

Border Research and the Transborder Immigrant Tool

Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab

The Tijuana-San Diego border has always been a site for staging military research. From 1968 until 1973, the US military spent close to \$1 billion a year on a new research program intended to end the war in Vietnam by establishing a computerized border field of networked sensors called Operation Igloo White. Igloo White was funded by ARPA (now DARPA), the Defense Department's edge technology sector, and the research was done by 45 scientists from R1 US universities. This group would gather every summer in La Jolla, California, where University of California, San Diego (UCSD) is located. While the project failed to end the Vietnam War with its virtual fence to capture the movement of North Vietnam soldiers crossing into South Vietnam, Operation Igloo White and its technologies were teleported to the US in the early 1970s, where they rapidly staged actions against drug cartels, smugglers, and most specifically immigrants crossing the border from Mexico.

In 1995, the Border Research and Technology Center (BRTC) was opened. It is operated by Sandia National Laboratories, located in San Diego. BRTC works with Homeland Security, the US Customs Service and Border Patrol, the US Attorney offices, and law enforcement agencies to strengthen technology capabilities and awareness on US borders. BRTC also works on joint ventures to identify technologies that will stop the flow of undocumented people crossing the Mexico-US border, and has also been participating in a project to detect heartbeats of people concealed in vehicles or other containers. Nine years later, in 2004, b.a.n.g. lab (which stands for

bits, atoms, neurons, and genes), in collaboration with Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 (EDT), started developing a border art and technology research center at the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (CALIT2). The latter was conceived as a \$400 million academic research institution jointly run by UCSD and UC Irvine that would develop a counter-aesthetic and critical technology to disturb the border technologies being developed by programs like BRTC.

In 2007 EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab started to develop a mobile phone technology called the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT), which provides GPS coordinates and survival poetry to immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border while leading them to water caches in the Southern California desert. In 2010, the project caused a firestorm of controversy on the American political scene. The artists of EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab—who included Ricardo Dominguez, the cofounder of EDT 1.0/2.0 with new media artist Brett Stalbaum, as well as new members Micha Cárdenas (an artist and theorist), Amy Sara Carroll (a poet and border studies scholar at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), and Elle Mehrmand (a mixed reality artist)—were investigated by three Republican Congressmen, the FBI Office of Cybercrimes, and UCSD.

TBT began with the basic question: What ubiquitous technology would allow us to create an inexpensive tool to support the finding of water caches left in the Southern California desert by NGOs? Our answer was that a cheap iMotorola phone series could be made reasonably useful for emergency navigation. Later phone generations that aren't yet within our price barrier, but are getting closer everyday especially with falling second-hand prices, are already fully useful as practical aids even without a SIM card or an available network service. With proper use, the GPS performance of these newer phones equals any GPS designed for desert navigation. GPS functionality on these phones does not require service, since the US government has extended free global GPS coverage. In an emergency scenario, we trust these later mobile phones to direct a lost person to a nearby safety site. The TBT's code is also available online to download at walkingtools.net, *sans* water cache locations, for any individual or community to use for their own GPS investigations.

Part of the history of the EDT 1.0/2.0 and b.a.n.g. lab has been to develop works that can create a performative matrix that activates and takes a measure of the current conditions and intensities of power(s), communities,

and their anxieties or resistances. So for us, the US Department of Defense launching “info-weapons” at us for a virtual sit-in on 9 September 1998 or the current confluence of “viral reportage” and the affective contagion of hate about TBT are all part of the performance, though of course we would much rather the hate mail never occurred. (Dominant media is bad enough to deal with.) The aesthetics of working in the zones of postcontemporary “artist” gestures cannot really escape these types of encounters; they are part and parcel of the patina of our work. But we also feel that the hate mail signaling the general fear of losing national purity is equal in importance with to poetry that it attacked. In fact, Glenn Beck, an extreme right wing pundit on the Fox News Channel, attacked not only TBT’s use of poetry, but that the poetry itself had the power to “dissolve” the nation. The performative matrix of TBT allows viral reportage, hate mail, GPS, poetry, the Mexico-US border, and immigrants to encounter one another in a state of frisson that asks: What is sustenance under the sign of *globalization-is-borderization*, and what are its aesthetics?

EDT 1.0/2.0 has always been invested in experimental poetry as part of its gestures—from the found poetry of the “404 file not found” of our ECD performances in 1990s to the border hack actions with the *Zapatista Tribal Port Scan* in 2000 on US Border Patrol servers, where we would scan and upload Zapatista poems that we had written into their servers. When we started to develop TBT it became important once again to have a core impulse of the gesture. In 2008 I sought out Amy Sara Carroll, who is an experimental poet and scholar at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and who researches art and the Mexican-US border. She thought that TBT becoming a geo-poetic-system (gps) could expand the frame of experimental poetry and “artivism.” She then began to work with us and established two geo-poetic tracks—one conceptual and the other an echo of desert survival manuals in multiple languages, which speaks to both the multiple borders that crisscross the planet and the multiple languages that cross the Mexican-US border via immigrants. Here is Amy speaking about TBT:

My collaboration with Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT) on the Transborder Immigrant Tool . . . [is] imagined as a global project under development; my own involvement in that ongoing process is linked to the question of what constitutes sustenance in the quotidian of the conceptual, on the varied musical scales of the micro- and macro-. For, often—rightly enough—conversations about crossing the Mexico-US border refer to disorientation, sun exposure, lack of water.

The Transborder Immigrant Tool attempts to address those vicissitudes, but also to remember that the aesthetic—freighted with the unbearable weight of “love”—too, sustains. A poetic gesture from its inception, the Transborder Immigrant Tool functions, via the aspirations of such a dislocative medium, as dislocative media, seeking to realize the possibilities of GPS as both a “global positioning system,’ and, what in another context Laura Borràs Castanyer and Juan B. Gutiérrez have termed a ‘global poetic system.” The Transborder Immigrant Tool includes poems for psychic consultation, spoken words of encouragement, and welcome, which I am writing and codesigning in the mindset of Audre Lorde’s pronouncement that “poetry is not a luxury.” . . . [This] speaks to the Transborder Immigrant Tool’s overarching commitment to global citizenship. For the excerpt, itself infused with the ‘transversal logic’ of the poetic, acts as one of the Transborder Immigrant Tool’s internal compasses, clarifying the ways and means by which I and my collaborators approach this project as ethically inflected, as transcending the local of (bi-) national politics, of borders and their policing.

TBT is also a critical response not only to the securitization of the US-Mexico border, but to the borderization politics that we see everywhere around the planet. This global borderization project allows the death of hundreds in order to profit from the cheap labor that is needed to keep global economies flowing. And since 11 September 2001, the rapid deployment of bordering, not only at the edges of the nation-state but also within it, has been characterized by an increase in bio-governance protocols that systematically connect atavistic emotions of fear and anxiety with technologies of surveillance. As a result, imaginary notions of the Other (immigrants) are targeted as the reason for the global economic and social collapse we find ourselves in. This is accompanied by a refusal to acknowledge that the conditions of securitization by entities such as the NSA, or the open market flows of undocumented, border-crossing mega-banks and Wall Street types worldwide, are at the core of the austerity shocks shuddering across the world.

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