Borders

A Story of Political Imagination

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Abstract

This article traces three different political imaginaries about borders, suggesting that the dominant imaginary—the one of border walls, driven by a fear of invasion—is only one way to live in the world. The goal is to make space in our political imaginations to rethink how we live together, including thinking beyond nation-states as containers that keep people in or out. By first showing how the vision of invasion is built and maintained with intersecting transnational technologies and ideologies, I open the way to thinking otherwise. Second, I trace the counterpolitics of borders developed by artists and activists, resisting borders and walls, as they work towards the end goal of freedom of movement. Finally, I turn to more speculative visions; I argue that we need to create room for alter-visions or alterpolitics—parallel alternatives to the current political order, which differ from oppositional politics. To this end, I read across the fields of immunology and anthropology in order to open an alter-political imaginary based on xenophilia, rather than xenophobia.

Keywords: borders, border walls, mobility, political imagination, invasion, alterpolitics
In January 2016, I went to the US-Mexico border wall as part of a larger interdisciplinary research project on multiple mobilities.¹ We started in Brownsville, Texas. We went to a refuge called the Hidalgo Pump House which was bisected by the wall, and well known as a birdwatching venue. We were accompanied by an activist named Scott who was at that time affiliated with the environmentalist group The Sierra Club; we wanted to talk with him about the intersecting politics of immigration and environmentalism. As we got up close to the wall, we saw something in the tall grass. We went over to look and saw a person—body—face down. Scott asked carefully, ‘Are you okay? Can you hear me?’ After what seemed like an eternity, the person lifted her head, and in a fear-stricken voice said in Spanish, ‘please don’t tell anyone that we are here!’ Her companion raised his head to nod from another spot farther down. They were hiding in plain daylight, in the middle of a nature preserve full of tourists; we calculated that they must have just recently scaled the wall and were trying to hide in the grass until sundown, when they could disappear. We offered them water, but Scott quickly ushered us away, so as not to draw attention to them. We moved to a spot farther away where we still could see them and tried to focus on what Scott was saying. Within 10 minutes, one of the birders—there in theory to admire the birds and the beauty of the landscape—spotted them. He made a beeline to Border Patrol and reported them. Within minutes, they were handcuffed, and led away.

What work do border walls actually do? We did not need to see that devastating act of denunciation and the violence of arrest to know that people regularly cross over border walls; anyone can see the fingerprints along the metal beams, the traces left by the many who have scaled it. Anyone who walks by can see the ladders on the ground beside the wall, along with ropes and
other paraphernalia; border patrol officers said they have to clear them away every day. The border patrol officers (CBP or Customs and Border Patrol) also admitted to us that walls are simply ‘tactical infrastructures’: the goal is for them to simply slow people down, so they can be caught after they cross. Indeed, we found that CBP use a measurement called the ‘border calculus’—an algorithm that anticipates how quickly someone will disappear after they scale the wall.

Despite this, much of the debate on borders—academically and politically, at least in relation to liberal democratic nation-states—has revolved around a dichotomy: whether they should be open or closed. The open borders argument is about free and unfettered movement for all, albeit while following liberal, market rules; and the closed borders argument suggests people should be able to create and maintain an inside and an outside. More specifically, this dichotomy builds on the long-standing debate about whether liberal democratic
nation-states have a moral right to control or restrict immigration. The classic defense of this position is offered by Michael Walzer (1983). He understands political membership as a social good, constituted by the shared understandings of a political community. This implies that members of a political community should be free to decide who is admitted to their political community in accordance with their own understandings of it. Membership decisions are tied to collective self-determination. On the other side of the debate, however, are thinkers who believe that fundamental liberal principles, such as freedom and equality, translate into a duty to maintain open borders (Carens, 1987). The two main lines of argument here for open borders are built around the right to freedom of international movement, and egalitarian ideals which underlie the duty to admit all would-be immigrants (Wilcox, 2015). To be clear, this is different from a more radical, no-borders approach, which challenges the unequal distribution of wealth based on nation-states, pointing to the way capitalism works hand-in-glove with nation-states (Anderson et al, 2011; Heller et al, 2019). Increasingly, walls are erected in the name of sovereignty and closed borders; according to some estimates, there are currently 70 border fences worldwide, compared to 15 in 1990. These are built by liberal and illiberal states alike. And yet, as we saw, not only are they not really closed, but they are not expected to be.

What if we were to move beyond dichotomies, to accept that no border will ever be hermetically sealed? My goal is to think in a small way about how to create new architectures of and for politics. I am interested in thinking beyond nation-states as containers that either keep people in or out, and that serve as the primary sites of either political belonging or exclusion, as they have primarily served to produce and maintain a world order based on inequality. The location of border walls as markers of the nation maps very clearly onto places where there is significant socio-economic inequality—indeed, the biggest predictor of who constructs the walls and where they do so is the wealth gap between the nation-state constructing the barrier and the place and population defined as a threat (Aizeki et al, 2021, p. 39). In other words, border walls—as one manifestation of the nation—help to keep out the ‘have-nots,' casting them not only as undeserving, but as criminal.
To be sure, there are political ideas and theories that rework the meaning of borders and sovereignty outside liberal frameworks, but they are rarely included in dominant public discourses—for instance, indigenous communities have long argued against the violence of settler-colonial notions of sovereignty, which they suggest are about domination and control, rather than about relationality with the land and all those who share it (Simpson, 2011; Coulthard, 2014; Fortier, 2017). There are also other smaller attempts at challenging this imaginary: for instance, theories and policies of belonging are being proposed based on residence rather than on national citizenship (Balibar, 2003; Varsanyi, 2005; Bauböck, 1994; Isin, 2017).

While these alternatives are only minimally reflected in newspapers or in policy, it is important to note that bordered worlds and border walls are only one way to live in the world. While they are built and rendered real through political, material and legal infrastructures, they require continuous work and ingenuity to be maintained as necessary and inevitable: they have to be imagined, constructed, legalized, patrolled, and re-imagined. For instance, Trump’s proposed border wall—the constant, key refrain of his presidency—was both symbolic and performative, putting in place the idea, if not the actual infrastructure; he repeatedly proposed building ‘a big, beautiful wall’, and, not unlike an art installation, had contractors display several 30-foot-tall prototypes in the desert. But it seems that even the contractors knew the whole plan was ultimately a fantasy; ‘The 2,000 miles is never going to happen in a hundred million years’, a contractor told DW Gibson, the author of the book 14 Miles. Yet, the project continued (Bauer, 2020). This is a performance that must be countered with an even better, more compelling set of acts. Trump is not the only one who can imagine new futures. As Dunne and Raby (2018) state, politics is a battle over the imagination, where the imagination can help us maintain pre-existing realities, or create alternative visions, denaturalizing the ‘real’. As they write, Brexit was an alternative vision of the UK that became real overnight, changing the lives of 60 million people. Politics is the business of creating alternative realities.

So, what if we reconceived of borders in different terms—such as permeable, partial, temporary—or in different forms, such as welcome lounges, flyways, or weather fronts, shifting hour by hour depending on membership? Such forms
and grammars of bordering depart from the typical narratives about borders and migration, where migration is seen as 'problematic mobility' (Anderson, 2017, p. 1532) and signals the need for control; rather than getting stuck in what Anne McNevin (2019) has called the discourses of ‘progressive time’ and ‘international space’, which take sovereign nation-states for granted as the spatial basis of political life, and where migration across borders is seen as a linear movement from one nation-state to another, I think through the lens of mobility, as it provides a different set of conceptual, analytic and empirical grammars by which to understand what are more often unruly, unpredictable, and non-linear movements. Mobility attends to movement (including pauses, stasis, and friction), understanding it in larger contexts and constellations of non-human things, such as commodities or pathogens. Mobility and its counterpart, immobility, help us to widen the frame beyond both migrants and the nation-state, to look at movement and emplacement, and how these work together, in intersection or at cross-purposes—never alone—but also how movement itself generates new political possibilities (De Genova et al, 2018; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). A perspective that starts from mobility enables us to ask what a border might mean or look like if we recognize the circularity, repetition and multiple types of movement that people engage in, in intersection with and against other people, non-humans and things. That is, it allows us to see that, in the example I started with, the lives and mobility of the migrants hiding in the bird-watching refuge were intertwined with, and pitted against, those of birds, who were purportedly being protected from people ‘like them’. What if we recognize not just that people move in changeable ways, but that the border itself moves, according to legal, economic, and environmental changes? The Southern US border is in the Rio Grande River, after all, and it clearly moves as the river shrinks and expands. How people move, then, necessarily depends on how the river moves.

I also turn to mobility as an analytic because of the way that it opens imaginative possibilities. Insofar as mobility implies the process of becoming rather than of being (it always implies change, however minimal), it leaves space to imagine an otherwise; and insofar as intellectual and political gaps appear when different types of mobility (i.e. of people, wall designs and birds) intersect and rub up against each other, without fully coinciding, the aperture
between the various regimes of knowledge and being open the way for different realities to be imagined and constructed, whether in practice, by way of prefigurative forms, or in a more strategic manner. To be clear, by political imagination, I mean that enacted by artists, activists and scholars but most importantly, by everyday people, including people-on-the-move. In this article, drawing on collaborative ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and secondary source research at a series of borders—US-Mexico, Morocco-Spain, France-UK, and Israel-Palestine—I play on the gaps and fissures of intersecting mobilities to expose and rework our current political imaginaries about borders.

With the goal of creating space for new forms of political imagination, I join a broader move toward speculative thinking in scholarship. Speculative work should not be confused with utopian projects, which often imagine a far or distant future. Locating itself in current material worlds and working out from there, speculation takes place at the edge of what we can see, at the limit; indeed, it can simply make ‘real’ what is already part of a collective imagination (Dunne and Raby, 2018). Speculative thinking is a blur, as designer Benjamin Bratton (2015, p. 14) writes, ‘between the real but-as-yet-unnamed and the imagined but-as-yet-not-real.’ Stated differently, I use empirical research primarily as a way to help imagine an ‘otherwise’ (Povinelli, 2011) or an ‘incipient not-yet’ (Zigon, 2019). If we are attentive to the link between potentiality and possibility (Zigon, 2019), we might be able to bring something new into being. I argue that it is important to create room in public discourse and practice not just for a counter or oppositional politics which reacts to a dominant form of politics (as in countering closed borders with open borders) but to enable alter-visions, or alternative political formations that exist alongside the current political order. By alter—as in the sense of ‘alter-politics’ (Hage, 2015) or ‘alter-life’ (Murphy, 2018)—I mean a coeval alternative to the current political order, a way of ‘being other to ourselves’ (Hage, 2015), which differs from an oppositional politics that tries to resist or defeat it. As the philosopher Jacques Rancière states (2010) the goal of political work is not to engage in the imaginary as opposed to the real. Rather, it involves a reframing of the real, a changing in the cartography of the sensible and thinkable; ‘the real is always a matter of construction’, a ‘fiction’ that passes itself off as real by creating consensus (2010, p. 148).
This essay is divided in three parts, each reflecting one political imaginary about borders. First, I trace the dominant political imaginary underlying border walls, and smart border technologies: it is about invasion. Second, I discuss the many counter-political imaginaries of borders, already being enacted by artists, activists, and engineers, to enable freedom of movement. Finally, I turn to more speculative visions that go beyond countering existing technologies; in particular, I make an attempt at imagining an alterpolitics by drawing from new understandings of the immune system, which conceive of people inseparable from larger ecologies and as search engines that require difference in order to survive. In this model, closing borders would be lethal.

Political imaginary #1: The ‘real’ politics of invasion

Contemporary media is full of imagery about invasive others. Indeed, contemporary border walls are perhaps most often justified by a need to stop a perceived invasion. Those who are outside national communities or territories are understood not only as dangerous, but as driven by the desire to attack, conquer, and penetrate the territory of the nation-state. In June 2018, Trump tweeted about those trying to cross the southern border of the US: ‘We cannot allow all of these people to invade our Country. When somebody comes in, we must immediately, with no Judges or Court Cases, bring them back from where they came’. He repeated this language of invasion over and over; for instance, when in 2019 a peaceful migrant caravan was moving from Mexico toward the US border, he stated, ‘It’s like an invasion. They have violently overrun the Mexican border’. But the idea that all those on the ‘outside’ desire to invade is only one way to imagine the world: it is a political ‘fiction’, or part of a larger political imaginary. It has been increasingly rendered ‘real’ by way of the language, laws and infrastructures that enact it. By tracing the histories of border wall architectures and technologies—in this case, I focus on the US-Mexico border wall—I show how ‘invasion’ has been designed and materialized.

Invasion invokes the idea of war. Invaders enter forcefully, and with hostile intent. As a military metaphor, it invites a military response. Militarism is justified by the idea of an invading horde. But I argue instead that the militarized technologies of the US-Mexico border wall have been built and amplified by a
set of transnational political relationships, in tandem with a border industry that is grounded on fear; not by an impending invasion from outside. While border walls purport to be the materialization of national sovereignty—deriving from and protecting an essential inner national identity—paradoxically, they are ultimately created by transnational, i.e. border-crossing, political technologies. That is, transnational designs and the economies they are embedded in have helped to manufacture the very idea of invasion. Walls could not be imagined or built without cross-border movement of designs, political ideologies and military economies: in this sense, border walls are ultimately about movement or mobility.

To understand how walls are mobile, and how they connect to transnational economies and political imaginaries to build the idea of invasion, it is important to know a bit about walls themselves. People often think that border walls are seamless, uniform structures. In fact, the US-Mexico border wall is made up of many different designs and materials. These include levy walls, floating fences, steel bollards, and picket fences—the designs have names like Normandy, Bollard, Landing Mat and Aesthetic—the ‘aesthetic’ design is for sensitive areas like universities or schools. The structures, materials and the smart border wall technologies are transnational—they are shared: border security technology is a global industry. I attended a ‘Border

Figure 2
Security Expo’ in January 2018 in San Antonio Texas, which draws tech companies and government officials from around the world, in the name of fighting transnational organized crime and terrorism. Israeli companies lead the way, profiting from the fact that Gaza is ‘a great laboratory’ (Miller and Schivone, 2015), sharing wares such as smart fences, which are highly fortified steel barriers that have the ability to sense a person’s touch or movement. Indeed, the Israeli company Elbit Systems furnishes an arsenal of ‘homeland security systems’ from Gaza and the West Bank to Southern Arizona. Such companies have created what some have dubbed the laboratory of ‘the Palestine-Mexico border’ (Miller, 2019) where technologies are tried out and data is shared.

These are transnational technologies, circulating in the name of national closure. But how does the political imagination involved in designing these, matter, and how does it travel? More specifically, what does it mean that these wall technologies were developed in different political or historical contexts and for divergent political purposes? I argue that designs embed their own political imaginaries. As social scientists have argued, artifacts always have a politics (Winner, 1980; Appadurai, 1986; Bennett, 2010). In the case of the US-Mexico border, these technologies import a particular political history of militarized violence, most specifically, from Israel-Palestine, where the separation barrier (what many now call the ‘apartheid wall’) was initiated in 2002 by Israel at the height of the second intifada. The immediate setting was a renewed Palestinian uprising in the face of the failure of the Oslo Accords and the promised peace agreement that would have granted Palestinians a separate state. The larger context is occupation and the violence of settler colonialism. Israel responded with military might, doubling down on territorial security. Consequently, the barrier was developed in a highly militarized environment. It is made up of electronic fence, iron, barbed wire and a lot of concrete; it is imposing and mostly impassable. It also uses the highest-level military technologies, from long-range sensors to unmanned aerial vehicles. What does it mean that these militarized technologies have since been imported into the US to shore up its southern border, which was not a war zone in the same sense? To be sure, the American ‘war on drugs’ has indeed produced its own deep and enduring forms of conflict and violence, but of a
different sort, as has the US’s own imperial and settler colonial histories. Those living around the border have co-existed for a very long time, as friends and often as family; this view of ‘invasion’ comes top-down, not from the region itself, where the majority do not want a wall (Burnett, 2020). Indeed, along the lines of recent arguments made by social scientists about ‘technopolitics’, we must understand that politics takes place at the level of technology itself — technology is a terrain for the negotiation of moral and political questions (Mitchell, 2002; Edwards and Hecht, 2010; von Schnitzler, 2016; Braun and Whatmore, 2010).

The Israeli occupation produced the Israeli border and homeland security industry; no country comes close to topping them in surveillance companies per capita. Their military exports—many of which are attached to homeland security—were worth $9 billion in 2018 (Miller, 2019) and are only growing in relation to what they themselves have called ‘Europe’s refugee problem’. They use the fact that their war zone doubles as a laboratory, in order to sell their technology—they boast that it was tested on the front lines. Since 9/11, the US has altered its southern border in accordance with the Israeli model. Indeed, the border wall between the US and Mexico has literally been manufactured by Israeli companies. Perhaps more importantly, the relationship with Israel has produced a different, militarized logic: a different system, which has, in effect, according to journalist Todd Miller, ‘globalized Palestine’ (Miller, 2019, p. 74). This has not only included giving contracts to Israeli companies for drones, and other surveillance technologies; but Israel’s IDF has trained US Customs and Border Protection and Homeland Security agents as well as US law enforcement officers explicitly in counter terrorism, broader perimeter security techniques and in securocratic combat (Miller, 2019, p. 78). In this process, war has been reframed, and the police have been militarized just as the military has been trained in policing technologies and assigned law enforcement duties.

In this sense, the wall technologies and the system of which they are a part enhance the militarization of the US-Mexico border, and further the connections between the police, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which is part of Homeland Security), Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and the military. In the language from recent US war zones, military logistics companies
have 'up-armed' the landscape (installed weaponry or protection); they have created a ‘border surge’. These technologies have helped to extend the idea of a war against immigrants—as invaders—legitimizing both the creation of a state of the exception at the border (Dorsey and Barriga, 2015; Mohanty, 2011; Sundberg, 2015) and the use of military violence against immigrants and other people of color throughout the country. To be sure, the militarization of the American landscape has a long history of its own (Masco, 2014; Lutz, 2009; Gusterson and Besteman, 2009). As politics scholar Victoria Hattam (2016) has shown, the US-Mexico border wall also reveals its own imperial histories, by being built in part with old Vietnam-war era landing mats.\(^8\) Ultimately, the border security complex initiated by the relationship with Israel has been grafted onto US imperial histories, resulting in a US-Israeli hybrid. In many ways, this wall security complex serves as a prototype of a border wall for the global north—a transnational political and infrastructural formation that works to keep out the racialized poor, i.e., the ‘invaders’.

There are multiple aspects to constructing a political imaginary around invasion. Not only do the ramparts need to be built, by facilitating the mobility of certain technologies which stop the mobility of certain people; the idea of immigrants as invasive must also be generated—other forms of imagination are required. This has been accomplished through a process of dehumanization that is at once about animality and racialization. That is, the ‘human’ as a conceptual category is not something natural or biologically fixed, but rather, it is the work of a constantly changing project of taxonomy. A metric of animality is used to exclude people from the category of humanity; but this in turn cannot be separated from race and racial classification, which orders bodies according to how animal they are (Kim, 2015). This taxonomic slippage has a longer history in the US, but it is being solidified into material infrastructures in new ways. In an interview with one of the wall designers whose prototype was a finalist for the Trump border wall, I learned that his ‘wirewall’ technology was initially developed to trap lobsters and crabs, then it served to keep fish in pens, and finally, to cage chickens. With its special PVC coating initially designed for the sea, it could withstand extreme environments and temperatures, while maintaining visibility through the fence. It was now being proposed for humans. This kind of transfer of technology from non-human
to human, not only likening people to animals but treating them as such, is built into the history of barbed wire; barbed wire was initially developed to control and enclose cattle by inflicting pain on them in the American West during the period of colonization. From there, it was transformed into the primary technology of controlling space for people—enabling the concentration camps used during the Nazi regime, and in the Russian Gulag (Netz, 2004; Barder, 2015). It continues to this day as a key tool to contain human beings in an ever-growing carceral world.

In terms of immigration, this transfer from non-human to human first happened at the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, where, perhaps not accidentally, Trump kick-started his incarnation of the wall in the last months of his presidency, with a 30 mile long, 30-foot-tall steel fence that has upended a portion of the landscape, its ecologies, and its water sources. In fact, the US-Mexican border wall was initiated in Monument Park in 1949 with the justification of keeping out contaminated ‘Mexican’ livestock, infected with hoof and mouth disease, but it quickly morphed into and built on a desire to keep out Mexican people (Piekielek, 2016). Indeed, this is just one instance of practices of quarantine—as practices of containment not unlike bordering—shifting from microbes and animals to people. Immigrants are regularly compared to other invasive entities like pests and swarms. And in fact, the language of ‘invasive others’ is used in overlapping ways for insects, pathogens, plants and even ideas with varying results: calling plants or animals ‘invasive’ justifies extermination, to protect the ‘natives’ (Ticktin, 2017). We can see this same response being invoked to deal with invasive humans. Trump’s words in reference to immigrants are once again revealing: ‘these aren’t people, they are animals, and we are taking them out of the country at a level and a rate that has never happened before’.9 Then, a few weeks later he said those who ‘invade’ should be deported, and that immigrants ‘pour into and infest’ the country.10

When migrants are likened to forms of parasitic, pathogenic or insect life, capable of infection and contamination (O’Brien, 2003), there are mandated responses, first and foremost of which is cleansing or elimination. Understanding people as invasive can open the way to new forms of dehumanization (Harris and Fiske, 2006; 2011; Wilson 2017), and new types
of violence, and in this case, it works by way of technology which regularizes the exclusion and conceals it from the conventional field of political discussion and legal contestation. Invasion is part of a political imaginary which has dire consequences, especially when enacted as the only reality possible.

**Political imaginary #2: A counter-politics of freedom of movement**

The current political imaginary of borders as devices to keep invaders out not only works to sort and contain people and things—it embeds other types of nefarious politics, enabling new forms of violence and ever-more exclusionary political formations. Knowing this, are there challenges to the way borders, and border walls, are conceived and enacted? In this section, I point to a series of examples of what I think of as imaginaries based on counter-politics, or ‘anti’-politics—forms of oppositional politics aimed at resisting, inverting, or countering the existing political order. The forms of counter-politics I trace respond directly to borders and to border walls by erasing or bypassing them, challenging, or reimagining them; as such, they allow us to see that borders and

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*Figure 3*

Ana Teresa Fernández’ art project *Erasing the Border*, Mexicali, Mexico, April 2016
© Sandy Huffaker, Reuters.
walls are not fixed, natural or inevitable. They enable and encourage us to imagine forms of freedom of movement. Once again, as in the political imaginary of invasion, I focus on the way imaginaries are materially re-envisioned or remade; I include artists, architects, designers, and engineers. Here, migrants get transformed from invasive to simply ‘people-on-the-move’—a term claimed by these folks themselves, to get away from legal categories built on exclusion and hierarchy, like refugee, asylum seeker and economic immigrant.

To start, there are artists all over the world engaged in re-thinking and re-working border walls: in 2017, the dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei instituted huge, gold metal cages resembling security fences in various locations in New York City, along with many smaller sculptures and fences, to make people in NYC encounter and feel the proliferation of fences. Mexican artist Ana Teresa Fernandez created a performance called ‘Erasing the Border’ by painting a section of the border wall blue, the color of the sky, and making it disappear into the horizon. The French artist JR took a photograph of a toddler, blew it up and pasted it onto a special scaffolding, where the toddler peered over the border wall into California, just south of San Diego. Seen from the American side, it reveals the wall as incomprehensible to a child (and hence denaturalizes it), while also humanizing people on the Mexican side. There are so many more examples by different artists at different border walls: Banksy has painted many provocative images on the Israeli-Palestine apartheid wall (on the Palestinian side) including a child being carried over the wall by a bunch of balloons; a little girl patting down an Israeli soldier with his hands up against the wall; and a row of people on an escalator, being taken over the top of the wall. There are other kinds of anti-wall installations that build on a more expansive idea of the sensory world, such as ‘Border Tuner’ by Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer; he mounted massive robotic searchlights on either side of the urban border zone between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua. When two beams of light cross, they create a bi-directional audio channel, connecting people on opposite sides of the river in direct communication through amplified sound. This allows people to engage in cross-border conversations. Border walls figure centrally in all of these artworks, insofar as they are the object of erasure, bypassing, remaking or mockery.
Visualizing and mapping can also be used to think beyond the current political imaginary of invasion, which shapes immigration and border policies. Indeed, it is impossible to rethink borders without engaging with the technologies that mark, spatialize and patrol them, particularly today, with expanding digitalized systems of border control. Dubbed ‘smart borders’, these forms of militarized surveillance located both around the border and well into the interior enable and require new forms of technology, from integrated fixed towers, remote video surveillance systems with cameras, surveillance drones, mobile X-ray units, automated license plate readers to cellphone tracking towers (Aizeki et al, 2021). There are motion sensors integrated into the wall. And lidar sensors, the same laser-based technology that gives sight to self-driving cars, are being proposed to help with better visibility at the border (Metz, 2018).

While across Europe and the US smart borders are categorized as more ‘humane’ than border walls insofar as they are purported to be engaged in deterrence and therefore less directly violent, they have nevertheless increased the number of migrant deaths by shifting migrant routes into more dangerous terrain and proliferated the surveillance of those within national borders. But rather than simply condemning such technologies, I want to point to the way they are being imaginatively repurposed by designers and activists, constituting another powerful counter-politics that makes these technologies enable—rather than curtail—people in their pursuits. They can help people move, and help people stay where they want. Ricardo Domínguez’ transborder immigrant tool is an early example of such a counter-technology: it was a mobile phone technology that provided poetry to immigrants crossing the border and simultaneously led them to water. Swedish-Iranian designer Mahmoud Keshavarz’s project on designing fake passports and reclaiming smuggling as a liberatory politics, is part of this very same counter politics of mobility (2016). Design can be a form of power, turned on itself—indeed, to this end, Keshavarz and the larger design collective of which he is a part, have written a manifesto for ‘decolonizing design’ (Decolonising Design Collective, 2019).

There are also newer examples where technologies initially used to detect migrants as threats are repurposed toward freedom. When a migrant ship goes down or people die at sea, the ‘Forensic Oceanography Project’ reconstructs
a composite image of what happened, using the vast apparatus of remote sensing technologies which provide an archive. These include optical and thermal cameras, radars, vessel tracking tools, distress signal mechanisms—which indicate geo-referenced coordinates—wind and current data collection devices, and image-producing satellites, which help track where a boat is, might be, or where it was recently (Heller et al, 2017, pp. 4-5). Here, using some of the same surveillance technologies used by states, a ‘disobedient gaze’ is enacted with the goal of unveiling not the migrants, but the political violence that such migration is often founded upon (Heller et al, 2017).

If these technologies focus on reconstructing the past to hold states accountable or to provide free passage, new forms of digital art use technology to reframe the ‘real’, scrambling the present to open the way to a different future, combining documentary with imaginative scenarios. In particular, Swiss filmmaker Ursula Biemann’s video essay the Sahara Chronicles invents a new mode of performative representation, whose ambition is not to represent but to re-constitute reality. Focusing on the many people, networks and industries that help people cross the Sahara, it provides an alternate map, re-organizing the complexity of migration by bringing different things into the frame. It combines interviews with the nomadic Touareg turned-migrant-smugglers after they were excluded from their own land, with footage that simulates imagery of aircraft equipped with night vision and thermal cameras; Biemann’s footage works to destabilize borders by showing them not as pre-existing, but simply as effects of the technologies. In both cases, these digital artifacts contest the media and governmental representations saturated with racism and fear; if, as Rancière states, politics is a cluster of perceptions and practices that shape the common world, these alternate framings of the sensory world are remaking the political.

While these representational and digital technologies produce varied counter-political imaginaries, there are also what we might call ‘analog’ counter-technologies; for instance, in his 2010 film Qu’ils reposent en révolte French filmmaker Sylvain George captures a memorable scene, where people-on-the-move gather around the fire near Calais, in France, getting ready to cross into the UK. They put nails in the fire, then use these burning nails on their fingertips, to erase any trace of biometric recognition. Their identities remain their own, untraceable by such measures. Similarly, in the co-directed French-Moroccan
film *Les Sauteurs*, filmed by one of the people-on-the-move waiting to cross into Spain from Morocco, at Melilla, we see a counter-technology being made: that is, when the Spanish Guardia Civil change the wall technology at Melilla, putting soft nets or mesh over the wire of the fence to block people from climbing it by making it impossible to get a good grip—people-on-the-move respond by designing home-made studs or cleats, and inserting them into the bottom of their shoes so they can climb up and over.

![Figure 4](https://example.com/figure4.jpg)

**Figure 4**  
Otra Nation Hyperloop  
© Made Collective, 2017

Finally, there are examples of walls being repurposed towards different ends; for instance, there is a proposal for a ‘utopian anti-wall’ by the MADE collective, which calls for the creation of 'Otra Nation', a half-Mexican, half-US co-nation with shared infrastructure and a border-long hyperloop transportation system. Indeed, insofar as it imagines a future, and tries to bring it into being, it is not so different from Trump’s proposed border wall. Another alternative to border walls was proposed in February 2019, also entirely imaginary, but given legitimacy by *Scientific American* (Fischetti, 2019), *The Atlantic* (Ahmed, 2019) and *The Washington Post* (Daniels, 2019). This ‘green alternative’ is a massive energy infrastructure project at the US border, dreamed up by engineers and scientists. With solar
panels, wind turbines, water desalination facilitations and pipelines for natural gas, this extensive snaking complex would theoretically produce clean energy for both countries, spurring economic growth and development in the region. Given its size and scale, the infrastructure in this plan would effectively replace the infrastructure of the border wall, yet it would work to connect people and things rather than to separate and contain them. To be sure, these models are not without their own problematic engagements with capital, expansion, and growth; but as counter political imaginaries—ideas that invert hegemonic visions of the world—they demonstrate once again that politics is a struggle for the imagination.

Political imaginary #3: An alter-politics of xenophilia

These artists and technologies counter, critique and undermine the politics of borders and border walls based on a vision of invasion, by allowing us to imagine that walls are not insurmountable or preordained; they push us to dismantle them, in the name of freedom. But can we go deeper, to challenge the very basis of what it means to be in the world, together? Why do we think it is even possible to wall ourselves off from each other, let alone desirable? While we need ways to subvert the current political order, we also need a different set of political imaginations, new visions about how we might live and be together; visions that can begin to redirect our imagination beyond this cartography. Once again, we might think of these as alter-imaginaries, or forms of alterpolitics, which do not run counter, but alongside, ‘real’ politics (Hage, 2015). These are alternatives that are not connected by straight lines to futures or pasts; they are alternative modes of thinking and inhabiting the earth. As Ghassan Hage explains, alterpolitics works to open space for radical otherness in our midst—trying to evade capture by existing political assemblages by creating a space beyond opposition or critique.

But how does one get to an alterpolitics? To be sure, the distinction between anti- or counter-politics and alter politics is messy, blurred; we need both registers of political imagination. Alter-politics may be radical, but not impossible; these forms can and do grow in the uncaptured excesses of racial capitalism and prefigure alternative ways of being. They are already being practiced. We can also think of alterpolitics in the language of the speculative,
which is at the edge of what we can see or feel, at the limit, more the terrain of potential than of the unknown or predetermined. It requires a deep dive into the not quite unknown, into the multiple futures that are lurking, one of which might be linked to the present if we help bring it into being. The goal of speculative work is to get involved in new becomings—it is an affective mode than encourages intervention in what things could be (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

I turn now to new scientific theories as a potential source of imagination for political and anthropological theory, and as a way to speculate about different presents and futures. New thinking in scientific fields can help to push our thinking about politics—it can help us imagine new ways of being (Ticktin et al, 2022). Rather than thinking of the traditional ways that biological or medical science has been used by social scientists—for instance, in theories of socio-biology, which purport to explain social life by way of biological models, yet tend toward biological determinism in the process—what if we did not see it as a one-way street in which scientific research is applied to political life, but rather, what if we combined scientific and political imaginaries? That is, rather than following scientific evidence in a literal, linear, or logical sense, what if we understood scientific inquiry as its own creative process and used it metaphorically, to scramble the way we understand relationships, the way we understand being itself, and to evoke new bio-social and political arrangements? What if we used its strangeness as a portal into new possible worlds? To be clear, this is not to suggest that science is imaginary; while I follow feminist science studies scholars who argue for a form of scientific knowledge that is situated, responsible, accountable and embodied, like them, I am guided by a commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world that don’t lose the materiality of things. I follow Donna Haraway (1991) and others like Sandra Harding (1986) who have argued for a ‘successor science’ that offers a richer, more adequate, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical reflexive relation to others. I simply want to avoid directly applying science (biological, physics, etc) to the social, as these are concerned with different subjects and problems. The regimes of knowledge may overlap, but they are only partially commensurable.
In this spirit, I draw on new understandings of the immune system to rethink borders. In particular, I turn to the work of medical doctor and anthropologist David Napier (2003; 2012; 2017) who examines theories of epigenetics, regenerative medicine, and immunology to challenge the idea that the job of the immune system is to attack and fight against invading pathogens, i.e., to eliminate the ‘non-self’. This model of the immune system grew out of scientific findings in the 1960s and developed in the context of the Cold War with its associated metaphors of secret invasion. Since the 1990s, Napier has challenged this idea, showing that, in fact, the immune system goes out to explore and familiarize itself with its environment; it works as a ‘search engine of difference’, looking for the unfamiliar in order to assimilate new information. Rather than protecting us in the present, the immune system is engaged in making a future we can live in, creating new cells and a future evidence base. As such, it ensures that living beings are familiar with the diversity of our larger environment and can adapt to it.

Napier proposes that we use this updated science to revise our political approaches (Napier, 2017). Rather than assuming we should be afraid of the Other, that we are constantly at war with difference, he proposes a medical theory that argues for the opposite: we require difference in order to survive. In other words, he proposes a social model of xenophilia rather than xenophobia. But I want to take this even further. Napier’s work shows that our immunological histories are not histories of stable beings—individual or social—but of encounters. Immunity can be understood as the memories of previous encounters between an organism and its environment (Keck and Ticktin, 2015). This model evokes a different human-nonhuman collective, one created across time and space, between species and microbes, histories and encounters. The immune system is constantly, recursively changing us, and in this sense, our bodies and the bodies of both human and non-human populations serve as archives. The immune system is grounded on relationships, not autonomy; it requires an acknowledgment of the world as a web of living beings.

How might such a scientific imaginary open the way to re-imaginings of political and social life? We could think of ourselves as ecologies or assemblages that are constantly changing, porous, curious, and perhaps even welcoming. It could mean that we should be in search of encounters and eager for new
experiences, rather than guarding against change. Closing borders—to our bodies, minds, political worlds—would be lethal; staying the same would be akin to dying.

We can use this perspective to think about borders in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic—a test of border regimes if ever there was one. Two early, dominant responses to Covid were to either lock down nation-states, ignoring everything else, from other illnesses to social and economic well-being—or to keep everything open, sacrificing the vulnerable in the name of economic survival. Neither of these had good results: millions of people have died. But if we see ourselves as search engines that require difference, could we imagine scenarios beyond openings or closures, beyond all or nothing? If we follow this new imaginary, we understand that no system of control can master the borders of our bodies, as we are always changing with our environments. More specifically, we are not separate from, but a part of, our environments. As Julie Livingston (2020) writes, ‘The body is an act of exchange and a site of vulnerability in a complex and more-than-human world’. It is, as she so aptly notes, a tentacular relationship, where the air we breathe and exhale eventually gets inhaled by someone else, somewhere else; where the water that goes through our bodies to keep us alive may next nourish a farmer’s field. Or, as Mel Chen notes (2021), where the smoky air, from the climate-change-enhanced wildfires of California, gets inhaled by an unmasked, infected pedestrian, creating a doubly potent inhalant for the next passerby. We are interconnected, co-constituted. Indeed, we must take advantage of the fact that through COVID-19 our connections have been rendered visible in a way that is impossible to ignore.

What if, then, instead of control and separation, instead of borders and defense systems, our goal was to manage our various forms of togetherness? Rather than conceive of ‘us versus them’—where ‘them’ is the virus, or perhaps the ‘infected foreigners’, or anyone who does not look like ‘us’—it is just ‘us’, always and only us, in various overlapping and partially commensurable configurations, in forms that are temporary and shifting. This is an ‘us' that begs for newness, change, difference.
The ‘us’ of nation-states has not worked to fight off Covid, because it is always accompanied by a ‘them’, rather than by a recognition of connection and a xenophilic desire for encounters with the other. Framing the problem as the need to shut the borders of nation-states against invasive others, is not only wrong, but deadly. As we have seen in the US, togetherness in the form of the nuclear family and the nation have been favored, and deemed ‘safe’, while immigrants, foreigners, people of Chinese origin and many others have been implicitly or explicitly rendered ‘unsafe’. These others are construed as invaders and conflated with the virus and are subject to ongoing forms of violence. ICE is still deporting people—including those who are sick—without regard for them, or the people into whose communities they are deported. But those on the ‘inside' have also been devastated by this nationalist imaginary: the nation is not a harmless or protected space for people in prisons, in nursing homes, in detention centers, in meat packing plants, and in poorer communities where people do not have easy access to clean water and soap, where they have no ability to isolate or to get health care. In fact, a focus on the nation as a space of supposedly nonviolent connection and care has already killed thousands and thousands of people.

Managing our togetherness rather than creating borders does not mean there are no temporary separations, or that all types of affiliation or togetherness must be the same. Quarantine and social-distancing make sense in situations determined by epidemiological measures, but medical quarantine should not be confused with political quarantine—using the political category of the nation-state as the geographic space of quarantine has not resulted in better health for the majority of people worldwide. Rather, we need to think about isolating and protecting groups according to vulnerability, not nation-state. This means understanding vulnerabilities as interfaces—not as static pre-conditions—created by contexts, encounters and relations that are also often undergirded by inequality. For instance, racism makes some people more likely to be exposed to, or live in, toxic environments—and these toxicities become embodied, exposing people to premature death. It is no accident that people of color disproportionately died of Covid19, all over the world.
In this political imaginary of xenophilia, we will never exterminate the ‘invaders’, or win a ‘war’ against them—viruses are already an integral part of our body-worlds. There are 1.7 million known viruses in wildlife, all of which have the potential to cross into and be activated in us, depending on our own biosocial conditions. The question is: how do we nourish the infrastructural conditions and forms of togetherness that keep the more lethal viruses inert, while still encouraging the innovativeness of non-lethal viruses? Indeed, viruses have been a driving force in the evolution of the species; a non-negligible percentage of human DNA comes from viral infections (Brives, 2020). In this sense, curiosity is the only way to survive, even as it inevitably entails (perhaps serious) risks. We could encourage a set of multiple and intersecting mobilities: after all, as I have been suggesting, this is the space for creativity and imagination. In this spirit, could we design playgrounds for certain human-virus meet-ups, and simply not invite animals like bats or pangolins, some of which carry viruses likely to skip the species-barrier, and would prefer to be left alone anyway, not driven out of their forested habitats? We could also leave out the industrialized chickens, since agri-business has magnified the spread of zoonotic diseases (Wallace, 2016). There could be a series of sneeze-fests where we share the contents of our air, from sterile to virile to viral? Could we then translate this way of being in relationality with the world—and its various non-human inhabitants—into a different way to imagine being together with humans as well?

This imaginary does not propose a territory of belonging, but a state of constant becoming; a commitment to exploring and embracing the liveliness of the world. In this sense, we can think of the two people I mentioned at the start of the essay—who crossed the US-Mexico border wall, and hid in the grass of the bird-watching refuge—as being at the vanguard this imaginative process. They were speculating on a better future, on a world in which birds and people might move with each other for a while; a world where a refuge for birds might also be a refuge for people.
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**Notes**

1. See The Multiple Mobilities Research Cluster: [https://www.multiplemobilities.org/](https://www.multiplemobilities.org/) Members include: Vicky Hattam; Laura Liu; Radhika Subramaniam; myself; and Rafi Youatt.

2. Leanne Simpson, referencing fellow Nishnaabeg scholar Gerald Vizenor, has suggested that we think of indigenous sovereignty in terms of ‘transmotion’ insofar as relationships are always in motion; there is nothing static in the natural world, and nation-states will never achieve this absolute control and stasis, however much they try (Simpson, 2011; Fortier, 2017).

3. There is a large and growing literature which uses the concept of mobility. Some of the work I have found most helpful includes Cresswell (2006); Kotef (2015); McNevin (2014; 2019); Tazzioli (2020); Sheller and Urry (2006); Sheller (2018); Walters (2015); and Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013).

4. See also Victoria Hattam, this issue.

5. I conducted the fieldwork with at the US-Mexico border or in conversation with The Multiple Mobilities Research Cluster; I went to Tangier and Melilla with anthropologist Liliana Suarez-Navaz; and I have thought about this in conversation with speculative designers Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby, in the context of a co-run Mellon Sawyer Seminar on ‘Imaginative Mobilities’. Finally, I have co-written a report for the Immigration Detention Network (Aizeki et al, 2021) on smart borders, and the dangers those pose by being framed as ‘more humane’.


7. I attended with Laura Liu and Victoria Hattam, two members of the Multiple Mobilities Research Cluster.
8 See Shahram Khosravi (2019) for how these same landing mats have circulated transnationally.


10 http://time.com/5316087/donald-trump-immigration-infest/

11 I think also in relation to what Michelle Murphy (2018) calls ‘alterlife’, which is life altered by chemical relations particularly on indigenous land, but life also open to alteration, life with the potential to become something else. In this sense, alterpolitics is about dismantling and world-building at the same time.

12 The concept of ‘biosociality’ challenges the dualist distinctions between biology and society or nature and culture, suggesting instead that human beings are configurations of biosocial relations. See Gisli Palsson (2013, pp. 22-41).

13 To be sure, science fiction and speculative fiction have long engaged in a similar process.

14 I draw on Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s more comprehensive definition of racism here, ‘the state-sanctioned and/or legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies’.