

Lori A. Brown, *Bodies + Borders*, (2017–)

Bodies + Borders, considers what role space participates in for those seeking to cross nation-state borders to primarily enter into the United States, but also to make their way into Canada. The research examines how space is legally defined and how the needs of those who enter both legally and illegally are provided for. The project foregrounds a diversity of subjects, such as migrants and asylum seekers, and their personal spatial experiences, ones whose voices are often ignored or overlooked, requiring architecture to engage in contemporary politicized spatial relationships. More broadly, the project focuses on both birthing spaces and spaces of refuge, how and if these services are advertised, citizenship laws and policies used to either allow or obstruct legal rights, the role of borders and identities of nation states as a mechanism to disempower, and ways women, parents with children and unaccompanied minors are using their bodies as a direct means to provide a different future for their children and themselves through transgressing actual space.

Initially, a focus of this research was to examine birthing centers solely dedicated to foreign women seeking to give birth in the United States in order to provide American citizenship for their newborn. The project began as one interested in how these pregnant women from primarily Asia and Central America come to the United States to give birth for different, yet related reasons. Initially drawn to spaces created to enable women to do this — from retrofitted mansions embedded within residential neighborhoods in Californian cities for affluent Asian women to birthing spaces created in post-industrial landscapes right across the U.S.-Mexico border for economically disadvantaged Mexican and Central American women — these underwhelming spaces are often but not always hidden, even camouflaged within their built environments. Early research revealed intersections between the production of space and reproduction and ways architecture was enabling such practices to occur. However, as the political situation in the United States continues to further destabilize, with border policies and their respective geographies frequently changing, combined with initial research trips to the border states of Texas, Arizona and New York, it became apparent that the original and singular focus on pregnant women must be reconsidered. It has become imperative to expand the focus to include parents and their children and unaccompanied minors who are crossing into as well as out of the United States because to exclude these groups would portray a much narrower spatial landscape. Although the public almost exclusively hears about those seeking to enter the country, there are others who are desperate to try and leave, offering a counter narrative to mainstream messaging. The project has evolved to engage these complexities and diversities of migration and the spaces being created to support these geopolitical mobilities.

Paramount to the project is how the border is not only conceptualized as legal, political, economic and cultural entities but also the lived experiences of those who inhabit this liminal space and their daily lived experiences. Renown Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa wrote extensively on the borderlands as both a cultural critic and a poet. Her work is instrumental in providing frameworks

into the complex and layered border conditions. Anzaldúa describes this border culture as the place “...where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds...lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.”¹ This ‘unnatural boundary’ is one that is now under constant contestation, surveillance and greater militarization.

As I have begun site visits and interviews with organizations and individuals working with those crossing the border, several broader questions have emerged. How does the legal and spatial intersect and when they do, how does space respond? What are the relationships between these support spaces and the legal frameworks they operate within or outside of? What are the scales of temporal occupation? How does the quality of space participate in these experiences? How do relationships form between ICE and local organizations? What are the roles of the domestic, religious and institutional types of organizational spaces that are providing the care? How do they provide support space? How are changing numbers of those in need accommodated? What sort of inherent flexibility and adaptability have they created to address large fluctuations in migrants needing care?

¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera The New Mestiza*. 1987. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 25.