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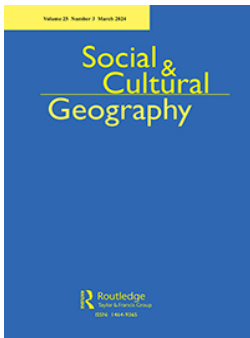
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The art of reimagining borders in Patricia Vázquez Gómez's *BorderXer*

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ABSTRACT

Geopolitical bordering practices affect not only migrants and refugees, but also non-human animals, environments, and Indigenous communities. But metaphorical borders also exist inside and are imposed on everyone. These include emotional, psychic, and cultural borders that limit freedoms. This article examines the potential solidarities for and multi-scalar politics of building an abolitionist praxis rooted in this expansive notion of borders and our collective struggles to cross or abolish them altogether. It examines US-based artist Patricia Vázquez Gómez's art exhibition *BorderXer*, first exhibited in Portland, Oregon, U.S.A. in 2019, to develop a geographical analysis of 'borderXers' (border crossers) that operates at scales from the flesh, to body, to community, to the transnational. The artist uses photographic, installation, textual, and video works to connect audiences' own experiences of borders imposed on their bodies and psyches to the material geographies of the US/México borderlands. These borders limit both freedom of movement and freedom to be in relation and community with others. These works unsettle dominant and dominating notions of borders and reveal possibilities for the remaking of exclusionary border relationalities. I argue that the aesthetics of the exhibition develop an abolitionist perspective on borders that exceeds the artist's explicit calls for 'open borders'.

El arte de re-imaginar las fronteras en *BorderXer* de Patricia Vázquez Gómez

RESUMEN

Las prácticas fronterizas geopolíticas afectan no sólo a los migrantes y refugiados, sino también a los animales, al medio ambiente y a las comunidades indígenas. Pero las fronteras metafóricas también existen en el interior y se imponen a todos. Estas incluyen fronteras emocionales, psíquicas y culturales que limitan las libertades. Este artículo examina las solidaridades potenciales y las políticas multiescalar para construir una praxis abolicionista arraigada en esta noción expansiva de fronteras y nuestras luchas colectivas para cruzarlas o abolirlas por completo. Examina la exposición de arte

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BorderXer de la artista estadounidense Patricia Vázquez Gómez, expuesta por primera vez en Portland, Oregón, EE. UU., en 2019, para desarrollar un análisis geográfico de los “borderXers” (cruza-fronteras) que operan a escalas que van desde la carne y cuerpo, la comunidad, y hasta lo transnacional. La artista utiliza material fotográfico, instalación, texto y de video para conectar las propias experiencias del público sobre las fronteras impuestas en sus cuerpos y psiques con las geografías materiales de las zonas fronterizas entre Estados Unidos y México. Estas fronteras limitan tanto la libertad de movimiento como la libertad de estar en relación y comunidad con los demás. Estas obras perturban las nociones de dominio de fronteras y revelan posibilidades para rehacer las relacionalidades fronterizas excluyentes. Sostengo que la estética de la exposición desarrolla una perspectiva abolicionista sobre las fronteras que excede los llamados explícitos del artista a “fronteras abiertas”.

L’art de la réimagination des frontières dans *BorderXer* de Patricia Vázquez Gómez’s

RÉSUMÉ

Les pratiques defrontières géopolitiques n’ont pas seulement des répercussions pour les migrants et les réfugiés, mais aussi pour les animaux non humains, les environnements et les communautés indigènes. Cependant, les frontières métaphoriques existent aussi à l’intérieur et s’imposent à tous. Cela inclut les limites culturelles, psychiques et émotionnelles qui freinent les libertés. Cet article étudie les solidarités possibles et les politiques multiscales liées à l’établissement d’une praxis abolicionniste ancrée dans cette large notion de frontières, ainsi que nos luttes collectives pour les franchir ou les abolir. Il s’appuie sur l’exposition *BorderXer* de Patricia Vázquez Gómez, artiste qui vit aux États-Unis, qui a pris place en 2019 à Portland, en Oregon pour développer une analyse géographique des « borderXers » (les passeurs de frontières) qui fonctionne sur différentes échelles, de la chair, au corps, à la communauté, jusqu’au transnational. Patricia Vázquez Gómez se sert de créations vidéographiques, textuelles, photographiques et de mise en scène pour établir une connexion entre les expériences personnelles du public face aux frontières imposées à leurs corps et leurs psychiques avec la géographie matérielle de la frontière entre les États-Unis et le Mexique. Ces limites s’imposent sur la liberté du mouvement ainsi que sur la capacité de pouvoir être en rapport et en communauté avec les autres. Ces œuvres dérangent les notions dominantes et dominatrices de frontières et révèlent des possibilités de refabriquer les relations d’exclusion frontalières. Je soutiens que l’esthétique de l’exposition présente une perspective abolicionniste des frontières qui va plus loin que les demandes explicites de l’artiste pour « l’ouverture des frontières ».

Introduction

In Fall 2019, artist, professor, and curator Patricia Vázquez Gómez (<https://patriciavazquez.art/>) produced a mixed media art show, *BorderXer*, at the Portland Community College

Cascade Paragon Gallery in Portland, Oregon, U.S.A. It was reshowed in 2022 in the Anita Building in Astoria, Oregon, U.S.A. The exhibition greets guests with textual prompts that serve as signposts throughout the exhibition like 'We are all borderXers/We need to cross borders to survive/We need to cross borders to thrive', to invite them to interrogate the myriad manifestations of borders that circumscribe freedom, the political acts of crossing those borders, and the material and metaphorical relationalities shaped by those borders. In another part of the show, an *altar* honours human and non-human borderXers ('border crossers'). Curated video installations show queer and gender variant artists coping with and healing from borders they have confronted or crossed. The artist's own video installation showcases the beauty and liveliness of the borderland environments. A poster and notebook document the Tohono O'odham's territory and struggles against US/México border regimes. In these and other ways, the exhibition offers an educative theorization of migrant and refugee, queer and trans*, non-human, environmental, and Indigenous borderXers and their geographies. As I will argue, each of these categories does more than just elucidate distinct aspects of territorial and metaphorical borders, they articulate the possibilities for solidarities around an expansive notion of border abolition that necessitates the remaking of social relations of dominance in the image of freedom.

In addition to bringing metaphorical borders of all types – political, psychic, emotional, cultural – to bear on audiences, Vázquez Gómez, uses their artwork to make visceral the human and non-human movements across the US/México border. By metaphorical borders, I draw on the artist's words and the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) to reference things like political divides, those tensions and indecisions that circulate in our psyches, coming to terms with fears and doubts, and engaging with cultural difference. These borders operate at multiple scales to limit our freedom to express ourselves, experience sexual and gender liberation, and be in relation and community with one another. The artist explains this is particularly germane for audiences in a place like Oregon as the galleries sit at a great spatial distance from, and for many audience members, remains analytically divorced from the materiality of the geopolitical border (Newman, 2022). This is in line with Louise Amoore's and Alexandra Hall's (2010) rebuttal to 'claims that [border] art's critical potential is related to its proximity (to the border, its visible apparatus, to a site of exclusion at territory's edge)', instead, they argue 'that it is precisely the prosaic and comfortable presence of border violences in our daily lives that must be arrested in their smooth running sequences' (p. 314). The emplaced and displaced sites of bordering that operate on the human migrants, non-humans, and queer subjects of the artist's works, as well as on audiences, produces borders at scales from the transnational to the body. Bringing these sites and scales into conversation highlights the expansive power of borders to dominate people's lives. More importantly, it emphasizes the need to develop multi-scalar resistance to the exclusionary border relationalities that circumscribe freedom.

Vázquez Gómez spotlights the metaphorical borders audiences intimately yet unevenly encounter to both establish affective connections to migrants and others caught in exclusionary border relationalities, and to cause audiences to dwell on the politics of their own relationships to borders. Exclusionary border relationalities refer to the partitions, limits, and forms of confinement – physical, political, economic, psychic, and social – produced both at and beyond the geopolitical border in ways that sustain racial capitalism, settler colonialism, ecological exploitation,

transantagonism,¹ heteropatriarchy, and imperialism. These depend on mechanisms such as policing, surveillance, deterrence, and detention to produce racialized, classed, sexualized, and gendered regimes of belonging, exclusion, citizenship, criminality, and premature death. As elaborated below, I read the 'X' in *BorderXer* as an emphasis on 'crossing' as a queer and trans* process of negating these legal and social exclusionary norms, and as an abolitionist practice of becoming. In addition to the human aspects of exclusion, I also make specific reference to non-human animals and the desert landscape as at once lively and simultaneously caught in deadly relationalities of borders.

While unable to view *BorderXer* in person, I use photographs of the exhibition taken by the artist alongside videos that were on display within the show – all of which were privately shared with me by the artist – to analyse the exhibition using close visual reading methods. I combine this with print and radio reportage on the exhibition, as well as personal communications with the artist to develop a geographic analysis of the show's impact. I ask how bringing migrants' stories and memorialization to bear on space of the US-based gallery, alongside representations of other material and metaphorical border crossings, exceed the possibilities for charting linear migrant narratives. How does relating the spatial metaphor of border crossing to the physical geographies of the US/México borderlands create opportunities for considering a notion of 'border abolition' that goes beyond the artist's calls for 'open borders?' How might we understand trans* and queer notions of borderXers for their potential to open a dialogue about expansive notions and geographies of border trans(*)gressions and making a world not dependent on exclusionary border relationalities?

I argue that *BorderXer* works against exclusionary border relationalities to imagine a world in which existing border logics become unthinkable. The artist combines a range of artistic mediums to showcase material and metaphorical borders operating at different sites and scales. They call on audiences to envision their own relationships to borders – as borderXers themselves – to open space for dialogue about the unnaturalness of borders and the need to reassess their social functions. The show juxtaposes different notions of borderXers to produce new visions for solidarity that require thinking expansively about the roles of borders in structuring the world. It queers audiences' understandings of the hegemonic subject of 'illegal immigrants' who cross borders. It instead offers borderXers as those who defy the legal and social confines of citizenship, gender, species, and being. Through *BorderXer*, Vázquez Gómez articulates the need for audiences to confront and undo human, non-human, and environmental border relations that constrain freedom for all.

The exhibition questions audiences' positionalities as potential borderXers with provocations printed on banners and the doors, 'What borders do you still have to cross?' and 'What would it take for you to cross them?' By leaving these as open invitations, the artist encourages audience members to join them in the project of confronting their own sense of being onto the concept of borders – queer and trans* subjectivities, place-based crossings, fears, and personal challenges. In publicity materials for the show, Vázquez Gómez explains:

Every time you step into forbidden territory you cross a border. Every time you challenge oppression you cross a border. Every time you defy an inhumane law you cross a border. In

a system that threatens to take away our individual and collective lives and spirits, becoming a borderXer is not only necessary, but inescapable. (Portland Community College, n.d.)

The exhibition is didactic, with a prescription to meditate on both the self and other borderXers in hopes of dislocating and denaturalizing borders and what it means to move across or beyond them. It encourages guests to reorient their understandings of border crossers around the multiply articulated possibilities for freedom, while also calling, in a repeated series of posters plastered across a gallery wall, for a world with 'open borders for all'.

I argue that even though the artist explicitly calls for open borders in their work, the underlying aesthetic throughout the exhibition gestures beyond an open borders framework. Rather, it opens an aesthetic space for audiences to think in terms of an abolitionist framework, or movement towards the negation and undoing of exclusionary border logics by building up new social and power relations rooted in freedom. 'Open borders' demand the elimination of barriers, the end of border policing and surveillance, and the freedom to move across borders without the notion of 'illegality' (Sager, 2020). Yet, these arguments are often couched in neoliberal capitalist logics of free trade and a defence of citizenship and the nation-state (Bauder, 2014; Gill, 2020). By contrast, and in a similar vein to border abolition, Harald Bauder (2014) argues that movements for 'no borders' view the elimination of formal citizenship, territoriality, and statehood as preconditions for the elimination of migrant exclusions and, as Natasha King (2016) adds, the making of freedom and autonomy of migration. It is both epistemologically and pragmatically distinct from open borders, particularly in its focus on current migrant-led struggles against what Harsha Walia (2013) calls 'border imperialism' and its fundamental opposition to state sovereignty (see Heller et al., 2019).

Border abolition draws parallels to the no borders framework. What makes it unique is its demand to undo the exclusionary and disciplinary relationalities of borders while simultaneously reconstituting and building up a broad spectrum of new social and geographical relationalities that render borders 'obsolete' (see Davis, 2011). On the one hand, border abolition questions the ability of states to work against themselves in the long term. But on the other, it also looks for opportunities to instrumentalize the state to work against the exclusionary *relations* of borders in the short term by enacting concrete policies that undo harm without reinforcing systems of bordering (see Gill, 2020). This is to accumulate abolitionist changes that do not reinforce the existing structures of dominance that borders enshrine. Border abolition is a negation of the negation – those deadly forces of borders – which unfolds in how we individually and collectively work to reimagine and remake the relationalities of borders. This necessarily operates from the intimate to the global, from the body to the transnational (see Mountz & Hyndman, 2006). Abolitionist praxis means enacting social relations premised around freedom of movement, self-determination, ecological thrivance, anti-capitalist modes of production, community, and queer and trans* futurities. As Jenna M. Loyd (2019) suggests, building on the contemporary prison abolition movement, an abolitionist approach also rejects the use of racist criminalization and detention policies to punish those who migrate. They state, 'Abolition within this context means creating the conditions for self-determined lives in the course of dismantling the binaristic valuation and devaluation of human life through categories of guilt and innocence, freedom and unfreedom. It means that no one is

disposable' (p. 104). The works portray a vision of something beyond the open borders framework by signalling a reorientation of our relationships to ourselves and to other borderXers. They critique expansive notions of borders that call on us to not just reimagine geopolitical borders but all the social relations that normalize exclusionary logics and practices.

The *BorderXer* exhibition is a timely intervention into conflicts over the construction of walls and other infrastructure along the US/México border pursued throughout the Trump presidency. Yet it also speaks to the much longer *durée* of border militarization and the myriad uses of borders and border practices (Van Houtum et al., 2005) to secure social relations and meaning beyond territoriality or the US/México border. Vázquez Gómez explains that they began developing the concept and pieces for the show around 2014. The show reflects their long-term involvement in immigrant rights movements and coming to terms with aspects of their own queerness (Altruda, 2022). The show is rooted in decades of hegemonic discourses around anti-immigrant nationalistic xenophobia and 'illegal immigrants', national security, 'immigration reform', and the construction of border fortifications. But it also operates through the difficult-to-remake relations of social, cultural, and psychic borders reproduced through daily practices and spatial processes (see Van Houtum et al., 2005).

Border art

The artist's perspective on borders draws on others who have opened space for thinking across borders through art and theory. They emphasize that they are 'not the first one who's thought of this, of course', and that they have been influenced by the performance artist Guillermo Gómez Peña and the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa, Ocean Vuong, Homi K. Bhabha, and Zapatista thinking (P. Vázquez Gómez, personal communication, 2023). While unpacking the influences of each of these thinkers lies beyond the scope of this project, it's worth noting that with artists such as Gómez Peña and the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo, there is a rich tradition of border art within which Vázquez Gómez's work is situated that focuses on Chicana/o movements, metaphorical borders and Borderlands, gender and sexuality, and visual and performance art, among other related themes (Sheren, 2015; Szary, 2012).

The show is grounded in the broader milieu of border art, following what Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary (2012) notes as the uptick in such border art (as 'borderscapes') around the US/México border coinciding with first the selective opening of the border with NAFTA, and then its subsequent hardening. Szary points to the ephemeral nature of border art and common themes of suffering bodies and barbed wire, to which Vicki Squire (2014) and Juanita Sundberg (2008) add the discarded belongings of migrants found in the borderlands. Other approaches to thinking through border art, such as that taken by Friederike Landau-Donnelly (2022), consider the performance art politics of dislocating and '(dis)assembling' borders as a way of de-normalizing (and pointing to the dissolution of) existing border regimes and their memorialization. Vázquez Gómez draws on these themes, especially the tensions between the hardening/loosening and dislocation of borders (to Oregon and audience members), as well as the focus on the violence of borders on the flesh and body.

When combined with the theoretical and poetic work of Anzaldúa, the borderlands and border art become sites for developing rich politics around the intersectional and (de) colonized self/consciousness constituted by intersecting forms of difference. Looking to Zapatista thinking is also particularly instructive because of its focus on non-hierarchical structures, Indigenous autonomous politics, decoloniality, radical feminist, and anti-capitalist positions that work to enact what audiences might read as an abolitionist praxis. In particular, the focus on autonomous territory over state-sovereign notions of territoriality (Reyes & Kaufman, 2011) eschews the relationalities that necessitate exclusionary border regimes. At the same time, it's important to recognize Vázquez Gómez's call in to audiences to recognize themselves as borderXers – and the liberatory potential therein – risks smoothing over the differences in positionality, scale, and power that can manifest as people cross borders. For example, this can manifest, as Nancy A. Naples (2010) explains, in moving from positions of 'resistance' to new positions as 'oppressors'. It therefore becomes necessary to engage in the challenging work of abolishing those structures such as racial capitalism, xenophobic and nationalist notions of exclusionary citizenship, and heteropatriarchy that give rise to and reproduce deadly border relationalities.

Situating borderXers

The X in *BorderXer* is most apparently a reference to 'crossing' like in street signs (P. Vázquez Gómez, personal communication, 2023). However, one might also read it as a disruption of the linearity of dominant and dominating notions of migrant border crossings. It can be located within the Chicanx/Latinx/trans* subject who refuses the borders of gender binaries by refusing the gendered a/o suffixes and easy pron(o)unciation. The 'X' also extends beyond both the borderlands and trans* subject to describe the openness to interpretation of who or what might become borderXers, the unnameable and unknowable, perhaps even fugitive subject who evades 'capture'. This approach to border art, particularly the ways in which Vázquez Gómez meditates on non-human, Indigenous, queer, and trans* positionalities, extends Gloria Anzaldúa's notions of borders. It fits within what T. Jackie Cuevas (2018) theorizes as a 'post-borderlandia' critique 'where gender variance pushes beyond the known frames of meaning and reformulates the potentialities of/for Chicanx . . . In a post-borderlandia frame of mind, we keep open to the radical potentiality of queerness, of gender, of Chicanidades' (pp. 13–14). The artist's borderland theorization looks beyond the fixedness of gender and sexual binaries, or an anthropocentric here-or-there-ness of border crossings, to imagine, as the artist's textual prompts call for, a 'seamless' world '*sin fronteras*', without exclusionary border relationalities. A world necessarily queer and trans*, where dialectical relationships between 'here' and 'there', between 'man' and 'woman' cease to be meaningful in favour of, as Marquis Bey (2022) describes of (Black) transness, 'a *movement* away from an imposed starting point to an undisclosed (non)destination . . . this emblemizes abolitionist gender radicality' (p. 44, emphasis original). By calling in to different borderXers by way of the 'X', Vázquez Gómez signals that crossing borders is an act of refusing exclusionary border logics, a queer and trans* abolitionist praxis of becoming, which points to the need for thinking beyond existing regimes of gender, sexuality, identity, citizenship, and territoriality.

The show encourages audience members to dwell in their own individual borders, as an 'Invitation to think about border crossing as an essential act' (Newman, 2022) for all people. Vázquez Gómez asks audience members to consider their individual subjectivities and bodies, to participate in the project of a radically open 'X', and to interrogate the different forms of borders they have and potentially will cross throughout their lives. These could be borders between places, class borders, borders around gender and sexuality, or borders that prevent one from loving and being true to oneself. In addition to referencing non-human animals, migrants, and refugees, the artist's description of the show reads 'BorderXers are those who thrive over tyrannic gender rules. BorderXers are those who love despite heteronormative prescriptions . . . BorderXers are those choosing life over death. BorderXer is any body who has refused to be subdued, reduced, broken, or fragmented'. By making apparent the struggles we all face in confronting borders, the exhibition hints at the question of what it would take for us to come to terms with our own borders, both material and metaphorically etched in our minds and bodies. Moreover, it compels us to imagine a world where we begin the arduous work of breaking down those borders starting with us and our communities.

Some of Vázquez Gómez's works are quite direct in their portrayals of migrant struggles as borderXers. Two works viscerally remind viewers of the state-sanctioned racial violence inflicted by the border/lands. Scattered throughout the exhibition hall are photographs of and actual physical belongings lost or left behind in the Sonoran Desert by migrants. The artist collected these belongings during their artist residency in, and trips through the borderlands. The belongings serve as ambiguous symbols of the indeterminacy of life, death, or incapacitation of migrants passing through the desert, a meditation on the trouble and uncertainty of border crossings. An 'X' that disrupts, and brings with it an unknowability, both of successful crossings and those who might have been lost to the desert (see Sundberg, 2008). Meanwhile, hanging from the ceiling are rosters under the headings 'prevention through deterrence' and 'the desert should not be/is a death sentence', documenting coroner records of 3,000 names (where available), locations, and cause of death of migrants' whose remains were discovered in Pima County, Arizona. These rosters memorialize the life sacrificed to border crossings, both named and unnameable – the 'X' that marks the places of lives ended prematurely – and signify the struggle of crossing through the borderland desert that awaits migrants after the initial border transgression.

Interspersed among these pieces are other works that take on much more complicated, nuanced, and metaphorical meanings that refuse to dwell on the violence of the geopolitical border. They instead open an aesthetic space for reimagining what a border is, the givenness and fixity of borders, and the geographical and personal stakes of crossing borders. Textual prompts, poetry, an *altar* installation piece, and video installations point to the exclusionary logics of borders. They also allude to the richness of the borderlands and the personal growth and healing that come from crossing through them. The artist explains that these borders 'prevent us from expanding our consciousness, our ability to be in relationships with others, to be generous, to be in solidarity, to be healthy. And that has an impact on the communities, societies and geographies we live in' (Vázquez Gómez, 2019). On the one hand, the artist explains how borders divide and tear apart people and places. On the other hand, they convey a sense of what it means to have a world without borders, where people *are* generous, *are* in solidarity, *are* healthy, and *are* in nurturing relationships with one another and the world around them.

Geographical metaphors of BorderXers

Vázquez Gómez's *BorderXer* offers a multi-scalar, multi-species, and en fleshed geography of borders and borderXers. For instance, the non-human animals and environments depicted throughout the exhibition articulate a distinct set of geographical and ecosystemic relationships disrupted by the border. This produces scales, spaces, and environments that push back against the nation-state's territorial bordering practices. The artist paints a picture of different geographical configurations of borders, anchored in but not exclusive to the spatial relationships bound up within the US/México borderlands. They articulate the multiplicity of ways in which borders are constituted and reproduced through practices of territoriality on the one hand, and imagined, believed, and reproduced on the other (Sager, 2020; Van Houtum et al., 2005).

Queer and gendered borders represented in the curated constellation of video installations and textual passages intersect with geopolitical borders in ways that shift the social meanings, bodily stakes, and psychological self-discovery that come through crossings. These diverge from the linear and often heteronormative immigrant narrative of transit, resettlement, assimilation, and success (or alternately, detention and deportation). Rather, they employ spatially grounded metaphors to carve out space for being and becoming free, whether in one's own body, within different communities, or in fugitive and fleeting places. This coming to terms with and understanding the structures of borders makes visible the imperative to challenge and deconstruct borders and find alternative ways to support, be in community, sanction, sustain, and heal what Anzaldúa (1987) theorizes as '*una herida abierta* [an open wound]' (p. 3) of borders. The artist reproduces this sentiment in gold lettering on the gallery floor that reads, 'a border is an open wound'. The gold honours both Anzaldúa and the borderXers caught in that wound. These en fleshed wounds translate and rescale the political stakes of territoriality to the intimate sites of the body in ways that expand our understandings of where and how geopolitical power is reproduced (see Massaro & Williams, 2013; Mountz & Hyndman, 2006).

The curated videos demonstrate artists processing their different forms of crossing or confronting borders through the geographies of their own bodies. The filmmakers use their flesh as sites of trauma, healing, and conveying the need to negate the violence of borders through abolitionist praxis. In the first video, *Heridas Abiertas (A Gloria)* by queer Latinx artist Emilio Rojas (2016), the artist is seen having an 'open wound' sketch of the US/México border tattooed without ink along their spine. There is a voiceover of questions typical of those asked by US Customs and Border Protection during entry to the US, followed by the same line quoted above from Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The tattoo inscribes the trauma of border crossing across the artist's body as a response to the disciplining of the border. But the tattoo will eventually scar and fade into their skin, only to be reopened during subsequent performances of the piece. This signals the reopening of wounds through intentional and agential acts of artistic recovery. In another video, *Cain* by cuir transnational artist Daniel Coka (2019), the artist stares into the camera, sitting silently while having intersecting lines in the shape of a cross stitched along their unblemished forehead. They appear to be sacrificing while simultaneously 'healing' their own flesh, creating a sutured border that closes the wounds of past traumas experienced during forced sexual 'conversion' therapy. Both artists locate borders on

their own flesh, within themselves, confronting their own crossings and experiences with violence as ways of moving forward, carving out freedom through confrontations with borders. If the body is that which borders discipline, then the flesh is the space through which the artists reclaim their bodies. These material and metaphorical borders beg the question of why society requires them and to what ends they function. What would it take for people and places to remain whole?

A third video, *to be home* by two spirit Purepécha artist fabian romero (2014), contains the text and voiceover of a poem written by the artist, with shots of them standing in profile wearing a backpack, ready to move. Projected video of someone walking through a cityscape plays in the background. The poem narrativizes the author's looking and longing for a sense of home 'here' in themselves, in their own body, by loving themselves against dis-placing forces of migration, loss, burial, movement, leaving, lack of acceptance, assimilation, capitalism. The video closes with a bust shot of the artist, taking a deep breath, finding home in a place of their own, in those who love them, here. The poem seamlessly weaves through different scales, different geographies, different social and material forces that make it a difficult yet powerful experience to find oneself and be comfortable in one's own body. It speaks to both the struggles the artist faces in creating a place where they belong, and the need for community to locate oneself against the anti-relational forces of borders. As a curated whole, these videos grapple with locating freedom in a world where forced and traumatic border crossings make it difficult to make place, find freedom, and arrive home. But they ultimately show one place to begin – the only place where we can always begin – is in our own bodies and communities. To borrow from Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017), this is making 'abolition geography – how and to what end people make freedom provisionally, imperatively, as they imagine *home* against the disintegrating grind of partition and repartition through which racial capitalism perpetuates the means of its own valorization' (p. 238, emphasis original).

Material geographies of BorderXers

Katherine McKittrick (2006), explains that conjunctions between material and metaphorical worlds perhaps create openings 'for envisioning an interpretive alterable world, rather than a transparent and knowable world' (p. xiii). Vázquez Gómez insists on bringing the materiality of the borderlands directly to audience members in an intimate relation to other human migrants and non-human beings. This is especially apparent in the belongings left and lost in the Sonoran Desert, the rosters of remains, and their own video installation featuring text of migrants recounting their journeys through the borderland desert. 'The objects' the artist reminds us in an interview with Kyle Cohlmiá, 'are important as a trace, as a reminder, as a material connection to the issues I am addressing in *BorderXer*' (Vázquez Gómez, 2019). These belongings, including USB flash drives containing photographs of children, along with clothing, food cans, and other essential items, connect the intimate lives of migrant borderXers to audience members who see their own selves reflected in the items left behind. As Sundberg (2008) explains, these types of found materials produce emotional and affective connections between the viewer and the migrant that 'often inspire individuals to learn more about US immigration policies, which have created the circumstances forcing border crossers to walk through the desert. This in turn may compel US citizens to take responsibility for transforming immigration

policies' (p. 883). The belongings dwell in the sorrow and loss of both personal mementos and potentially, life. But they also remind audiences of the humanity of migrants.

On the other hand, in their post-humanist analysis of discarded migrant belongings, Squire (2014) critiques the potential for such art to fall into the trap of 'naïve humanism' that fails to critically interrogate renderings of 'the human' and 'risk[s] reproducing the logic of dehumanisation that they attempt to overturn' (p. 17). Yet, I argue that in juxtaposing discarded belongings alongside other works throughout the exhibition that emphasize the overdetermined nature of borderXers, Vázquez Gómez takes diverse 'material discursive "cuts" [that] enact people, places and things in multiple ways without necessarily assuming the supremacy and/or powerlessness of people' (Squire, 2014, p. 17). In this way, the exhibition, continuing from Squire, 'forces consideration of the significance of the desert environment and discarded migrant belongings in relation to processes of de- and re-humanisation that cannot derive from any pure or pre-existing conception of "the human"' (p. 18).

The geopolitical border serves as a touchstone for understanding the relationalities posed by borders and borderXers, providing a source of inspiration for new solidarities, transformations, and self-discovery. It offers a material backdrop against which to imagine a different kind of border politics – and therefore a spatial politics – in which movement and flows are not only those of capital, of those with privilege, or of those fleeing racial capital's machinations. It is a border politics grounded in the dialectical tension between 'transcendent closure and immanent openness' in which 'we may assert that bordered spatialities are inherently partial, selective, and opportunistic, both in their representation as in the interests that they serve' (Van Houtum et al., 2005, p. 3). The textual promptings throughout the gallery challenging audiences to become borderXers gesture towards the future crossings-yet-to-come. They are a beckoning against the stasis of lost or left behind belongings and rosters of those migrants sacrificed to the desert. This demands alternative geographical relationalities in a vision of freedom that resists the knowability of dominant borderXer narratives. Ones that instead look towards an unknown yet alterable abolitionist horizon in which borders and crossings are no longer necessary or fugitive acts but are natural movements or journeys of self-discovery unfettered by exclusionary border logics and infrastructures.

Vázquez Gómez explains that the work of healing, of building, of movement might take shape in ways such as working with a community-based organization focused on migrant justice, or:

to stay connected and ready to respond when something bad happens ... But we can also start by connecting not only with our immigrant neighbors, but our neighbors in general. In the end is all about the relationships we build. And we can do that any time, in any place, and without the help of any organization. (Vázquez Gómez, 2019)

The artist not only relocates the US/México border for Oregonian audiences but hopes that the show encourages them to act, to begin building community relationships, networks, and support structures, to heal and transform, to decolonize, and to overcome their own borders. This is the work of abolitionist praxis that operates through and across geographical sites and scales. These ways of conceiving of movement, both physical and social, resist the imposition of borders, of limits, of partitions, of confinement, and gesture towards something more.

Crossing indigenous geographies

The artist invites guests to consider the settler colonial structures of borders. In a work featuring an outline of the traditional lands of the Tohono O'odham and their Indian Reservation, along with a notebook covered in the words 'there is no O'odham word for wall', the artist highlights the border that crosses Indigenous lands and impinges on Indigenous communities. The notebook contains media stories of Tohono O'odham border tensions with, and resistance to the nation-state that make visible a rich set of struggles against border fortifications and militarization. By signalling the disruption to existing Tohono O'odham geographies, and resistance to it, Vázquez Gómez further inverts the contradiction of border crossings and their temporalities. The artist shows how the borders that cross Indigenous lands render a bordered present and even further walled future against an existing Indigenous past and present. This reminds audiences of the relative novelty and unnaturalness of the border and how it must constantly reinforce itself against ongoing challenges by Indigenous peoples. In this way, the continued existence of and reference to the Tohono O'odham makes urgent the project of unmaking the settler colonial relations of borders to imagine an abolition rooted in decolonial futures.

The artist's juxtaposition of works featuring migrant and non-human borderXers alongside Tohono O'odham geographies reminds audiences of the messiness of working out the relationalities between different populations implicated in processes of bordering or undoing those borders. That each of the different communities of borderXers have different stakes in the freedom of movement, self-determined sovereignty, radical ecologies, and various forms of freedom means dealing with the often-conflicting interests of borderXers. This calls for developing understandings of the relationships and potential solidarities forged by migrants and refugees crossing settler colonial borders and entering Indigenous lands that are caught in the relations of the nation-state (Byrd, 2011). Coming to terms with this messiness is the constant struggle of an abolitionist praxis rooted in the materiality of border geographies. Taking these conditions seriously requires consideration of the settler colonial nation-state project and the self-determined sovereignty of Indigenous peoples as a dialectical contradiction insufficiently addressed by open borders. Resolving this dialectic requires thinking towards decolonization and abolition to undo the exclusionary and settler colonial border relationalities that circumscribe collective freedoms.

Crossing non-human geographies

One of the first works greeting guests is a print featuring a jaguar overlain with what appear to be topological representations of a river within the US/México borderland (see [Figure 1](#)). Underlining the jaguar is the word 'BORDERxER' stamped in colourful boldface type. The print, reproduced multiple times across a gallery wall, prompts audiences to consider the relationship between hegemonic racialized discourses of 'illegal immigrant' borderXers, the river that creates a geophysical border between the US and México, and the felids and other species whose habitats and traversals of the borderlands transcend socially construed borders. These figurations reorient audiences' assumptions about



Figure 1. *BorderXer* by Patricia Vázquez Gómez. Photo Credit: Patricia Vázquez Gómez.

borders away from anthropocentric ideas of what or who constitutes a border and borderXer towards what borders represent in different contexts and for different entities.

It is in the liveliness of the borderland environments that the border itself is the entity which crosses the established geographies of non-human species and fractures both the environment and the rhythms of life. The geopolitical border, and borders more broadly, are actively produced and reproduced by the state in attempts to contain that which cannot ever be fully contained. The artist's video installation, *BorderXer* (2019), features shots of pigs, a mountain lion, a deer, a bird, snakes, coyotes, a bear, and jaguars, interspersed with resplendent shots of cactus, flowers, shrubs, and the rough terrain, giving life to the desert landscape. The geopolitical US/México border, along with its attendant infrastructure and policing activities, disrupts life in the borderlands. It alters the patterns of movement, nesting, and hunting for fauna, and growth patterns for flora, forcing them to navigate around border infrastructure, clearings, makeshift roads, and human incursions. It transforms habitats and fractures species' connectivity across all levels of the ecosystem. By thinking with the non-human, the artist encourages audiences to take into consideration animal crossings and environmental qualities like erosion and surface water that the border disrupts. The video installation thus has an 'ability to counter-balance fixed aspects of the wall by its fluidity' (Szary, 2012, p. 218).

In gold lettering on the floor of the exhibition hall are snippets of textual prose in gold lettering, bordered along the top with outlines of different nation-state borders such as Mexico's northern and southern borders and the Palestinian borders. One of these contains the prose 'the sea cannot be fenced/el mar does not stop at the borders/the skin of the earth is seamless/'. This reminds audiences that borders are neither natural nor inevitable, and that they divide but fail to contain. It also connects, if perhaps problematically, the scales of the world (earth) to the scale of

the specific geopolitical borders represented, to the scale of the body (skin), flattening the hierarchies between distinct scales and places. Yet, this points to the fluidity of scales at which borders operate in mutually constituting ways and points to the potential for translocal 'countertopographies' of resistance to those militarized borders (Katz, 2001; see also Mountz & Hyndman, 2006). Borders serve as porous challenges that both human migrants and non-human beings cross at great risk, despite the threat of the harsh border/lands themselves or the ever-changing environments and ecosystems produced by border infrastructure and human incursions. Non-human beings and the environment, in other words, are alive and agential in ways that necessitate them to become borderXers of borders that cross and constrain non-human geographies.

Representing and honouring BorderXers

The artist explains that their personal journeys retracing migrant trails through the borderlands shape the contours of the exhibition in ways that recount both the challenges of transiting the harsh Sonoran Desert, as well as the revelatory potential of the experience of pushing oneself to endure border crossings as a 'powerful experience' of self-discovery (Altruda, 2022). The show reflects the journey of the artist in migrating from Ciudad de México to Portland and coming to terms with aspects of their own queerness, and each of the borders they had to cross to arrive there (Vázquez Gómez, 2019). It serves in part as what Anzaldúa (2009) calls *autohistoria* that 'goes beyond the traditional self-portrait or autobiography; in telling the writer/artist's personal story, it also includes the artist's cultural history. The *altars* I make are not just representations of myself; they are representations of Chicana culture' (p. 183). Similarly to Anzaldúa, the artist builds off their own subjectivity and crossings to generalize about different forms of border crossing.

Like Anzaldúa, Vázquez Gómez works in the medium of *altar*. But theirs diverges by not portraying a direct reflection of themselves or the specificities of the sociocultural space within which they are situated, but rather, their and audience members' broader relationships to non-human and spiritual kin. The *altar* installation (see Figure 2) is surrounded by a draped tent, and on the ground directly in front of the opening are the words, overlined by the contours of a border, 'One has to cross many borders, and it takes courage and patience'. At the centre of the *altar* stands a brightly coloured yellow, black, green, and pink *alebrije* crafted by Pedro Elías – a fantastical Mexican, cross-species creature comprised of body components from distinct and recognizable animals. The *alebrije* has the head of a northern jaguar, legs of a jaguar crossed with an iguana, the neck of a rufous hummingbird, wings of a monarch butterfly, torso and tail of an iguana, and tail fin of a humpback whale (P. Vázquez Gómez, personal communication, 2023). Numerous candles and string lights surround the *altar*. In front of the *alebrije* sits a placard containing a Catholic-inspired 'prayer' offered to the 'Sacred guardian, protector of all just and impossible causes', along with pocket-sized prayer cards guests can take with them. There are also instructions for guests to take a hang tag containing the name of a migrant who died crossing the Sonoran Desert on which to document 'your border-crosser intention'. On the ground in front of the *altar* sits a kneeling cushion, inviting audiences to further engage in the practice of honouring borderXers.



Figure 2. *Altar* by Patricia Vázquez Gómez. Photo Credit: Tristan Paigge.

This *altar* signals the possibility of mourning as well as celebrating the life, habitats, and ecosystems in the borderlands, bringing audience members in intimate conversation with other borderXers. The iconography embedded within the *alebrije* evokes the connectedness and interdependencies between humans, non-human species, and the spiritual and terrestrial world. The prayer seems to honour both the animals comprising the *alebrije* and those migrants whom the *alebrije* serves to protect:

You, the greatest warrior, humble servant of nature give us your protection, enlighten us give us courage, serenity, and strength to overcome fear, apathy and doubt to face all injustices, inside and outside and to make the final crossing into power.

The *alebrije* acts as both a spiritual protector for human migrants (Figuroa Serrano & Bernal Valdés, 2021) and a resplendent representation of non-human animals whose geographies are disrupted by border regimes. The *altar* becomes a way for the living – and by extension audience members – to be in an intimate connection with the spiritual and non-human, producing new opportunities for solidarities across life, death, and species. In the artist's words, it is 'an invitation to find and ask for courage to cross whatever borders participants haven't crossed yet, therefore, an invitation to embrace borderXing' (P. Vázquez Gómez, personal communication, 2023).

If the border produces a sacrificial borderland geography, then the *altar* honours and memorializes this sacrifice through the imperative to negate exclusionary border relationalities. It prompts imaginings of how everything symbolized in the *alebrije* would develop and synthesize new geographical relationships to borderland environments without the border. For non-human beings and the environment, dismantling border infrastructure would bring a resurgence of species, habitats, and rhythms of life. Likewise

for humans, this is more than just removing border infrastructure, because crossing the border is more than just moving through space. Abolition demands the remaking of border relationalities altogether in ways that deconstruct the logics of policing at and beyond the border (Loyd, 2019). It means making worlds hospitable on both sides of borders without threat of capitalist exploitation. It means abolishing and decolonizing the settler colonial relations that cross and contain Indigenous communities and lands. It means healing the land. It means restoring all the connections and interdependencies bound up within the *alebrije* and other works in the *BorderXer* exhibition. Stretched to the limits of its representation, the exhibition provokes audiences to imagine a different world altogether. One not just without borders, but without the structures and relationships that sustain exclusionary border logics – the domination of nature, imperialism, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism that make borders necessary in the first place.

The visceral representations of migrant death and abandonment have the potential to dwell on racial and ecological violence and affirm for audiences their expectations of the negative space of the border as a site governed by death. But other works convey an alternate set of possibilities. Vázquez Gómez recounts that they weren't 'interested in making "one more documentary" telling a very tragic story', not to 'tell me how much you suffered, but to find a different side' (Altruda, 2022). The rosters hanging in the middle of a gallery room form a sort of hallway, guiding audiences through the space towards the artist's *BorderXer* video installation. The video, referenced above, contains shots of borderland environments and non-human animals overlain with text recounting the observations of four migrant women as they crossed the borderlands during their journeys from México to Portland. The stories convey a sense of the extreme struggles the migrants experienced during their transit, facing starvation, dehydration, fatigue, and loss. Yet they also point to their hope and wonderment experiencing the borderland environments for the first time. The rosters and stories leading into the video's verdant representations of the borderlands and non-human borderXers bring audience members along the journey from viewing the borderlands as a site marked by death to one of life and possibility. The exhibition asks audiences to reimagine the borderlands and border crossings as a positive space of alternate futures. One where the borderlands are a space of life and queer and Indigenous futurity. Even the left behind belongings and stories of migrants might be read not only in terms of loss, but also freedom – many of the materials left behind and the stories recounted in the video are evidence of successful border crossings, of survival sustained by the empty food cans and the shedding of no longer needed items. The indeterminacy of the origins and stories of the belongings obscures the knowability of migrant borderXers, a reminder of the fugitivity demanded of such crossings.

This ambiguity, which blurs the lines between life/death, caught/free, and stasis/becoming also works to challenge the trans* and queer border crossings the artist deals with through the curated videos and textual prompts. Rather than presenting transparent or knowable crossing or celebratory coming out narratives, the artist questions, and therefore challenges the ongoing violence of borders beyond the event of crossing. José Muñoz (1999) offers a caution against taking at face value the type of liberatory (and perhaps liberal) politics offered by Anzaldúa in their theorizations of crossing social, psychic, and queer borders: 'I hesitate to fully embrace Anzaldúa's formulation because I worry that it contains the potential for being too celebratory of queer diversity, and in doing so elides the recalcitrant racisms and phobias that are still present throughout

queer culture' (p. 138). Vázquez Gómez heeds this by suggesting that what faces people once they cross their own borders, metaphorical or otherwise, remains fraught with challenges and visceral threats of state sanctioned and extralegal violence. In an interview, the artist reminds audiences of the political economic, sexual, gendered, and interpersonal violence that compels many migrants to cross the US/México border in the first place (Altruda, 2022). The pressures of transnational globalization, US foreign policy, narco-violence, climate disaster, and 'weak' states make the lives of potential crossers and refugees tenuous. But awaiting them on the other side are labour exploitation, racism, hyper-policing, fear of deportation, heteropatriarchal and transantagonistic violence, institutional and administrative violence, and cultural ostracism. The exhibition prompts audiences to consider that the crossing itself is a challenge perhaps only superseded by the ongoing borders and forms of policing and violence that lie beyond and make the after-crossing a site governed by the fear of violence or further limits on one's freedoms. If crossing borders produces a certain sense of growth and liberation, then it also inaugurates new forms of policing and violence that demand more than open borders can sustain. It requires transforming, through abolitionist praxis, the underlying social and political conditions in ways that make personal growth, coming to terms with oneself, migration, and remaining in place processes not governed by fear but by hope.

Conclusion

Throughout the *BorderXer* exhibition, Vázquez Gómez sits in the dialectical relationships between borders and crossings. Geopolitical borders, as exclusionary and destructive geographical and geophysical formations, are anti-relational forces that tear apart the landscape, divide habitats, separate families and communities, and seek to prevent the processes of human and non-human movement. Social and self-imposed borders make it difficult to find place in oneself or one's communities. Yet Vázquez Gómez resituates the liveliness of the borderlands and borderXers in the relations that potentially re-form despite borders, or perhaps even the new sets of relations that emerge because of borderXings. For instance, aerial video footage documenting the beauty of the borderlands appears to use the same type of drone filming technology used in border surveillance. But the artist repurposes and strategically undermines these uses to illustrate the boundlessness of borderland environments, and perhaps, the possibilities for a landscape unmarred by borders. What they capture is not fugitive border crossers, but an open landscape that refuses the scaring of border infrastructure.

The geographies that Vázquez Gómez articulates produce a sense of possibility for an abolition that makes space for human and non-human movement, boundlessness, and thrivance. This is abolition for being in relation with each other and the environment, for being in community. In the exhibition, this manifests as an explicit call for 'Open borders for all, not just expats and Americans' printed on posters lining a gallery wall. According to the artist, this poster signals the privilege that some people hold, allowing them to freely cross these borders and become part of what the artist terms 'transnational gentrification'. But if 'open borders' leave the possibilities for new racial capitalist and exclusionary relations to emerge in their wake, then what the artist is calling for is indeed something else: the unmaking of exclusionary border relations and the abolitionist imagining

beyond the confines of borders. The artist explains that ‘the idea of freedom for me is very tied to other people’s freedom, or to better say, everybody’s liberation’ (Vázquez Gómez, 2019). This is only sustainable through constant work, resistance, and struggle to enact new modes of production, new geopolitical regimes, decolonial relationalities, and productions of environment that do not allow newly renovated border logics to replace the old. This is the abolitionist work of changing ourselves in and as we change the world (Gilmore, 2017). The exhibition illuminates the creative aspects of abolitionist praxis that allow us to imagine ourselves differently, and to want to build a borderless world for all, not just some.

BorderXer begs the question of what it might mean for society to be liberated of all borders, not just geopolitical ones, but the very social structures that produce dialectical tensions between here and there, between citizen and non-citizen, between man and woman, between human and non-human. Perhaps this gesture towards an abolitionist worldview allows audiences to imagine ways in which relations of bordering reveal themselves as unnatural. Where, as the artist’s textual passage evokes, ‘the skin of the earth is seamless’, and in which the common-sense logic of the need for borders unravels. The metaphor of skin as a geographical representation repeated throughout the exhibition is particularly meaningful because it conveys the flesh not only of the earth but of those who traverse it, whose bodies might be sacrificed to the harsh borderland conditions, or seamless in the abolition of borders. Thinking along the scale of the body draws the connective tissue between the metaphorical borders we and society project onto ourselves, and the daily violences that inscribe geopolitical borders onto the bodies of borderXers caught in the deadly webs of border enforcement. This suggests the geographical project of border abolition can begin from the humble everyday practices of negating and remaking these social relations of borders within us, our communities, and the places we live. As an expansive yet coherent whole, the exhibition works to unsettle borders through solidarities forged across the multiplicity of borderXers. It suggests that human migrations are merely movements from one place to another or through personal growth without regard to the socially constructed geopolitical, social, cultural, and psychic borders. That perhaps crossings gesture towards transcendence of settler colonial border relations that insist on more than ‘open borders’ can offer. It instead demands the abolition of exclusionary border regimes, however messy that process might be in practice. In other words, if racial capitalism, imperialism, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and transantagonism require the inequalities that exclusionary border relations enshrine, then ‘opening’ borders does little to combat the underlying issues forcing people to undertake arduous crossings. What if instead of asking ‘what borders do you still have to cross?’ the question is ‘why do you have to cross borders in the first place?’ Taking this question seriously reveals the possibilities for imagining abolitionist and decolonial futures. Thinking about the conjunctures between borderXers of all sorts, including the self, makes this an imperative for us all to get free.

Note

1. I use the term transantagonism, in the vein of Marquis Bey (2022), to signal more than the fear or hatred of trans* people inherent in transphobia, but rather, the state-sanctioned and extralegal violence inflicted on trans* people within a transphobic society.

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