

Unwalling Citizenship

Fonna Forman

For most of the twentieth century, the border between the United States and Mexico performed like a line in the sand, with obelisks and later low chain-link and corrugated metal fences that demarcated where one country began and the other ended. In many places along its continental trajectory people moved back and forth quite freely. Children hopped across in one direction, and back as easily in the other. Over the last decades, with the upsurge of protectionist politics and anti-immigrant fever in the United States, the border has become increasingly militarized, with concrete pylon walls, ranging from 18 to 27 feet tall, crowned by electrified coils and panoptic night-vision cameras. The border now performs more like a partition than a line, because its goal is less to demarcate than to obstruct the flows and ecologies that have always defined life in this binational territory.¹

But borders are ultimately porous things; they cannot stop environmental, hydrological and viral flows, economic flows, normative and cultural flows, ethical and aspirational flows. These often informal and invisible circulations shape the transgressive, hybrid identities and practices of everyday life in this part of the world.

Racist political narratives in the United States portray our region as a site of criminality, of dangerous undercurrents of drugs and unwanted people who undermine the safety and prosperity of good, hard-working Americans. But in my work, I have been committed to telling very different stories about life in this border region, grounded in the experiences of those who inhabit it.

I am a principal in a research-based civic and architectural practice located at the San Diego–Tijuana border, an unconventional partnership between a political theorist (me) and an architect (Teddy Cruz). We investigate

¹ For further discussion, see Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, “Access All Areas: The Porosity of a Hostile Border,” *Architectural Review*, May 27, 2019, 18–23; Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, “The Wall: The San Diego–Tijuana Border,” *Artforum* 54, no. 10 (2016): 370–75.

informal practices in the city – social, moral, economic, civic and spatial. We focus particularly on the ingenuity and resilience of people who inhabit the periphery in conditions of scarcity: how they assemble housing and infrastructure, markets of exchange, democratic practices and general strategies of collective survival.

By “informal” we mean practices that emerge “extra-officially” from the bottom-up to address the urgent challenges of marginalized and displaced populations, almost always in the absence of formal support, and often subverting or circumventing “formal” power structures and policies. By “formal” we mean the top-down institutions of planning and governance that organize cities and regions from a macro perspective.²

Formal planning arranges space through a deliberate civic armature that is subsequently ‘in-filled’ with private interventions. In the absence of committed public leadership in recent decades, civic agendas in cities across the world have been hijacked by private interests and corporate agendas, shrinking accessible public space, accelerating gentrification, dispossession, dramatically uneven urban growth patterns, and explosive informal development at the periphery. These dynamics have intensified in recent years with the globalization of cities across the planet and rapid urbanization caused by political instability, climate change, food scarcity and the neoliberalization of the global economy. Periurban slums, the underbelly of global economic growth, are growing faster than the urban centers they surround.

While we condemn the economic forces that marginalize people into slums, we are nevertheless inspired continually by the ingenious self-built logics of spatial retrofit and adaptation, the vibrancy of informal market dynamics, and the solidarity of communities confronting scarcity and marginalization. While the informal border neighborhoods where we work are denigrated by formal planners and their corporate developer friends as ugly, criminal, neglected, to be avoided, to be cleared, to be cleaned up, we observe intensely active, creative urban agents who challenge the dominant paradigms of neoliberal growth that exclude them. Their counterhegemonic everyday practices demonstrate other more inclusive and collective ways of inhabiting the city.

In the San Diego–Tijuana border region, much of this informal activity also involves dense networks of cross-border cooperation, productive transgressive flows of people, money and materials that are largely discounted in formal accounts of our divided binational region. From this vantage, the jurisdictional line between the United States and Mexico is less a solid than

² Some have argued that polarizing formal and informal dynamics can undermine progressive consensus-agendas for the city. While we accept their hybridity in practice, we believe the formal–informal binary helps to convey power, disparities and resistance in the neoliberal city. For discussion, see Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, “Changing Practice: Engaging Informal Public Demands,” in *Informal Markets Worlds – Reader: The Architecture of Economic Pressure*, ed. Helge Mooshammer, Peter Mörtenböck, Teddy Cruz, and Fonna Forman (Rotterdam: nai010 Publishers, 2015), 203–23.

a mesh, a sieve of regional ecologies that circulates what walls cannot contain. Citizenship itself, we argue, is a fluid, performative concept. It is not a formal identity corroborated by documents in one's pocket, but a practical experience of belonging that emerges through shared practices of living and surviving together, sometimes actively resisting and countering divisive narratives and practices together, in a disrupted civic space. We seek to inspire more inclusive imaginaries of coexistence and cross-border citizenship in contested territories like ours.³

Blurring the line between research and activism, we have committed to *grounding* our critical claims about borders through horizontal practices of engagement where university researchers and residents of border neighborhoods assemble as partners to share knowledges, learn from each other, and ultimately coproduce new narratives, new strategies, new alliances and new, more equitable projects in the city. These commitments are embodied in an initiative called the UCSD Community Stations, which I will explore in this chapter.

As a political theorist, I think about the ethical and epistemic challenges of doing research in places of marginalization and struggle. I am keenly attuned to dynamics of power when universities arrive in communities, and am critical of both extractive research methods and humanitarian problem-solving missions. In the next section I will explore some of the challenges we have encountered doing political theory in solidarity with border communities, as well as strategies we've devised to mitigate them. I believe these reflections are generalizable and can contribute to broader dialogues on doing more activist political theory. I will then illustrate the kind of solidaristic political theory I do through a set of projects focused on citizenship that we have coproduced at the border with community partners.

POLITICAL THEORIST AS CURATOR

At the workshop gathering of this group in Victoria in March 2019, we discovered a shared commitment to doing political theory that is relevant and topical, that generates better arguments not only for academic audiences but for citizens and policy-makers as well. This entails that the political theorist take a position on conflicts and injustices in the world. But what does it mean for a political theorist to take a position in solidarity with people struggling against injustice? How do we avoid overconfidence in our knowledge or our capacity to say something relevant and faithful to real experiences? In this section I want to reflect on the epistemic challenges of doing political theory in solidarity with people struggling against injustice.

³ These themes are explored in Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, *Unwalling Citizenship: The Political Equator* (London: Verso, forthcoming).

I've always been inspired by Albert Hirschman's work on community-based development in mid-century Latin America. His commitment to traveling, observing and listening as a way of countering centralized World Bank planning practices has oriented the kind of theoretical work that I aspire to do.

In 1954, Hirschman was appointed by the IBRD as an economic advisor to Colombia's National Planning Council.⁴ He was young, and it was his first time working on a team of economic experts designing policy for a country struggling to emerge from poverty. It didn't take long before he became exasperated with grand development planning and its stultifying obsession with probabilities and linear balanced-growth paradigms.

So he quit, and spent the next several years traveling across Colombia as a private consultant, determined to understand how real problems were solved collectively in context by real people. He believed there was no other way to understand but to go and see. By the light of an "empirical lantern,"⁵ as he would later call it, Hirschman set out to observe the diverse, scrappy, incremental, bottom-up reform projects, animated by the sweat, ingenuity and creative collective adaptability of people navigating conditions of scarcity. Hirschman was drawn to the unintended, the spontaneous and the unplanned. He was inspired by unexpected genius and the "interaction effects" that were lost on the mid-century planner and his blueprints for development. Hirschman's subversion of balanced growth – perhaps his greatest heresy ever – was incubated during this period of fieldwork. It was on the ground, talking with real people solving real problems, that he discovered a phenomenon that would situate his work over the next decades: that it is actually tension and disequilibria, and not the pursuit of ends such as growth and happiness, that trigger collective capacities into motion.

Years later, in 1984, Hirschman published *Getting Ahead Collectively: Grassroots Experiences in Latin America*, a slim, richly illustrated essay written in the days immediately following a 14-week immersion in grassroots development projects funded by the Inter-American Foundation across Latin America.⁶ The title, he explained, was a reformulation of Adam Smith's famous line about "bettering our condition," but given a distinctively collectivist bend. He saw the book as a journalistic rather than an academic exercise, but his case studies elucidate themes that had become dominant in his work since his IBRD days in Colombia: inverted sequences, the complex motivations for collective action and the intangible benefits of social cooperation, like a deepened sense of collective capacity and possibility that can remain latent in communities and be reawakened by new tensions.

⁴ The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) is the lending arm of the World Bank Group.

⁵ Albert Hirschman, *Crossing Boundaries: Selected Writings* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 88

⁶ Albert Hirschman, *Getting Ahead Collectively: Grassroots Experiences in Latin America* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1984).

Hirschman spent a good deal of time in *Getting Ahead Collectively* reflecting on “intermediary organizations” who take it upon themselves to do what he called, with some tempered cynicism, “social promotion” among the poor. Social promotion had exploded across the continent in the 1970s and 1980s among young professionals – restless, educated middle-class youth who wanted reform, were increasingly cognizant of human rights, increasingly intolerant of the inequality around them, and yet who resisted pathways conventionally available to them: either dismal professional careers that tended to bolster the status quo, or guerilla fighting. Young lawyers, economists, engineers, sociologists, social workers, architects, agronomists and priests packed their bags and took to the field, eager to steward a more equitable future.

Hirschman observed that grassroots activism tends to accelerate in periods of increasing privatization, filling a vacuum left by the retreat of public investment. In this sense, he believed social promotion could help to temper an era of selfishness and produce more caring social relations. He also saw these organizations as bridges to funding opportunities and to planning agencies for whom these sites and their practices were so often below the radar. Often they also introduced new technical skills and capacities to communities, and information for better local decision-making. But he didn’t like the opportunist language of intermediary or broker or facilitator to describe this activity, and he was critical of the presumptions these organizations often carried with them into the field.

He described social promoters as naïve do-gooders, arriving essentially the same way development economists did: well-intentioned, and with blueprints for improving lives. Like the “visiting economists syndrome” he attributed to World Bank apparatchiks, social promoters would descend with a copy of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* under their arm, ready to “spread literacy” without much regard to the particular people they hoped to save, their local perceptions, priorities and aspirations. Perhaps a desire for education would be a *consequence* of development, Hirschman speculated, rather than the instigator, as conventional development theories would have it. He did not hide his skepticism. His narrative is sprinkled with examples of intermediary organizations that suddenly appear, rarely through participatory processes, and succeed only in mucking things up, the pivot in his stories of development dysfunction: and *then* came the architects and the engineers . . . and *then* came the sociologists and the anthropologists . . .

Long before academics began to worry in large numbers about development imperialism and epistemic justice, Hirschman reported brilliantly from the field that charitable impulses and planning schemes typically misfire when they bypass local knowledges and practices. He was critical of social promotion understood as a one-way, top-down enterprise of experts descending to fill empty vessels, and instead advocated horizontal processes of engagement and reciprocal learning. Through his own work in *Getting Ahead Collectively* and

elsewhere, he demonstrated a way of doing theory that is grounded in the voices and collective practices of grassroots actors themselves.

Political theory can learn a lot from Hirschman's work in mid-century Latin America. If we aspire even implicitly to advance justice, fairness, equity, etc., on behalf of people who are already marginalized, excluded, dispossessed and exploited, we inflict double harm by assuming that our concepts hold meaning for them, that our wishes for them align with their own. Political theorists in general are motivated by real challenges and urgencies in the world. With some obvious exceptions, this is ultimately what distinguishes us from more analytical or historical modes of engaging political ideas. We explore justice, equality, freedom, rights and agency because we believe it matters to real people. Some of us might characterize our work as solidaristic in this sense, but fewer of us include the voices of marginalized and exploited people in our theoretical work, or consider narrative accounts of the injustices they experience. How, then, do we know that our ideas resonate with theirs? Poignant outrage at the state of world affairs can drift unwittingly into advocacy and well-intended claims on behalf of, in defense of, or in solidarity with real people struggling against injustice. But do these claims expose real harms, describe real struggle, or are they well-intended approximations of these things? Does it ultimately even matter if we are writing primarily for academic audiences?

We cannot all be anthropologists or do fieldwork, but a more ethnographic sensibility would help.⁷ Drawing on the research of others is one possibility. But I propose that political theorists interested in doing solidaristic work can also cultivate skills of listening to the experiences of people struggling against justice. I have been inspired by Jim Tully's commitment to "always listening."

My approach begins with listening carefully to those suffering the lived experience of injustices in their own ways of knowing and articulating them. This application of the norm of always listening to the other side helps to free us from our own sedimented descriptions of the real and disclose new possibilities.⁸

Moreover, our ideas as political theorists can *do* more than appear in a book or journal read by a handful of academic colleagues. Too often we write and publish long after a provocation has passed, long after it can be of *use* to anyone. How can political theory be more practical, responsive and projective in its solidarity?⁹ Here I will propose, and later through examples demonstrate,

⁷ Lisa L. Herzog and Bernard Zacka, "Fieldwork in Political Theory: Five Arguments for an Ethnographic Sensibility," *British Journal of Political Science* 49(2) (2019): 763–84.

⁸ James Tully, *On Global Citizenship: James Tully in Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 282.

⁹ A question explored in Brooke Ackerly, Luis Cabrera, Fonna Forman, Genevieve Fuji Johnson, Chris Tenove and Antje Wiener, "Unearthing Grounded Normative Theory: Practices and Commitments of Empirical Research in Political Theory," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2021). See also Michael Goodhart, *Injustice: Political Theory for the Real World* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

a model of “coproduction” that entails *accompanying* struggles against injustice, seeking dialogue with people and groups who are receptive to collaborative thinking, and possibly also collaborative advocacy and intervention.

Reflecting on political theory in this more practical, or activist, solidaristic mode, I borrow a concept from the visual and performing arts, and suggest that political theorists can be “curators.” I will use this concept often in the next section to describe the sort of work I do. My intuition here emerges from a conversation many years ago with Carlos Uribe, a community-based curator and director of the *Museo Casa de Memoria* in Medellín, Colombia. Uribe’s goal is to support collective healing and foster intergenerational civic memory of Medellín’s violent histories of injustice. His methods include visualizing and continually recontextualizing the experiences of real people, refracted through the artistic vision of local cultural producers and the experiences of the communities they work with. He describes his role as a curator as “accompanying the process” of cultural production and public display. For Uribe, the curator is not simply arranging objects on a wall, motivated by sterile aesthetics or conceptual considerations oriented by art history or genre. Instead of seeing curation as a revisionist enterprise, he engages solidaristically in the process of cultural production itself through intimate dialogue with the public artist and the communities the artist engages. Motivated by a commitment to collective memory and healing, Uribe brings his unique skills of spatial organization and public pedagogy into a shared agenda of performance and display. Political theorists, like curators, can “accompany” struggles against injustice. Instead of producing speculative work, like a revisionist object on a wall that is often irrelevant by the time it sees light, political theorists can partner with communities in real-time, weaving diverse skills, knowledges and experiences into a richer account of struggle, and more responsive strategies of resistance, advocacy and intervention. While helping to improve real conditions, coproduction also produces better theory, grounded in real experiences.

Recognizing communities as coproducers of knowledge entails a shift in academic norms. University research culture is filled with assumptions that *we* know more, that *we* are trained, that *we* have languages to communicate complexity and the tools needed to solve the world’s problems (if only *they* would listen to us). Universities tend to think of community-based work in one of two ways: as “applied research” or as provision of “services.” These vertical tropes place the university in an epistemically privileged position, and conceive of communities as a subject of investigation or a passive recipient of benefits without knowledge or agency.

I am not suggesting that universities and other wealthy institutions shouldn’t share their resources, or ever do research *in* communities: they absolutely should! When done ethically, these can be legitimate and important activities. I am also not saying that communities have nothing to learn from academic

researchers. But we need to distinguish vertical modes of engagement from horizontal and collaborative ones, in which university and community both contribute knowledges and resources, and everyone learns and coproduces something that could not have been produced by either partner alone. Coproducing knowledge with communities is not an *applied* activity. We do not figure everything out in our campus labs and then descend to test our solutions in the world.

It is important to emphasize too that coproduction is not about flipping conventional academic presumptions and reproducing verticality with the community on top and the researcher as a passive vessel. I am proposing a horizontal model wherein diverse experiences, knowledges and skills meet. Horizontality is inherently agonistic in this sense, or at least has great potential for agonistic moments. Sometimes even trusting partners find themselves at odds when diverse experiences and knowledges push and pull in different directions. We experience contestation in our work all the time. Learning how to listen and dialogue respectfully during moments of difference and disagreement, how to negotiate compromise, typically has made our partnerships stronger.

There is no formal category for coproduction in the academic merit trinity of “research, teaching and service.” Because community work looks like charity to an uncurious bureaucrat, coproduction is typically relegated to “service” – that zone of activity in the research university reserved for the unproductive and the big-hearted. But coproduction is not charity. Teaching our students the ethics of community engagement, and cultivating skills of dialogue, respectful listening and collaborating, is not “service-learning.” Tipping the model of community–university engagement from a vertical to a horizontal plane is an ethical move, motivated by considerations of epistemic justice and labor equity. Universities must never take for granted the rooted knowledges, resources, social capital and labor that community-based agencies and residents invest when they engage academic researchers, when they divert from the intense demands of everyday life to open their spaces, minds and hearts, and share sometimes agonizing experiences and stories of injustice.

Communities are justifiably skeptical of research universities, who often suddenly appear with requests, plant their flag and then disappear just as abruptly once they extract what they need. University projects come and go with the wind, “one offs” associated with a research project, an academic course, an internship or a grant that ends, leaving communities feeling instrumentalized and abandoned, with diagnoses left unaddressed, challenges left unmet, projects feeling half-done, critical consciousness stirred perhaps but with few outlets for meaningful action. Often times, it doesn’t even dawn on researchers to share their research and publications with their community “subjects.” Moreover, because research universities are big, fragmented institutions, sometimes multiple projects and requests land at once, without coordination or knowledge of each other, creating confusion about what’s what and a sense of overload. Sometimes researchers are reckless with the delicate

social ecologies of community-based work, unaware of alliances, but also rivalries and pecking-orders that often exist among nonprofits operating in conditions of scarcity. Bringing resources and opportunities to a community organization, researchers sometimes unwittingly take sides in local controversies and power dynamics, and stir up trouble.

We designed the UCSD Community Stations as a platform for community–university engagement in the San Diego–Tijuana border region, a model of horizontal partnership, long-term trust, and coproduction. In the next section, I say more about the UCSD Community Stations, how they perform as civic spaces for the exchange of knowledges, and how they orient the kind of solidaristic political theory that I do.

LOCALIZING THE GLOBAL: THE UCSD COMMUNITY STATIONS

San Diego–Tijuana is a zone of conflict and disparity, and presently a lightning rod for American nativism. ICE¹⁰ continues its dehumanizing sweeps, while thousands of Central American migrants escaping violence and poverty wait at the wall for asylum that never comes, reviled by the Mexican public as a nuisance, an “infestation,” a drain on scarce public resources. Or else they sit in US detention centers as tools of deterrence, exposed to a raging pandemic, and, until very recently, separated forcibly from their children. Global injustice is an intensely local experience here. When I founded UCSD’s Center on Global Justice a decade ago, my intention was explicitly to *localize the global*.

Against these local atrocities, border communities and activists on both sides of the wall have devised compelling strategies to defy and circumvent unjust power, transgress boundaries and confront hateful political narratives, often at great personal risk. Some of this contestation is dedicated to sanctuary and protecting people targeted by, or rejected by, the state. Some of it is working through the courts and other institutions of power to advocate for people already ensnared in the net of political violence. Some of it is a more considered exercise of civic freedom, in Tully’s sense, organized around exposing and countering unjust power and devising new strategies, including cultural strategies, for doing that.¹¹ Much of it arises informally through everyday collective practices of adaptation and resilience in conditions of scarcity and danger. Over the years we have accompanied some of these bottom-up emancipatory transgressions, and irruptions of democratic agency, in close partnership with community organizations rooted in the neighborhoods that flank the borderwall.

In the recent period, the borderwall has attracted artists and cultural producers from around the world to engage in acts of performative protest.

¹⁰ ICE is the Immigration and Customs Enforcement wing of US Homeland Security.

¹¹ I will use this concept as James Tully does: to describe practices of dialogue and negotiation around power and contestation that produce solidarities from the bottom-up.

While these gestures by visitors are often creative and provocative, we have been mostly critical of this uptick in ephemeral acts of resistance that dip in and out of the conflict. They tend to be extractive in their processes, and their impacts on public consciousness are as fleeting as the Instagram posts they generate. What happens the day after the happening?

With our partners, we have been advocating for a longer view of resistance and more strategic thinking about cultural, institutional and spatial transformation in the border region. To enable this longer-term work, we developed the UCSD Community Stations, a network of civic spaces in four border neighborhoods, two on each side, where university researchers, community organizations and residents convene to share knowledges and generally “act otherwise” together through research, education and civic programming.¹² Each Community Station is designed, funded, built, programmed and managed collaboratively by the UCSD Center on Global Justice and a deeply rooted community organization. Inspired by the famous Library Parks project of Medellín, Colombia, which we’ve studied and written much about,¹³ we have transformed urban remainders into civic spaces, richly programmed for dialogue, collaborative research, urban pedagogy, participatory design and cultural production. The Community Stations also present a new model of urban codevelopment between public universities and community organizations to fight the creeping gentrification of border neighborhoods. We’ve demonstrated that the university’s economic power, social capital and programmatic capacity can become leverage for communities to build *their own* public spaces, as well as housing and green infrastructure.

The content of civic programming varies from station to station based on the priorities of all involved, but all the stations seek to increase public knowledge; challenge divisive political narratives; devise strategies to counter exploitation, dispossession, deportation and environmental calamity; foster solidarity and collective agency; and imagine possible futures. These agendas often invite agonistic encounters with formal institutions of power that govern the border

¹² “Acting otherwise” is James Tully’s concept. See James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 1, *Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4. For more on the central commitments of the Community Stations see Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, “Critical Proximities at the Border: Redistributing Knowledges Across Walls,” in *Spatial Practices: Modes of Action and Engagement in the City*, ed. Melanie Dodd (London: Routledge, 2020), 189–201.

¹³ For discussion, see Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, “Global Justice at the Municipal Scale: The Case of Medellín, Colombia,” in *Institutional Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Luis Cabrera (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 189–215; and Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, “Latin America and a New Political Leadership: Experimental Acts of Co-Existence,” in *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*, ed. Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson and Dominic Wilsdon (Boston: MIT Press, 2016), 71–90. *The Medellín Diagram* is a visualization project by Teddy Cruz, Fonna Forman, Alejandro Echeverri and Matthias Görlich, commissioned in 2014 by the Medellín Museum of Modern Art for the United Nations World Urban Forum.

zone. Sometimes contestation opens opportunities for mutual recognition and cooperation, and sometimes it does not. For us, the goal is less about resolving conflict than about understanding, recognizing and *civicizing* it. We see democracy in the border zone as a fundamentally agonistic process of exposing the complex histories and mechanisms of injustice that are too often hidden within official accounts of who “we” are. We believe that recuperating this information and generating counternarratives is foundational to the exercise of civic freedom. To accompany this process, an active area of our research (and teaching) is codeveloping civic tools with our partners – diagrams, radical cartographies and story-boards – that visualize conflict and render the complex histories and mechanisms of political power more accessible. We also exhibit these visual tools in cultural institutions, museums and biennials, to increase public knowledge and rouse broader public indignation and solidarity.

There are four UCSD Community Stations in operation: two in southeast San Diego, and two in Tijuana. Here, I will discuss two that participate in solidaristic work on citizenship, which I will explore in the second half of this chapter.

UCSD-CASA

The UCSD-CASA Community Station is located in the border neighborhood of San Ysidro, California, a few blocks from one of the busiest international land crossings on earth. With 100,000 crossings everyday, the neighborhood is under continual surveillance by US Homeland Security, and fragmented by freeway and surveillance infrastructure. San Ysidro is 90 percent Latinx, many of whom are DACA recipients; many are undocumented. There are regular reports of egregious human rights violations in San Ysidro, mass sweeps, entry and seizure without warrant, and the detention of minors in adult facilities. San Ysidro’s proximity to the borderwall means that illicit deportation can take a matter of minutes. Families are terrorized by threats of the proverbial “knock at the door.”

Our Community Station is a partnership with the community-based social service organization Casa Familiar. The Station is located inside a beloved historic church, purchased by the organization many years ago, but left essentially vacant and in a state of disrepair. Together we pursued grants from ArtPlace America and the PARC Foundation to renovate the church into a black box community theater, equipped with sound and recording studios for youth groups. The Station also includes social service pavilions and an open-air classroom for civic and educational programming. The funding we raised to codevelop these cultural and civic spaces became leverage for our partners to qualify for municipal subsidies to build ten units of housing around the Station. In conventional affordable housing projects, developers try to reduce non-revenue-generating collective spaces to the greatest extent possible. Our model was very different: to codevelop robustly programmed collective spaces

first, as foundational to a community-based social housing project at the border; and *then* leverage that funding to facilitate a development package for housing. The project broke ground in December 2018, and was completed in February 2020 when the tenants moved in.

Programming at the UCSD-CASA Community Station focuses on cultural processes that expose injustice and increase capacity for collective political and environmental advocacy. UCSD researchers partner closely with community activists, *promotoras*, residents and youth to document experiences of injustice through dialogue, storytelling, and “transurbance,” nomadic/walking workshops inspired by the Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade collective in Rome. These experiences then become evidentiary material for new cultural strategies to engage hearts and minds, including community theater, music, dance and visual arts. Against the backdrop of political repression, San Ysidro has a young, energetic community of cultural producers and border activists with deep roots on both sides of the border, for whom art and performance are tools for exposing injustice and communicating with wider publics and institutions of power. Much of this youth activity is homegrown at The Front, a gallery and cultural venue Casa Familiar launched more than a decade ago. To illustrate our “cultural process” take, for example, our work on air quality, a major challenge for border neighborhoods such as San Ysidro. Our undergraduate student Annika Ullah, a double-major in biology and visual arts, was invited to visit the backyard of San Ysidro resident Guillermo Cornejo, to see his lemon trees. Every lemon was coated with black silt, produced by tens of thousands of cars idling daily a few blocks away, as they wait for hours to cross the border. The lemons became powerful bottom-up evidence for a documentary film exploring the intersection of border policy, community health, storytelling and activism. *Border Lemons* was a cultural strategy for visualizing power, and for mobilizing community awareness and arts activism around air quality – that high rates of lung disease in San Ysidro are not “the way of the world” but an injustice. The lemons also became a tool for dialogue with agencies that govern air-quality policy and resources in the border region.

UCSD-ALACRÁN

Our two Community Stations in Tijuana are located a mile apart in the Laureles Canyon, an informal settlement of 92,000 people that literally crashes against the border wall in the western periphery of Tijuana. Laureles Canyon lacks water and waste management infrastructure and is highly susceptible to erosion, landslides and dramatic flooding when its channelized sewage canals get clogged with trash.

The UCSD-Alacrán Community Station sits in the most rugged and polluted sub-basin of the Laureles Canyon. It is a partnership with the faith-based organization Embajadores de Jesús, led by activist economist and *pastor*, Gustavo Banda-Aceves, and activist psychologist and *pastora*, Zaida Guillen.

With limited resources, in recent years they built a refugee camp at this site to provide shelter, food and basic services to hundreds of Haitian and Central American refugees navigating unjust asylum processes in the United States and Mexico.

The shelter began in 2016 when Banda-Aceves met a group of Haitian men whose wives and children were granted US asylum, leaving them waiting on the Mexican side of the wall. These men were skilled in construction; together, they built a warehouse structure at the Embajadores site in Alacrán to shelter dozens of tents. As migration accelerated over the next years, with the arrival of thousands of Central American migrants in Tijuana, Embajadores opened its doors, and occupancy began to swell. What began as a single structure evolved incrementally through necessity, ingenuity and self-built logics into a full-on sanctuary neighborhood of informal housing units and public spaces of varying sizes and configurations, threaded into what seems like impossible canyon topography. This was all well underway when we began working together. When we met, Embajadores was receiving no formal institutional support or public subsidy of any kind, but it was rich in social capital. A cohesive core of migrant men and women were already dedicated to the life and future of the sanctuary, and through their sweat equity over time asserted collective ownership of the spaces.

Our work together began with envisioning future scenarios, which focused on increasing housing capacity, but also more fundamentally on how the sanctuary could evolve into a more solidified home. With our partners we reimagined the idea of refugee camps, from charitable holding stations or ephemeral sites of shelter, into spaces of inclusion where staying becomes an option. Hospitality is an essential first gesture when the migrant arrives, when the needs of the body, for food and water, medicine and shelter, are most acute. A humanitarian response to migration at the point of arrival is the mark of an *ethical* society. But as needs become more complex over time, charity is not the appropriate model for building an *inclusive* society. Inclusion demands a transformation of the city and of ourselves, welcoming the migrant and their children into our collective civic identity, ensuring participation in public life, opportunities for education, financial stability, and health and well-being – physical, psychological and spiritual.

Together, we conceived of the UCSD-Alacrán Community Station as an *infrastructure of inclusion* to embed housing units in communal spaces dedicated to holistic well-being, small cooperative businesses, fabrication, a computer lab, a health clinic, an industrial kitchen, a laundry and a nursery – all codesigned and managed by Embajadores, residents and UCSD researchers and students. We also committed to a sustainable sanctuary that includes bio-filtration infrastructure, native planting, water and waste management and zero-net energy, with photovoltaic panels and battery storage.

The project broke ground in March 2020 and, at the time of this writing, the site has been graded and the foundations poured. The participatory process that

got us to this point is a powerful story of cross-sector collaboration. It's a complex story, but as we began to design and assemble resources for the project, we approached one of the NAFTA factories that encircle Tijuana's slums, a Spanish *maquiladora* that produces lightweight metal shelving systems used in warehouses across the world. It was an agonistic impulse: Can we hold these factories accountable to the settlements that provide cheap labor for their global production chains? Can they become partners in social housing? We had worked with Angel de Arriba, CEO of the Mecalux factory, a couple years earlier. As part of a social housing exhibition in 2015 at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin, he partnered with us to adapt Mecalux systems into structural pilot applications, like small bus stops to shelter workers from the hot Baja sun while they wait for maquiladora vans to transport them to their shifts. The HKW project illustrated that institutions of power, public and private, can help to reorient a city's surplus value toward public priorities. Meeting us again, de Arriba remained receptive to what he called our "humanitarian" agenda, quite apart from the "virtue-signaling" that typically motivates corporations to engage in charitable activity. On the spot, he agreed to a materials subsidy for our housing project in Alacrán.

With philanthropic support (a long story which involves the selling of a rare Jean Prouvé armchair at Sotheby's¹⁴) we are now accelerating construction of a 16,000 sq. ft. housing project in Alacrán, anchored in Community Station spaces. We are designing a framework that hybridizes Mecalux frames with concrete post-and-beam frames, typical of local construction practices, and affordable plastic coverings and shadings. We are building the "bones" and "skins" of the buildings, so to speak; the interior systems will be in-filled by the residents who will inhabit them. Incremental building practices are conventional in informal conditions. Most houses evolve this way over years, as needs evolve and resources become available. To expedite this process, we have raised funds for a fabrication lab, with a tool library, a couple of trucks and tractors and a flow of recycled materials. This will enable rapid completion of the Station itself; it will also incubate a construction cooperative ready to take on other building projects across the Laureles Canyon. Owned and managed entirely by the residents, this cooperative will enable flows of income, with a portion dedicated to the longer-term collective needs of the sanctuary.

BUILDING TRUST, MANAGING COMPLEXITY

To conclude this discussion of the UCSD Community Stations, a brief comment on how an initiative so complex, with so many participants and so many moving parts, complicated by a militarized international border, can avoid

¹⁴ Bob Rubin, "A Rare Prouvé Armchair Sold to Benefit Urgent Housing Initiatives in Tijuana," *Sotheby's 20th Century Design*, November 26, 2019, www.sothebys.com/en/articles/a-rare-prouve-armchair-sold-to-benefit-urgent-housing-initiatives-in-tijuana.

placing unreasonable burdens on already-stressed community organizations. We resolved long ago that the university must never become a weight on our community partners.

First and foremost, we don't disappear. Our capital investment in Community Stations infrastructure quite literally cements campus commitment to our community partners, and we have secured programmatic funding that will enable us to carry this work resolutely into the future. Additionally, we designed unconventional staff positions called *Bridge Staff*, who keep one foot on campus, and one foot in the community organizations, beholden to both, managing flows of money, people and materials, and coordinating our collaborative research and programming. Imagine the temperament and skill-set needed to authentically bridge and build trust in such vastly different worlds: knowing how to navigate university bureaucracy while possessing intimacy with the delicate social ecologies of community-based work.

We also recognize that that our community partners invest time, resources, social capital and knowledges when they collaborate with us. As a matter of epistemic justice and labor equity, we are committed to always validating and compensating these contributions. We designed a second unconventional role called Public Scholars: community leaders who codesign the content of our Community Stations programming, become bridges of trust to residents and youth, and coproduce research with us and our students. But we also ensure that they will never be saddled with managing our students in the field. UCSD students participate in Community Stations activities through fully supervised field internship programs, led by seasoned Field Coordinators who have built relationships of trust with our community partners over time, and who understand the complexities of navigating border dynamics accompanied by student teams.

Universities wishing to develop long-term collaborations with communities need to invest in positions like this, which build trust and manage complexity. In our case, enthusiastic support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for these unconventional dimensions of our work made it easier to explain to university bureaucrats why we need salaried staff who spend half their time in community organizations, and why we fund "scholars" who don't have conventional academic credentials.

GLOBALIZING THE LOCAL: PRACTICES OF CIVIC ELASTICITY

We have always resisted the abstraction of global justice theories, as if justice is something that happens "out there" in the world somewhere. Our work engages struggles against injustice in the "here and now" of our border region, where the rubber hits the road, so to speak. Unlike the *critical distance* taken by scientists in their drive for objectivity, we pursue *critical proximity* to accompany the process of struggle.

Our work *localizes the global*. But we also recognize that “the local” can quickly devolve into myopia and protectionism. As part of our local activism with our Community Stations partners, we experiment with more expansive civic imaginaries that situate border neighborhoods within broader spheres of circulation, interaction and solidarity. To *globalize the local* in this sense, we create cartographical experiments that “nest” border neighborhoods within incrementally expanding spatial scales – from the greater San Diego–Tijuana border region, to the continental border that divides the United States and Mexico, to border zones across the world. Through this nesting strategy we seek to provoke more elastic civic thinking, through which local communities can visualize and situate themselves within broader ecologies – regional, continental and, ultimately, global. Nesting has both particularizing and universalizing effects: it reaffirms local uniqueness, that we experience and counter injustice in our own particular ways; but it can also provoke resonances and more expansive feelings of solidarity with others and possibilities for coalition-building.

Recognizing spatial alignment on a map is much easier than recognizing solidaristic affinities with people inhabiting these broader ecologies, which is necessarily a more speculative and provisional activity. Unlike a comparative approach, where one reflects conceptually on similarities and differences, a nested approach enables a person to understand herself incrementally as part of larger spatial systems that contain the challenges she faces. Her civic affiliations and identities can become more elastic in this sense. By elasticity we mean the ability to stretch and return: the ability to move between local and more expansive ways of thinking and connecting, to expand and contract, over and again. Elasticity is a civic skill. With our community partners we curate convenings and workshops, using visual tools to nurture more elastic civic thinking. A rubber-band that is rigid can snap if stretched too far, too fast. In this sense we see our cross-border civic dialogues in the Community Stations as stretching exercises, so to speak.

Some years ago I wrote a book called *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy* that explored Smith’s localist moral psychology in similar terms.¹⁵ Smith believed cosmopolitan philosophy was anthropologically flawed since human behavior tends to bias spatially, affectively and culturally toward local places and people. He was not terribly troubled by this, since he believed humans produce better ends with better knowledge, access and motivation, which local proximities tended to provide. But he also suggested that our affinities and perspectives can grow, can be stretched to use the current metaphor of elasticity, to include broader spheres as we come to understand our interdependencies and shared interests with others.

¹⁵ Fonna Forman, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

In what follows, I will illustrate the kind of solidaristic political theory I do through this nested scaffold which expands incrementally across interdependent scales – from border neighborhoods, to the border region, to the continental border, and ultimately to a speculative global border we call *The Political Equator*. I will explore these scales through the visual tools we've designed for civic dialogue and have exhibited in cultural institutions across the world.

REGIONAL: CROSS-BORDER COMMONS

In this era of escalating tension and militarization at the border, where racist public rhetoric defines who people are and assigns them in a Foucauldian sense to their fixed geographical place, we offer counternarratives of interdependence and coexistence that reflect the cross-border circulations and transgressions of everyday life across our region. Our Community Stations themselves are a transgressive infrastructure. Distributed on both sides of the wall, they become observatories for documenting these flows through ethnography and scientific research, increasing public awareness of the social and ecological ties between San Diego and Tijuana, between the United States and Mexico.

Our aspiration is to foster what we call a “cross-border citizenship culture,” where belonging is oriented not by the nation-state, but by the shared stories, challenges, everyday practices and aspirations among people who inhabit a violently disrupted civic space.¹⁶ Those who benefit from narratives of separation and mistrust prefer that we remain a fragmented public, and that the idea of citizenship divides rather than unites. As a corridor of knowledge flows across the wall, the Community Stations become a platform for constructing a regional civic identity from the bottom-up, a cross-border *res publica*, as Jim Tully describes it: “Participation in dialogues and negotiations over how and by whom power is exercised over us constitutes our identities as citizens and generates bonds of solidarity and a sense of belonging to the *res publica*.”¹⁷

With our partners we curate “convergences,” “cultural performances” and “unwalling experiments” supported by visual tools like the ones I will discuss,

¹⁶ See Antanas Mockus, “Building ‘Citizenship Culture’ in Bogotá,” *Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (2012): 143–46. In partnership with Mockus, in 2013 we designed the Cross-Border Citizenship-Culture Survey that helped us identify latent opportunities for fostering a cross-border public in the San Diego–Tijuana border region. For more, see Fonna Forman, “Social Norms and the Cross-Border Citizen: From Adam Smith to Antanas Mockus,” in *Cultural Agents Reloaded: The Legacy of Antanas Mockus*, ed. Carlo Tognato (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 333–56; Gregory Scruggs, “New San Diego-Tijuana Survey Holds Mirror Up to Border Cities,” *Next City*, February 25, 2015, <http://nextcity.org/daily/entry/binational-survey-san-diego-tijuana-border-antanas-mockus>. The project was exhibited publicly in 2017 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in *Visualizing Citizenship: Seeking a New Public Imagination*.

¹⁷ Tully, *Public Philosophy*, vol. 1, 147.

to facilitate broader recognition of our cross-border citizenship: to expose it, name it and embrace it as uniquely ours.

The movement of water through shared canyon systems has been a powerful device to stimulate more elastic civic thinking in our region.¹⁸ The neighborhoods where our two Tijuana-based Community Stations sit are nested inside the Tijuana River Watershed, shared by San Diego and Tijuana. Twenty-five percent of the watershed is in the United State; 75 percent is in Mexico. This San Diego–Tijuana *bioregion* is radically bisected by the international border. The two cities have never adequately recognized the watershed that unites them, or engaged in collaborative urban planning for the benefit of everyone across the region. Municipal planning maps in both cities literally stop cold at the line, as if there is nothing but blank white space on the other side. Intensification of borderwall infrastructure in recent years has interrupted sensitive environmental and hydrologic systems, deepening the environmental health impacts of this mutual neglect.

The collision of natural and jurisdictional systems, of environmental and political forces, is perhaps most profound and visible precisely where our two Community Stations sit. The Laureles Canyon is an important finger of the binational watershed that crosses the borderline and drains northbound into the Tijuana River Estuary, a precious, environmentally protected zone in southern San Diego county, before discharging into the Pacific Ocean. The estuary is considered the “lungs” of our bioregion, and a critical environmental asset to populations on both sides of the wall.

Because the informal settlements of Laureles Canyon lack public water and waste management infrastructure, waste is managed in one of two ways: through trash-burning, which spews black carbon particulates into the air and into lungs; and through wide-scale dumping into canyon creeks and drainage culverts that clog during rain events. Industrial toxic dumping is also a common practice among the *maquiladoras*: the multinational factories that dot the periphery of Tijuana, often located on the ridges of canyon slums to access cheap labor and circumvent feeble municipal attempts at environmental regulation and zoning. Waste in the canyon mixes with copious quantities of loose sediment, exacerbated by the informal building practices of squatters, as well as speculative developers who buy cheap land on craggy hillsides and flatten the topography with backhoes to subdivide into mini-pads. Informal development produces tons of loose sediment every year that become sludgy flows whenever it rains. Waste and erosion challenges in Tijuana’s canyon slums are aggravated by “precipitation whiplash” in this part of the world: erratic and heavy rainfall patterns caused by climate change that produce dangerous mudslides and flooding across the Laureles Canyon. Because the canyon sits

¹⁸ A strategy first proposed in the 1970s by Donald Appleyard and Kevin Lynch in *Temporary Paradise? A Look at the Special Landscape of the San Diego Region: A Report to the City of San Diego* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1974).

at a higher elevation than the estuary in San Diego, this waste flows northbound, carrying tons of trash, sediment and industrial waste that inundate and compromise the binational estuary. In recent years, US Homeland Security carved concrete dams and drains into newly built borderwall infrastructure, which serve to siphon and accelerate these calamitous northbound flows.

The borderwall is sold to the American public as the key to national security, but in our region it causes great environmental *insecurity*. Some have observed that the chickens have come home to roost.¹⁹

The *Cross-Border Commons* is a visualization project that illuminates these topographical and hydrological dynamics in accessible ways, to communicate to publics on both sides of the wall that regional wastewater flow is not a “Mexican problem” – the way Americans typically dismiss the challenges of our neighbors – but a shared bioregional challenge that Tijuana and San Diego need to tackle together. At the very local canyon–neighborhood scale, where we work, this means working closely with our community partners to cultivate a sense of *bioregional* well-being, of ownership and civic commitment toward an estuary that sits behind America’s wall. To cultivate this more elastic sense of belonging and commitment, we have codesigned visualization tools and cartographies that nest local neighborhoods in this larger watershed ecology.

We often lead nomadic workshops and visit a promontory located high above the Laureles Canyon, called Mirador, where one can witness these dramatic environmental collisions from above. Imagine Mexican children standing on a narrow sliver of land along the eastern rim of the canyon, hundreds of feet above the borderwall. Imagine they plant their feet facing due west, with the vast blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean in front of them, Mexico to their left, the United States to their right. Below, to their immediate left, they see the dense informal settlement where they live; they can spot their houses, their schools and experience their proximity to the border and a country they and their families are not permitted to enter. Below, to their immediate right, almost directly beneath their feet, they see the borderwall which, from this vantage, looks like a flimsy and ridiculous strip inserted onto a vast and powerful natural system. Lifting their eyes further to the right, they see the green expanse of the Tijuana River Estuary, with its lush wetland habitats and sediment basins contrived to catch the northbound flows of waste from their community. From this vantage the characters of this cross-border environmental story about flows and interdependence come to life. We’ve witnessed this moment of recognition again and again over the years, among children, our students, policy-makers and even foundation presidents. I will

¹⁹ In a similar vein, see our study of harmful water-flows from Gaza into Israel: Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, “Interdependence as a Political Tool: Three Building Blocks for Gaza,” in *Open Gaza: Architectures of Hope*, ed. Michael Sorkin and Deen Sharp (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2020), 302–25.

always remember the first time I witnessed it. There are places on the US side where one can grasp these dynamics, but it is most profound from Mirador. I suspect there are few places on earth where the dramatic collision of informality, militarization and environmental vulnerability can be so vividly experienced.

Patrick Geddes, the early-twentieth-century Scottish sociologist and early urban planner, designed the Camera Obscura in the center of Edinburgh, one of the first museums dedicated to urban research. A five-story building constructed as an observation tower, the ground floor was dedicated to global dynamics; the topics of each ascending floor contracted in geographic scale, culminating on the top floor, which was an open-air diorama dedicated to the local. It enabled people to look out across the territory, observe its geographic composition, and comprehend the environmental systems that organize the city. Geddes claimed that visual cognition of the territory, comprehending the city from a spatial vantage, an ability to name the rivers and valleys, plateaus and mountains, was essential to the construction of a civic identity and of collective political will. He coined the words “regionalism” and “conurbation,” which are often used today to describe binational zones such as San Diego–Tijuana.²⁰ Our commitment in the Community Stations to cultivate an elastic civic identity through visual cognition, to experience the local as part of a region, a conurbation, is inspired by Geddes’ Socratic impulse to ascend from the city.

Sometimes, however, nurturing civic elasticity entails descending below the familiar, going down with an empirical lantern, as Hirschman described it. Several years ago, we curated a cross-border public action through one of the sewerage drains Homeland Security carved into the wall, between Laureles Canyon and the estuary. We negotiated a permit with US Homeland Security to transform the drain into an official southbound port of entry for twenty-four hours. They agreed, disarmed by our self-description as “just artists,” as long as Mexican immigration officials were waiting on the other side, in Mexican territory, to stamp our passports. Our convoy comprised 300 local community activists and residents, representatives from the municipalities of San Diego and Tijuana, and artists and border activists from around the world. We understood the event as an “agonistic” intervention because we summoned institutions and agencies who are often at odds with one another. In Chantal Mouffe’s words, we created an itinerant “vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted.”²¹ As we moved together southbound under the wall, we witnessed slum wastewater flowing northbound toward the estuary beneath our feet. This strange crossing from estuary to slum under a militarized culvert, and the stamping of passports inside this liminal space, amplified the most profound contradictions and interdependencies of our border region. The great insight

²⁰ Notably in Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics* (London: Williams, 1915).

²¹ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3.

was that protecting the US Estuary demands investment in the informal settlements in Mexico, increasing bioregional awareness, and codeveloping neighborhood-scale participatory waste and sediment management initiatives.

Our border-drain crossing was more than an ephemeral happening; it helped to solidify a durable, cross-border, public commitment to action. We are now leading a binational land conservancy project, the *Cross-Border Commons*, which identifies unsquatted slivers of land in the Laureles Canyon, bundles them into an *archipelago of conservancy*, and connects them with the Estuary in a continuous political, social and ecological zone that transgresses the international line.²² Our binational coalition is comprised of state and municipal agencies, environmental nonprofits, university researchers like us and community organizations such as Divina Providencia and Embajadores de Jesús. Every participant brings a unique set of knowledges and capacities to this bioregional effort: some do environmental research, some advance policy, some mobilize public knowledge and support and some advance sustainable practices in communities. With our Community Stations partners in Laureles we are codeveloping sustainable waste management and anti-erosion practices in the canyon, oriented around conservation, reuse and the separation, composting, collection and removal of trash, as well as native planting, reforestation and the development of bio-swales and pervious ground cover to keep precarious topsoil intact. With this ‘green cross-border stitch’, as we all call it, we are rethinking the border through the logics of natural and social ecologies, and reimagining citizenship through a shared commitment to the health of our bioregion.

CONTINENTAL – MEXUS: GEOGRAPHIES OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Our *Cross-Border Commons* project in San Diego–Tijuana has provoked curiosity about other sites of porosity and ecological interdependency along the continental border between the United States and Mexico. Over the years we have collected aerial photographs across this continental span that document precise moments when the jurisdictional line of the nation collides with natural systems. At some of these junctures, like ours, the borderwall cuts through and violates delicate natural ecologies. San Diego–Tijuana, El Paso–Juarez, Brownsville–Matamoros and many less populous locations powerfully illustrate what dumb sovereignty looks like when it “hits the ground” in a complex bioregion. But at other junctures, nature is too mighty to be bisected. Mountains, canyons and bodies of water frequently interrupt America’s great wall and complicate its territorial dominion. Of course, these landscapes are generally impossible for human transgression as well, so the

²² For more, see Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, “Citizenship Culture and the Transnational Environmental Commons,” in *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment*, ed. Karl Kusserow and Alan Braddock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 416–27.

border-builder simply militarizes their edges and co-opts them in its strategies of spatial division and control.

In recent years we developed *MEXUS: Geographies of Interdependence*, a visual project that stretches our elastic civic aspirations to the continental scale. *MEXUS* visualizes the continental border between the United States and Mexico without the jurisdictional line.²³ Because the border is not a place where things end, *MEXUS* dissolves the border into a bioregion whose shape is defined by the eight binational watershed systems bisected by the international border. Our Tijuana River watershed in San Diego–Tijuana is nested at the westernmost corner of *MEXUS*, where the 3,145 kilometer borderwall descends absurdly into the Pacific Ocean. The Rio Grande Valley, and the cities of Brownsville–Matamoros, anchor the other end.

MEXUS also exposes other systems and flows across this bioregional territory that the wall cannot contain: 11 tribal nations, 110,000 square kilometers of protected lands, 16,000 square kilometers of croplands, 28 urban crossings, many more informal ones, 15 million people and more. By erasing the line, *MEXUS* exposes and unwalls this thick system of ecologies and interdependencies and challenges the legitimacy of the colonizer's rationalist nineteenth-century line imposed onto complex systems shared among nations. As one San Ysidro resident once put it: "if the border needs to be there, why does it need to be so stupid?" The borderwall proposed by the Trump administration threatened to close these spaces even further, compromising the common destiny of border communities. Only the most myopic or racist of nationalist politics could conclude that walling the other will solve our problems. While the borderwall satisfies protectionist urges for physical security, it simultaneously harms the nation by interrupting the environmental, economic and social flows essential to the health and sustainability of the larger region. By fortifying its violent line against the other, the United States violates its own people and its own natural resources.

Ultimately, our civic purpose for designing *MEXUS* was to counter America's wall-building fantasies with more expansive imaginaries of belonging and cooperation beyond the nation-state. Instead of seeing the border through the lens of division and control, *MEXUS* provokes more ecological thinking oriented by dynamic regional circulations. It provokes a more inclusive idea of citizenship oriented by coexistence, shared assets and cooperative opportunities between artificially divided communities. The ecologies of *MEXUS* become an organizing framework for dialogues about a bioregional civic identity among Mexicans, Americans and diverse Tribal Nations who inhabit this contested space.

²³ Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz, *MEXUS: Geographies of Interdependence* was first presented in the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale, commissioned by the United States pavilion for the exhibition *Dimensions of Citizenship*.

GLOBAL: THE POLITICAL EQUATOR

From our border at San Diego–Tijuana we have imagined an elastic civic identity, rooted in local experiences and affective ties, that is able to recognize resonances and solidarities with others at broader scales, as a strategy of resistance against injustice. Our “final stretch” in this cross-border civic imaginary (and in this chapter) is a visualization project called *The Political Equator*. Taking the Tijuana–San Diego border as a spatial point of departure, *The Political Equator* traces an imaginary line across a flattened map of the world, visualizing a corridor of global conflict between the thirtieth and thirty-eighth parallels north. Along this trajectory lie some of the world’s most contested thresholds, including the US–Mexico border at San Diego/Tijuana, the most-trafficked international border checkpoint in the world and the main migration route from Latin America into the United States; the Strait of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean, the main route from North Africa into “Fortress Europe” thickened in recent years to contain flows of humanity from Lampedusa into Italy and from Lesbos into Greece; the Israeli–Palestinian border that divides the Middle East, emblemized by Israel’s fifty-year military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; India/Kashmir, a site of intense and enduring territorial conflict between Pakistan and India since the British partition of India in 1947; the border between North and South Korea, which represents decades of intractable Cold War conflict; and China’s militarization of sovereign islands in the South China Sea, and colonizing ambitions toward Taiwan and Hong Kong.

While the *Political Equator* is represented lyrically as a flat line that bisects an astonishingly diverse assemblage of recognized violent border conflicts across the world, it operates ultimately as a *critical* threshold that conceptually bends, fragments and stretches to engage the forces of nationalism and border closure everywhere. Visualizing the *Political Equator*, again lyrically, alongside the climatic equator is revealing. This band, give or take a few degrees, contains our planet’s most populous slums, its sites of greatest natural resource extraction and export and its zones of greatest political instability, climate vulnerability and human displacement. It also contains all of Trump’s “shithole countries.” The collision of nationalism, environmental catastrophe, forced migration and borders is the great crisis of our age, the global injustice trifecta of our time, and is perfectly recognizable to our community partners at the San Diego–Tijuana border.²⁴

CROSS-BORDER CITIZENSHIP

In our work, we seek to reclaim the idea of citizenship for more inclusive, democratic and environmentally proactive cross-border agendas. In an

²⁴ On climate and migration specifically, see Fonna Forman and Veerabhadran Ramanathan, “Climate Change and Mass Migration: A Probabilistic Case for Urgent Action,” in *Humanitarianism and Mass Migration: Confronting the World Crisis*, ed. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 239–50.

increasingly walled world, with reactionary nationalism surging everywhere, we challenge the claim that we are living in or somehow moving toward a postsovereign reality. Right now, the demand to protect national borders is ascending across the world, with citizenship tethered to territory and inherently closed to those beyond the gate. The cosmopolitan retort to these xenophobic urges across our planet is satisfying from a humanistic vantage, but thinking of ourselves as “citizens of the world” ultimately lacks visceral appeal and mechanisms for meaningful collective agency. Everything interesting about citizenship in political theory today happens somewhere between these two extremes, with attempts to ground citizenship in something real while remaining compassionate, nondiscriminatory and inclusive. Through our work in border communities, we have come to embrace an elastic idea of citizenship that is grounded in local experiences and affective ties but is nevertheless fluid and open, its boundaries continually renegotiating themselves around the confluences, shifting challenges, opportunities, interests and aspirations among diverse people who together inhabit contested space. Border regions are a natural laboratory for rethinking citizenship along these lines.

Now, it may seem naïve or even insulting to some that we propose discussing citizenship in a context like the US–Mexico border, where formal belonging is so rigidly fixed to nation and documentation and has been so dramatically denied through racialized political violence. But we advocate turning the concept back on itself, recuperating the idea of citizenship as a cultural concept that emerges more inclusively from the bottom-up through everyday practices of mutual recognition and more deliberate acts of civic freedom. Through civic programming in the UCSD Community Stations we are committed to identifying these confluences, overlapping sensibilities, crosscutting resonances, and aspirations among jurisdictionally ruptured publics, often hidden behind the shadows of walls.

By means of our partnerships we discover new and sometimes sudden opportunities to mobilize solidarities. For example, there is a pervasive mistrust of conventional progressive political leadership on both sides of the border, especially among young people who no longer connect with the dominant social justice narratives of earlier generations. How can researchers, cultural producers and agencies on the ground help to mobilize these convergences into productive forces? Outrage over US policies of gratuitous hate – like family separation at the US–Mexico border, like high rates of COVID-19 infection among migrants deported back to their home countries – are opportunities to unite cross-border publics in solidarity. This kind of solidarity can be fleeting, topical, but openings like these become powerful summoners for curating civic dialogue in contested places like ours.

Our local experiences in San Diego–Tijuana have oriented our aspirations for broader critical reflection on unjust migration policies and border conditions *everywhere*. Moving from local experiences to a global project is

a necessarily speculative and provisional activity. But what we propose here should be distinguished from an abstract normative position. Ours is a *grounded critical theory* that has emerged through our participation over many years in civic processes along the US–Mexico border. The broader resonances we claim have also been validated over the years through partnerships with colleagues and activist networks who work in similarly solidaristic modalities in conflict zones across the world. In the words of Tijuana-based artist Marcos Ramirez ERRE, borderwalls exist only to be transgressed. For him, this is the ultimate aspiration of public art. In sites across the world characterized by rising nationalism, surveillance and control, and the criminalization of migrants, this is the ultimate aspiration of civic freedom as well.