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J. D. Schnepf

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CONVERSATIONS



## “Hopes and dreams toward survival”: art and security at the US–Mexico border

J. D. Schnepf

Princeton Writing Program, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA

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On the relationship between words and women’s survival, feminist writer Audre Lorde wrote:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. (1984, 37)

Poetry, for Lorde, is the very foundation upon which women shape the world, delimit its possibilities, and imagine its future. Experimental poet Amy Sara Carroll drew on Lorde’s account of poetry’s life-sustaining properties as she wrote “The Desert Survival Series”/“La Serie De Sobrevivencia Del Desierto,” a collection of 24 “pared down prose poems,” as part of a collaboration with the art and activist group Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) for the new media artwork Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT). The TBT is a mobile phone application that EDT members Micha Cárdenas, Ricardo Dominguez, Elle Mehrmand, and Brett Stalbaum designed in 2007 to “[provide] GPS coordinates and survival poetry to immigrants crossing the US–Mexico border [...]” (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2017, 2). While prototypes of the application were installed and tested on iMotorola burner phones, the TBT was never put into practical operation. Nonetheless, as art, it invites us to imagine an alternative future for the US–Mexico borderlands – a practice that migrant studies scholar Aimee Bahng terms “speculating the border” (2018, 53).

In such a future, GPS coordinates direct migrants to the location of water caches left in the Sonoran Desert by NGOs, while the survival poems, translated into multiple languages and stored as audio files, convey spoken words. One of the survival poems explains how, alone in the desert, one could gather rainwater from “the broad leaves of yucca and agave”/“las

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**CONTACT** J. D. Schnepf  [jschnepf@princeton.edu](mailto:jschnepf@princeton.edu)  Princeton Writing Program, Princeton University, 210 New South, Princeton, NJ, 08544, USA

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anchas hojas de la yuca y el agave” (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2014, 47), while another poem reveals how

the fruit of the organ pipe cactus ripens to red and drops its spines. The prickly pear cactus’ tuna reddens to purple, but never loses its needles. Dethorned, dethroned, both are delectably edible. Peel their skins./la fruta del cactus órgano se torna roja y pierde sus espinas al madurar. La tuna se torna un color morado, mas nunca pierde sus púas. Destronadas [sic], desespinadas [sic], ambas son deliciosas. Quíteles la piel. (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2014, 49)

Carroll’s poems speak of the arid earth as a site of harvest. In the tradition of Georgic verse, they provide didactic instruction for dealing practically with the land. Listening to them, the migrant might learn how to make use of desert plants to survive the crossing: yucca leaves might quench her thirst, while cacti could supply her with vital nutrition.

Such information would no doubt prove crucial to those who attempt the perilous journey. As Téllez, Simmons, and del Hierro (2018) have documented in this journal, in the years since 9/11 the militarization of the southern border has made the Sonora region particularly dangerous for women who are routinely subject to physical and sexual violence as they attempt to survive the trek. The desert’s daytime temperatures and lack of shade compound these hostile conditions, leaving those passing through especially vulnerable to dehydration and death. Law enforcement agencies at the border tacitly rely on the desert’s harsh climate as a general deterrent: “[t]he weaponization of wilderness,” critic Gaby Cepeda states, “turns the landscape into the ‘unsung hero of the border patrol,’ a fixer that both kills and gets rid of the mess” (2018). As Cepeda’s observation makes clear, life and death along the US–Mexico border often neatly aligns with the biopolitical interests of the US security state.

Given this context, EDT’s survival poetry offers us the opportunity to consider art’s capacity to intervene physiologically in the biopolitics of border security. To regard poetry in this way is to take seriously the feminist scholar Inderpal Grewal’s call for an approach to international relations that attends more vigorously to forms of securitization that go beyond the conventional “realist terms” of the national security state (2018, 19). This narrow outlook, Grewal contends, has failed to comprehend new forms of “dispersed sovereignty and governance regimes that currently operate beyond the state” (2018, 19). In what follows, I take Grewal’s critique as an invitation to think about state security otherwise by thinking about poetry. EDT’s survival poetry makes use of regional references. At the same time, it takes seriously the possibility of a universal language that disregards national borders. By dwelling in scales both broader and narrower than the nation, EDT’s poems have a disruptive effect on entrenched epistemologies of geopolitical agency. In the poems, government agencies and national allegiances hold no sway. At the same time, this poetry makes new transborder

networks of distributed agency possible. Unlike the border biopolitics that equates crossing the desert to death, EDT's poetry reimagines the journey as a life-sustaining one.

Since the group's founding, EDT have defined themselves as practitioners of art and activism – or what group member Ricardo Dominguez calls “artivism” (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2017). Before designing the TBT, EDT orchestrated earlier acts of border artivism. For instance, in a creative project known as SWARM (South West Action to Resist Minutemen), the group disabled the websites of “California and Arizona Minutemen organizations, Save Our State initiatives, and congressional representatives supporting anti-immigrant legislation” (Raley 2009, 40) by creating an application that “allowed users to send useless requests or personalized messages to a remote web server in a coordinated fashion, thereby slowing it down and filling its error logs with words of protest and gibberish,” and producing what EDT called “a kind of virtual sit-in” (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 1998). Media studies scholar Rita Raley refers to this kind of digital activism as “tactical media” – a term that “signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible” (2009, 6). EDT are one of a growing number of tactical new media artist and activist organizations that include the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) and the Department of Ecological Authority Tactics, Inc. (DoEAT) who not only create protest art specifically to critique the state's escalating securitization of the US–Mexico border but also to imagine alternative forms of sustaining human life that might be possible in border spaces. Through their critical practices, Raley argues, these groups “use the virtuality of their medium to critique the immobility of material bodies” across national borders (2009, 36). Further, “[t]heir critique of the neoliberal ideologies of free-flowing virtual capital is manifest in their tactical use of the very technologies, techniques, and tools that late capitalism itself employs” (Raley 2009, 36). By slowing down the speed at which global capitalism's communication infrastructures shuttle information, new media artists draw attention to how such infrastructures might be used otherwise.

Overwhelming remote servers with messages to disrupt anti-immigrant policies is just one example of this. EDT's TBT application introduces new uses for GPS technology too. While US Customs and Border Protection regularly uses GPS in the name of US national security, EDT's practice of transmitting water locations via GPS digital infrastructure to migrants on the ground posits a challenge to the standard assumption that such technology necessarily shores up the interests of the nation-state. GPS, or global positioning systems, require the robust digital infrastructure of satellites originally launched into orbit by the Department of Defense for military purposes (Kaplan, Loyer, and Daniels 2013, 401). On the system's deployment at the US–Mexico border, scholar Caren Kaplan writes,

GPS is used extensively by most of the interested parties involved in border patrol and observation activities. The US Border Patrol has integrated GPS units into almost every facet of its operation ranging from digital mapping to devices in transport vehicles to hand-held devices for agents in the field. (Kaplan, Loyer, and Daniels 2013, 410).

These devices work in conjunction with the “virtual fence,” a networked security apparatus made up of “remote-detecting sensors, remote-controlled cameras, and unmanned autonomous vehicles (UAVs)” (Raley 2009, 34). Customs and Border Protection’s fleet of UAVs rely on GPS to perform “surveillance and reconnaissance” and “[transmit] hi-resolution full-motion video and infrared imagery to ground control stations” to enforce the geopolitical rulings of the US–Mexico border (Gregory 2011, 244). What EDT’s innovative use of GPS technology reveals is not just how the nation-state has limited the use of technological infrastructure to the activity of securing geopolitical borders, but how this securitization might be disrupted through its own tools of enforcement. Using GPS to guide migrants to water sources, EDT imagine cross-border solidarity through the linking of human life to hydration.

As Carroll began writing the poems that make up the TBT’s “The Survival Series,” she asked herself how poetry could similarly sustain human life in the desert’s harsh conditions. Drawing on “desert survival handbooks, military manuals, a guide for border-crossers briefly distributed by the Mexican government” – texts with practical information for surviving the harsh desert climate (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2014, 4) – Carroll found answers to this question. Through the poems, Carroll sought to transform the migrant’s relationship to the desert ecosystem from one of adversity to one of hospitality. While poetic language is often non-referential, the TBT’s poems are referential and transitive, advancing art as a tool of physiological interface between humans and non-humans. Although attentive to the many lethal scenarios that might unfold as one makes the crossing, Carroll’s poetry seeks out an alternative biopolitics to the “weaponization of wilderness,” one in which the desert functions to make the migrant live rather than let her die. The poems seek to recast the desert as a site of nourishment for the disoriented traveler, opening with the line: “The desert is an ecosystem with a logic of sustainability”/“El desierto es un ecosistema único en si mismo, con su propia lógica de sustentabilidad” (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2014, 45). One could argue that the poems endorse a practice of resource extraction that prioritizes the needs of humans over and above the non-human world. To be sure, the migrant eats and drinks from the land. Rather than frame this scenario as removal, however, the verses recast this relation as one of attachment and even conjoining. Directed to graft herself onto the water supply of the fishhook barrel cactus, for example, the migrant is encouraged to “put a small portion of its pulp in your

mouth, taste it before you swallow its sap”/“ponga una pequeña porción de la pulpa en su boca, pruébelo antes de tragar su savia” (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2014, 50). In these poems, language works as a tool to ensure the human biological system is safely connected to the desert ecology of plants, animals, land, and weather instead of the national security state. The TBT’s poems thus link migrants to material sustenance through non-human technological and biological systems. While the network of attachments that tethers satellite to cell phone to cactus to human life may seem an unlikely web of distributed agency, this art nonetheless proposes that such leaps of the agential imagination are precisely what is needed to ensure migrant survival across the US–Mexico border.

While grafting human life to the desert’s ecosystem does not dismantle the primacy of the nation-state when it comes to matters of security, it does point to strategies of human survival that escape a strictly national framework. The poetry series underscores this turn from the security state by emphasizing the global community as a source of protection instead:

When everything—including this cell phone—fails, build a signal fire in dirt or sand, away from brush and trees. Use dead cacti and mesquite. A fire in the shape of an “X”—the international symbol of distress—needs no translation./ Cuando todo—incluyendo este teléfono móvil—falle, construya una señal de fuego en la tierra o en la arena, lejos de arbustos y árboles. Use cactus muertos y mezquite. Un fuego en forma de “X”—el símbolo internacional de peligro—no necesita traducción. (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2014, 69)

Imploring the listener to use materials from the land as a last resort, the poem asserts that the universal language of an X-shaped fire communicates across all political borders. Other poems underscore that ready alternatives to national allegiance are already available to us once we turn to the non-human world. One poem begins: “Ultimately, many would argue that nature sets the standard for neutrality. Unlike human beings, nature maintains no allegiances to nation, family, business, religion.”/“Al fin y al cabo, muchos argumentarían que la naturaleza establece el estándar de neutralidad. A diferencia de los seres humanos, la naturaleza no mantiene lealtades a una nación, familia, negocio, religión” (EDT 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab 2014, 67). Like the neutrality of the natural world it describes, the TBT also makes no claim to national allegiance while nonetheless offering security. As EDT write of their tool, it aims to “[transcend] the local of (bi-)national politics, of borders and their policing” (2017, 4).

Mediating the distance between the real space of the Sonoran Desert and the virtual space of satellite-assisted transmissions, the TBT offers a disruptive art intended to hijack the digital infrastructures of the US government to cultivate counter-militaristic aims. Raley has suggested that border disturbance art can be understood as “diffuse, networked, and temporarily situated,

rather than territorially situated" (2009, 37). While the TBT aptly establishes the transformative promise of attending to diffuse, networked, and temporarily situated forms in times of heightened national security, it also demonstrates that territoriality matters. As technologies of sustenance, digitally networked arts that engage the ecology of actual places such as the Sonoran Desert must contend with the materiality of these real spaces in all their regional specificity, even while gesturing to broader global communities. Beyond a return to the regional, EDT's disruptive art also introduces us to the benefit of turning to other disciplines to make use of new methodologies. In this case, close reading poetry, a practice borrowed from literary studies, can prompt a reconsideration of geopolitical agency by illuminating those forms of security that exist outside of familiar state-centered discourses. EDT's TBT thus not only works as a productive resource for testing new methodologies and critiquing existing accounts of geopolitical agency, it also centers poetry's capacity to induce an embodied experience, one with the potential to reshape the governance of life along the US–Mexico border.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

*J. D. Schnepf* is a Postdoctoral Lecturer at Princeton University and a co-chair of the Novel Theory Seminar at Harvard University. She is currently completing a book manuscript on drones and domesticity.

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