ACME
An International Journal for Critical Geographies
Revue internationale de géographie critique
Revista internacional de geografía crítica

Counter-Archive as Methodology
Activating Oral Histories of the Contested Canada-US Border

Johanna Reynolds, Grace Wu et Julie Young

Volume 22, numéro 4, 2023

Departures, Arrivals, and Encounters: Feminist Understandings of Borders and Human Im/mobilities

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106681ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1106681ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Centre for Social Spatial & Economic Justice at the University of British Columbia

ISSN

1492-9732 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Reynolds, J., Wu, G. & Young, J. (2023). Counter-Archive as Methodology: Activating Oral Histories of the Contested Canada-US Border. *ACME*, *22*(4), 1197–1214. https://doi.org/10.7202/1106681ar

Résumé de l'article

Remembering Refuge: Between Sanctuary and Solidarity is a counter-archive based on oral history interviews with people who crossed the Canada-US border to seek refuge and advocacy groups working at this border in two moments of crisis: the 1980s Central American crisis and the 2017-19 crisis at Roxham Road. This paper foregrounds counter-archiving as a methodology, building from the oral histories to illustrate how borders and bordering practices are navigated and contested and how these lived experiences push back at state-directed logics and narratives of migration. By drawing connections across past and present struggles over mobilities and borders, we offer a critical genealogy of refuge around the Canada-US border. The oral histories collectively and individually contest state-led narratives of migration as a 'crisis,' the need for borders to be further securitized, and specifically of the Canadian state's generous humanitarianism towards a select few. We introduce the methodological choices, contexts, and limitations of the project's research design, and present two themes that emerged from the oral histories: the contested element of 'choice' in migration movements and the important roles played by resistance and refusal in the working out of borders. Finally, we emphasize that relationships between borders are crucial to understanding the histories of asylum around this border, and the political shift activated by the counter-archive of centering borders as lived, experienced, contested or refused.

ACME An International Journal for Critical Geographies

Counter-Archive as Methodology: Activating Oral Histories of the Contested Canada-US Border

Johanna Reynolds

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University
johanna.reynolds@gmail.com

Grace Wu

Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Concordia University
gya.wu.17@gmail.com

Julie Young

Department of Geography and Environment, University of Lethbridge
julie.young@uleth.ca

Abstract

Remembering Refuge: Between Sanctuary and Solidarity is a counter-archive based on oral history interviews with people who crossed the Canada-US border to seek refuge and advocacy groups working at this border in two moments of crisis: the 1980s Central American crisis and the 2017-19 crisis at Roxham Road. This paper foregrounds counter-archiving as a methodology, building from the oral histories to illustrate how borders and bordering practices are navigated and contested and how these lived experiences push back at state-directed

logics and narratives of migration. By drawing connections across past and present struggles over mobilities and borders, we offer a critical genealogy of refuge around the Canada-US border. The oral histories collectively and individually contest state-led narratives of migration as a 'crisis,' the need for borders to be further securitized, and specifically of the Canadian state's generous humanitarianism towards a select few. We introduce the methodological choices, contexts, and limitations of the project's research design, and present two themes that emerged from the oral histories: the contested element of 'choice' in migration movements and the important roles played by resistance and refusal in the working out of borders. Finally, we emphasize that relationships between borders are crucial to understanding the histories of asylum around this border, and the political shift activated by the counter-archive of centering borders as lived, experienced, contested or refused.

Keywords

Canada-US border, oral histories, counter-archive, refuge

> And the officer told me, "You know, you make a crime." I said, "I didn't kill nobody." Because I didn't know this word, you know, in English. And he said, "You know, when you cross the border, you make a crime." I said, "No, I didn't make a crime because I just crossed. I know, I understand I cross illegal, but because I want to go to Canada." And the officer, he was so nice person because he told me, "Oh, this is hard to treat women like that," he said, because at that time I was young, you know, and then he said, "It's so hard, but you have to do some papers and..." But always trying to ask me questions. You know, "Why?" Why I came, why I didn't do in my country. I said, "In my country it's not easy to get a US visa."
>
> (Maria; from El Salvador, currently living in Windsor, Canada)[1]

Introduction

Maria's story provokes questions about how movement across borders is judged, and specifically why "legality" is the frame through which crossing borders is measured. The concept of legality also very quickly slips into questions of legitimacy, deservingness, and innocence through which people seeking refuge are framed and their movements are judged (Labman and Liew 2019; Macklin 2005). All of this factors into the kind of 'refuge' that can be found. Maria's words strike at the heart of what is at stake in the negotiation of borders: both for state actors – including sovereignty, governance, and reputation – and for people who have been displaced and dispossessed – including safety and refuge. Here, the official perception that "you make a crime" when you cross a border without authorization is

[1] Note that all names are pseudonyms.

juxtaposed with Maria's insistence that "I didn't kill nobody. … I just crossed." The excerpt helps us to understand how assumptions underlying border policies and practices tend to center the state, its desires and priorities, vis-à-vis safety and contested border crossings. Maria's perspective as a person who has crossed multiple borders in search of safety for herself and her daughter unsettles the equation drawn between legality and migration and draws our attention to other ways of framing and understanding borders and refuge. It is this tension within struggles over border crossings that lies at the heart of the counter-archiving process that is examined here.

Maria told her story as part of the research project, *Remembering Refuge: Between Sanctuary and Solidarity*. The primary output of the project is what we call a counter-archive of the Canada-US border, built as an open-access, multimedia website that is both an archive of individual oral histories and a pedagogical resource. It aims to engage educators, students, and the broader public in thinking about the narratives and logics underlying systems of border and migration management. Grounded in oral histories carried out with a small group of people who have sought refuge in Canada at different moments and some advocates who have worked in Canada-US border communities from the 1980s onwards, the counter-archive positions people who have been displaced as important producers and bearers of knowledge whose voices are central to ongoing struggles over membership and human rights, and to understanding both how borders function and their impacts. In this paper, we foreground counter-archiving as a methodology that builds from stories of contestations over border crossings to illustrate that border control should be understood as a "site of struggle over the forms, means, and terms of international mobility" (Walters 2006, 156). In light of the violences and dispossessions effected by state policies and practices (Walia 2013), we see it as an ethical imperative to center people who have crossed the Canada-US border in order to tease out struggles over the production of knowledge about migration and displacement. The project is grounded in a set of oral histories that collectively and individually help to contest state-directed narratives including of migration as a 'crisis,' of the need for borders to be further securitized, and of states' generous humanitarianism towards a select few. While held up globally as a model of refugee generosity and leadership, Canada has relied on its geography to selectively limit its need to put its commitment to the right to asylum into practice (Hyndman and Mountz 2007), while also insulating the country's asylum policies and practices from international scrutiny, a phenomenon that Labman and Liew (2019, 190) refer to as "moral licensing…whereby curtailing access to asylum can be justified because Canada has seemingly done its part in resettling thousands of overseas refugees."

When we designed the project, prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic declared in March 2020, Canadian and US officials were seized with another set of interlocking crises at their borders: people continued to arrive at the Canada-US border by foot to make refugee claims while the implications of what were widely referred to as 'migrant caravans' from Central America to the Mexico-US border continued to unfold (Ormiston 2019; Rosenberg et al 2019). Between 2017 and 2019, more than 54,000 people crossed into Canada at Roxham Road, an

unofficial entry point between New York state and the province of Quebec. The arrival of people at the land border with the United States revealed anxieties about border management and tested Canada's "humanitarian imaginary" (Young 2019, 409), revealing both its logics and its limitations. The juxtaposition of high numbers of people seeking asylum at the Canadian land border and the movement of Central Americans towards the US for the same purpose were reminiscent of the 1980s period of crisis when Maria arrived at the Detroit-Windsor border to seek refuge - the connections across these moments invited further investigation.

Our work was inspired by the scholarship of critical border and refugee studies and by projects that seek to engage the public in the difficult questions that circulate about migration and bordering practices, to challenge existing discourses and redefine how we engage with them. We problematize the idea that borders are fixed as well as the border logics that take them for granted. Importantly, far from proposing to offer a general experience or narrative of the border or of the two time periods, the project and its counter-archive output offers a partial and fragmented view, a point of entry into grappling with some of the dynamics of bordering practices and border crossings that builds from stories told by people who have experienced them. In the next section we explain the methodological choices, contexts, and limitations of the research design, which in turn influenced the parameters of the counter-archive. We also briefly present the border logics and histories that the counter-archive is countering. In the final section, we expand on two themes that emerged from the oral histories: the contested element of "choice" in migration movements and the important roles played by resistance and refusal in the working out of borders. Finally, the concluding section returns to the importance of the relationships between borders to understanding the histories of asylum around the Canada-US border, and the political shift activated by the counter-archive of centering borders as lived, experienced, contested, or refused.

Counter-Archiving as Methodology

We used a counter-archiving methodology in designing the project. Counter-archives surface questions about the creation of knowledge: how it is produced, who produces it, and whose knowledge 'counts.' Chew, Lord and Marchessault (2018, 9) argue that counter-archives have the "explicit intention to historicize differently, to disrupt conventional national narratives, and to write difference into public accounts and history." Importantly, counter-archives - as the name suggests - seek to counter the hegemony of traditional institutional archives that impose "ideological narratives about national history as a white European settler colony" (Chew et al 2018, 9) and have historically excluded or marginalized women, Indigenous Peoples, communities of colour, migrants, and queer communities. Moreover, counter-archives push against teaching history as an artifact - i.e., "as something in the past, closed and finished" (Keshavarz and Zetterlund 2013, 27). The counter-archive also builds on research that examines how "unofficial" archives illuminate the ways in which communities have always contested borders (Young 2019).

In the case of border histories, official archives capture the official narratives that support border policies and logics. These narratives prioritize recounting success stories of welcoming people into the country while also managing perceived risks to national security and the integrity of border systems. The focus on management of risk lends itself to an understanding of borders "in crisis" that in turn justifies the construction and use of heavily securitized and externalized borders (Johnson et al 2011; Miller 2019). It also perpetuates a migration system that emphasizes preventing entry rather than understanding the complex reasons for which people might be on the move, setting up an equation of 'good/innocent' and 'bad/suspicious' ways of entering which then get read onto the bodies of people who enter via a particular mode or location. Those who wait and 'follow the rules' are welcomed and turned into emblems of the generosity and humanitarianism of the nation-state, while any 'unauthorized' entry into this fortified space is seen as threatening (Hyndman and Mountz 2008). Numerous researchers have underscored how policies reinforce expectations of victimhood, passivity, waiting, and gratitude, and cast suspicion on actions perceived as expressing agency (Lacroix 2004; Malkki 1996; Nyers 2006). This also results in the proliferation of dangerous, lengthier, and often deadlier routes and modes of migration (cf. De León 2015). Moreover, research focused on how to "manage refugees" has reinforced and reproduced neoliberal and imperial agendas (Nguyen and Phu 2021). Borders continue to function as colonial technologies that enact violence (Walia 2013), even as they can also provide a bounded sense of refuge. A pointed question from Roberto[2], in one of the oral histories included in this project, illuminates how border struggles and imperialism are co-constituted:

> What if we built a wall against them [North Americans]? From there, we wouldn't let any mineral enter from Latin America. All of the food that they receive from our lands, all of the petroleum from South America…so, it is like returning to the same; it's unjust.

As critical refugee studies scholars have made clear, foregrounding the stories and memories of refugees themselves – people who have experienced militarized borders, racism, and the violence of nation-states – shifts the focus from state-centered mechanisms of refugee-making and the expectations these engender (Espiritu 2014; Nguyen and Phu 2021).

Building on Keshavarz's (2018, 162) scholarship on developing ways to resist how "borders frame certain moments and events as natural, catastrophic, or normal," this counter-archive frames border histories as political, constructed, and not natural, underscoring that a lot of work goes into making borders function in the ways that they do as well as into removing other possibilities from view. As the work of both De León (2015) and Jones (2016) demonstrates, border policies contribute to producing the violence that emerges around

[2] Roberto was an activist with the Brigade of Agricultural Workers in El Salvador. Prompted by the persecution of his fellow activists, he fled El Salvador in 1984. He stayed in Los Angeles for two years before making his way to the border in Buffalo, New York, where a local advocacy group helped him to seek asylum in Canada. He currently lives in Toronto.

them. The counter-archive – built from the narratives of people displaced by and attempting to seek refuge within state policies – points to the underlying narratives that support systems of border and migration management and engages with the implications of these policies and practices especially in shaping how migration is understood.

We designed the project in the midst of a moment that was framed as a crisis for Canadian officials, who, beginning in 2017, were responding to movements of residents of the US crossing the border to make asylum claims as they anticipated that their temporary protected status (TPS) in the US would not be renewed (Blanchfield 2017). This was also a moment when then-President Trump announced his disdain for people from "shithole countries" and questioned their need for refuge in the US (Woodhouse 2018). Between January 2017 and December 2019, more than 54,000 people crossed the border "irregularly" to make refugee claims according to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB 2019). In response to the dramatic increase in border crossings, Canadian officials began operating in crisis mode: initiating a task force on irregular border crossings; setting up a temporary structure staffed by RCMP officers at the busiest unofficial crossing point near Roxham Road between Champlain, New York, and Hemmingford, Quebec; and, engaging their US counterparts in discussions on the need to 'modernize' the *Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement* that governs asylum seeking between these countries.[3]

Accounts of border crossings such as Maria's that opens the paper remind us that the declaration of any 'crisis' at the border is but a recent chapter in a lengthy and contested history of border crossings that scaffold and unfold through contemporary border politics. Part of the issue with this 'crisis mode' of framing the border is that it works within an emergency present moment that provides no historical context, as if it is a variation from the norm of how the border typically operates (Carastathis et al 2018; Côté-Boucher, Vives & Jannard 2023; Roitman 2013; Young 2021). Another reason the crisis framing is problematic is that it ignores the consequences of policies that are disproportionately experienced by those enduring the instability and violence of precarious migration status. As Carastathis, Kouri-Towe, Mahrouse, and Whitley (2018, 5; emphasis in original) argue, labeling something a crisis:

> shifts the focus from the *experience of displacement as a crisis for refugees*, to the *perception of their entry as a crisis for nation-states*. The shift from crisis as the *cause* of forced migration to the construction of crisis as an *effect* of human mobility has a number of important political effects, not least of which is that it enables accelerated border militarization…and the closure of paths to safety.

[3] An important detail about this bilateral agreement, introduced in 2004, is that - until March 2023 - it only applied at official land ports of entry, which pushed people to cross the Canada-US border at unauthorized locations such as the one that emerged at Roxham Road.

In this sense, the crisis framing is state-centric and ahistorical. Counter-archiving as a methodology, alternately, tries to get at some of the other actors involved in navigating and contesting borders.

For these reasons, we selected two periods of contested crossings of the Canada-US border: the contemporary period (2017-2020) began primarily with the arrival of long-term residents of the US who are of Haitian descent[4] and others who fled due to the anticipated expiry of their TPS (Blanchfield 2017; Young 2021); and the 1980s-early 1990s when people from Central America were fleeing their countries at 'crisis' levels (Rosinbum 2015; Young 2019). This demonstrates the longer history of how the border operates, despite the Canadian government's crisis governance that positioned the contemporary moment as unprecedented. Most Canadians have forgotten about this earlier period in Canada-US border history when discourses of crisis and abuse of the system were in circulation. In 1987, the Canadian government moved to cancel the moratorium on deportations to El Salvador and Guatemala and imposed visa requirements for nationals from these two countries in response to the arrival of large numbers of people seeking asylum arriving at Canadian ports of entry. Then-Prime Minister Mulroney's Conservative government indicated this was because a "better way" was needed to manage the perceived crisis at the border of Central Americans looking to Canada for refuge in light of US policies that left them vulnerable to detention and deportation (Canadian Press 1987; Young 2019). The new Canadian policy approach cast doubt on the legitimacy of their refugee claims, even though claims by nationals of both countries had higher than sixty percent acceptance rates (García 2006). At the same time, this period saw residents of communities that straddled the Canada-US border participate as part of the wider Sanctuary Movement (Crittenden 1988; Rosinbum 2015; Young 2019). We wanted to learn from these histories of what Nolin (2006, 106) refers to as "asylum demand at the border" and the activism that emerged in relation to it, and consider their connections to the contemporary moment. We framed the project around the concepts of sanctuary and solidarity because these threads from the 1980s context resonate in the contemporary context despite shifts in policy that have altered the landscape of refuge at the Canada-US border. This includes, most explicitly, the implementation of the *Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement* (STCA) in 2004, which made it more difficult to enter Canada to claim asylum while also pushing people to more remote and precarious pathways of entry such as Roxham Road (Côté-Boucher et al 2023; Labman and Liew 2019).

In addition to these two time periods, we initially focused our research in relation to two key sites: the Plattsburgh (New York)-Lacolle (Québec) and Detroit (Michigan)-Windsor (Ontario) border crossings. The Plattsburgh-Lacolle port of entry (POE) - the closest official POE to Roxham Road - experienced high numbers of people seeking asylum at the border in

[4] Reporting on the large numbers of people crossing at Roxham Road initially focused on Haitians but it quickly became clear that people from many countries of origin were making use of this route. In fact, Nigerians accounted for a significant number of people who crossed (Nasser 2023).

both the 1980s-90s and the contemporary period (Rosinbum 2015; Tasker 2017); Detroit-Windsor experienced much smaller numbers but has a history of cross-border solidarity and a long-standing Central American population (Young 2019). While these remained key nodes around which we organized the fieldwork, the actual locations of oral history interviews covered a broader landscape from Toronto through southwestern Ontario (including the Windsor-Detroit border city as a whole) and from Montréal across southwestern Québec. It was because of these histories that we selected these two moments and two border crossings that were important as the organizing parameters for the fieldwork. Both choices encouraged our initial focus on outreach to people originally from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Haiti. Crucially, the stories of people on the move from these countries have challenged how Canada and the US have framed who counts as a refugee (Young, Reynolds and Nyers 2019). In the 1980s, most people arriving at the border to make refugee claims were originally from El Salvador and Guatemala and were not recognized as refugees in the US, in large part due to the Reagan administration's long involvement in supporting the military regimes in those countries. As a result, many people with precarious legal status in the US crossed the border into Canada to secure their legal status (García 2006; Nolin 2006). In the contemporary context, people from Haiti are often dismissed as 'economic' migrants rather than 'genuine' refugees, using the argument that their claims do not meet the narrow terms of the Refugee Convention definition (Edmonds 2017; Paik 2016).

As it turned out, our recruitment process connected us mostly with Salvadorans, a couple of Guatemalans, and no Haitians apart from one community advocate. We had greater success in recruiting participants who could speak to the earlier moment of crisis and most of the stories captured in the counter-archive address the 1980s context, although they were collected in 2019. We anticipated that it would be more difficult to recruit people from the contemporary period given that many people would be in refugee determination proceedings and living with precarious status, which turned out to be the case. While our outreach efforts were met with interest from community advocates, many of their organizations and community groups had already been approached by journalists and researchers. As one advocate relayed to us after we had been doing outreach for several months, "everyone is looking to speak to asylum seekers at this time...the organization already reached out a couple weeks ago to all participants who were claimants...for another research on the resettlement of the claimants who crossed Lacolle...I'm sorry the timing is not convenient" (personal communication; 15 September 2019). The oversaturation of research and media attention given to the Haitian community at that time caused us to halt recruitment efforts and focus on the earlier period. Related to our outreach strategy, it also became clear that it was important to include stories in the counter-archive from advocates as we attempted to make connections with people with lived experiences of crossing the border. In this sense, this was not a project that sought to tell the story of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Haitian migration to Canada; it was always designed as a history of the Canada-US border within these time periods where there was heightened attention to contested border crossings as the focal point. Moreover, the global Covid-19 pandemic erupted into our work on this project, leading us to suspend ongoing

recruitment efforts. The counter-archive holds the stories we were able to collect between May and December 2019. However, we have designed it as a living archive, so that additional stories can be contributed over time.

Finally, we made use of an oral history approach in collecting the stories because it was well-suited to operationalizing our methodological objectives. Oral history emerged as a method that was a response to the hegemonic telling of history, with the goal of capturing details, stories, and perspectives that had not been archived. Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook (2017, 2) argue histories that include the voices of "everyday" people "serve a public pedagogical function that can be transformative for law, policy, media, and citizenship." Crucially, oral history is an approach that elicits and situates stories in their broader contexts, lending itself well to drawing out connections and intersections across time periods, geographies, and borders (Loza 2016). Here, the oral histories encourage an understanding of migration and borders based not in their potential to elicit empathy for individuals but, rather, in how the stories call into question the functioning of nation-state borders and state-centric approaches that tend to be central to the framing of dominant narratives of migration. The counter-archival approach further allowed us to engage with the politics of simultaneous hospitality and hostility that 'host' states exhibit (Derrida 2000; Mahrouse and Kouri-Towe, this issue). The border encounters recounted in this project are relevant to understanding struggles over mobilities and their connection to military, labour, and resource extraction policies. The personal stories signal the violence of geographical borders and of the policies that enforce them and speak to how border policies are racialized and classed, while also highlighting acts and practices of solidarity and refusal. In the next section, we delve into the countering process in greater depth by focusing on some of the stories shared as part of the project that speak to both official and unofficial narratives of the border.

Stories and what They Tell Us about Borders and Displacement

> When I see the people in the US and Mexico, or the Central Americans, I understand what they're running from. I seen it. I seen the living in El Salvador and also as a visitor. I seen it… I know the dangers and all this bad stuff that corrupt governments and gangs make all these people wanted to leave at the same time. Sometime, I just stay quiet because at the same time I want to tell them, "Don't do it because of the dangers." When I see these kids coming with them, but I know the drive that they have because of what they see and what they live in, it's a strong push in the life to make it here. I don't know. For me, it's very hard because, one, I understand why they want to do it. Also, I want to tell them not to do it or do either way my mom did it or find a different ways. But it's hard. ... But if I could do something, I will tell them not to put their life in danger but at the same time, either you die not doing nothing or you die trying to do something. I did it. I did it at 14, almost 15.
>
> (Santiago; from El Salvador, currently living in Windsor)

Here, Santiago draws connections between his migration journey from El Salvador to Canada over three decades ago, and the news stories circulating about recent migrant caravans heading towards the US-Mexico border from Central America when we interviewed him in August 2019. In this excerpt, Santiago demonstrates a deeply personal understanding of what options were available to those trying to migrate at that time and the decisions people make within the constraints of their particular situations. His own experience is testament to this. The civil war in El Salvador meant that his safety was in jeopardy. At age 14, Santiago decided to attempt to find safety in the United States. He took a bus from El Salvador to Guatemala and another to Mexico. When he made it to Monterrey, a northern Mexican city, he was detained and deported to El Salvador. It was at this point that he learned his mother and stepfather had been working on a resettlement application for their family to Canada. Remembering all the challenges he went through as he sought safety, Santiago reflected: "But I'm just glad. I'm glad that I was one of the lucky ones, that I survived. I survived that experience, I survived the opportunity to get out of the country."

Santiago's story speaks to how people weigh the options that feel available to them when seeking safety and security, despite the possible dangers. In this sense, his story helps to tease out the complex and iterative nature of migration decision-making, and the contested element of 'choice' in migration movements. At the level of the individual, decisions around leaving or staying in place can sometimes feel like inevitable death, as Santiago explains, "either you die not doing nothing or you die trying to do something." And yet, when individual choices are assessed by others - state officials, the media, etc. - expressions of agency tend to be read as evidence of not being in legitimate need of protection (Macklin 2005; Mainwaring 2016). Starting in the late 1980s, the discourse of 'asylum shopping'[5] became a prevalent way of describing concerns about how people seek asylum: "prevent[ing] refugee claimants from haven 'shopping'...had become the subject of increasing international concern" (Kelley and Trebilcock 1998, 418). This concern was part of the justification for the *Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement*, which institutionalized the perspective that people should be forced to make their claims in the first place they arrive and, by extension, that not doing so should be viewed with suspicion (Chesoi and Mason 2021). Indeed, in 2019, then-Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction Bill Blair reinforced this view in commenting on a newly introduced provision that barred asylum claims in Canada by those who have previously made a claim in one of the Five Eyes countries (an alliance between Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand), saying: "But we don't want them sort of shopping around and making applications in multiple countries" (Harris 2019, para 11). Perceptions of choice are mobilized to call into question the legitimacy of people's need for

[5] Asylum shopping is a pejorative term used to suggest that asylum seekers "shop" for the best location in which to make their claims and, by extension, that not making one's claim in the first country one passes through casts doubt on the validity of one's asylum claim.

security and safety. For example, in the contemporary moment, Santiago's experience of first trying to cross the US-Mexico border, being deported to El Salvador, and then working with his family to be resettled to Canada, might be read differently. Put simply, the contested element of choice frames asylum seekers as "testing the perceived benevolent nature of the Canadian state" (Reynolds and Hyndman 2021).

More than this, Mainwaring (2016, 291) argues in the context of Mediterranean migration that "the prevalent construction of migrants as victims or villains misconceives [their] agency, however limited…[and] conceals the contested politics of mobility and security evident in negotiations between migrants, borders guards, smugglers, fishermen, and other actors" (see also Macklin 2005). Santiago's story resonates with this body of scholarship that seeks to problematize how migrant agency and questions of 'choice' are framed, and troubles dominant narratives that flatten and simplify how borders are negotiated and how people execute their migration journeys. It illustrates the complexities of navigating policies, borders, and communities as people seek refuge, while also underscoring the importance of understanding how contestation and refusal shape the border and experiences of seeking refuge. Indeed, a key element of the counter-archiving methodological approach insists that resistance and refusal are actually central to how borders work. This ranges from organized advocacy networks such as the Sanctuary Movement that was active throughout the 1980s to more "tactical" ways of negotiating borders (Young et al. 2017).

Javier's story is illustrative of these differing forms of contestation. Javier lived in Guatemala and during the civil war (1960-1996) helped organize a union and had family members who supported the leftist *guerillas*. When he began being followed by state actors, he made the decision to leave the country. After riding the freight train *La Bestia* for 20 days through Mexico, he connected with members of the Sanctuary Movement who facilitated the rest of his journey - crossing the US-Mexico border, spending time in sanctuary in Indiana, USA, and arriving in Windsor, Canada, in 1991. He now lives in Leamington. In his oral history interview, he talked at length about the support he received from members of the Sanctuary Movement along the way. Here he talks about the moment when he and his daughter crossed the US-Mexico border as part of that journey:

> They organized it all there [from San Diego]. They said to me, we're going to give your wife money so that she can go get your other three children. And you will go to Nogales to the Catholic Church. … And I was taking my 7-year-old daughter. They passed my daughter among fifteen girls who all had party hats on, as though they were coming from celebrating an imaginary birthday party. And they put her in the middle. (…) Since she was already 7 years old, they told her, when they stop the car and you see the person in uniform that is going to stop us, don't stop talking. Pretend as though you are speaking English and speak to the other kids there, as though you're all having lots of fun and clowning around. And they passed her in front of the Immigration gate.

> And then with me, two pastors came, one Methodist and one Baptist. (…) And they said to me, if someone from US Immigration stops us, you tell them that we are studying bird species and that you are showing us where they are located. (…) I had a guidebook about birds, and a camera. But the camera was to monitor the American immigration agents. And we walked past a hollow like that, we passed by walking, there was still snow (…) on the ground. And then, the fence that we passed was three strands of barbed wire – well, even that we passed over, and then two people received me, a young woman and an older woman. (…) And they said to me, if you see a car, especially if it says US Immigration, throw yourself to the ground. (…) And the car we were waiting for arrived, it turned around the tree and it parked next to us and they said, quickly, come in, come in, take the paper and pretend that you're reading it. (…) I was very nervous, very excited. When they said, you already have your feet in the United States, on US soil. … You've made me remember as though it was yesterday that this all happened.

Javier's story is illustrative of the different scales of border work and of the many actors involved in pushing back at how states have decided to enforce their borders and categorize people as they seek to cross. We use the word 'decide' here to underscore that border policies and practices enacted by state officials are not neutral or natural but rather are deliberate moves to justify the categories they impose on people's movements. Javier's experience of crossing several borders raises questions about narratives of legality and illegality, and points to how border stories and modes of migration might be understood differently depending on who is telling the story.

Many of the stories in the counter-archive remind us that there are important actors beyond the state that impact how borders could or should work - and other ways of responding to and supporting journeys aimed at seeking safety, including the histories of sanctuary and solidarity across the continent. For this reason, the counter-archive insists that the stories and experiences of people who have crossed borders are foundational to how we should understand the Canada-US border and its histories of asylum. In addition to individual oral histories, the inclusion of interviews with advocates underscores the history of people building solidarity then and now, a necessary piece to understanding how the border actually works and how individuals navigate and contest borders. This is another element of how the project counters ahistorical understandings of the Canada-US border, by showing that advocacy networks persist, although their parameters and the landscape of refuge have shifted over time.

Conclusion

By means of the counter-archiving methodology, the stories shared by Maria, Roberto, Santiago, Javier, and others are brought into conversation with and become a way of translating critical scholarship about the complexities of migration into accessible resources for the general public. Foregrounding the stories of people with lived experience of seeking

refuge shifts the focus from state-centered mechanisms of refugee-making while also contesting the logics on which these mechanisms rely. Because the counter-archive is built from the narratives of people displaced by and attempting to seek refuge within state policies, the materials call upon educators and visitors to engage with the implications of these policies and practices. This is not to suggest that counter-archives are a 'solution' to these dilemmas: *Remembering Refuge* provides a fragmented and partial view of the working out of borders. Its aim was to develop a way of engaging with public and scholarly debates about borders and displacement that was grounded in lived experience. The counter-archiving methodology enabled this work.

Ideally, the counter-archive would have worked with communities to develop and present the stories it contains. We had originally envisioned activating the counter-archive through community-based workshops and events, which were not able to take place due to public health measures during the Covid-19 pandemic and other unanticipated circumstances. Siegenthaler and Bublatzky highlight the relationships that can be created through participatory archives that support "multi-directional, collaborative forms of knowledge production within and beyond an archive, its boundaries, and its materiality" (Siegenthaler and Bublatzky 2021, 284). They argue that online spaces open new archival possibilities to center migrant agency, suggesting that "participatory repositories and archives…cater for publics who identify with increasingly diverse, complex and transnational histories and memories beyond dominant national narratives, potentially co-creating new notions of community and nationhood" (284). It is worth emphasizing that we see the project output as a living archive to which stories and modules can and will be added over time.

Pedagogy is an ethical imperative[6] underlying the project, whereby the stories open space to reflect on, reconsider, and reframe the narratives through which contested border crossings are often understood and portrayed. That is to say, from the outset the intended contributions of the research were pedagogical because we insist that research cannot ignore its relevance for learning and unlearning important concepts and ways of seeing. While calls for 'policy-relevant' and 'solutions-oriented' research have dominated and shaped the fields of refugee and migration studies – which to our knowledge have generated few alternatives that do not reproduce physical violence and precarity – this project sought to emphasize that another approach is urgent because the stakes are high. The research aimed to draw connections across past and present struggles over mobilities and borders by activating oral histories. It offers a critical genealogy of the Canada-US border across the two moments of crisis that motivated it. As the themes emerged from the oral histories as well as from our engagement with critical border and refugee studies scholarship, we developed education resources that illuminate the connections across story and theory and push people to see

[6] As an anonymous reviewer of this project framed it: "in the context of border policing policies that explicitly intend to harm people to deter their crossing, pedagogy-relevant research is an ethical imperative over so-called policy-relevant research (though the two are not mutually exclusive)."

themselves as part of a broader history of border imperialism (Walia 2013), as well as of solidarity and support.

While many insights emerged from the oral histories, these two are crucial: migration journeys are complex as are borders. Both should be obvious and yet they are not part of how the public tends to understand migration and borders. We propose that this is a simple but not simplistic way of understanding what is at stake in these discussions. As shown in Santiago's story, migration decision-making is not straightforward and the best option available to you can change over time, with different actors implicated in why and how decisions are made. In addition, Javier's excerpt reminds us why stories of contestation and refusal matter to understanding how borders work. State officials, politicians, and media commentators impose logics that cannot be the only way of understanding the terms of migration. Seeing the complexity of both migration journeys and borders necessarily entails understanding the relationships between borders - not just across geographies but also across time. In a contemporary moment when there were intense discussions of both the Canada-US and US-Mexico border in crisis, failure to make connections to the historical and geographical contexts resulted in a missed opportunity to capture the nuance and complexities of migration and displacement in the region. Employing oral histories allows more of these complexities to emerge. Centering borders as lived, experienced, contested, and refused is a necessary shift in perspective. While the counter-archive is grounded in stories, it is also important to understand that people with migration histories are often reluctant to share their stories in part related to the dominance of state narratives and logics that frame movements as (il)legal and (un)authorized. Maria offers a stark insight into all of these questions when she poignantly refuses the criminalization of her journey, arguing "I just crossed."

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, guest editors, and trusted colleagues for their helpful comments and suggestions. This research was generously funded by the National Geographic Society and undertaken, in part, thanks to funding from the Canada Research Chairs Program and the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Lethbridge.

References

Blanchfield, Mike, "'Daddy, Let's Go to Canada': The Fearful March From Trump to Canada," *Macleans,* August 27, 2017, macleans.ca/news/canada/daddy-lets-go-to-canada-the-fearful-march-from-trump-to-canada/

Canadian Press. "Canada Won't Deport Salvadorans," *Windsor Star*, January 30, 1987, A1.

Carastathis, Anna, Natalie Kouri-Towe, Gada Mahrouse, and Leila Whitley. 2018. "Introduction: Intersectional Feminist Interventions in the "Refugee Crisis," *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 34(1), 3-15.

Chesoi, Madalina, and Robert Mason. 2021. Overview of the Canada–United States Safe Third Country Agreement. Background Paper. Publication No. 2020-70-E. https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/202070E#ftn56.

Chew, May, Susan Lord and Janine Marchessault. 2018. "Introduction: Archive / Counter-Archives." *Public* 57: 5-10. http://www.publicjournal.ca/public-57-archivecounter-archives/.

Côté-Boucher, Karine, Luna Vives and Jannard, Louis-Philippe. 2023. Chronicle of a "Crisis" Foretold: Asylum seekers and the case of Roxham Road on the Canada-US border. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 41(2): 408-426. https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544221127614

Crittenden, Ann. 1988. *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

De León, Jason. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves.* Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2000. "Hostipitality," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5(3): 3-18.

Edmonds, Kevin. 2017. "Haiti: Pushed Out and Pulled Away: The End of Temporary Protected Status," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (49) 4: 398-401.

Espiritu, Yen Le. 2014. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees.* Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

García, Maria C. 2006. *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Harris, Kathleen. 2019. "Liberals move to stem surge in asylum seekers — but new measure will stop just fraction of claimants," *CBC News*, 10 April. https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/refugee-asylum-seekers-border-changes-1.5092192.

Hyndman, Jennifer, and Alison Mountz. 2008. "Another Brick in the Wall? Neo-refoulement and the Externalization of Asylum by Australia and Europe," *Government and Opposition* 43(2): 249-269.

Hyndman, Jennifer, and Alison Mountz. 2007. "Refuge or Refusal: The Geography of Exclusion." In *Violent Geographies*, edited by Derek Gregory and Allan Pred, 77-92. New York: Routledge.

IRB. 2019. "Refugee Protection Claims Made by Irregular Border Crossers." Available at: https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/statistics/Pages/irregular-border-crossers-countries.aspx.

Johnson, Corey, Reece Jones, Anssi Paasi, Louise Amoore, Alison Mountz, Mark Salter, and Chris Rumford. 2011. "Interventions on Rethinking 'the Border' in Border Studies," *Political Geography* (30)2: 61-69. https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/C_Johnson_Interventions_2011.pdf

Jones, Reece. 2016. *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move.* New York: Verso.

Kelley, Ninette and Michael Trebilcock. 1998. *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Keshavarz, Mahmoud. 2018 "Undesigning Borders: Urban Spaces of Borders and Counter-Practices of Looking." In *Undesign: Critical Practices at the Intersection of Art and Design*, edited by Gretchen Coombs, Andrew McNamara and Gavin Sade, 161-174. New York: Routledge.

Keshavarz, Mahmoud and Christina Zetterlund. 2013. "A Method for Materialising Borders." *Tensta Museum: Reports from a New Sweden,* 27-30. https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1406353/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Labman, Shauna, and Jamie Liew. 2019. "Law and Moral Licensing: The Making of Illegality and Illegitimacy Along the Border," *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 5(3): 188-211.

Lacroix, Marie. 2004. "Canadian Refugee Policy and the Social Construction of the Refugee Claimant Subjectivity: Understanding Refugeeness," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17(2): 147–166.

Llewellyn, Kristina R. and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook (eds). 2017. *Oral History and Education: Theories, Dilemmas and Practices*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Loza, M. 2016. "From Ephemeral to Enduring: The Politics of Recording and Exhibiting Bracero Memory," *The Public Historian* 38(2): 23-41.

Macklin, Audrey. 2005. "Disappearing Refugees: Reflections on the Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 36: 365-426.

Mainwaring, Cetta. 2016. "Migrant Agency: Negotiating Borders and Migration Controls," *Migration Studies* 4(3): 289-308.

Malkki, Liisa H. 1996. "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11(3): 377–404.

Miller, Todd. 2019. *Empire of Borders: The Expansion of U.S. Borders Around the World.* London: Verso.

Nasser, Wael. 2023. "A Mixed-Method Study on Understanding Irregular Migration to Canada Through Technology-Mediated Communication: YouTube as a Case Study." MA thesis. University of Lethbridge.

Nguyen, Vinh, and Thy Phu (Eds.). 2021. *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Nolin, Catherine. 2006. *Transnational Ruptures: Gender and Forced Migration*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Nyers, Peter. 2006. *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*. New York: Routledge.

Ormiston, Susan. "How Thousands of Asylum Seekers Have Turned Roxham Road into a De Facto Border Crossing," *CBC News*, September 29 2019, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/the-national-roxham-road-immigration-border-1.5169249

Paik, Naomi. 2016. *Rightlessness: Testimony and Redress in U.S. Prison Camps Since World War II.* University of North Carolina Press.

Reynolds, Johanna and Jennifer Hyndman. 2021. Shifting Grounds of Asylum in Canadian Public Discourse and Policy. In *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada,* edited by Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu, 23-45. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Rosenberg, Mica, Delphine Schrank, Kristina Cooke, Julia Love, Loren Elliott, & Encarni Pindado. 2019. "A Common Road to Different Fates," *Reuters*, October 10. https://graphics.reuters.com/USA-IMMIGRATION-PROFILE/0100B2FK1NP/index.html.

Rosinbum, John. 2015. "'We Are in the Middle of Two Great Powers': Refugees, Activists, and Government during the Plattsburgh Border Crisis of 1987," *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 31(2). https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40319

Siegenthaler Fiona, and Cathrine Bublatzky. 2021. "(Un)Sighted Archives of Migration—Spaces of Encounter and Resistance: An Introduction," *Visual Anthropology* 34(4): 283-295. DOI: 10.1080/08949468.2021.1944766

Tasker, John Paul. "Far-Right, Anti-Fascist Protesters Temporarily Shut Quebec Border Crossing." *CBC News*, September 30, 2017, https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/far-right-antifa-clash-across-canada-1.4315053

Walia, Harsha. 2013. *Undoing Border Imperialism*. Chico, CA: AK Press.

Walters, William. 2006. "Rethinking Borders Beyond the State." *Comparative European Politics* 4(2/3): 141-159.

Woodhouse, Leighton Akio. 2018. "Trump's "Shithole Countries" Remark is at the Center of a Lawsuit to Reinstate Protections for Immigrants," *The Intercept*, June 28., https://theintercept.com/2018/06/28/trump-tps-shithole-countries-lawsuit/.

Young, Julie E.E. 2021. "The Border as Archive: Reframing the Crisis Mode of Governance at the Canada-US Border," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* (29)4: 568-588. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2021.1882951.

Young, Julie E.E. 2019. "Seeing Like a Border City: Refugee Politics at the Borders of City and Nation-State," *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37(3): 407-423. DOI: 10.1177/2399654418790765.

Young, Julie E.E, Luann Good Gingrich, Adrienne Wiebe, & Miriam T. Harder. 2017. "Tactical Borderwork: Central American Migrant Women Negotiating the Southern Border of Mexico." In *Transnational Social Policy: Social Support in a World on the Move*, edited by Luann Good Gingrich and Stefan Köngeter, 200-221. New York: Routledge.

Young, Julie E.E., Johanna Reynolds, and Peter Nyers. 2019. "Introduction: Dis/placing the borders of North America," *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 5(1-2): 1-11.