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Borderlands Archives Cartography

Bridging Personal, Political, and Geographical Borderlands

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Borderlands Archives Cartography (BAC) is a personal commitment of the participants to the Mexico–U.S. borderland communities. It conceptualizes, within the digital humanities, personal knowledge of the fronteriza/transfronteriza to resist hegemonic impositions. This chapter describes how the project emerged from a need to visualize and deepen the understanding of the region, with its communities and histories, through postcolonial practice of the digital humanities. The result is a study of the Mexico–U.S. borderlands region that expands the notion of borders while creating new methodologies of data analysis and alternative forms of archival material enabling interdisciplinary research.

The project had to address the challenges of processing and accessing transnational archives, such as the poor physical state of the material, digital policies, the organization of multilingual newspapers, collaborations with individuals and institutions from the United States (Global North) and Mexico (Global South), and the sustainability of independent student projects. BAC offers solutions to some common problems of transborderlands projects, while raising greater issues important for the future of postcolonial digital humanities.

The Personal Is Political: Toward a Postcolonial Digital Humanities Project

The project highlights alternative histories of the borderlands/la frontera, producing new knowledge of local communities. We view the fronteriza/o identity as that of someone who lives or lived in the region and has adopted transfronteriza/o as a way of life. According to Olivia Ruiz, “lo transfronterizo is reflected in both material activities, ways of thinking . . . the transfers of movement and the use of the border space” (Ruiz, “Visiting the Mother Country,” 107). Additionally, “the international movements are immersed in the local structures of the countries that share the border as well as the [total] structure of the border region. This
can result in a way of thinking or a “border society”” (Newby, “Border Crossing and Settlement,” 3).

Using these two terms, we address the history of the borderland region and its communities, and interpret struggles which are different yet similar: hence the importance of multiple experiences to decolonize monolithic perspectives of the border. We approach the project from what Chicana theorists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa refer to as “theory of the flesh,” “one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on . . . all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity . . . to bridge the contradictions in our experiences . . . by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words” (Moraga and Anzaldúa, This Bridge Called My Back, 19): in other words, our personal experiences.

Borderlands Archives Cartography sees the borderlands/lafrontera as an interstitial region between Mexico and the United States that has been delineated by changes in the geographical border, along with the fluid dynamics of relations between nation-states. Perhaps one of the best-known descriptions of the Mexico–U.S. border is Anzaldúa’s, who refers to the region as “an open wound [una herida abierta] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. Before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country: a border culture” (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 25). This metaphor is drawn predominantly from a U.S. perspective, but the “third country” to which she alludes is founded on a complex system of coexistence networks shaped by migrants and border communities.

Debra Castillo and Maria Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba observe about border studies that

it is important to take both sides . . . into consideration or to be specific about which side one is going to talk about or study and to recognize the material and metaphorical differences involved in such transnational analyses. Otherwise, the “intellectual colonialism” . . . will be perpetuated to the detriment of both. (Castillo and Córdoba, Border Women, 4)

This was a crucial principle in structuring BAC as a transborderland project that would integrate a border region, sharing archives and involving binational communities, since it is important to “rethink our habitat (home, city, country, world) not as a static place with peoples who enjoy fixed identities, but rather as dynamic territories and peoples with multiple identities” (Castillo and Córdoba, Border Women, 5): that is to say, a fluid, mobile region.

BAC emerged in 2017 in resistance to toxic discourses about the Mexico–U.S. border. The stereotypes used against borderland communities and migrants—Mexican citizens and Latinos among others—have great repercussions, since these impositions affect individual identities: the person is misrepresented nationally and
globally. In the light of this reality, BAC is dedicated to locating, mapping, and facilitating access to nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century newspapers from the past and current border regions. Through visualizations, the project maps the geographic location of the newspaper publishing establishments to provide a deeper historical and archival context, in order to foreground the history of the borderlands and its communities before and after the current dividing line was drawn. Full data, with maps, graphs, tables, and other visualizations, can be found on the BAC website (https://www.bacartography.org).

Maps and archives are colonial products; but when unrepresented individuals or communities utilize and re-create these tools, they serve to contest the colonial cultural record. Audre Lorde argues that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, “Master’s Tools,” 94); however, BAC’s transnational data, digital transborder archive, and digital map serve as tools to question colonial impositions upon the region, its archives and its maps, that silenced the binational history of the region as conventionally found in archival material. Likewise, it challenges established narratives, posing new questions that arise from the historical memory of the region, involving loss of territory, immigration, exile, deterritorialization, deportations, militarization, cross-border flows, and transnational treaties. These digital practices break with the traditional forms of the archive, transforming it from a “static repository [to] an active site of knowledge production . . . [that] interprets and even shapes knowledge from the ground [up]” (Cotera, “Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster,” 783).

The bridging of our fronteriza knowledge with archival material and digital technology resonates with postcolonial practices that work toward a digital cultural record focused on local communities, whose digital knowledge production emerges from their own narratives. In accord with Roopika Risam’s view, this requires praxis at the intersection of digital technologies and humanistic inquiry: designing new workflows and building new archives, tools, databases, and other digital objects that actively resist reinscriptions of colonialism and neocolonialism. Consequently, postcolonial digital humanities explores how we might remake the worlds instantiated in the digital cultural record through politically, ethically, and social justice-minded approaches to digital knowledge production. (Risam, New Digital Worlds, 5)

As a project of postcolonial scholarship in the digital humanities, BAC includes the following methods and practices in mapping, while responding to the existing state of the digital cultural record of the borderlands:

- designing new workflows set up by graduate students and noninstitutional collaborations across the Global North and South—museums, universities, libraries, private collections, among others;
developing a transnational digital databank by incorporating various archives;
creating a cartographic transborder archive through a digital map.

Borderland Newspapers: Creating a Transborder Archive

Against the current political discourse of a border wall, in a region where prejudice predominates and local communities continue to be marginalized and erased, BAC presents a shared transborder archive by conflating the newspaper records of both nations comprising the region. As borders are in constant transition in political, cultural, historical, and geographic discourses, current and past political rhetoric has displayed the geographical and ideological border between the United States and Mexico as a threat. However, transnational dynamics, and nationalistic rhetoric with all its implications, are not recent phenomena: borderland newspapers have long documented them. As an archival project covering material from both sides of the border, BAC provides a valuable platform for understanding the relationship between the United States (Global North) and Mexico (Global South) in this particular region.

The prevailing perception is that the United States has always been the leading innovator and producer of cultural advancement in this region. However, printing was introduced to the Americas in 1533, fourteen years after the arrival of the Spaniards, in the region now known as Mexico. In the Southwest, Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Latinas/os have been practicing literary production and self-documentation from before the birth of the United States (Kanellos and Martell, Hispanic Periodicals in the United States, 76). At the same time, newspapers on the U.S. side have helped individuals and communities protect their rights by fighting against segregation and discrimination. They have also helped to maintain the language and culture, raising the educational levels of the communities by publishing creative literature in Spanish (76). Overall, newspapers on both sides have documented various political, social, and economic processes from the colonial era to more recent times, that help to understand the border region with its multidimensional cultures and identities.

From this perspective, while the mainstream print culture of the region has favored central Mexico and the history of its state capitals, the United States has prioritized newspapers from the colonies rather than the Southwest. Language, race, and regional location are some of the factors that determine the prioritizing of material for digitization and/or preservation: “access to digital periodical archives is unevenly distributed, with the largest collections sold by commercial providers beyond the means of smaller institutions” (Cordell, “What Has the Digital Meant?” 2–3). Hence in both countries, the material is found in varying conditions—physical, microfilm, or digital—and across private, commercial, and institutional repositories. These archives are located on both sides of the border but treated separately; multiple
archival policies govern and regulate their access, impairing the unified image of a binational region that has engaged with a shared history since its formation.

National discourse and policies have thus come to overshadow and impoverish the local and regional patrimony. As Rodrigo Lazo observes, “Archive and nation came together to grant each other authority and credibility: the archive contained documents and records that supposedly spoke to and about the state, while the nation granted a certain cachet to an archive, elevating it above its local and regional counterparts” (“Migrant Archives,” 36). The borderlands archives tend to reflect the multiple transitions of the region, leading to what Lazo refers to as migrant archives, “[that] reside in obscurity and are always at the edge of annihilation. They are the texts of the past that have not been written into the official spaces of archivization, even though they weave in and out of the buildings that house documents” (37). He claims that these archives call “for the ongoing examination of how memory is constituted, how history is written, and how research is connected to identity. In other words, control of the archive has epistemological and political ramifications” (38). Building on Lazo’s observation, we propose a transborder archive that consists of newspapers of three types: (1) those whose circulation was restricted by the border; (2) those that crossed the border; (3) those that crossed in and out of the nation-states multiple times.

The varying transborder and transnational dynamics found within the material reflect the movement of individuals in and out of the nation-states. Hence their study and conservation are valuable for local, national, and binational history. The challenge of creating a transborder archive is to prioritize, digitize, and ensure access to borderland newspapers to communities from both the Global North and the Global South.

Local Practices: Bridging the Global North and South

When creating BAC, our personal identities as fronterizas with transfronteriza dynamics were taken into consideration, as was a decolonized approach to the study of the border and borderland communities. Our initial concerns were:

- How could these archival materials reach the communities on both sides of the border?
- Were newspapers being published in both countries at a given point of time?
- Were the newspaper editors from the two sides in communication?
- Was the same news being covered by both?
- Can technology facilitate access to these newspapers?
- What tools could be used to produce alternative border stories with local material that documents border communities?
- Is it possible to create a transborder archive incorporating digital components?
This set of questions led to the creation of a project that bridges archives from the Global North and South with the aim of producing a mutually useful resource.

The praxis of postcolonial digital humanities allowed us to subject the complex dynamics of the border region to a deeper analysis. The first stage of the project was to consult archival collections on both sides of the border. When creating BAC’s transnational data, the following metadata was included:

- title, city, state, country, establishment address, language, number of issues,
- dates of publication, archival sources and link, historical period.

The last item was needed to situate the newspaper in the historical context of the region. With regard to the address, BAC meticulously searched throughout the newspapers to obtain the addresses not only of publication but of distributing establishments, to generate the coordinates to map their location. For addresses that no longer existed, current and old maps were consulted. The incorporation of the addresses was crucial as it allowed us to maintain a historical record of the newspaper establishments and printing-press locations in the border region.

With respect to the historical period, BAC used the year of publication of the newspapers to determine how they would be selected, categorized, and processed. As already recounted, the U.S.–Mexico border has gone through many geographical and political transitions. The project protocols therefore demarcated the historical periods as follows:

- Period One (Colonial), 1808 to 1846;
- Period Two (Mexican-American War), 1847 to 1854;
- Period Three (of the current division line), 1855 to 1930.

The states and regions to be included were determined in accord with these historical periods. Currently, BAC’s protocols consider nineteenth-century newspapers from all states in the north of Mexico and the southwest of the United States, while those in the twentieth century are restricted to cities along the current border region. This information is subject to change as more data is gathered.

Once the transnational data was collected, the idea emerged of a transborder archive, bringing together local, national, and binational history. The archive thus serves as an alternative tool to construct the notion of a fluid borderlands region. Using new forms of cartography such as a geo-analysis tool, the transnational data was incorporated in a digital map to visualize the transborder archive. The creation of BAC’s digital map allowed us to deconstruct the notion of a static repository and to decolonize this region utilizing the master’s tools. According to Annita Lucchesi, “The power of mapping is that there is so much power in it. It doesn’t necessarily have to be oppressive. . . . It can be liberating. It can be healing. It can be empowering, especially when it’s being used by people who have
been historically oppressed” (Deerchild, “Mapping MMIWG”). In other words, by incorporating local newspapers in tools such as digital maps, the project dismantles the externally imposed mechanisms that have divided these marginalized or misrepresented communities. The use of visualizations brings to the forefront many neglected dynamics and junctions of complex identities, arising from the shifting geopolitical borders between Mexico and the United States since colonial times until the twenty-first century.

As Alexander Cors remarks, “Maps are a tool as much as an end: they allow us to see data in a new way, and to ask questions that send us back to the archive to reconstruct the stories within the maps” (“Digital Humanities & Methods”). BAC’s digital map enables us to visualize and engage with its transnational data in multiple forms: for instance, it reveals the presence of a broad spectrum of newspaper production along the Mexico–U.S. border, allows interaction with transborder archival material, and incites us to question the archive and understand the region in depth in different ways: geographically, historically, politically, socially, and culturally. With regard to shifting of the border, the map allows us to observe such movements. As Edward Ayers notes,

movement, manipulability, and specificity of the dynamic maps will give us a glimpse of what deep contingency might look like over time. By allowing us to see space and time at a distance, in relatively abstract ways, the maps show us dissolving and crystallizing patterns otherwise invisible in rows of numbers or static maps based on the same data. (Ayers, “Turning Toward Place, Space, and Time,” 12)

The Carto platform, a geographic information system (GIS) tool, allows us to develop layers, based on BAC’s historical periods, that visualize the particular transitions of the region. This enables us to question the hegemonic discourses imposed on this geopolitical space and to create other views of the borderlands through the transnational data. It also destabilizes the notion of the border as a recent division: we can now visualize multiple identities, derived from the newspapers, challenging past and current political discourses that attempt to control the region and borderland communities. Again we see how a transnational databank, a transborder archive, and BAC’s digital map, based on the definition of local practices, demonstrate the possibilities of bridging the Global North and the Global South by challenging political and geographical borders through the use of technology.

Collaborations: Breaking Hierarchies in Digital Humanities

We viewed and created the project from the perspective of graduate students as well as members of the communities in question, subject to the current political tensions.
At the same time, we engage with issues such as the state of the archival materials, collaboration with institutions and scholars, and the sustainability of independent digital humanities projects by students.

In the course of our work, we found some archival material from Mexico in U.S. repositories that were subject to various restrictions for digitization and online circulation, thus limiting access. Transborder archives are not being restored and preserved like other categories of material owing to their language, location, and sometimes lack of funding. Digitized newspapers sourced from the United States are mostly preserved by nonprofit organizations that depend on commercial publishers such as Gale, Readex, and EBSCO to continue their task: this can make access an expensive business. Even the newspapers freely available online are bound by restrictions that allow only partial downloads or none at all, as well as limited access to the platform. This forces individual scholars to contact the institutions concerned, thereby exposing themselves to new restrictions. These challenges are traditional problems, as Huub Wijfjes states:

> Although millions have been invested in digitisation projects, still only a fraction of historical newspapers is available for research purposes. Lack of money, but also the scattering of collections and problems related to copyright protection, can still be decisive for the success of research efforts. (Wijfjes, “Digital Humanities and Historical Newspaper Research,” 7)

Such restrictions are common in various U.S. borderlands newspapers. The problem was partially solved by including, in the digital map, information about each newspaper and the link to the relevant private collection or commercial publisher’s platform.

When working with institutions and libraries of both the Global North and the Global South, transborder projects like BAC find collaborations subject to hierarchical constraints. When trying to set up collaborations with institutions and libraries in the Global South, we encounter a resistance to working with scholars from the Global North—even individuals like the present authors, hailing from the same country—for fear of appropriation or restriction of the material once it is mounted to a digital platform.

This echoes Risam’s observation on the recording of digital knowledge: “humanities scholars must all work to make sure the digital cultural record does not only reflect the epistemologies, knowledge hierarchies, and values of the Global North” (Risam, New Digital Worlds, 140). Another issue in respect of collaboration is the tendency to rely on projects based on institutions rather than independent projects by students. For instance, although BAC continuously works through collaborations between institutions, libraries, archivists, organizations, and individuals to preserve and digitize newspapers, it faces challenges because these are independent
projects managed by graduate students. In order to break the institutionalized hierarchy, future negotiations for collaborations and project proposals should consider alternative models and approaches that support the expansion and continuance of projects like BAC.

The situation calls for dialogue on the following questions:

- How can access to archival material in repositories across nations be facilitated by institutions?
- What kind of practices can ensure transnational collaboration in digital humanities projects, especially those managed by students?
- What does ethical mentorship look like when working with students who are creating DH projects based on their communities, their personal experience, and/or as an endeavor toward social justice?
- On a plane directly germane to BAC, what practices are needed to encourage independent projects created, managed, and sustained by students?

BAC has created a transborder archive, visualized through a digital map, based on transnational data that exemplifies a postcolonial line of digital humanities scholarship, creating new forms to highlight the importance of the borderlands region, its archival material, and the history of its communities. From its beginnings, BAC has taken note of the fluid expanse of the region and the transitions in its border between the Global North and South. This responds to a diasporic model of global digital humanities that “offer[s] the possibility of increasing collaboration across geographic boundaries, breaking down barriers to participation in scholarly endeavors across the Global North and Global South, and cultivating local methodologies and theories that promote pluralistics and hybrid praxis on a global scale” (Risam, New Digital Worlds, 66). Support within the DH community for postcolonial practices, inclusion of people of color, and attention to issues of social justice were crucial to BAC’s development.

Projects such as BAC work toward a deeper understanding of the Mexico–U.S. border with its political tensions and transnational dynamics; hence toward decolonizing the discourses that obscure the history of a region straddling the Global North and Global South, and comprising many communities. In the case of BAC, bridging personal knowledge, local practices, and historical archives, the colonizer’s tools are employed to develop an alternative way of documenting the historical memory. Locating, mapping, and facilitating access to the newspaper archives of the binational region is a way of repossessing our heritage by filling the lacunae in the official history and recovering a multiple legacy of experiences. With this in mind, it is important to create postcolonial digital humanities scholarship with tools that break with colonial, patriarchal, and imperialist structures, re-creating instead a past and a present through active agency and resistance. New interpretations of
the past can lead to a better understanding of the present and help to resist impo-
sitions in the future.

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