



# Braiding Borders

## Performance as Care and Resistance on the US-Mexico Border

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Just after dawn on 20 January 2017, in the frigid, early morning winter air, small clusters of women began walking toward the Paso del Norte border bridge that connects El Paso, Texas, in the US; and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, in Mexico. Along with the linked cities of Tijuana/San Diego in California, and Nogales/Nogales in Arizona, Juárez/El Paso is one of the three largest urban border crossing points connecting Mexico and the United States, and it is the second busiest port of entry overall. There are just three official points of crossing between Juárez and El Paso, and thousands of people cross the Paso del Norte border bridge on foot every day, walking back and forth between the United States and Mexico for work, shopping, to visit family, and other quotidian activities. This day, however, was to be different.

At 6:30 a.m., 52 women gathered at the bridge. At the moment that Donald Trump's presidential inauguration day events began in Washington, DC, women from both Mexico and the United States walked onto the international bridge. Interrupting regular pedestrian traffic flow, they organized themselves standing in a single line that stretched from one side of the bridge to the other. They alternately stood either facing each other, their arms linked, or back to back. Starting simultaneously from the outer edges of the bridge, the women braided their hair together to form a single, collective braid of hair and bodies. Women with hair too short to

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braid wrapped their heads in scarves; these were plaited in with the other women's hair. Xochitl Nicholson and Sandra Paola López Ramírez, the braiders and organizers of the intervention, were braided in last at the center of the bridge. Once the braid was complete, the women, the majority of whom had not known each other prior to the performance intervention, stood together in a long line of linked bodies.

As Donald Trump and his family, friends, and supporters attended the traditional inaugural church service and tea reception in DC, these women held space, and each other, on the international bridge that links these two cities and countries. Although they had initially planned to carry out the intervention in complete silence, the intimacy and intensity and adrenaline of the moment resulted in tears and emotional laughter and eventually in song. After roughly two hours, and at the moment in which Trump's official swearing in ceremony began in DC, the women unbraided themselves from one another, hugged, cried, said their goodbyes, and dispersed.

What does it mean to make political performance not just about, but literally on the border? How might the braid be theorized, both in the sense of the linking of bodies into a sinuous, breathing rope of embodied resistance, but also the act of braiding itself, which is one often born of intimacy, of, though certainly not always or exclusively, shared spaces between mothers and daughters, sisters, and friends, an intimate act of personally caring for another body? This embodied border intervention, entitled *Braiding Borders*, offers capacious room for analysis. For one, this women's intervention could be analyzed in juxtaposition with the historic women's marches that took place the following day, 21 January 2017, across the US and in cities around the world. Like the women's marches, the women on the bridge for *Braiding Borders* were gathered in opposition to Trump's presidency, and in fact the organizers of *Braiding Borders* were asked by city officials in El Paso to also organize an El Paso women's march, which took place the following day concurrent with the other women's marches. Although the idea for *Braiding Borders* existed long before the women's marches were planned, and the performance and subsequent march remained independent from each other and were quite different in obvious ways, both the marches and *Braiding Borders* originated out of a desire for collective, embodied, feminist protest in response to direct and indirect attacks on women's bodies. This is made all the more pressing in El Paso and Juárez by the rampant and ongoing *feminicidios*<sup>1</sup> in Juárez and the predation and sexual assaults on undocumented female migrants during their migrant journeys north through Mexico toward and across the US border. Given the current sociopolitical context, the most pressing questions are: What is the power and possibility of performance as a form of resistance against exclusionary geopolitical demarcations and physical and rhetorical violence against female, immigrant, and Latinx bodies? Can performance function as a means through which to dismantle and reinvent mobilities of belonging and body politics of dissent?

The US-Mexico border is 1,933.4 miles long and traces a line east from the Pacific Ocean in California, past Arizona and New Mexico, to end in Texas at the Gulf of Mexico. Much of the border region is rural, remote, and wild, stretching across and along wide rivers, steep ravines, craggy mountains, and desolate desert. The desolate landscape makes for difficult border crossing conditions. Prior to the 1990s, most migrants tended to take the relatively easier routes

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1. I use "feminicidio" instead of "femicidio," in line with Rosalinda Fregoso's argument that femicidio is generally defined as the murder of women and girls because they are female, whereas feminicidio is the murder of women and girls that is founded on and enabled by unequal and gendered power structures (in Fregoso and Bejarano 2010:5).

*Figure 1. (facing page) Braiding hair together on the Paso del Norte border bridge in an intervention that began simultaneously with Trump's inauguration day events. Braiding Borders, 20 January 2017. (Photo by Sasha von Oldershausen)*

through the neighboring border cities of Tijuana/San Diego, Nogales/Nogales, and Juárez/El Paso. Although the contemporary human rights crises in the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) has resulted in unprecedented waves of Central American refugee crossers,<sup>2</sup> border crossing has long been a defining characteristic of the US-Mexico border, both because the region continued to be closely linked even after the dividing political line was drawn and because of the United States' economic reliance on Mexican labor.<sup>3</sup>

Large-scale, low-wage labor migration from Mexico to the US was formalized in 1942 with the Bracero Program, which was intended to fill labor shortages during World War II. Over the two decades that the Bracero Program ran, more than 4.5 million individual contracts for temporary employment were approved, and an interdependent relationship between Mexican workers and US employers was established. When the Bracero Program was terminated in 1964, workers continued to cross into the US seeking work, and they continued to be hired, only now without legal status (Andreas 2013:33).<sup>4</sup> Over the next several decades, unauthorized immigration continued to rapidly increase with little official response from the US. Things sharply changed in the 1990s with then-President Bill Clinton's declared military "crackdown" on the border and the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on 1 January 1994 (301).<sup>5</sup> Although NAFTA was ostensibly designed to eliminate trade barriers among the US, Canada, and Mexico, the immediate result for Mexico was an economic crash, due in part to the influx of subsidized US corn that put millions of Mexican farmers out of work and upended centuries-old ways of life for rural Mexicans. As a direct result of NAFTA, under which the US profited and Mexico suffered, this newly unemployed and impoverished low-wage workforce began making its way toward the US to find employment, either in the maquiladoras (Mexican-based assembly plants) flourishing along the border or across the border into the US (see Fiess and Lederman 2004).

This wave of migrants was met with a dramatic increase in the militarization of US border control. From 1993 to 1999, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) budget expanded from \$1.5 billion to \$4 billion, with much of that money allocated to border enforcement and militarization. This included physical barriers, surveillance equipment, and additional militarized agents (border patrol more than doubled, growing from 3,389 agents in 1993 to 7,231 in 1998).<sup>6</sup> This increase in border militarization had a number of unintended effects: it

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2. The number of people coming from the Northern Triangle to seek asylum in the US has drastically increased since the early 2010s, with asylum seekers from all three countries predominantly citing as their reasons for leaving forced gang recruitment, extortion, violence, poverty, and a lack of even the most basic level of economic opportunity required to survive. From 2012 to 2015 the numbers of asylum seekers coming from the Northern Triangle to the United States increased fivefold (see Cheatham, Labrador, and Renwick 2018).
  3. Central American immigration into the US is not a new phenomenon. In the 1980s, fragile nation-states, civil wars, and economic instability drove significant numbers of Central Americans northward. Even after many of these political conflicts ended in the 1990s, the ongoing violence and political and economic unrest, combined with some of the world's highest homicide rates and rampant organized crime, have resulted in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras consistently ranking among the most violent countries in the world (Cheatham, Labrador, and Renwick 2018).
  4. Although Congress had passed an act in 1952 that made it illegal to harbor, transport, or conceal illegal entrants to the US, the employment of undocumented migrants was conspicuously overlooked in a concession to agribusiness interests. As a result, employers were under very little legal risk, and they were in a position to take advantage of the undocumented Mexican workers no longer protected under the auspices of an official worker program.
  5. On 10 December 2019, President Trump signed into law a revised North American Free Trade Agreement titled the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. The new version updates the original agreement to include new laws on topics such as intellectual property protection and the internet and changes in several key areas, including the automotive and dairy industries.
  6. Operation Blockade, which was implemented in El Paso in 1993 and involved 450 agents who were paid overtime to cover a small stretch of border, resulted in a sharp decrease in attempted illegal entry in that particular

encouraged migrants to stay in the US (as opposed to the more circular migration that had previously been the norm under easier crossing conditions), it did not stop undocumented crossing, and it caused a substantial surge in the economy of illegality and violence in the border region more broadly. While border apprehensions did decrease in areas with augmented surveillance, they also increased along the rest of the US-Mexico border, indicating that when one stretch of border became difficult to cross, undocumented migrants did not turn back, but instead shifted to more remote, dangerous crossings. Ultimately, changing US strategies did not deter migrants, but they did make the journey much more dangerous, putting migrants at greater risk, and they fed the violence and economies of illegality—smuggling drugs and people—already proliferating on the Mexican side of the border.<sup>7</sup>

In Juárez, the economic and social instability wrought by NAFTA and the maquiladora border economy combined with the dramatic increase in violent cartel activity of the 1990s into the 2000s to ghastly effect.<sup>8</sup> The maquiladoras, which operate under beneficial tax systems and center on low-wage, large-scale production, are infamous for their difficult working conditions and worker exploitation. These policies, coupled with the close proximity to international export, made the US-Mexico border region a major industrial zone, but they also contributed to increased danger within the border region, and especially in El Paso's neighboring city of Juárez, where the maquiladora industry is especially toxic. With a population of over one million, Juárez is the sixth largest city in Mexico. It also has the largest concentration of maquiladoras and thus is both an economic powerhouse and a repository for low-wage, low-skilled labor, the majority of which has typically been women, many of whom migrate to Juárez from other parts of the country in search of work. The implications of this are dire: poor female workers, often traveling alone and to regions where they don't have strong support networks, have very little recourse with which to protect themselves, whether it be from cartels, corrupt police officials, or abusive labor environments. One of the consequences of the border region's economic shift toward a heavy reliance on female workers from other parts of Mexico was a population of men between the ages of 18 and 35 with few job prospects and limited options. They live in a cartel- and maquiladora-dominated region where workers endure horrible conditions to make products they cannot afford to buy, with better working conditions literally in sight across the border but still out of reach (unskilled laborers typically make 6–8 times more money on the US side than they do on the Mexican side) (Shirk 2014:486). This is the population upon which organized crime heavily relies.

This dynamic is now further exacerbated by the Central American refugee crisis. According to the Migration Policy Institute, while Mexican immigration into the US has steadily declined since 2009, the size of the Central American immigrant population in the US has grown nearly tenfold from 1980 to 2015 (to 3.4 million Central American immigrants in 2015), with immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras accounting for almost 90% of the total population growth (Lesser and Batalova 2019). When these Central American refugees arrive

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20-mile stretch. Although studies found that the people deterred by Operation Blockade were generally “commuter migrants” (those who walked across the border to work service jobs in El Paso and then back again), and even the government reported that smugglers and undocumented migrants avoided the blockade by simply crossing outside of that stretch of border, Operation Blockade was seen as a great success, and there were immediate efforts to replicate it in Nogales, Arizona (1994); San Diego, California (1994); and Rio Grande, Texas (1997) (see Andreas 2013; Cornelius 2001; Ewing 2014).

7. While smuggling had long been a border industry, it saw a dramatic increase in the 1980s as a result of the US war on Colombian drug trafficking. Mexican drug smugglers benefitted from US efforts to cut off the Caribbean maritime smuggling routes. Mexico swiftly became the nucleus of drug trafficking into the US, and Mexican cartels flourished (Andreas 2013).

8. The maquiladora system didn't start with NAFTA. It dates back to the 1960s, when Mexico initiated two different programs (the National Border Program and the Border Industrialization Program) that each promoted the growth of maquiladoras along the US-Mexico border.

to border cities like Juárez, they usually lack support networks, familiarity with the region, and the means to pay for shelter, food, water, and other necessities. This puts them at serious risk of kidnapping, sexual assault, and other forms of violence (HRW 2019).

Ultimately, the El Paso/Juárez border region is one of contrasts. Since 1997, El Paso has consistently ranked among the safest of US cities, even as Juárez became an increasingly unsafe and violent city, renowned for ghastly working conditions, horrific gang violence, and rampant feminicidio. It is thus a region marked by stark differences—and yet, the two cities are connected by rich economic, cultural, and familial ties and separated by a distance so short that one can walk across a bridge from one city to the other.

Xochitl Rodriguez Nicholson, the primary artist behind *Braiding Borders*, grew up in El Paso with family on both sides of the border. She has always had what she described as a strong awareness of the relativity of privilege. By most US standards, hers was not a privileged upbringing—she was raised quite poor by a single mother and her grandmother, she helped care for a brother with severe disabilities, and her family relied on food stamps to eat. Yet, she lived on the US side of the border, the dream of many on the Mexican side of the border. Now in her 30s, Nicholson is a performance artist and community organizer. She makes art both alone and as part of the Caldo Collective, an artist-driven curatorial collective she cofounded that works to support artists and art projects in El Paso.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of a lengthy conversation on 29 September 2017, Nicholson described how she has experienced drastic changes in what it means to live and function on either side of the border, as well as the feasibility of the crossing itself.<sup>10</sup> Although as a child she crossed frequently and with ease to visit her grandmother, aunt, and other extended family members, as Juárez became more dangerous the violent culture of feminicidio directly impacted her family. She became afraid to cross and felt scared and uncomfortable when she did. This led to the performance piece she described as the precursor to *Braiding Borders*, a 2012 performance intervention entitled *Only Feet*.

For what was to become *Only Feet*, Nicholson watched women crossing the bridge, studying where they went when they crossed, how often, and why. In our conversation, she laughingly remembered:

Initially I shadowed them, simply observing, but then that felt creepy and unfair, so I began interacting with the women. They were really open and thrilled to hear me say, “I’m connected to you, even though we haven’t met.”... My goal was to try to understand the community of women I felt cut off from because I was afraid to cross.

For the performance intervention, Nicholson made a veil covered in mesquite and other seeds harvested from the desert. Wearing the veil, she traced the footsteps of the women she had met. Starting at the bridge, she walked to their destination, and then back to the bridge, where she would reset and walk to the next destination. The goal of *Only Feet* was to be an echo, born of seeds scattered on the desert floor, for the women she had met, who remain unseen and unknown:

When I was a very, very little girl, I’d walk with my mom and grandma to gather seeds and rocks in the desert. The seeds were a very profound symbol for me personally, but they are also universal. I work a lot with memories from my childhood, memories that other women might share. The idea came from generations of women in my family. I’m very interested in raising my daughter to think about where she belongs and how she is related to the other women in her family, because each generation has been fortunate that the women have been so fierce, and they have fought so hard. [My daughter] is where she is because of how hard these women across generations have fought.

9. For more on the Caldo Collective, see [www.thecaldocollective.com/](http://www.thecaldocollective.com/).

10. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Xochitl Nicholson are from this interview, conducted 29 September 2017 over Skype.

Themes of identity, belonging, safety, violence, and the intimate bonds between women are also at the heart of *Braiding Borders*:

My mother and grandma used to braid my hair, I braided hair with my girlfriends, and now I braid my daughter's hair. In a lot of families in El Paso, children are raised by grandma and mom in single parent households, so there's a strong bond between women in a family, and in mine it was very pronounced. We never shied away from talking about it. When my daughter had hair long enough to braid, the first time I braided it, it was like a keyboard down my spine, all of these memories of my grandma braiding my hair, or my mother. It felt almost like every instance sitting between my grandma's legs on the floor, while she sat on a chair, this beautiful thing. It all came right back as I sat braiding my daughter's hair. It was sensory overload. And I thought, holy shit, what if we could have a braiding session where women could come together to braid each other's hair?

Nicholson initially planned for women to line up along either side of the border fence and to weave their hair together through the slats in the fence as a way to unify in spite of and across the border. The idea progressed through several stages of development until she had a fairly concrete performance intervention planned—but when Donald Trump was elected to be the next US president, it felt like everything had suddenly changed. Trump's political rhetoric and the bigoted behavior it seemed designed to enable felt like a personal assault on so many levels—on her, on her poor, single, Latina mother, and on her severely disabled brother. It seemed that everyone she loved and cared for was being assaulted, seemingly from all sides, and there was nowhere to go—not Mexico, due to the feminicidio, violence, and corruption, but the US didn't feel safe either. Nicholson returned to the performance concept, stripped it down to its roots, and reworked it into an embodied, collective, feminist intervention against the unrelenting physical and rhetorical attacks on bodies like hers.

As *Braiding Borders* developed, Nicholson and Sandra Paola López Ramírez, who joined *Braiding Borders* during the production phase, grappled with how to best execute the intervention and protect the women involved. Nicholson had initially envisioned the participation of 50 women on the bridge, 25 from each country, all positioned to stand in such a manner that they stood facing their fears, meaning that Mexican women would be positioned to face south toward Mexico and women from the US would face north. However, she said she “realized almost immediately that this made no sense because such clean divisions between here and there, and us and them, do not reflect the actual reality of living in a border region.” Much like her own experience, many of the participants identified with both sides of the border. Nicholson explained:

El Paso/Juárez is a collective region that exists with a dividing wall running through it, and people needed to be able to choose for themselves how they defined their relationships to the two countries and the border that divides them. If you are going to face your fear, and direct your embodied resistance accordingly, each woman needed to choose for herself which country that would be.

Because the intervention was explicitly about the bonds between women and collective feminist resistance in the face of unrelenting attack, the organizers chose to include only female-identifying participants, though they also explicitly invited others to bear witness and stand in solidarity.<sup>11</sup> It was critical that no one be at risk as a result of their involvement.<sup>12</sup>

11. López explained that one person complained they were being exclusionary, but, she said, “it seemed similar to the ‘all lives matter’ argument some people made in response to Black Lives Matter—to say that on that day we were going to stand as women did not in any way lessen the value of all the other groups under fire and in danger.” All quotes from Sandra Paola López Ramírez are from our conversation on 4 October 2017.

12. Due to stringent US visa restrictions, it is generally much easier for US citizens to enter Mexico than the reverse, which meant that any potential risk born of illicit border crossing would have most likely fallen on the shoulders of those participating from the Mexican side of the border.

However, because the bridge has two separate ports of entry on either side of the bridge (in other words, you exit Mexico, walk across the bridge, and then enter the US), the performance did not necessitate formal entrance into another country. Even so, Nicholson and López worked with immigration attorneys to come up with a careful script so that every woman would know what to say in the event that they were approached by officials from either Mexico or the US. They also garnered the support of both “the electeds” (as Nicholson called them) in El Paso and the law enforcement on the Juárez side to ensure that everyone understood that it was a performance and their actions were law-abiding. They also received quite a bit of media attention both before and during the performance, and this prominent visibility likely also contributed to the ease with which the performance intervention took place.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, *Braiding Borders* went off without a hitch—52 women from both Mexico and the US lined up on the bridge to have their hair braided together, and there were no issues with law



Figure 2. Standing back to back and arm in arm across the Paso del Norte border bridge. Braiding Borders, 20 January 2017. (Photograph by Sasha von Oldershausen)

enforcement in either Mexico or the US—and was a powerful experience for many involved. As one participant walked out onto the bridge, she commented, “It’s barely starting, and I’m so emotional.” Another woman shared, “I feel proud, I feel excited, I think I feel like I’m standing on the right side of things. There’s a lot of ways to stand in the dark today, but I don’t feel like I’m in the dark at all” (Nicholson and López 2017). Although they had initially planned to execute the performance in silence, there were tears, laughter, and hushed conversations as connections were formed. One participant, Leah Gillespie, said “I’m born a white American and I’m going to be braiding my hair with a Latina woman... It really marks this idea that, yes, we have our

differences, but here are our similarities. And we’re binding those similarities in an act of solidarity.” Similar to Nicholson, some participants were there to honor their own complex relationships to cross-border identity politics. Nancy Lechuga shared, “I’m here because my mother is from Juárez, my daughter was born in the United States in Denver, Colorado, and I feel like I’m a bridge between them” (in von Oldershausen 2017). The performance felt so intimate and powerful to the participants that they eventually asked the media and audience to step back in order to allow the women to feel more deeply connected to each other and the power of the feminist gathering. At the performance, Nicholson reflected:

I think it’s easy to feel like we’re in the dark right now. It’s really scary. Today especially—it was hard to wake up. [...] This was a nice way to crawl out of that darkness and stand in the light. We were standing together on the bridge as the sun rose and there’s noth-

13. See coverage in the *El Paso Times* (González 2017), *Mic* (Durkee 2017), *Ms. Magazine* (Sleighel 2017), *New York Times* (Archer 2017), *Remezcla* (Simón 2017), *Splinter* (von Oldershausen 2017), and *Yaboo* (Greenfield 2017).

ing that can send a clearer message. No words, no act is stronger than coming together. (in von Oldershausen 2017)

This collective, performative mobilization of bodies on the bridge lasted some two hours. When the intervention ended and the women went home, what, in the end, did this performance “do”? In the context of inflamed border politics and literal and rhetorical violence against women, immigrants, and Latinxs (a situation that has notably worsened in the two years since the election), what are the possibilities for performance to carve out new mobilities of belonging and dissent?

Spaces are constituted and reconstituted by *how* people use them, which means that just as human behavior has the potential to reinforce the function of a space, it has the same potential to contest it. The border bridge is a highly scripted space, entirely defined by its function: to regulate the conditions of bodily crossing from one country into the other. There are specific, normative human bodily behaviors that are supposed to—allowed to—take place in these highly controlled spaces of border crossing, and these behaviors are enforced through laws, surveillance, and what Foucault ([1975] 1995) so effectively described as the very real threat of discipline and punishment should individuals not regulate their own bodies in accordance with specified regulations. As such, *non*-normative human actions and interventions, such as protests and site-specific performance, challenge these regulations and, in turn, the very meaning of the spaces themselves. Judith Butler asserts in her analysis of the 2013 protests in Tahrir Square that

when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones), they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity. ([2015] 2018:11)

Butler argues that when bodies congregate, they lay claim to certain spaces as public spaces, and although some might contend that these spaces were already public, “[w]e miss something of the point of public demonstrations if we fail to see that the very public character of the space is being disputed and even fought over when these crowds gather” (70). There are no fixed rules about the ways in which certain kinds of spaces may encourage and discourage different forms of publics. Space always involves ongoing negotiations of power. For example, a city or town square is typically designed to be a space of public gathering, but the nature of that gathering is often still quite regulated. (For example, the Egyptian government evidently considered the 2013 protests in Tahrir Square the wrong kind of public gathering.) A bridge, meanwhile, seems more of a transitional space, intended for movement from one side to the other, but one has only to think of the bridges upon which lovers linger and off of which youthful swimmers



Figure 3. Celebrating at the end of the performance intervention. Braiding Borders, 20 January 2017. (Photo by Sasha von Oldershausen)

jump and others hang fishing lines. These bridges are destinations of gathering and community building. In other words, even though some spaces seem designed *to* create publics, while other spaces are created *by* publics, all spaces are contested sites of ongoing negotiations of power and human behavior.

*Braiding Borders* was staged in a location heavily embedded with literal and symbolic power at a precise time that a massive transfer of power was occurring—both literally and with massive symbolic implications. Grounded in spatial and temporal specificity, *Braiding Borders* was a powerful rebuttal of the exclusionary geopolitical function of the border and the literal and rhetorical violences to which it is linked. The women who assembled on the border bridge drew attention to questions of where, why, and how movement and belonging (to a country, to each other) is policed. When these women stood in an interwoven braid of bodies across the bridge, their bodies were not defined by the attempt to cross, the privilege of entry, or the fear of rejection. Instead, they were gathered in literal cross-border feminist formation. In this intervention, they undermined normative notions about the rights of and restrictions against certain bodies and how bodies are conditioned and allowed to behave in particular spaces, and they offered different mobilities of interconnectivity. Within the space of performance, the bridge's function of differentiation and division was rejected for one of connection, solidarity, and resistance—the women came together *to be* together differently. Not only did this performance dismantle and invent new mobilities of belonging to place and to each other, thus offering pointed commentary about the performers' lived and desired relationality, it was also an action of fundamental, visible, and embodied dissent.

In highlighting their opposition to the violent border policies and rhetoric targeted at bodies such as theirs—women, migrants, Latinxs, those with identities shaped along and across borders, languages, and cultures, the performance emphasizes the blurred lines between political and personal, public and private. Policy and rhetoric are ostensibly political and public, at times perceived to be distant and disconnected from the everyday lives of individuals; but when policy and rhetoric are targeted at people's very bodies, their access to education and economic mobility, and their very ability to move freely and safely through space, they also directly impact the personal and the private realms of people's lives. There is nowhere to hide, no one correct direction to face in order to face your fears when you live them in surround sound. Instead of rushing from one side to be appraised for entrance to the other, the women of *Braiding Borders* stood still in the in-between, interrupting pedestrian traffic and drawing onlookers. More than that, they engaged in a specific yet universal embodied act of caretaking, one that links bodies, often female bodies, across generations. The act of braiding is one of connection and caretaking; in the context of *Braiding Borders*, it is also one of unequivocal resistance.

Explicitly about the border region and literal and rhetorical violence, *Braiding Borders* is equally about how certain bodies are (and are not) supported by the political systems we live in but also by each other, and the possibilities for resisting oppression and creating alternate spaces of solidarity and support. The intervention is entirely site-specific: the performance challenges the normative confines of the bridge, but the bridge is also an integral, constitutive part of the performance, giving its quiet, yet defiant, embodied challenge much of its meaning. The relationship between performance and space is dialectical: space's meaning is produced through bodily movement and regulation, and thus it can be challenged by bodies and performances that seek to subvert it. Butler writes,

When we think about what it means to assemble in a crowd, and what it means to move through public space in a way that contests the distinction between public and private, we see some way that bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action. ([2015] 2018:71)



Figure 4. Braiding hair together in the chilly morning air, El Paso del Norte border bridge. Braiding Borders, 20 January 2017. (Photo by Sasha von Oldershausen)

Grounding feminist dissent in collective caretaking, these bodies, in their plurality, claim and reconfigure the space of the crossing, even as the border bridge is so deeply constitutive of the action.

*Braiding Borders* was experienced by the participants, and also, albeit in a different capacity, by viewers who were called upon to participate as witnesses. Such practices of witnessing and solidarity are at once symbolic and concrete. The act of making the performance resulted in people coming together to assert the value of their bodies, their right to be cared for, and their decision to care for each other. This literal and felt practice of performance—of solidarity, of collaboration, of resistance, of survival, of defiance, of claiming, and of protest—contests the rhetoric that frames the border as “us vs. them,” and it defies those who threaten and denigrate women, Latinx, and immigrants.

Political art—including both performance and writing—is about connecting humans and creating different spaces for imagining. It involves arguing for new ways of seeing, speaking, protesting, being in, and creating community. It offers different kinds of engagement and points of entry with sociopolitical debates. *Braiding Borders* criticized US-Mexico border policies and their correlated literal and rhetorical violence by performing alternate forms of cross-border belonging, feminist solidarity, and interconnectivity. While such actions of feminist solidarity and protest may be necessary at any time, during our current sociopolitical moment, in which women, people of color, and immigrants seem under near-unrelenting attack, they are also a crucial practice of care and resistance. This is true for the artist—Nicholson spoke of this performance as though its creation was in response to an urgent need for resistance felt deep in her soul—but the performance also had a much wider impact. The performance introduced women to each other who had until then been strangers, forging new connections based in solidarity and protest. It created new ties and ways of working together on both sides of the border, in Mexico with the police and on the US side with elected officials.

Although the performance resignified the border bridge, the border obviously continues to exist—there is still a felt and lived boundary there. And, looking back at this several years later, the ghastly truth is that Nicholson was right to be afraid. Trump’s presidency has been defined

by incessant and incomprehensible cruelty, including forcibly separating immigrant children from their families and putting children in cages (see Chotiner 2019). Asylum seekers are being denied and deported, and it is becoming ever more difficult for refugees to enter the country through legal means (see Hannon 2019); and ever more dangerous: on the morning of 3 August 2019, a white man drove nearly 10 hours from his home in Dallas to El Paso with the stated intention of shooting Mexicans because of what he saw as the “Hispanic invasion of Texas.” He killed 22 people in an El Paso Walmart (Romo 2019). Certainly, while the arts have the potential to play a critical role in shaping responses to atrocities and preventing their future occurrence, and calls for justice and redress often originate in civil society, performance alone cannot prevent or end such atrocities. And yet, in these dark political times, such practices of resistance, solidarity, and care are critically important. As Adrienne Maree Brown writes,

Art is not neutral. It either upholds or disrupts the status quo, advancing or regressing justice. We are living now inside the imagination of people who thought economic disparity and environmental destruction were acceptable costs for their power. It is our right and responsibility to write ourselves into the future. All organizing is science fiction. If you are shaping the future, you are a futurist. And visionary fiction is a way to practice the future in our minds, alone and together. (2017:197)

When we study performance and other bodily practices, we are often seeking frameworks for understanding what is accomplished by bodies gathering in particular ways and what affective, sensorial, and political resonances are created through ephemeral bodily contact in specific spaces and moments. By creating deliberate, pointed stillness in a place entirely defined by transit and access, *Braiding Borders* is a literal coming to a place of crossing and *not* crossing, but instead stopping to gather in intimate community. In that very moment it is also an affective and imagined arrival *elsewhere*, one found in the linger on the bridge, in the braided bodies and hair, and in the cross-border bodily articulation of defiant feminist resistance.

Art can serve as witness, and in places and times that otherwise feel suffocating and precarious, art can create what Nicholson called light but could also be called hope. For ultimately, and as *Braiding Borders* reminds us, the radical performative and political power of resistance is about creating something that speaks in particular ways to the outside world, but resistance is *also* fundamentally about the individual and collective assertion of the right to be seen, to be heard, and to be cared for.

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