as wasting usable natural resources, it has since been re-embraced via the 'controlled burn,' which is aimed at reducing overgrown underbrush as well as providing wider ecological benefits. It is an elemental practice that also highlights human supra-elemental practices.

Aspen and Pine, Greater Jemez Nuclear Ecological Complex

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Text: Rafi Youatt

Photo: Rafi Youatt, 2019



In 2000, a controlled burn near Cerro Grande got out of control near Los Alamos National Laboratories in New Mexico, threatening post-Cold War nuclear research and nuclear material alike, and leaving the lab surrounded by scorched forest landscapes. Most high intensity burn zones leave a one-color monotone of black before the green vegetation starts to regrow; this one is just north of the lab in the Rio Grande National Forest, and unusually burned into a stark two-tone, with both aspen and pine, black and white, and the monstrous among the still living.

Claw Clutching Stones, Greater Jemez Nuclear Ecological Complex

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Text: Rafi Youatt

Photo: Rafi Youatt, 2019



Dozens of environmental laws were waived to build the US-Mexico border wall. Under pressure, migratory holes were inserted into its design to enable the movement of endangered species like the ocelot and jaguarundi whose ranges would be severed. About 438 “cat holes” were planned, although not all were installed nor were they always slated for the right locations. The holes are 8.5×11 inches, purportedly the largest aperture possible that would not permit human passage. In the US, these are the dimensions of a sheet of letter paper. It remains to be seen if the limits of mobility these dimensions impose on human and animal alike meet the limits of an oppositional imagination.

Coahuiltejano-Ocelotexan Region

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Text: Radhika Subramaniam

Photo: Radhika Subramaniam, 2015



Bigbelly

**LET'S MAKE
NYC CLEAN
AND RAT-FREE**

**A LITTLE LITTER CAN LEAD TO
BIG PROBLEMS**

In the summer of 2017, when NYC declared itself a ‘sanctuary city,’ it put \$32 million toward a ‘war on rats.’ “We refuse to accept rats as a normal part of living in New York City,” said the mayor as he announced a plan of environmental attack. Rats were already off the roster of city dwellers that WildlifeNYC listed in its 2016 campaign that embraced other urban creatures such as coyotes, raccoons and deer. But rats are no more intruders in this space than humans are; migrants on the same ships that brought many to these shores, the messy excesses of urban environments provide their ideal harborage. They refuse to accept the sentiment on the side of this Brooklyn garbage can.

Bedford–Stuyvesant Concrete on Mixed Woodland Gentrification Zone

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Text: Radhika Subramaniam

Photo: Radhika Subramaniam, 2018



Take the bee's eye view of this sundrenched hillside, redolent with the scent of herbs and wildflowers. Down below are the twinned Prespa lakes in whose waters Greece, Northern Macedonia and Albania make a tremulous tri-state border. The bee itself hovers on the mountainous line between Greece and Northern Macedonia. The Prespa Agreement, signed the year prior to this image, established the name for Greece's northern neighbor in a bid to definitively disentangle linguistic, cultural, and ethnic Greek and Slavic genealogies. Borderlines repudiate cross-pollination.

Balkanic-Hellenic Unconformity

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Text: Radhika Subramaniam

Photo: Radhika Subramaniam, 2019