



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

Chapter Title: The Border Crossed Us (2011)

Chapter Author(s): CATHERINE D'IGNAZIO, AMBER DAY and NICOLE SIGGINS

Book Title: Critical Landscapes

Book Subtitle: Art, Space, Politics

Book Editor(s): Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten Swenson

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1xxxgv.24>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Critical Landscapes*

JSTOR

CATHERINE D'IGNAZIO,
AMBER DAY, AND NICOLE
SIGGINS WITH THE INSTITUTE
FOR INFINITELY SMALL
THINGS

The Border Crossed Us (2011)

ON THE TOHONO O'ODHAM RESERVATION

There is a fence in Ofelia Rivas's backyard. It is a vehicle barrier that consists of eight- and ten-foot steel tubes placed several feet apart and linked with steel cables. It is a recent fence, authorized by George W. Bush's 2006 Secure Fence Act and erected by the Department of Homeland Security in 2008.

Ofelia lives on the Tohono O'odham reservation, the second-largest Indian reservation in the U.S. She is a traditional O'odham, and an activist for the environment and for youth empowerment through education in traditional O'odham ways. She was already fighting to keep her culture alive before the fence cut her people in half.

O'odham lands straddle the U.S.-Mexico border along seventy-five miles of harsh, beautiful, windswept desert. This was Tohono O'odham land long before it "belonged" to the U.S. or to Mexico. Around 15 percent of O'odham live on the Mexican side in small villages. Ofelia's father lives in one such village. It used to take her half an hour to reach him; now it's five hours with checkpoints and roundabout driving.

The new border fence divides the community, prevents tribe members from receiving critical health services, and subjects O'odham to racism and discrimination. It's not just the fence but the protocol of checks, detainments, and even wrongful arrests and abuses (including the arrest of spiritual leaders during ceremonial walks). The land is being occupied by a foreign invader and it is us—the Americans.



37. The Institute for Infinitely Small Things, *The Border Crossed Us*, 2011. Installation/intervention. Courtesy the Institute for Infinitely Small Things.

IN NEW ENGLAND

The Border Crossed Us was a temporary public art installation in spring 2011 by the Institute for Infinitely Small Things, in consultation with Ofelia Rivas, that transplanted the U.S.-Mexico border fence from southern Arizona to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst campus.¹ The project was commissioned by the University Museum of Contemporary Art.

The Border Crossed Us divided the university campus along its north-south boundary with a three-hundred-foot to-scale photographic replica of the vehicle fence that runs along the international boundary in southern Arizona. Visually it was designed to look like a campus construction site, with temporary fencing, sandbags, and cones. As photographs generally wrap construction sites to advertise what is to come in the future, our site advertised the fence in Arizona, planting a seed of doubt as to whether or not a true fence might be under construction at that site.

The fence ran between a parking garage and the campus center, blocking a popular pedestrian crossing. Over the course of two weeks it served as a provocation, a touchstone for conversation, and a site for talks and performances. Along with the visual intervention, *The Border Crossed Us* included sound—Ofelia's field recordings from the

construction of the fence mixed with her voice singing a song of welcome and hope to the students at UMass Amherst. These sounds emanated from a giant vent in the ground next to the fence. A nearby sign held a poster that changed each day. It was lettered in stark text with questions frequently posed at border checkpoints, such as “Why are you here?” “How did you get here?” “Are you a citizen?” “What color are you?” and “May I touch you?” Students were invited to text to a website their responses to these questions.

Along with the fence’s insertion into daily life on campus, the project invited a delegation of Tohono O’odham, including a tribal elder and a youth, to speak about their experience. They led “tours” of the U.S.-Mexico border on the college campus. In addition, the Native American Studies Certificate Program in the Anthropology Department held a panel discussion on Borders and Indigenous Sovereignty as part of the campus’s annual Native American Powwow. Border issues affect many other tribes, including the Mohawk and the Abenaki. The delegation of O’odham spoke along with others about these issues during the conference and participated in the powwow.

Finally, the Institute worked with anthropology and journalism faculty members to develop class assignments and reflection exercises to help students engage more deeply with the fence in their own community. The project asked people both geographically and experientially removed from the Tohono O’odham to momentarily experience the border, walk beside the fence, and feel the impact on their own landscape: to reflect, to judge, to justify, and to witness. In addition to the texting system where people could direct their immediate responses to the installation to the project website, students wrote longer essays for their classes. Many of these responses detailed real or perceived borders in their own lives and as experienced on the university campus. Some students detailed places in which they felt unfairly judged or out of place: “Anytime I walk near the engineering buildings, I feel slightly uncomfortable because I feel like I don’t belong. I realize that the other people walking around probably have no idea I’m not a science person. But nonetheless I feel as if I don’t fit in.” Other students detailed ways in which they had personally crossed perceived borders on the college campus in subtle ways, for instance starting a game of basketball:

Many times the courts become differentiated in regards to who is playing on the courts. The far courts usually are taken over by Asian students, the middle court is usually African Americans, and the third court is usually white kids. I don’t know why this happens but me and my friends notice how this has happened several times. I think that it is just because people feel more comfortable being around others that are like them. My experience was when my friends and I went over to the court that was mostly Asian students and called the next game. It’s not like it was a big deal but I believe that just the fact that we noticed the difference among the courts and were the first ones to play on another court, we crossed a border.

How does the international border in Arizona, seemingly remote from a college campus in New England, touch all of our lives? What happens when we divide a territory that the

community imagines as contiguous? We may imagine that the border is far away in a remote desert, but if the border can cross the Tohono O'odham, then the border can cross us.

NOTES

1. Ofelia Rivas, a Tohono O'odham traditional tribal elder, is an international human rights and indigenous rights activist, and founder of the O'odham VOICE Against the WALL and the O'odham Rights, Cultural and Environmental Justice Coalition.

This page intentionally left blank