Borders of Solidarity: Life in Displacement in the Amazon Tri-Border Region

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Abstract

In 2004, the representatives of Latin American countries, gathered in Mexico City, devised a multilateral Plan of Action (MPA) in order to foster an improvement on refugee protection mechanisms in the region. Among its many proposals, the document advanced the idea of borders of solidarity. The proposal calls attention to new forms of thinking about border zones and border lives and how different actors might dialogue to improve the reception, assistance, and protection of displaced groups in a region marked by deep social inequalities and political violence. This paper is an attempt to make sense of these assumed new modes of governance of borders, trying to elucidate multiple perspectives and mechanisms of dealing with life in displacement in border contexts. The paper follows the narratives stemming from national and international officials, NGO and assistance workers, and displaced families' associations, in the context of the Tri-Border area between Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. The paper aims to unveil how each discourse deals with the (dis)connections between borders, displacement, and protection. I argue that perceptions of the role of borders, as both bridges and barriers, and as spaces of life, vary according to how each group appropriates and interferes in the political dialogue. Some focus on the management of mobility; others on the improvement of life conditions for marginal groups; still others try to interrupt the political processes that make such marginalization possible in the first place. I propose three varying understandings of solidarity that speak to each of these perspectives— managerial, faith-based, and autonomous—stressing the problems and also the positive aspects that might be learned from approaching borders through the lenses of solidarity.

Résumé

En 2004, des représentants des pays latino-américains, réunis à Mexico, ont élaboré un plan d'action multilatéral en vue de favoriser une amélioration des mécanismes de protection des réfugiés dans la région. Parmi ses nombreuses propositions, le document avance l'idée de frontières de la solidarité. La proposition attire l'attention sur de nouvelles formes de réflexion sur les zones et vies frontalières et comment les différents acteurs pourraient dialoguer afin d'améliorer l'accueil, l'assistance et la protection des groupes de personnes déplacées dans une région où règnent la violence politique et de profondes inégalités sociales. Le présent article tente, en donnant un sens à ces supposés nouveaux modes de gouvernance des frontières, d'éclaircir de multiples perspectives et mécanismes pour affronter la vie en déplacement dans des contextes frontaliers. L'auteure s'appuie sur les récits issus de hauts placés nationaux et internationaux, des intervenants des ONG et de l'aide, et des associations de familles déplacées dans le contexte de la zone tri-frontalière entre le Brésil, la Colombie et le Pérou. L'auteure vise à dévoiler la façon dont chaque discours prend en compte les (dis)jonctions entre frontières, déplacement et protection. Elle soutient que la perception du rôle des frontières, comme ponts et barrières aussi bien que comme espaces de vie, varie en fonction de la façon dont chaque groupe s'approprie le dialogue politique et s'y immisce. Certains se concentrent sur la gestion de la mobilité, d'autres sur l'amélioration des conditions de vie des groupes marginaux, d'autres encore tentent d'interrompre les processus politiques qui rendent une telle marginalisation possible en premier lieu. L'auteure propose trois interprétations différentes de la solidarité qui approfondissent chacune de ces perspectives — managériale, confessionnelle et autonome — en soulignant les aspects négatifs

mais aussi positifs qui pourraient être tirés d'une approche des frontières à travers le prisme de la solidarité.

There is a lot of pain and misunderstanding;
the border remains an infected wound.
Perhaps the utopian spirit of the
border project lies in its impossibility.
—Guillermo Gomez-Pena, *Warrior from Gringostoika*

In 2004, the representatives of Latin American countries, gathered in Mexico City, devised a multilateral Plan of Action (MPA) in order to foster an improvement of refugee protection mechanisms in the region. Among its many proposals, the document advanced the idea of "borders of solidarity." Though not conveying the idea of an open borders project, the proposal certainly calls attention to new forms of thinking about border zones and border lives and how different actors might dialogue to improve the reception, assistance, and protection of displaced groups in a region marked by deep social inequalities and political violence. If a No Borders project presents the case against immigration controls and entails a radical redemocratization of borderlands,[1] to think about borders as geographical imaginaries of solidarity leads us to interpret the border not as "a category but rather a perspective."[2] In this way, borders can be reappropriated by new modes of governance and, at the same time, be rethought as spaces of life. Therefore, perhaps, the most ambitious aspect of borders of solidarity is precisely to highlight the moment in which *being displaced* acquires the meaning of *living as border* and boundaries are subsumed into a rather provocative evocation of an indifferentiation between the limits of life and the limits of modern geographies. By trying to elucidate multiple approaches and mechanisms of dealing with displaced and refugee populations in border contexts, this paper elaborates on the *perspectivism* of solidarity practices.

The reflections presented here are the result of fieldwork conducted in 2007 in the Tri-Border area of Brazil, Peru, and Colombia, more specifically in the twin cities of Leticia and Tabatinga. The paper follows the narratives stemming from national and international officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and assistance workers, and displaced families' associations in this particular context in order to unveil how each discourse deals with the (dis)connections between borders, displacement, and protection. I argue that perceptions of the role of borders, as both bridges and barriers, and as spaces of life, vary according to how each group appropriates and interferes in the political dialogue. Some focus on the management of mobility; others on the improvement of life conditions for marginal groups; still others try to interrupt the political processes that make such marginalization possible in the first place. I propose three

varying understandings of solidarity that speak to each of these perspectives: managerial, faith-based, and autonomous solidarity. Though presented in parallel fashion, these three perspectives on the linkage of borders and solidarity are actually intertwined in the everyday practices of border dwellers. The attempt to advance solidarity as a search for autonomy (evinced by the social organization of displaced families) challenges aspects of the regulation and management of mobility as well as reinforces a discourse of rights and inclusion that is premised on statist and citizenship-based categories. In a sense, all perspectives are marked by a certain ambivalence that is constitutive of displacement as social practices that deal with the dual processes of ordering the world in dichotomies (citizen/alien; migrants/refugees; subject/object; rooted/displaced) and thinking the world from dichotomous concepts.[3] Thus, the paper aims at contributing to a more critical analysis of what borders of solidarity might actually promote and how they can impact on the daily lives of those who inhabit such sites.

The paper is organized in five sections. In the first section, I present a brief description of the Tri-Border area, highlighting the paradoxes of distance and proximity as well as the overall political context in which the narratives of groups emerge. The second section discusses the overall policies presented in the MPA and analyzes some of

Border marker between Leticia and Tabatinga along Avenida da Amizade (Friendship Avenue). Carolina Moulin, 2007, personal archive.

Map of the adjoining cities of Tabatinga, Brazil, and Leticia, Colombia, and nearby Santa Rosa, Peru.

its consequences. The third section discusses the views of assistance workers, in particular, those associated with the Catholic missionaries in the region. The fourth examines the narratives stemming from displaced groups' associations, focusing on the difficulties and strategies of intervention devised by them to advance their claims in a context of social and political abjection. The fifth and concluding section advances a classification of solidarity approaches in relation to borders, stressing the problems and also the positive aspects that might be learned from each set of discourses.

Representing the Border Landscape

The Tri-Border area between Peru, Brazil, and Colombia is located in the heart of the Amazon forest. The main urban centers are the twin cities of Tabatinga, Brazil, and Leticia, Colombia, the latter being the capital of the Departamento de Amazonas. The twin cities are physically joined and blend into each other. Transit and movement are free between the cities, as there is no border controlling post along the avenue that connects them. From the Colombian side, it is only possible to reach Leticia by plane or by a very long and treacherous journey combining paths and boat trips. Tabatinga is connected to the provincial capital, Manaus, some 1,600 kilometres away, by plane—only one flight during business days—or by boat in a three- to five-day journey (depending on the direction, whether up or down the river). Control of goods and people takes place only on the Brazilian side, some 50 kilometres down the Amazon River, in what is called Base Anzol (Hook's Base). The Hook serves as a customs, security, and immigration-processing checkpoint. There, a handful of federal police agents are responsible for checking the documents and cargo of all the boats

Bairro União (Union Neighbourhood): an occupied area along the borderline between Tabatinga and Leticia. Most of its inhabitants are poor peasants from mixed nationalities and also from indigenous background. In the flood season, water runs beneath the houses along with the garbage and sewage that is throw in there. Carolina Moulin, 2007, personal archive.

sailing into Brazilian territory. Their main goal is to check passports and to look for drugs. In my conversations with local populations, many have shown intimate fear in relation to that checkpoint. They are often asked to open everything and many have told me about cases of racial profiling, abuse, and discrimination among travellers, especially those of Colombian origin. "As the Head of the Brazilian Federal Police in town told me, there is very little that passes unnoticed at the Hook.

The massive Amazon River criss-crossing the exuberant landscape and the supposedly free movement of peoples and merchandise along the avenues, streets, and fluvial routes are at odds with the violence (at least one violent death per day is registered in town), poverty, lack of public services, and a not-so-subtle military/police enforcement presence along its edges. In total, more than one hundred thousand people live in the region. They rely on the informal economy, exchanges of goods, and the few public service positions available in town (with both the local government and the military) to survive. The idyllic landscape provides a postcard background for a politically convoluted context, marked by a precarious political economy. There is no industry or reasonable public investment, a lack of basic

infrastructure, and an increasing pressure from guerrilla and paramilitary groups reliant on a transnational network of drug trafficking and on multiple forms of exploitation of people's social vulnerabilities.

The border has a dual impact on the city. It alters the cultural and social landscape; the city operates in bilingual mode and all three currencies (real, pesos, and soles) are accepted in most stores. The *cabloco* face, that of the mixture of white and indigenous peoples, marks the typical image of its inhabitants. At the same time, federal and provincial authorities consider the region as a strategic crossroads for sovereign presence and control over human mobility.

At certain moments, the twin cities portray worlds that seem miles apart, either by the imposition of state regulations, by language differences, or by the absence of political discussions within the local transnational context of the historical and social realities that are enmeshed in this particular time-space zone. Brazilians seem, in general, surprisingly ignorant of the forty-year-old civil war that has disrupted their fellow neighbours, though they are very much aware of the Colombian and Peruvian presence in the city, and also of the circulation of money and drugs that is pervasive there. It is common to hear people state that there is not a single family in Tabatinga who has not relied at some point on "dirty" drug money. Twenty-five per cent of its population is of Colombian and Peruvian origin and probably half of them (or more) have some family-related background to either country.

This region and Tabatinga, to be more precise, is important for learning about borders of solidarity for two main reasons. First, in the past years the Amazon border corridor has caught the attention of international organizations and state authorities in relation not only to the illegal activities that have taken place there,[4] but also mostly because of the influx of foreigners towards Brazilian territory. The National Committee for Refugees (the Brazil Ministry of Justice responsible for refugee-related policies and status determination) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimate that around twenty thousand Colombians now reside in the Amazon region. Most of them are considered to be "of concern" for they have been displaced by the Colombian conflict. This number is five times the total number of refugees who have been recognized nationwide by Brazil so far. Because of the difficult access and supposed absence of state/guerrilla interaction, Tabatinga presents itself as one of the main entry corridors to Brazil, given the relative intensity of traffic along its fluvial lines. These numbers are compounded by the almost fourfold increase in population experienced by Leticia in the past ten years (from ten thousand to forty-five thousand inhabitants). NGOs in the assistance front have also reported important increases in the number of displaced families in town. Official data indicate almost 160 families,[5] but many displaced do not fit the criteria for inclusion in the social programs implemented by Colombian authorities and, while present, remain invisible. The almost fifty-year civil war in Colombia has generated one of the gravest internal displacement crises in the world, with an estimated three million people expelled from their houses and land.

Second, there are significant development inequalities between the countries. The image of Brazil is one of a land of opportunity and security for the poor rural and indigenous peoples on the Peruvian and Colombian side. As one assistant worker stated,

> The education system in Brazil is more welcoming and better structured than in Colombia. Schools are better in Tabatinga especially for the children. So there are issues in Brazilian development and social investment that attract the poor in Leticia. And there are also things in Leticia that attract the Brazilian in these borders. But certainly, there is an inequality in the flow of people; it is thicker in the Brazilian direction, of course because Brazil is more developed.[6]

Moreover, for those fleeing the generalized conditions of human rights violations in Colombia, Brazil presents a distant but real opportunity for escaping and for claiming asylum. The current estimates are that Colombia has more than three million internally displaced people (IDPs), though the data presented by UNHCR and the Catholic Solidarity Network has been contested by government officials. Not surprisingly, then, the issue of human mobility has become a priority topic within regional diplomatic negotiations. The coordinator of the Social Pastoral in Tabatinga, Father Gonzalo, recognizes that Tabatinga and Leticia, despite their calm atmosphere, are a time-bomb waiting to explode: "by the time violence reaches Leticia, they will all enter Brazil and request asylum."[7]

Sovereign Appropriations of the Border Zone: The Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action (MPA)

The main focus of the MPA is certainly the Colombian conflict, the largest humanitarian crisis in the subcontinent, and its impact on neighbouring countries—Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela—especially in border zones. Mainly sponsored by Brazilian diplomats and UNHCR representatives, the final document was consensually signed. It relied on the active participation of civil society organizations for its implementation. The process that led to the agreement involved three sub-regional meetings between state authorities, international organizations, and also transnational and local networks, usually conducted by civil society types

of arrangements. Whereas in all sub-regions the meetings involved a direct dialogue between these three groups, the meeting of the subgroup of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, and Peru had to be separated. Governments and non-governmental organizations met separately in part due to the Colombian government's denial of many of the claims presented by civil society representatives. It was the only document which highlighted the need to balance the state-based concern over security, involving "terrorism, organized crime, drug and arms trafficking and other types of transnational delinquency," with the humanitarian claims of protection for those in conditions of vulnerability.

The MPA's main conceptual innovation was to articulate solidarity, borders, and the treatment of foreigners, particularly refugees. The notion of "borders of solidarity" advanced in that document looks to a means of bringing together institutional efforts of improving the humanitarian effects of national borders (for example, by granting free access of displaced and refugee persons to neighbouring territories) and the procedures of governing them and of sharing the burden of the refugee "problem" in the continent. Initially, this new regional approach seems to convey the idea that there is a growing convergence among multiple discourses, notably from a varied range of actors, on the notion of solidarity. Accordingly, what is meant by "solidarity" and how it is "engaged" in the context of borders is crucial.

The most acknowledged reading of solidarity is advanced by Emile Durkheim's distinction between "mechanical" and "organic" solidarity.[8] The first refers to the relationship established between functionally similar units and the emergence of social structures that regulate and restrain action. The latter encompasses complex social formations comprised of functionally interdependent units in which solidarity is defined in terms of "mutuality."[9] In both cases, "solidarity" refers to a fundamental quality of the dynamics that connect social units within a system. In current sociological studies, as Rippe[10] suggests, two major views are predominant. The first one describes acts "carried in order to support others, or at least to describe a disposition to assist […] that arise from interpersonal relationships and ties." This is the case of nationalism that explores the "categorical identity" of citizens, who share "a specific dimension of culturally significant similarity."[11] A second view, which Rippe calls "project-based solidarity," involves the condition under which one person makes the concern of another person or group, which faces a special plight, her own. Her (active and symbolic) assistance is directed at overcoming the particular problem or at finding a remedy for the special plight.[12] Rather than competing views, as Rippe seems to suggest, neither of these approaches questions the need for borders as limits of communities and, consequentially, of solidarity practices. In fact,

the temporal quality of project-based solidarity indicates that, when it comes to others (foreigners, refugees, migrants), solidarity can only be a finite goal and the needs of such others are read and defined according to the assistant's perspective. Thus, project-based solidarity does not oppose, but rather complements, solidarity practices informed by categorical identity qualities. The MPA is, in important respects, an attempt to convert the *refugee problem* into a temporal object of project-based solidarity that does not necessarily involve the reframing of the terms of practices of communitarian or interpersonal solidarity.

As Turner and Rojek[13] indicate, solidarity is usually interpreted in relation to scarcity, caught in the tension between the need for reciprocal and trustful relations and the competitive drive of individuals. In that sense, the building of (national) communities is an attempt to reconcile these two ends, by limiting the scope of solidarity while, at the same time, defining the terms of "getting and giving" scarce resources. Therefore, displaced groups are seen as operating in the limits of this precarious balance, since their presence involves the need for sharing material and ideational resources with a community to which they do not belong. For the purposes of the discussion presented here, it might be more useful to think of solidarity as a discursive economy that produces social space through an emphasis on different aspects of connective elements between individuals and groups (trust, reciprocity, subordination, equality, exclusion, etc.). In the terms advanced by Calhoun, social solidarity can be directly related to the production of a public sphere, defined as:

> self-organizing fields of discourse in which participation is not based primarily on personal connections and is always in principle open to strangers. A public sphere comprises an indefinite number of more or less overlapping publics, some ephemeral, some enduring, and some shaped by the struggle against the domination of others.[14]

Borders of solidarity are, accordingly, a battle between competing, yet also overlapping, publics and their perspectives on how the border can (or should) become a space of life and of democratic engagement beyond the criterion of (statist) citizenship.

The policies devised in the MPA involved, for example, "support to implement a program with the objective of determining in a reliable manner the magnitude and the characteristics of the *refugee problem,* with a view to identifying protection and assistance needs as well as to propose the most appropriate durable solutions," the "reinforcement of institutional mechanisms for protection and refugee status determination; the formulation of a Regional Strategic Plan

to address the protection, basic assistance and integration needs of all of the populations in need, using a *territorial and differentiated* approach."[15] This approach would involve fostering the social and economic development of border zones, particularly those isolated and impoverished, benefiting both refugees and local communities and taking into special consideration the specific situation of the rural population, women, children, and the elderly.

These "solidarity" policies are based on two main objectives. The first is to account for those who need protection. This strategy both measures and establishes a population of concern for whom needs would be assessed (magnitude and strengthening the refugee status determination) and promotes solutions. Second, there is a presumed need to reterritorialize mobile subjects and to intervene on the lived "spaces" of the border (integration and connection between uprooted and hosting communities), in order to articulate the relationships between local, national, and international levels. This reterritorialization involves, usually, the spatial containment of refugees and displaced groups within cities and delimited border areas, as well as their inclusion in a juridical framework in which their mobility is controlled and regimented by state and international officials. For integration to succeed, public policies of humanitarian protection should come alongside strategies of development promotion. Effective inclusion depends on transforming the figure of the displaced into an important part of projects of local development. It thus combines an effort at legal protection, in the form of granting and opening up access to the refugee determination process for those considered to be entitled to it, and social intervention on the spaces and limits of the communities which are receiving these groups.

When analyzing the strategies of Southeast Asian states in a global political economy, Aihwa Ong resorts to the idea of "graduated sovereignty":

> Graduated Sovereignty refers to the effects of a flexible management of sovereignty, as governments adjust political space to the dictates of global capital […] Graduated sovereignty is an effect of states moving from being administrators of a watertight national entity to regulators of diverse spaces and populations that link global markets.[16]

The MPA entails, I argue, a form of such a graduated sovereignty in terms of the management of mobility that is enabled precisely by a framing of the displaced as a population and developmental problem. Once we know how many "potential" refugees and irregular migrants are out there, once we can count the uncountable,[17] we will be able to devise the appropriate disciplinary mechanisms to resolve the problem. Institutions can be empowered to protect and integrate only those who the state determines are entitled to be part of the whole, and to separate them from those who are not. In addition, the MPA devises a transnational system of governance (involving states and international organizations) over mobility in an area that has been remarkably protected from external interference and democratic control.[18] Rendering the mechanisms of governmentality more flexible is deemed necessary to respond to the emergence of social groups that potentially disrupt claims to authority and territorial/national unity required for the exercise of solidarity.

We must not assume here that the state, and its sovereign prerogatives, constitutes a homogeneous actor. Flexibility in the management of populations provided by the construction of "borders of solidarity" requires the articulation of multiple levels of governance. Federal, provincial, and local authorities are all called upon, within their respective jurisdictions, to implement and foster policies that permit the measurement of the magnitude of the "displacement" problem and at the same time allow for the inclusion and reception of those recognized as such. Federal governments have the prerogative of status determination and local/provincial sectors are activated during the integration phase of the process.

One of the subliminal problems with this approach is, first, that it fails to recognize the border as a living space and, second, that it hides the contradictory nature of the refugee legislation in most Latin American countries. Once recognized as refugees, individuals face important restrictions against their mobility, one of which is the requirement of not returning to their countries of origin (and thus exacerbating in important respects the current situation of many who live in border areas and those who have transnational ties) and the prohibition of engaging in any political activity. It leaves unanswered the question as to what should be done with those who are deemed "worthy" of solidarity but who nevertheless inhabit spaces where such solidarity can only be partially upheld. It should be noted, however, that the MPA has been successful in bringing more attention to the issue of displacement in the region, as well as in providing incentives for states to review and adopt more inclusive legislations in relation to refugee groups. Countries like Ecuador and Venezuela have expanded the range of rights and services available to Colombian asylum seekers and also reinforced the presence of humanitarian actors in border areas. Colombia has provided almost two billion dollars for an otherwise "rhetorical" program for IDPs and countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Chile are increasingly involved in resettlement projects of vulnerable IDPs living in border areas.[19]

In the concluding note on borders of solidarity, the document states: "*solidarity* can only be sustained through *active cooperation* between the *State, civil society and UNHCR*, with the financial contribution of the international community, within the framework of responsibility-sharing."[20] The claim of sharing the burden over mobile populations is a common one in forced-migration discussions. The goal seems to be to activate a network of action that would permit several actors to share the costs and responsibilities associated with the management of vulnerable populations with their cultural, social, and economic needs. This network involves multiple levels of state-based governance and also civil society organizations.

Many scholars have highlighted the ways in which civil society neither accounts for the multiplicity of political subjectivities in contemporary times nor represents the most legitimate voice in terms of the concerns and demands of those in conditions of social marginality.[21] One might argue that the distinction between state and civil society, and moreover the emphasis on "civil" forms of social organization, has foreshadowed other forms of struggle that happen in the interstitial spaces and by groups that do not necessarily fit into the categories of traditional citizenship.[22] Santos aptly points to the fact that in most of the world, and notoriously in the developing world, state and civil society have been intertwined as mechanisms of social regulation, and thus have not accounted for much of the politics and struggles of social groups.

> If in some core countries it could be reasonably argued that civil society had created its state, in the periphery and even in the semi-periphery, the opposite had actually occurred. In the latter case civil society was thus an even more artificial entity than the state itself. The multiple social processes that were left out of civil society, so narrowly defined were the gauge of the weaknesses of the peripheral and semi-peripheral states.[23]

The same point is advanced by Chatterjee when he identifies a split between an elite organized domain, that of state and civil society, and an unorganized subaltern domain, which he calls political society. "Civil society restricted to a small section of culturally equipped citizens represents the high ground of modernity."[24] As he points out, political society and subaltern communities negotiate within the high domains of state law and bureaucracy. They also move beyond it by asserting their own conflict resolution mechanisms, by providing alternative regulations of social life and membership, and very often by reacting and refusing to subsume themselves to the categories and interpretations of normality and legality given in a top-down perspective.[25]

Therefore, and taking these considerations on the relationship between civil society and state, it is not surprising to see the overlapping concerns between these two actors in the final accords of Mexico. It is important to emphasize that this is not a criticism of the intentions or the hard work done by groups and persons who have devoted their lives to helping others. The argument here is one focusing on the underlying conditions of possibility of such resolutions in relation to the treatment of difference that lies at the heart of border experiences. They are, henceforth, a criticism of the systemic conditions that make dis-"place"-ment[26] possible in the first place and the consequences of engaging with multiple practices of solidarity from the perspective of abject populations.[27] As such, despite recognizing the originality and creative effort underneath these initiatives, we have also to question the assumptions and mechanisms that are put in motion and the consequences, and costs, of improving the living conditions of displaced groups. We need to do so not only from the standpoint of sovereign actors but also from the perspective of those who live in these circumstances.

Humanism at the Border: A Social Assistance Approach

The relationship between Catholic missionaries and the Amazon border region dates back to the earlier colonial period. The religious component and the presence of the Catholic Church are important aspects of the social fabric in the border. Given the relative inadequacy of public services and difficult access to social assistance, the Church has provided a fundamental network of support for those living in conditions of poverty and destitution.

The historical work of faith conversion has been somehow supplanted by a "moral rescuing" approach, aimed at fostering strategies of local organization and activism. A Tri-Border team of missionaries, church followers, and social workers was instituted and assists those involved in loosely defined experiences of human mobility. The work consists of providing orientation for those who have migrated to the region, for example by assisting them with presenting claims to state authorities at different levels. It serves as an assistance centre to which they can resort in cases of need or emergency and which provides programs of professional training and self-sufficiency in conditions of displacement, such as establishing collaborative projects with educational institutions and governmental agencies. The members of the migration "arm" of the HMT (Human Mobility Team) are very few and most of them are not from the region. Despite providing institutional assistance, the affiliation to the place is always transitory, except in very rare cases. They stay there for a couple of years and then are sent by

their respective dioceses to other missions. The HMT is thus mainly composed of migrants itself.
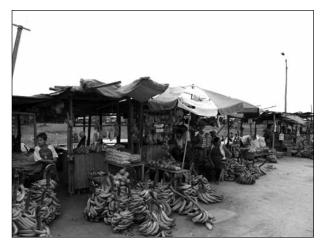
The missionaries live under very poor and strenuous circumstances. Their motto of "living for and with the poor" translates into a reality in which they are housed in one of the most vulnerable communities, the Union Neighbourhood, and funding is restricted to basic food and housing provisions. Given these restrictions, the help provided for those deemed to be in "need" is mostly of an advisory nature. The situation has changed slightly in regard to those requesting asylum in Brazil. UNHCR has now established a partnership with the HMT for the reception and assistance of asylum seekers in the region. UNHCR also pays for the expensive transportation fares of asylum seekers and refugees should they be willing to move inside Brazilian territory and after their application has been filed. Up to mid-2007, only eighty-two people have requested asylum in Tabatinga and have received the "refugee"-based assistance of the Social Pastoral. The majority of the work is then conducted with border dwellers and the displaced families who have not resorted or intend to claim refugee status. The situation in Leticia is even worse for there is no funding available except for that provided by the programs put in place by state authorities to help those who can be classified under he Displaced Persons Act. As one of the assistance workers stated:

> Refuge is not an alternative to all of the displaced, except in the cases of those who have not adapted to living conditions here or whose life is really in danger. To leave, once again, can be even more traumatic, and honestly we have advised them about that. Very few displaced who come here know about the option of asylum, and even if they knew I am not sure they would opt for it: their decision to claim asylum would be based on an illusory evaluation of Brazil, thinking that it is a more developed country, with more opportunities. Life in Brazil is hard even for Brazilians, the language is a barrier and rural, poor peasants will suffer the most.[28]

In that sense, the approach adopted by the HMT is a more sensitive one because it recognizes the heterogeneity of displacement and mobility experiences in the everyday lives of those they assist. They also have a clear understanding of the limitations of the governmentality structure in terms of bringing to light and resolving the multiplicity of demands and sometimes incongruent and incoherent requests made by these groups. They see the constraints on both sides of the equation, as states and international organizations try to regiment and to compartmentalize mobility experiences in terms of clear-cut categorizations and as displaced peoples, refugees, and other marginalized groups make claims to inclusion and help without necessarily taking the actions (or being willing to take the actions) needed to promote change in their lives. One might say these frustrations are also a by-product of the limits of our political imaginaries as they attempt to fit these liminal subjects into the categories of states and civil society. One of the missionaries vented his frustrations with the slow pace of people and change, stating, "one needs a lot of spirituality to work here as the sense of adventure vanishes off too quickly." The sense of time is very different in the Amazon from that of global flows which refugee and displaced communities are supposed to be a part of—a global temporal frame marked by instantaneity and measured in real time. In a way, despite the desperate condition of many of the displaced, they are still very much resilient to change (especially because they associate change with trauma). And the social/spiritual workers feel discontented and frustrated with their moral and emotional attachment and the absence of short and mid-term results or significant impact in the life conditions on the border. One of them told me this is the fate of their "moral and humanitarian task," a mixed feeling of responsibility towards destitute others and of disappointment with the limited practical results achieved. The frustration comes, for example, as a consequence of the incapacity of untying the knots of structural social inequalities pervasive in the border and in the lives of border dwellers. Many of them choose invisibility and being undocumented as a strategy of survival and the state infrastructure only reiterates the fears and suspicions of these groups.

Nevertheless, the philosophy of the HMT work is one centred on ideas of vulnerability related to displacement experiences. They aim to provide a moral and religious oriented program, with no discrimination based on faith practices, that would help individuals and families to overcome the traumas and violence that have led them to become border dwellers. They seek to speak for the displaced/migrant communities' concerns with local authorities and other interlocutors, while at the same time attempting to elucidate and bring to light their realities and demands. The idea of solidarity has always been an intrinsic part of the Catholic network of social assistance; it has always informed the strategies of intervention between assistants and assisted in the context of human mobility as portrayed by these specific organizations. Claims to solidarity are also an intrinsic part of Catholic social theory, traced back to an original brotherhood conception under which all humans are God's children. More than that, it is a solidarity approach based on a particular conception that, on one hand, recognizes the distinctions and differences in the ways dis-"place"-ment is experienced, and, on the other, assumes that these same experiences are lived by abject, marginal, vulnerable, and
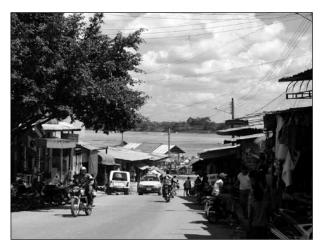
Street vendors in the harbour area, Leticia. Carolina Moulin, 2007, personal archive.

Street vendors in the harbour area, Tabatinga. Many of the migrants and displaced make their living on these sites. Carolina Moulin, 2007, personal archive.

victimized subjects. We are all the same under God's eyes, but that equality cannot be fully realized in the here and now. All we can try to do is to alleviate and be responsible for the other, especially for those others who are in need. In important respects, this humanist approach to borders assumes a hierarchical standing not of individuality, but of suffering and agency. Because of their trauma and condition of invisibility, the displaced should be endowed with the means for making legitimate claims in relation to their community and also to official authorities. Even if their displacement and mobility experiences are different and heterogeneous, their suffering and vulnerability is the same; they are victims of a system that inherently excludes and the space of exclusion they inhabit is a delimited and socially definable one. From that particular position, the goal of humanitarian work is to make the displaced realize, through a mediated form of subjectivity,[29] that they have rights. In important respects, the HMT presents a contextualized approach to solidarity on border zones, that takes the lived experiences of mobile subjects as its starting point, but that also subsumes them under the rubric of victimization.

Contesting Borders: Displaced Groups' Interventions

The focus of state based organizations is in the ordering of the displacement "problem." They aim at compartmentalizing experiences of mobility under defined rubrics, as refugees, asylum seekers, irregular migrants, temporary workers, or permanent residents. These labels allow for public policies to be devised and for "durable solutions" to be implemented in terms of integration, resettlement, or expulsion. Catholic assistance networks, in contrast, portray

mobility experiences as contextualized and distinctive experiences. They emphasize the position of vulnerability and the need for a charitable, humanist approach to difference whose common denominator places them all equally under the rubric of "the poor" and needy. Despite their important, sensitive, and vocational efforts, the results have so far been limited and the challenges faced keep mounting. Frustration and concerns over the sustainability of their strategies are amongst the many issues raised by those who devote their lives to helping others. Both strategies resort to claims that the border should be seen as a zone for exercising and performing solidarity acts towards those considered to be different. But what sorts of self-organized foundations have been put in place by the displaced groups in order to overcome their problems and survive in conditions of political marginality?

Displaced groups know well the double nature of their condition of social marginalization. On the one hand, their situation derives from the poverty and destitution associated with uprooting processes: they have lost their businesses, property, and means of livelihood, and the cohesion of their families has been disrupted. These are the consequences of expulsion. On the other hand, it derives from their exclusion from both the national and the international realm, their being left in a permanent state of in-betweeness, as non-citizens and as non-foreigners. The international framework, even the one devised by the Mexico Declaration, does not create mechanisms to deal with internally displaced peoples, unless they become a recognizable "other" (as a refugee or asylum claimant, for example). Hence, their negatively defined existence, in relation to conventional forms of belonging, becomes more

acute because they also inhabit a liminal time-space zone, that of the border.

In this context, and mostly in response to their own liminality, displaced families have tried to put forth associations that would be able to speak for them and to press official authorities. In Leticia, two associations are now fully run by displaced peoples. Association 1 (A1)[30] has been in place since 2004. Forty-five families are actively participating in it and the appointed directors say their main goal is to search for resources, especially in the areas of education, health, and housing. They meet regularly and the convocations are usually on a mouth-to-mouth basis or through the local radio station. Every member contributes two thousand pesos (around three US dollars) whenever they can. One of the members stated how much had changed in terms of the discrimination and xenophobia faced by the displaced in the border zone:

> When I arrived here, discrimination was really bad; it was unusual; now things are a little better. People think we are all displaced and that all the displaced live from government money, but this is not true. If we do not work, we do not eat.[31]

A case worth mentioning is that of Carmela. Despite living in the border for almost seven years, she entered the association a few months before my arrival in the border. One of the reasons was that it took years for Colombian authorities to include her and her family in the protection network. She remained displaced in the border for six years without ever being recognized as such. Her husband was recognized but once she decided not to live with him, the government did not extend the protection to her and her children. For the past couple years, she says, they have received help, but very little.

> I came to Leticia because my family was here, they supported me. I defend myself washing clothes, I am an 'independent saleswoman'—I sell clothes, cosmetics, and so on. But it is not enough, I have small but recurring debts. Debt is a problem for all the displaced, life is very expensive here, we stay here just because it is very peaceful here. That's the reason I remain here.[32]

The displaced that arrive at the border are supposedly informed of the presence of displaced peoples' associations through Social Action, a governmental agency with a mandate to care for and manage the displaced families. They promote meetings and workshops. But they have also undermined the associations' work by choosing non-affiliated displaced families to speak for the displaced community, and this has disrupted grassroots attempts of creating an "interrupting" voice in the political debate in the area.

> Here in the association we have people capable of speaking for and understanding the problems of the displaced community, but the Directors of Social Action have nominated outsiders that have nothing to do with the elected leaders of the association to speak on our behalf. We have sent communiqués to other entities denouncing this behavior and we will soon make this known to the central government. We have also scheduled a meeting to gather all the movement leaders to debate this situation. We want her replacement, by someone who can work in accordance with the displaced."[33]

In her statement, Carmela makes two important claims. The first one states the ability and capacity of the self-organized associations to speak on behalf of themselves. She refuses the mediated subjectivity that has been pervasive in border engagements. She responds to the disrupting policies of governmental authorities that aim at destabilizing their initiatives by disturbing their leadership role. Secondly, she reverses the traditional assertion that places them as the ones who should be *in accordance* with governmentality strategies and victimization approaches. It is the official authorities that should work in accordance with the displaced; the displaced are *entitled* to demand from the appropriate agencies access to benefits and it is their *duty* to dialogue with them. The form of solidarity enabled by the experience of self-organization among the displaced enables an empowering position that reverses the systemic logic usually attached to the governing of mobility. It does so in very conflictive, rudimentary, and incoherent ways.

The associations face many constraints and problems, precisely because they have to work through their differences without erasing them, if they want to respond to the structural challenges presented by their condition (and especially in relation to the increasing pressure of multi-level governance and networked action that has made its incursions in the region). One of these problems is exemplified by the breakdown of the association into two groups. One remained Association 1 (A1) and a new association (A2) was formed. Juan, the director of A2, explains the conflict in the following terms:

> We were faced with many inconveniences. Inside the board, we witnessed many irregularities and we wanted things to be made in a different way. As a leader one must always be with the group. Because of these clashes, I decided to quit the Association and others did the same. So we were a numerous group and we decided to create a new Association within a strategy of more transparency and consistency. Right now, there is a lot of collaboration between the two associations, especially with the changes in direction that took place. The concerns of the displaced are the same, mainly related to economic concerns over survival and the

discrimination we face here. Many said that the displaced should be taken away from here. They even requested the Army Captain to arrange a flight to take us all out. So we scheduled a meeting and we showed the locals that we are also Colombia, that we could have moved anywhere but *we chose to be here* because we do not belong to this war, we are not the protagonists of the conflict, we are neither Left nor Right.[34]

Pablo, the Treasurer of A2, also highlights the conflictive context that led to the separation, recognizing that many of the problems regarding the construction of a solidarity group remain:

> The dismantling in two associations was caused by conflict. There was a disclosure of certain negotiations that were taking place on the leadership's back. Those against these negotiations decided to establish another organization. But now we have new leaders and things have changed, but still the problem remains, of those taking advantage of these processes and ignoring both displaced associations.[35]

When looking at the narratives of mobile groups, one can see the emergence of alternative forms of solidarity that seem to contest the particular/universal divide pervasive in civil society arrangements and state-based discourses. It is an approach that fosters a sense of empathy of interests while retaining a central role for agency and, thus for conflict, precisely because they experience and relate to similar contexts in different ways. But that does not necessarily mean that because of that they forfeit their right to present claims, not as citizens, not as refugees, not as foreigners, but as displaced. As Juan stated, "we are also Colombia," we are here, we have been there and we intend to stay. This is not to say that their efforts of solidarity organization are not presented with dangerous choices. At many times, they resort to the same language and discourses that have created the conditions of possibility for their existence. They use a rights based discourse, even if disconnected from the traditional sites of citizenship; they fall back on appeals to a nation, to sovereignty prerogatives and to international organizations in an effort to translate their experiences to those who have never experienced or faced the disruptions of forced displacement. But, at the same time, they emphasize that, despite not choosing to be displaced, they chose where to go for reasons related to the lack of imminent conflict, proximity with neighbouring countries, family and ethnic ties, and so on. They chose to remain displaced, to not ask for asylum and thus to permanently yet precariously *live as a border*.

Varying Solidarity Approaches to Borders

In important respects, to rethink the border as a zone of solidarity requires a questioning and reframing of how to deal with difference and mobility. In this concluding section, I argue for the need to clarify the potential meanings of solidarity in order to avoid the reproduction of exclusionary discourses. What I have tried to show is that solidarity has, of necessity, to be differentiated. Contrary to what many presume, solidarity does not necessarily lead to political ideals of emancipation and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity, nor does it necessarily question the dichotomy between inside/outside as spaces of order/chaos. I propose three different types of solidarity with very different impacts over what it means to rethink borders in their relation to claims over mobility. The first one, *managerial solidarity,* is expressed precisely by the MPA attempts of improving refugee protection in the continent. It is a meaning connected to strategies of control and discipline, that can improve the living conditions of refugees and locals who live in refugee-like situations, but on the terms that they be defined as "refugees" and therefore in opposition to the "citizen." The first action proposed by the MPA is to "carry out an assessment of the number of persons who could benefit from this Plan of Action" and "present a study on the impact of the presence of asylum-seekers, refugees and other persons in need of international protection in the geographical areas covered by the program."[36] This is not to say that the MPA does not incorporate other groups who might be affected by the "refugee situation." For example, in regard to public policies towards border areas there was a specific concern with making sure local populations would also be incorporated in the programs and would benefit from them, "since these populations are bearing the brunt of solidarity, despite being populations as needy and poor as the refugees themselves."[37] What is interesting to note is how the managerial discourse equates solidarity with strategies of development and with the obliteration of the demands of these groups, even while recognizing the collapse of both the mechanisms of international protection (which the Plan proposes to resolve) and of "citizenship" as the conveyor of rights and access to justice and equality.

The second one is what I call *faith-based solidarity* and is framed around ideas of unity or the need that for individuals to be in solidarity with one another "they need to develop a sense of self and become a community of fate."[38] This sense of belonging can have either a localized or a more universalistic basis, either referring to small groups who share a particular identity or social position or referring to broader social contexts such as those based on claims over humanity. I argue that the perceptions presented by Catholic NGOs and some local level organizations tend to

rely on such definitions. They use a common origin, a claim to that which makes us the same and that ultimately justifies an erasure of alterity. In this way, and even though there is a legitimate concern with the well-being of the other, there is necessarily the creating of an "other" that is in the process victimized, impoverished, turned into an object of charity, and in need of moral and social rescuing.

Finally, a third possible meaning is what I frame as *autonomous*[39] *solidarity* in which individuals and groups are able to share and advocate for common goals without having to resort to a common denominator beyond difference. Their solidarity and coming together are rooted in the multiple ways in which differences are played out and performed in the global/local realities they live in but without the need for a complete convergence of ideals and identities. It is a coming together that recognizes friction[40] as a productive moment and as a source of change and opening of possibilities. It is a form of resistance that sees in that which separates us—the accident, the outside, the unexpected—a potential for reacting to hierarchies and exclusions. Arguably, autonomous solidarity is perhaps most directly related to a potential political imagination envisaged by a No Borders approach, by creating a public sphere of indistinction in which categorical identities, though still present, become increasingly irrelevant. Nevertheless, these are also incomplete and uncertain experiences of solidarity that have faced important practical limits in their conceptualization and implementation. One of them, as previously highlighted, is the drive towards unity based not on claims to the "inter" as in-between (as a cosmopolitan solidarity would entail) but on the national (even when the national is no longer there as is the case of displaced and refugees).

In a way, all forms of solidarity present their openings and dangers. Even the ones who tend to respect, tolerate, and embrace a togetherness-in-difference, as the experience of the Displaced Associations in the Tri-Border zone exemplifies, are filled with uncertainties, mixed results, conflict, frustrations, and sometimes reproduction of the constitutive elements that allowed for their displacement, such as those entwined in claims to nationhood and to citizenship-related rights. To live in-between, to live as a border, presents enormous challenges. There have been attempts to circumscribe and to some extent re-inscribe these lives in the "normal" ordering of things. Even though well-intentioned, as I do believe is the case of both governmental and civil society initiatives, one should be clear about the assumptions and meanings involved in their claims. This paper has aimed at bringing to light what is involved in the representations of border zones and of conceptualizing borders as sites of solidarity from these two particular and privileged speaking positions. It has also attempted to contribute to a discussion of the narratives that have usually been disregarded, namely of those who live outside, or better said, *in-between* the national and the international, the citizen and the foreigner. The experiences of mobility and political organization of the displaced communities at the Tri-Border attest to the possibilities, and limitations, of alternative conceptualizations of political subjectivity and of perhaps less homogenizing strategies of building solidarity approximations. They are certainly embryonic, inceptive collaborations, but they speak, I believe, in important respects, to the anxieties ushered by the failing design of citizenship,[41] notably in the context of a developing world where the thrust of citizenship was never complete in the first place. If a No Borders world remains within our imaginaries of hope, border as spaces of diverse solidarities are already under way.

Notes

1. Theresa Hayter, *Open Borders: The Case against Immigration Controls* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).
2. Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 188.
3. Mignolo, 85.
4. The Colombian government has put in place a program, sponsored and funded by the US government, to fight the guerrilla and paramilitaries and also to prevent growth and distribution of drugs in its countryside. The control over coca plantations has impacted some rural communities and augmented the violent displacement effect of the war, as reports show the products used have damaged the soil and water supplies. Also, toughening controls have expelled many of the coca planters to neighbouring countries and some isolated incidents show the use of foreign territory in Brazil and Peru as transporting sites for the transnational scheme of drug distribution regionally and internationally. I heard from several different participants the claim that many of the violent deaths occurring in the Tri-Border area were a result of the fight over the controlling of drug distribution routes in the region. In that case, the assumption that the war has not yet reached the border collapses into a picture where the region has become of vital interest for financing the drug scheme that supports the conflict with arms and money. As a consequence, it also becomes a strategic standpoint in states' policies to repress drug and arm trafficking schemes.
5. International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Estudio Investigativo para la descripción y análisis de la situación de la migración y trata de personas en la zona fronteriza Colombia–Brasil* (Bogota: IOM, 2007), online: http://www.oim.org.co/modulos/contenido/default.asp?idmodulo=7&idlibro=205 (accessed December 20, 2007).
6. Human Mobility Team – Tri-Border, interview with Carolina Moulin, July 2007.

7. BBC Brasil, "Colombians see Brazil as an inaccessible refuge" (March 11, 2008), online: http://www.bbcbrasil.com (accessed March 11, 2008).

8. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1933).

9. Craig Calhoun, "Imagining Solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, Constitutional Reform and the Public Sphere," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 147–171.

10. Klaus Peter Rippe, "Diminishing Solidarity," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1 (1998): 355–374.

11. Calhoun, 160.

12. Rippe, 357.

13. B. S. Turner and C. Rojek, *Society and Culture: Principles of Scarcity and Solidarity* (London: Sage, 2001).

14. Calhoun, 164.

15. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action* (Mexico City, November 16, 2004), chapter 3, section 2.

16. Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 78.

17. Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies at Territory's Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

18. William Walters, "Secure Borders, Safe Haven, Domopolitics," *Citizenship Studies* 8, no. 3 (2004): 237–260.

19. For a recent institutional evaluation of the MPA (in which these achievements are described), see UNHCR, *Plano de Acción de México: el impacto de la solidariedad regional* (San José: Editorama, 2007), online: http://www.acnur.org/biblioteca/pdf/5484.pdf.

20. UNHCR, *Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action* [emphasis added].

21. See Roxanne Doty, "Fronteras Compasivas and the Ethics of Unconditional Hospitality," *Millennium* 35, no. 2 (2006): 53–74; Nevzat Soguk, "Transversal Communication, Diaspora, and the Euro-Kurds," *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008): 173–192.

22. Carolina Moulin and Peter Nyers, "'We Live in a Country of UNHCR': Global Political Society and Refugee Protests," *International Political Sociology* 1, no. 4 (2007): 356–372.

23. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense: Law, Globalization and Emancipation* (London: LexisNexis, 2002): 69.

24. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 41.

25. Chatterjee and Santos mainly refer to relations within states. As such, one might argue that perhaps the concept of global civil society is more appropriate for it allows the incorporation of actors who work on a transnational and international basis, as is the case of UNHCR and the Solidarity Network (the Catholic organizations on the South-American continent—their relationship extends to several NGOs and civil society types of organizations in countries that both send/receive asylum seekers, refugees, and IDPs). Nevertheless, it is possible to question whether the idea of a "global civil" society can in fact tackle the political participation of groups who only tenuously and ambiguously relate in any meaningful way to the concept of citizenship. Therefore, for many displaced communities, the "civil" component of these types of arrangements, whether global or local, is highly constraining and, to a certain point, exclusionary. An example is provided precisely by the MPA, since states and transnational civil society actors participated in the framing of the agreement but not a single refugee, asylum seeker, or IDP was present in the Mexico meeting. This point was brought to the attention of participants by a Mexican-based NGO. Peter Nyers and I have advanced some criticisms of the idea of global civil society and proposed the idea of a "global political society" as a possible contribution to incorporate the political participation of these groups within the framework of transnational relations. For a more detailed discussion, see Moulin and Nyers.

26. Rajaram and Grundy-Warr.

27. Peter Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism: The Politics of Protection in the Anti-Deportation Movement," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 1069–1093.

28. Carolina Moulin, Personal Notes on fieldwork visit based on Interview with Human Mobility Team, July 2007.

29. Prem Kumar Rajaram, "Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 3 (2002): 247–264 (doi:10.1093/jrs/15.3.247).

30. All names of people and institutions have been changed or omitted to preserve anonymity.

31. Displaced Groups, recorded interview with Carolina Moulin, July 17, 2007.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. UNHCR, *Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action.*

37. *Ibid.*, chapter 3, section 2.

38. Chris Brown, "Borders and Identity in International Political Theory," in *Identities, Borders, Orders*, ed. Mathias Albert, David Jacobson, and Yosef Lapid (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 117–136.

39. The term "autonomous" refers to the ability of certain groups to work together on a common issue while retaining the right to differ or to disagree. It has been used in research on migration in recent years to highlight how migrants can decentre "the state as the regulator of human movements across international boundaries" and can establish their own mechanisms of self-organization based on collective priorities. Nestor Rodriguez, "The Battle for the Border: Notes on Autonomous Migration, Transnational Communities, and the State," *Social Justice* 23, no.3 (1996): 3. I would like to thank William Coleman for introducing me to the concept.

40. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

41. Cynthia Weber, "Designing Safe Citizens," *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 2 (2008): 125–142.