TECHNOLOGIES OF DIVISION: EVERYDAY BORDERING

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how *border thinking* allows us to situate sociotechnical systems in everyday social processes as designed 'bordering' systems, regulating access and exerting control by embodying politics of difference in the context of everyday life for migrants in the United States. Through a discussion of everyday designed artifacts—credit cards and drivers' licenses—the paper examines the tensions created in a process of acculturation, and calls for designers to attend to the ways in which designed artifacts embody larger political structures, becoming actors in the politics of inclusion/exclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Borders have recently gained noticeable attention as the divisions between modern nation-states' borders have blurred, a product of the world's population's accelerated state of flux; as evidenced by the current refugee crisis in Europe and the number of economic migrants moving South to North in the American continent. This has led to a rise in political discourses and plans of grand walls and harsh policies against refugee resettlement. In this paper, we present the idea that there are bordering devices more inconspicuous than concrete walls with monumental aspirations. Migrants face barriers on a daily basis, and these barriers are embodied through designed everyday objects. This phenomenon is a product of sociotechnical systems adopting bordering qualities.

The purpose of this paper is to present an understanding of how sociotechnical systems regulate access and exert control by embodying politics of difference (Winner 1980) in the context of everyday life for migrants in the United States. This paper wishes to contribute a perspective centered on the design of artifacts and how these mediate social relationships, generate conflicts, and perpetuate power relationships between migrants and their new communities.

This paper first draws a theoretical framework that sets the concept of border beyond geographical debates. Using a definition of bordering as a practice of othering (van Houtum and van Naerseen 2002) and Walter Mignolo's (2000) border thinking paradigm, it is possible to situate the design of everyday objects as bordering artifacts or technologies of division. The paper then explores how these borders shape migrants' behaviors and local practices to reinforce politics of difference. Finally, we discuss the credit card and driver's license in the context of the United States as examples of this bordering.

EVERYDAY BORDERING

Nation-states' borders have become increasingly porous as evidenced by the massive flows of refugees fleeing to Europe and economic migrants crossing the United States' southern border. Excessive surveillance and policy aimed at restricting human mobility has proven unsuccessful: failed border control has led to a proliferation and heterogenization of other components and institutions of borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). We will not attempt to define what a border is or is not, as this is not within the scope of this paper; instead we wish to introduce Mignolo's *border thinking* paradigm:

> The borders and border thinking I am referring to are always restricted to the border or line that divides and unites modernity/coloniality and

> materializes in actual new walls after the fall of Berlin wall; in laws, psychological racial barriers, borders of gender, sexuality, and racial classification, and so forth. Now physical and psychological borders in general (that is, not those that emanate from modernity/coloniality) could become, and are becoming phenomena to be analyzed from the perspective and concerns of different disciplines (sociology, economics, anthropology, aesthetics, linguistics and so on). (Mignolo 2000: xvi).

Border thinking allows us to situate sociotechnical systems in everyday social processes as 'bordering' systems (van Houtum 2005).

Policy, services and artifacts have been designed by modern institutions (such as governments, private banking sector, public services and utilities providers, among others) as part of current sociotechnical systems to restrict and regulate access for migrants. These sociotechnical systems have become points of conflict for those dwelling in the borders of these systems. These systems have spurred in part due to the impossibility of materializing nation-state borders, as concrete walls also are permeable:

> In our time, nation-states are moving away from their role as guarantors of a community of citizens within a territorial unit, charged with the policing of links between 'inside' and 'outside': Instead, these states are becoming internationally organized systems geared towards trying to separate people and circulations deemed risky or malign from those deemed risk-free or worthy of protection. This process increasingly occurs both inside and outside territorial boundaries between nation-states, resulting in a blurring between international borders and urban/local borders. (Graham 2011: 89).

Consider passport and visa stamps a material manifestation of these internationally organized systems; there is a global agreement that some passports afford unrestricted access to certain places, while others actually activate further screening and surveillance. Even though this is a fascinating area (see Keshavarz 2016), I wish to focus on the process of inclusion and exclusion that occurs *within* nation-state borders, primarily what happens to migrants once they have crossed nation-state lines, and how they carry out everyday practices.

STRATEGIES OF CROSSING/REINFORCING BORDERS

Processes of how migrants adjust into their countries have been long studied in psychology and behavior studies, but also in more sociologically-oriented fields such as cross-cultural studies. In this domain, Berry's (1997) model of acculturation is perhaps one of the most prevalent theories. According to Berry, migrants, when faced with a new culture, situate themselves in different strategies of acculturation, which can be categorized–from most to least desirable–as assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. These four outcomes result from migrants' ability to negotiate the relationship between their heritage (origin) culture and the dominant culture into which they are resettling. Other authors have made claims that Berry's theory might be flawed and loaded with assumptions (see Weinreich 2009; Schwartz, et al. 2010; Chirkov 2009); this paper does not seek to contend current acculturation theories; instead, we are introducing this concept of acculturation to provide some historical grounding on how migrants are expected to adjust lifestyles and identities in order to successfully or unsuccessfully be part of their resettling country.

It is common to see the terms 'assimilation' and 'integration' in mainstream media; which means that even though the general public might not be familiar with academic studies on acculturation, the concept is embedded into mainstream ideas about migrants and it is perhaps the most dominant model for understanding cultural exchange. We can trace back the concept of acculturation to early attempts to indoctrinate Native Americans to a more European lifestyle (see van West 1987 for an account about the role design played in this process). Therefore acculturation–as a concept and strategy–is deeply rooted in American history and has an undeniable, implicit colonizing agenda.

While scholars in the field of cultural studies have more sophisticated accounts of processes of cultural exchange, the pervasiveness of the acculturation ideology leads to sociotechnical systems embodying politics (Winner 1980) of acculturation. It is through this nature that control is exerted by allowing or denying access based on how well migrants adopt practices from the dominating culture.

We could make the claim that sociotechnical systems are constantly mediating the relationship between migrants and new communities, but we believe a more accurate way of thinking about the role of systems would be defining and re-defining the separation between them. It is precisely this dual conception that generates subjective and collective conflicts. This duality is what the act of everyday bordering seeks to establish and reinforce, as broken nation-state and regional borders allow a massive flow of people, commodities, and money that blur the distinction between Western and Eastern civilization, Christianity and Islam, Latin and Anglo America, and Africa and Europe (Mignolo 2000).

Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) refer to this as *technologies of division*; we have created technology that underlines the separation between outsiders from insiders. These systems, which include designed artifacts, create tensions between the practice of reinforcing borders–by dominant political interests that seeks to divide and exclude–and

practices of border crossing–by migrants that seek to integrate.

TECHNOLOGIES OF DIVISION: CREDIT CARD AND DRIVER'S LICENSE IN THE UNITED STATES

Why everyday borders? As Michel de Certeau once stated,

> "life consists of constantly crossing borders (…) It is known that there is no identity document in the United States; it is replaced by the driver's license and the credit card, that is, by the capacity to cross space and by participation in a game of fiduciary contracts between North American *citizens*" (1981, pp.10–18, emphasis ours).

Identity, in this case is tied to belonging to system of financial exchange and unrestricted mobility; and, in both cases a designed artifact mediates access to these infrastructures. These infrastructures define everyday life processes, especially in the context of American life where so much of public participation is held exclusively in the economic sphere.

Therefore, if American identity is tied to ability to participate in financial exchange and freedom of movement, integration by migrants would also be measured under those terms. In this sense, the credit cards and driver's license adopt a bordering function. In some cases–depending mostly on immigration status–these borders have an exclusionary nature, and in others they act as acculturation devices.

Only ten states and Washington DC give driver's licenses regardless of immigration status (Park 2015); which means that in most of the country, undocumented migrants are completely excluded from this form of public participation, and this exclusion can only be regarded as a form of control (Winner 1980; Joerges 1999). This control becomes especially conspicuous in the case of North Carolina's recently released driver's license for undocumented migrants, where the state has developed a different design to the regular license, making a driver's immigration status explicit (Figure 1). This driver's license performs a dual function: as it allows access to mobility, it reveals the condition of otherness. The design of this artifact and its inscription of otherness, in fact, shapes the social practice of driving (Shove, et al. 2005):

> (B)ordering rejects as well as erects othering. This paradoxical character of bordering processes whereby borders are erected to erase territorial ambiguity and ambivalent identities in order to shape a unique and cohesive order, but thereby create new or reproduce lately existing differences in space and identity – is of much importance in understanding our daily contemporary practices. (van Houtum & van Naerssen 2002: 126).

Figure 1. Samples of driver's licenses (depending on immigration status) issued by the State of North Carolina (Images taken from http://nbclatino.com/2013/02/22/dreamers-drivers-licenses-in-nc-will-have-a-no-lawful-status-stripe/ and NC Department of Transportation https://www.ncdot.gov/)

Obtaining a credit card is in most cases dependent on having legal work authorization that manifests in a Social Security Number. In a similar manner to the driver's license, it acts as a dividing and exclusionary device for undocumented migrants; significantly restricting public participation in the economic sphere. On the other hand, if a migrant is allowed a credit card, their identity becomes tied to their credit score, which is a measurement of creditworthiness. Having a credit card affords a different embodied experience of shopping, and it opens new practices around consumption. If we understand credit score as an external validation of a form of citizenry, we can start to comprehend the incentive migrants have in adopting practices that will assure them a good score, practices that are tied to American lifestyle, therefore undergoing a process of acculturation that is initiated by possessing a credit card.

DISCUSSION

Through these two examples we can start placing artifacts as actors (Latour 1987) in bordering processes. By recognizing these artifacts as actors we can start situating them as actors with the potential to generate conflict (Sökefeld 2015). Conflict arises from a power relationship that oftentimes finds some resolution (but can never be completely resolved, as power relationships are constantly reframing themselves) by processes of subjugation (migrants) and appropriation (dominant political interests). If we start framing the problem of migrant integration in these terms we can start unveiling the logic of coloniality that shapes "the existential conditions of migrants who are always dwelling in the borders" (Mignolo 2000: xv). Kalantidou and Fry (2014) use border thinking as a framework that provides an understanding of how design has always been embedded in structures that regulate and control access:

> Designing, and being ontologically designed by the experience of 'being in place(s)' over time, is always a condition of political emersion. The world of human fabrication that constitutes *topos* [place] is always political, *in that the making of a world is always for and thus serves, someone.* (Kalantidou and Fry 2014: 6, emphasis ours).

The issue of *bordering* in design is not new, although it might not have been called that way. A classic example of this are Robert Moses' Long Island (Figure 2) parkway overpasses in materializing the dominant class's racial and social class biases (Caro 1974; Winner 1980; but also see Joerges 1999) adopted this bordering nature. In this particular case the othering process these designed borders seek to establish was directed mostly to African Americans. With this we wish to make clear that bordering strategies are not exclusively directed to migrants, but they are common in creating divisions between hegemonic (power-holders/dominant) populations and minority (vulnerable) populations.

Policy, services and artifacts have been designed by modern institutions (such as governments, private banking sector, public services and utilities providers, among others) as part of current sociotechnical systems to restrict and regulate access for migrants. These sociotechnical systems have become points of conflict for those dwelling in the borders of these systems.

Michel de Certeau's observation about the credit card and driver's license sets some context to understand processes of building identity in the United States related to economic productivity. Having credit and unrestricted mobility determine a person's productivity in the context of this country; where excessive commoditization and urban sprawl requires credit and driving to be a productive member of society. These two small artifacts that are commonly found in most US citizens' wallets therefore act as gatekeepers to American identity; becoming technologies of division.

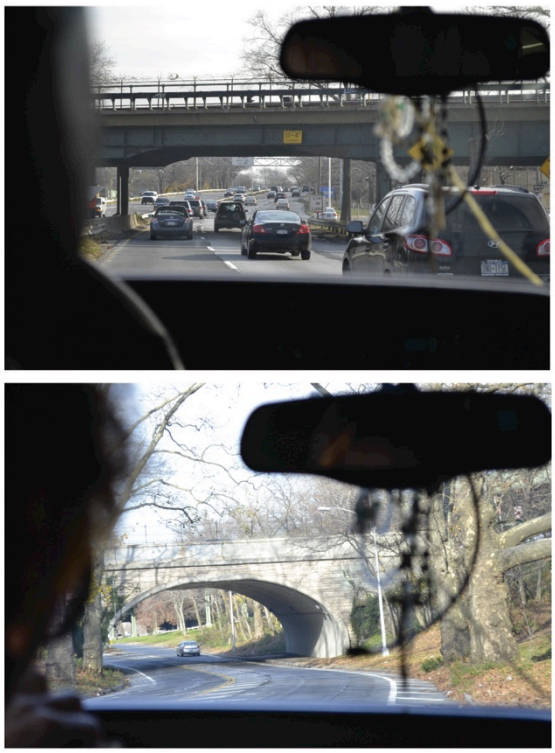

Figure 2. Long Island parkway overpasses (Long Island, NY). It has been claimed that Robert Moses specified lower overpasses to discourage or prevent buses from NYC running to the Jones Beach State Park.

As Mignolo (2000) notes "now physical and psychological borders in general (that is, not those that emanate from modernity/coloniality) could become, and are becoming phenomena to be analyzed from the perspective and concerns of different disciplines (sociology, economics, anthropology, aesthetics, linguistics and so on)." (p. xvi); but the field of design has been particularly absent (with some notable exceptions such as Kershavarz 2016; and scholars in the field of Science and Technology Studies such as Bijker & Law 1992; Geels 2005) in these conversations to a point that the lack of criticality from the field of design makes it a complicit in exclusionary process and establishing politics of difference.

The initial findings of this paper seek to spark further discussion about designing in times of intense debates around migration and politics of difference in general. We believe that the design discipline should be aware that designed things embody larger political structures and are actors in politics of inclusion/exclusion. We expect to further this research by documenting actual experiences of othering–induced by designed artifacts and services–in the current context of the United States. We hope our position in this paper will trigger reflection about design's role in aiding politics of difference and welcome discussion from designers from other parts of the world that are also thinking about similar issues in their context.

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