

**Border Matters Presentation**  
**Platicas Series**  
**LMAS**  
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**Introductions**

- Hello everyone and thanks for coming. As you know, my name is Dr. Megan Morrissey and I use she/her pronouns.
- I use she her pronouns and am an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies where I study the rhetorical constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship.

**TRANSITION TO SLIDE 2 (Some Important Information)**

- Before getting started I wanted to point at that for accessibility, a transcript of my talk is available at the link provided for those who would like to reference it.

**General Stuff**

- One of the real benefits of series like Platicas is that it affords the campus community an opportunity to think about the ways particular objects of study, in this case, borders and borderlands, are relevant to each of us in different ways.
- **As a rhetorical scholar** I approach the study of borders through representation. In other words, I am concerned about the way the border is represented symbolically—through the language we use to describe it in popular media and in presidential addresses, to the images of it that circulate in popular culture, and to the art that aims to capture or reflect on its form and function.
- To study these **representations** is to ask questions like:
  - What is the border?
  - How is it constructed and (re)constructed through modes of representation like language, art, or visual images?
  - What does the border mean to/for people?
  - Why do particular representations of the border carry more weight than others?
- Indeed, how we think about, conceptualize, and symbolically represent borders have serious implications for the ways people live their lives. Treating the border as a boundary line produces dichotomies of citizen/immigrant, insider/outsider, or neighbor/intruder.
- Thinking of the border as a zone of contact rather than separation, however, produces different implications. Suddenly this space becomes something more constructive—a space of new possibilities and creative collaborations.
- There is much at stake for the way, as a people we come to understand something like the border, and though I am asking you to consider the ways the border circulates symbolically in our public discourse and popular culture, I don't want us to lose sight of the material conditions

that such representations produce. People live and die on the border, in large part because of these symbolic constructions.

- This talk and corresponding paper pushes rhetorical scholarship beyond simply considering representation though. It pushes us to think about the ways that matter might affect, and perhaps construct, representations, relationships, and meaning. It pushes us into the realm of scholarship known as “**new materialism.**”

### **Transition to the actual content of the paper**

- Questions about the relationship between symbols, discourse, and materiality have regularly fascinated me, and so it is not surprising to those who know me that the art installations Kikito caught my attention.

### **TRANSITION TO SLIDE (Meet Kikito)**

- Southeast of San Diego and just outside of Tecate, Mexico, under the curious and playful eyes of a toddler, the United States and Mexico meet.
- Kikito’s larger-than-life frame appears to have climbed the Mexican side of the border wall, just enough to peer down over its edge.
- A towering, highly detailed black and white photograph, Kikito’s image is out of place in the brown, sun soaked desert—a glimpse of something human and vulnerable in a space that is often characterized as unforgiving and highly militarized.
- His focus is constant, trained over the wall with a curiosity that demands a response to his questions:
  - “Who are you?”
  - “What is this?”
- Kikito’s 70-foot image rises above the border wall with the help of a massive scaffold, at a site that was carefully selected by the French artist JR.
- **Known for his street art**, and for installing larger than life photos of people onto walls across the world, JR’s work “is often drawn to places where residents’ humanity and individuality are habitually ignored or subsumed in political rhetoric”
- Using the image of a young boy whose family lives within walking distance of the installation, JR grounds his project in the local even though his French national identity mark him as an outsider.
- In so doing, JR uses his international reputation and privilege to install these projects without seeking explicit permission to do so, and calls audiences to critique the colonial logics that uphold borders as essential elements of government, citizenship, and international relations.

### **TRANSITION TO SLIDE (Giant Picnic)**

- To mark the end of Kikito's 1-month installation, JR organized a second installation, The Giant Picnic, at the toddler's feet—a celebration of Kikito's success and an opportunity to bring people together across the border that would otherwise remain strangers.
- Kikito and the Giant Picnic momentarily punctuated the 2,000-mile material boundary that demarcates national legacies of conquest, violence, and exclusion, but in their brief existence, challenged those who encountered them to (re)consider the border's function and their relationship to it.
- As an example of a larger genre of art, I use the term *border art* to classify those installation art projects occurring at or along national boundaries like the U.S.-Mexico border and that act on audiences in ways that can physically, emotionally, or spiritually move them into new modes of identity and relation.
- Specifically, I contend that **the border matters**—that its materiality (that is, its embodiments, affects, and relationalities) actively contribute to its reality rather than being passively changed, structured, or organized by human symbolic construction.
- Drawing from **women of color feminists** who theorize identity, power and marginalization from the material space of embodied and relational experience, I suggest the border's reality is ontologically composed of the influences of both matter and discourse and use JR's border art as a case study through which to explore this relationship and its implications.
- **Ontology**, as a point of clarification, refers to the state or nature of being. In this project, the state or nature of the border is that which I theorize, arguing that it is a complex combination of matter, discourse, and relationality that makes the border what it is.
- It becomes evident upon examining the comment threads that accompany JR's Instagram posts about both projects, that those who encounter his art are presented with an opportunity to become something different in and through their experiences—a shift in embodiment that changes the materiality of the border and that reflects its role as an actant in the construction of the border's reality.
- Indeed, these **Instagram posts** (specifically the photos and the comment threads that accompany them) are what I analyze in this essay
- In place for one month, Kikito's image captured global interest with JR regularly posting photos of the installation on his Instagram account that were then shared by his followers across the social media platform and by news outlets such as the *Huffington Post*, *New York Times*, ABC and CBS.
- In an interview with the *New Yorker* during the installation JR explained:  
 What I hope for the most is not only that people will see the photo but that they'll decide to go there by themselves. They'll talk to Border Patrol, they'll talk to people on the other side that they can see through the fence. That experience is intimate to each person who will see the piece. I won't even hear about it. (Schwartz, 2017, para. 13)

- While other Latinx artists have installed artwork along the border before, JR's efforts received considerable media attention in part because of his other high profile projects and international reputation.
- The people who live at, along, and within the borderlands—Kikito and his family included—are part of the imperial Western gaze that contextualize U.S. international policy discussions and their implications.
- Both Kikito and the Giant Picnic appear to have been successful, as art installations and also as social critiques, which is evidenced by JR's Instagram photos that feature many people visiting the installation sites and interacting across lines of difference, as well as the tens of thousands of comments and "likes" that accompany these posts.
- JR announced the project using his Instagram account, and eventually provided the Google Maps location for people to travel to/visit the installation, however, Kikito and the Giant Picnic are both material and virtual—inviting onlookers to engage with the installations and the U.S.-Mexico border, and to be transformed by them.
- Both installations were fleeting insofar as their physical presence only lasted for a limited period of time—more long lasting however, are the virtual images of both events that now, more than a year later, are still searchable and easily accessible on the Internet.
- JR's enduring commentary about the border and the U.S. policies and laws that organize this space stand in contrast to the militarization and conflict that are regularly invoked in U.S. discourses about the border.
- As both **material and virtual artworks**, JR's Kikito and Giant Picnic installations are provocative case studies for exploring how borders matter.
- In particular, these border art installations speak to, with, and against the popularly circulated construction that the border is a militarized zone of enforcement and instead demonstrate its vitality and ability to act on people and the geo-political surround.
- As the comment threads from JR's Instagram posts indicate, there is no question about the physical force of these projects, nor their ability to *move* people, so we must then push beyond the logic that the border is simply a symbolic construction to instead consider the ways in which the border is comprised of what Gries calls, "**distributed relations.**"
- New materialists point out that attending to matter's distributed relations reveals the dynamic contributions matter can make, upsetting the belief that humans can act on objects and spaces, but that objects and spaces are themselves, inert.
- In this analysis I focus on the ever developing and evolving relationship between the natural terrain of the border, the wall that punctuates portions of it, the individuals who occupy these spaces, and the border art that is installed there.

- Considering these emerging and dynamic relationships between people, communities, and nations that border art reflects and produces, I suggest that JR’s work is a rhetorical composition that “transforms and transcends across genres, media, and form as it circulates and intra-acts with other human and non-human entities” (Gries, 2015, p. 7).
- In so doing, JR’s work moves in nonlinear and constantly evolving ways to become part of various collectives and consequences that comprise the reality of the U.S.-Mexico border.
- Thus, this project explores the ontology of the border, extending border studies scholarship to further investigate the materiality of that space.
- To begin, I discuss border studies scholarship and its emphasis on symbolic sense-making to introduce a **new materialist border studies** that more complexly attends to the material world of the border and its effects.
- I will then move on to discuss the particularities of JR’s border art installation as a specific case study through which to explore the role of materiality in constructing the border’s reality.
- So now, on to **border studies scholarship**

#### TRANSITION TO SLIDE (U.S. Mexico Border)

##### The Border Becomes

- The U.S.-Mexico border functions ideologically and materially to organize peoples’ lives, producing the conditions that lead to protection or persecution.
- As one of the world’s most fortified border zones, this boundary between the United States and Mexico functions as a profound site of disciplinarity, conditioning the ideological commitments and practices in which U.S. citizens engage, and establishing the grounds upon which immigrants might access belonging.
- Much rhetorical scholarship theorizing borders has attended to the ways that language about national identity, immigration, and borders, impacts the material effects it has in the world and on people’s lives (DeChaine, 2012).
- Fundamental to this orientation is the act of **bordering** that centers the premise that “borders are products of human symbolic action, created by human agents through particular and often complex rhetorical practices” (p. 3).
- This scholarship generally assumes that discourse influences the border, but not necessarily the corollary claim that the border, as a material object, affects discourse.
- Indeed, the social construction of the border can and has been used to mark bodies as *foreign*, *different*, and as *outsider*, designations that go on to have material affects for those who have been so labeled (Cisneros, 2008; Flores, 2003; Ono, 2012; Morrissey, 2015).

#### TRANSITION TO SLIDE 5 (Space and Place of the border 1/2)

- Rhetorical scholarship, such as that on bordering, attends to the practice and function of representation, offering important theory about the socially constructed quality of human experience and the material implications of discursively determined categories and labels.
- In spite of this, there remains embedded in much of this scholarship, an assumption that humans are the only contributors to the process of the border's meaning-making.
- Complicating this overly simplistic dualism of the animated human subject, acting on the inert, non-human object, I draw on **women of color feminist theory** that grounds embodied experience and relationality as ways of *knowing* the world—an **epistemology**.
- As I argue, embodied experience and relational longings are not only epistemologies, but also ontologies that make the border knowable and that materialize the border's reality.
- Using JR's border art as an analytic example, I argue that the border is in a constant state of being made and remade through the emerging, ongoing, and dynamic relationships between people, language, and physical space that actualize it as a vital, influential actant in the meaning making process.
- Specifically, I elaborate the new materialist assumption that borders themselves, instead of being the product of "social sense-making, are in fact "**vital assemblages** that both have lives of their own and influence the lives of others" (Gries, 2015, p. 53).
- Carrillo Rowe (2005) has suggested that **differential belonging** might be a way to make sense of these networks and experiences, offering a **politics of relation** as a way to theorize these connections.
- She explains its difference from a politics of location, noting that a politics of relation tips "the concept of 'subjectivity' away from 'individuality' and in the direction of the inclination toward the other so that 'being ' is constituted not first through the 'self,' but through its own longings to be with. Belonging precedes being" (p. 17).
- Differential belonging, unlike traditional modes of belonging, directs critical attention to the communities into which we desire inclusion, orienting us away from normative spaces of belonging (such as nation-states) and towards identification with marginalized communities and spaces (such as women, immigrants, and the land).
- To **be longing**, as Carrillo Rowe (2005) describes, is to recognize the constant desire that compels us toward other people, relationships and communities.
- In this way, the border becomes animated, shifting and transforming—a dynamic and hybrid relational construct that is always already changing in and through its interactions with humans, the policies of nation-states, and the geographic terrain.
- The materiality and symbolicity of the border constructs the binary of citizen and immigrant and itself depends on and reproduces a dichotomous logic that differentiates human subjects from non-human objects.

## TRANSITION TO SLIDE (Space and Place of the Border 2/2)

- This oversimplification about the ways that reality is produced insulates our knowledge and the full extent to which we can know the border (Shapiro, 2007), something that Chicana feminist scholars already theorized in their accounts of living at and on borderlands.
- For example, Anzaldúa (2007) complicates the border's ontology, explaining, "The U.S.-Mexico border *es una herida abierta* where the third world grates against the first and bleeds.
- And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country" (p. 25).
- Anzaldúa acknowledges the embodied experience and the longings that living at/along the border produces, investing it with a certain capacity to affect reality that an exploration of differential belonging clarifies.
- Differential belonging and a politics of relation emphasize how the border pulls on bodies and produces longings to/for people and places—materializing different modes of being and becoming that new materialists can then engage with more specific purpose.
- Such a shift "disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature" (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 10).

*Talk about slides and the ways the border breaks up the natural space*

- Thus, leaning into the assumption that borders are not static entities and that they produce affects in the world, new materialist bordering embraces the radical contingency of the border and its potential to transform those who encounter it.
- This orientation to bordering compels us "to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems, and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency" (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 9).
- Through a lens of **new materialist bordering**, JR's installations along the U.S.-Mexico border become two of multiple actants constructing the meaning of the border and making it come to matter—indeed, producing its reality and revealing its ontological hybridity.
- Highlighting these complex entanglements between human and nonhuman entities, these installations depend on the social and material construct of the border to organize viewers' experiences with these projects.

## TRANSITION TO SLIDE 7 (JR on Instagram)

- Border artwork such as JR's depends on the space and place of the installation to construct fleeting manipulations of the discourses and materialities that organize social life.

*Talk about the slide (images of JR with Kikito)*

- Ran (2009) noted, “**installation work** can identify and create space, transform space, activate, intervene, or inhabit space.”
- Unlike more traditional art forms that are hung and studied inside the defined space of a museum or a gallery, installation artwork depends upon the mutually constitutive relationship of art and space.
- Peterson (2015) elaborated, “Installation art forms alternative spaces and perceptions of space, and viewers must therefore approach and interact with it differently” (p. 14).
- In this way, installation art presents a unique lens in and through which to better understand the ways the border, as a material space—that is “a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 25) comes to act on people and what potential exists for altering these matters and modes of relation.
- JR’s border art invites his Instagram followers to a celebration of life and human connection that encourages them to experience the border and to perform their relationship to it in invitational ways.
- While the artwork produces the persuasive appeal that compels people to experience the border differently, it is people’s interactions with the border itself that are altered—a relational shift that produces different embodiments and ways of being in the world.
- Beyond the ascribed and avowed identities of “Mexican” or “American,” “Border Patrol” or “immigrant,” that depend on normative colonial configurations of the border in order to make sense, JR’s work calls people to consider the space of the border as a zone of connection rather than crossing, and in so doing, produces the opportunity to imagine—and indeed to materialize—**different relational configurations**.
- It is by and through border art installations such as JR’s that the border’s dynamic configuration is revealed, and through which the symbolic construction and performative embodiment of identity may shift. In other words, JR’s border art installations revise what the border is, how it works, and the modes of relation it affords, which in turn may produce new realities.
- Carrillo Rowe (2004) explained, “The cultural production of space creates the condition of possibility for a range of lives and livelihoods that might be possible for any group of people living with and/or moving through that space. Space is not inert but rather a site of highly contested meanings with tremendous consequences for those who occupy it. (p. 121)
- Border art that acts on people, not only produces new modes of knowing and understanding the world, but fundamentally alters its being. This ontological shift, that brings matter into focus, offers complex ways to theorize the border and new perspectives on the role of border art such as JR’s.

## **Choreographing the Border's Becoming**

- With 1.2 million followers on Instagram, and a total of 1,935 posts at the time of text collection in 2019, JR's images of both the Kikito and Giant Picnic installations enjoyed broad international circulation.
- To assemble the body of text I analyzed for this project I searched through these posts and identified 21 that specifically referenced Kikito or the Giant Picnic.
- In addition to collecting JR's posted images/videos, I also captured the comments that accompanied each post to more fully understand the response to JR's projects and commenters' attitudes toward the U.S.-Mexico border.
- Analyzing these initial images/videos, and the remarks that accompanied them, reveals a complex and mutually dependent network of emerging relations between art installation, the border, and the people virtually or materially visiting the space of these projects.
- These emerging relationships might be considered "choreographies of becoming" in and through which "we find cosmic forces assembling and disintegrating to forge more or less enduring patterns" (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 10) that in this instance, materialize the border's reality in new and/or different ways from the normative U.S. discourses of militarization, security, and danger.
- Reconfiguring one's relationship to the border by asking visitors to imagine this material and ideological construct differently, shifts the ways visitors understand themselves—a transformation evidenced by commenters' remarks about the project that I will begin to detail.
- Specifically, the patterns that shape the border and produce its reality derive from the longings to be in relation to the border in specific ways—as insiders, as defenders, as crossers—that can be re-imagined through border art that interrupts this desire and produces new longings, reveals different relationalities, and creates alternate ways for the border to matter.
- To explore how border art materializes new border realities and transforms its visitors, I organize my analysis to reflect the expanse of philosophical to deeply embodied reactions that JR's Instagram followers reported.
- First, I look at the *abstract appeals* and embodiments that the border produces—statements that indicate a higher order identification that supersedes "citizens" and "foreigners" as modes of relation.
- These materialize in discourses of connection that emphasize "becoming one people."
- I follow this with an analysis of the more grounded statements that JR's Instagram followers make that reference and materialize *community connections*—comments that speak to the ways in which JR's art opens possibilities to embody friendship and communion.

- Finally, I explore the most *personal and intimate accounts* that JR’s Instagram followers offer, examining how the border materializes as a relational partner generating spiritual, emotional, and/or physical longings and affects for those who encounter it.
- So, working from the most abstract modes of relation to the most intimate, I’ll begin with the ways Instagram commenters reflect on JR’s work as a way to ‘become one people.’”

### TRANSITION TO SLIDE 8 (Figure 1: Two Mountain Bikers)

#### Becoming One People

- JR’s followers engage with, and respond to, his work by producing higher order connections between themselves and others that are premised on ephemeral and/or spiritual linkages.
- These associations depend on the interplay between the border’s matter (its expansive natural, unbridled terrain) and its symbolism (its contested and contentious character) to materialize the moral high ground of human connection in spite of and above the separations that the border is regularly used to create.
- Sadly, we need look no further than the news about family separations along the border for evidence of this.
- Constructing a comparison between the integrity of human connection and the artifice of national borders, JR’s followers respond to images of Kikito and the Giant Picnic in ways that reiterate the value of community and human connection over national security.
- Identifying these comments as **performative utterances** that do something in the world, evidence a shift in the border’s materiality that reveals its ontological hybridity.
- In response to Figure 1, which featured two mountain bikers riding past Kikito’s image as he looked on from behind them, one person remarked, “You really smashed it with this one, really sums up how pointless the proposed wall is and how humanity will overcome it like everything else” (2017, September 7).

### TRANSITION TO SLIDE 9 (Figure 2: Kikito peers down)

- Speaking human connection into being within a comment thread of 884 comments, this poster embodies the experience of connection and materializes the humanity that they argue overcomes the division that the material border produces—indeed it *performs* connection.
- The human connection that materializes in and across the comment threads that accompany JR’s posts do the work of crossing the very borders that these installations criticize.
- Visitors from all over the world identify their geographic locations in the comments and follow these identifying statements with congratulatory, celebratory, or defiant remarks about the border’s role in separating a people who are bound by a higher order connection to human kind.

- Featuring a close up photograph of Kikito peering down over the border wall at a group of 4 mountain bikers who stand posing for a picture. One poster remarked, “**We’re all human!** The government draws lines.”
- Another noted, about the first of three photographs featuring the Giant Picnic installation, “What a beautiful, powerful way to highlight our shared humanity, and the ridiculousness of the artificial border we create between each other”
- And still another pointed out, “Walls divide countries but they will never divide us”
- In each of these examples we witness a similar relationality emerge – the desire to connect with other people is more urgent than the need to separate oneself from others. I don’t have time to detail every example, suffice to say, in each of them, a similar sentiment and relationality is replicated.
- Specifically, the desire to connect with other people is more urgent than the need to separate oneself from others. This desire to be in communion with other people is activated by the separation that the border’s current materiality begets, however, posters’ comments center “belonging as a starting point for naming and imagining location” (Carrillo Rowe, 2004 p. 19).
- Further challenging the normative discourses that overly simplify the relationships between humans as a matter of citizenship and nationality, is a collection of posts that appeal to the **spiritual configurations** that organize human interaction.
- One poster explained that JR’s project was “God’s work,” and another responded to to an image of Kikito, advocating for JR to “Keep spreading the Lord’s work”
- A different person cited a bible verse: “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 19:14)...unless they are Dreamers.”
- This final poster, offering a critique of current U.S. immigration policy by way of religious pedagogy, calls into the question influence and authority of any nation-state that should interfere with the care and cultivation of children.
- In this way, JR’s installations afford new opportunities to produce the border as something more inclusive, with many commenters’ remarks providing the very connective tissue that brings forth a new reality.
- The desire to belong with others finds an outlet in JR’s Giant Picnic and Kikito installations where virtual and material participants are invited to gather and reflect, to share a meal together, to embody community, and to become good neighbors.
- This next collection of comments identifies and participates in an embodied performance of friendship and neighborliness that I will now explore.

- Through commenters' remarks about friendship and community, JR's Instagram followers participate in a politics of relation that recognizes the influences of space to configure relational opportunities, expanding critical consideration for the ontological production of borders.

### TRANSITION TO SLIDE (Figure 3: The Giant Picnic)

#### Becoming Neighbors and Friends

- While the border has the capacity to act in the world, the production and installation of border art such as JR's creates alternative modes of interacting with, understanding, and experiencing the border and its effects.
- These affective connections are the result of embodied experience and emphasize the generative potential of matter to reconstruct social, cultural, and political realities—indeed to configure the relational possibilities that exist.
- The border, and the installation art that re-orient its materiality, demonstrate how new modes of relation can materialize, and subsequently how the border can matter in more **connective** ways.
- Recognizing the potential for human connection that exists when the symbolic construct of the border is revised, One poster commented, "It's a beautiful reminder to love thy neighbor. Another poster, added, "Thank you for inspiring humanity to love thy neighbor."
- Becoming a catalyst for the border's reconfiguration, JR's border art depends on the border's current materiality as a space of separation for his installations to produce these affirming affectivities.
- It is the **incongruity** that JR produces—using the border's reality as a space of separation that makes both projects' invitation to gather remarkable—and that allows visitors to embody neighborly modes of belonging and relation instead of the dichotomous relationality of citizen and foreigner.
- The materiality of the border, comprised of portions of steel wall, border patrol agents, communities of people, and the installation art that JR, assembled produces the identity and the relationship "neighbor" by delimiting the space that defines and separates the nation state from Mexico.
- Despite making a distinction between one nation and another, people visiting JR's installations appear to be inspired toward kindness and community in the face of the border, rather than isolation and defense.
- Put plainly, as one poster remarked, JR's two projects "mak[e] people connect with one another".
- Although both installations provoke visitors into modes of relation and identity that emphasize unity and connection, the experience of **sharing a meal** is revered as an especially significant act that materializes a politics of peace that resonates with many posters.

- In reference to Figure 3 and the Giant Picnic installation, one commenter noted, “This is exactly what the world needs right now. Breaking bread across man made borders and building relationships.” Another person, remarking on the same post noted, “Breaking bread, breaking barriers.”
- To share food across the same table with another and to hold the space of such basic human nourishment with another is an act that produces commonality and does exactly the thing that popularly circulated U.S. narratives about the border suggest are impossible in and along that space.
- Indeed, the giant table, set to provide a meal to unnamed guests, calls virtual and material visitors to in fact *be the invited guest*.
- In this way, JR’s work makes the border a participant in the meal—a collaborator in an event that brings people together and that moves them to embody “guest” as a preferred identity,
- This effort seems to level the ideological playing field that is hierarchically (re)produced in and through U.S. discourses of citizenship.
- Regardless of social class, citizenship status, nationality, or race, all people who participate in this event are invited and thus welcomed upon joining the table—an embodied performance with emotional, spiritual, and physical effects evidenced in these comments.
- While the act of sharing a meal moves people into intimate relation with each other, it also blurs the subject-object duality that organizes much contemporary U.S. discourse about the border.
- Capturing the ontological hybridity of this contested space by detailing the complex relationship of material and symbolic elements that contribute to the border’s reality, we see evidence that “agency becomes a distributed enactment of entangled things intra-acting within phenomena” (Barad, 2007, p. 235).

#### **TRANSITION TO SLIDE (Figure 4: Two Border Patrol Agents)**

- In this way, the border’s materiality becomes a central player in the construction of meaning, as JR depends on the border’s divisive reality to make sense of his project incongruously.
- Through the tension produced by juxtaposing dissimilar ideas, new possibilities emerge. This perspective by incongruity demonstrates the potential of JR’s border art to make the border matter differently.
- Motivated to visit the actual site of the installations, one commenter noted:
  - Checked it out yesterday, spoke to a family on the other side.
  - Thank you for this.
  - Connecting people throughout your art.
  - A little boy asked me why he couldn’t cross the fence ☹
  - I said idk neither can I, I don’t fit lol, then he said, but I do.

- Reflecting the curiosity and confusion of a child at the site of Kikito’s feet, this person’s comments produce a moment of differential belonging that manufactures new modes of being that materialize through the incongruous alignment of the border’s *current* and *potential* reality.
- Carrillo Rowe (2004) explained, “Differential belonging entails navigating across such boundaries of difference to build intimate knowledge of that which lies between self and other” (p. 38), and it is through this *building* that the border’s ontological value becomes evident, and that the modes of relationality inspired by the border and border art move beyond ways of *knowing*, to become ways of *being*.

### TRANSITION TO SLIDE (JR Shares a cup of tea)

- Capturing moments of shared interaction, inspired by JR’s border art installation, we witness the border’s matter becoming a nodal point of communion rather than conflict.
- These installations produce longings for connection and call visitors to embody and experience the differential belonging that the border produces—a longing to be in relation with other people and with a space that is otherwise “off limits.”
- This shifting mode of relation—from stranger to neighbor, outsider to community member—makes the border something different from a zone of separation and is the result of JR’s material and symbolic disruptions.
- Moving from the higher order logics that JR’s Instagram followers use to materialize connections in/across difference, and the incongruous and grounded commentary that allows his visitors to perform identity and relationality in different ways, the final collection of posts I will now examine detail more specific intimacies between self, other, and the border.
- Moving toward an even greater level of specificity, JR’s installation work and the remarks that characterize it are deeply grounded within the personal and intimate sphere by commenters who note the border’s capacity to produce flesh and blood longings.
- These affective responses produce partnerships in and across national boundaries that materialize as a result of commenters sharing their vulnerability.

### Becoming Partners

- The **flesh and blood experiences** and longings that JR’s art produces, materialize a politics—a way of knowing and being in the world—that remakes the border’s materiality in and through the flesh.
- Thus, JR’s art shifts the border’s matter in significant and cyclical ways
  - The border materializes the art that materializes new modes of identity and relation
  - That through people’s embodiment of these new relational modes,
  - Materializes the border in new ways.

### TRANSITION TO SLIDE (Breaking Bread)

- A large portion of JR’s Instagram followers describe the border as a relational partner that acts on them in physical, emotional, and spiritual ways and that produce physical longings for relation and desires to belong—with other people, across lines of difference, and with the border.
- In their accounts, JR’s Instagram followers describe myriad **physical responses** to his pieces that signal an emotional investment in the subject matter upon which the art comments and that the border sits.
- Many visitors noted, that the installations made them cry. Others describe losing their breath: Still others remarked on being made speechless.
- Expressing the embodied reaction that they experienced upon encountering this art, these commenters disrupt the binary between subject and object, demonstrating the ways their flesh and blood have been altered by/through their encounter with JR’s border art.
- Further emphasizing the emotional impact of JR’s work other commenters remarked, “My heart is heavy”, that his installations are “heart touching”, and that these projects are “Wonderful! Inspiring! Made my heart sing”.
- JR’s installations capture a sense of longing, producing intimate and personal experience that often come from a deep emotional investment.
- People who encountered JR’s work describe being emotionally moved by their experience, and that movement evidences the material force that border’s matter produces.
- Prioritizing the body and the embodied experience that grounds our ways of knowing, women of color feminist theory demonstrates the political utility and coalitional possibility of attending to materiality.
- As we see detailed in the comment threads analyzed here, JR’s Kikito and Giant Picnic installations brought people to the border from both sides of the national boundary and provided a mechanism by which these visitors could engage in a bi-national meeting celebrating friendship, kindness, and communion at the very site whose materiality so often prohibits these possibilities.
- In this way, the border produces the opportunity for familiarity and unity as much as it produces the limitations for such things, and in the fleeting moments of both border art installations, this duality is most evident.
- Inviting participants to transform and transcend this duality, JR’s artwork provides an opportunity for visitors to prioritize the body as a mode of knowing differently and *being* different (Anzaldúa, 2007) by changing the ways they perceive reality and embody different performances of identity and relationality.

## Conclusion

- As I hope I’ve demonstrated, an exploration of JR’s art reveals that his online followers easily see his projects as creating unity in abstract and deeply personal ways.

- Through referencing the spiritual and biological sameness that materializes for and between people across the border, the communal connections that are forged emotionally and physically among participants, and the intimate relationalities that observers and participants encounter upon engaging with the work and each other, JR's projects demonstrate the need, and indeed, the richness of critical investigation that disrupts the colonial Western dualism of subject and object.
- Foregrounding the ontological hybridity of the border's reality forces us to reconsider the questions we ask, the claims we generate, and the border's function as a sense-making system in normative U.S. discourses of citizenship and belonging.
- The body (matter) plays a central role in the process of sense-making and feminist scholars have produced an infrastructure by/through which epistemology can be decolonized, introducing ways for new materialist critics to investigate how reality is "collectively, materially *and* semiotically constructed via a variety of actants that have equal ontological footing" (Gries, 2015, p. 6).
- In this way, new materialist bordering explores the border—it's matter, discourses that symbolically craft it, and the embodied experience the space produces—to disrupt colonial logics that reinforce the duality between subject and object.
- Instead of approaching the border and the people one might meet there with skepticism and fear, JR's Instagram followers and fans are asked to incongruously identify with and relate to the space and one another in ways that foreground abstract and grounded iterations of human connection.
- This shift in identification and relationality materializes in face-to-face and virtual conversations that are demonstrated in the comment threads and that foreground alternative social and cultural logics as ways for framing the border and understanding its influence.
- A specific case study, then, this analysis reveals the emancipatory potential of art and its ability to speak back to governmental authorities and national discourses, potentially offering new modes of being and belonging that include (rather than exclude) those living within the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.
- In this way, JR's border art installations suggest how immigration reform advocates and other critical audiences might transform the contentious and violent rhetoric that currently frames U.S. discourses and experiences of the U.S.-Mexico border into something more inclusive.
- A shift in discourse such as this certainly stands to benefit Mexican, U.S., and global citizens who are daily impacted by divisive discourses that alienate and oppress entire populations in the name of citizenship, patriotism, and national security.
- Further, while this symbolic shift in the border's meaning is something critical scholars in the discipline have begun theorizing, it is the ontological hybridity that a new materialist critique brings into focus that offers the greatest theoretical contribution.

- It is by and through theorizing the ways that matter can act on people, as well as the cultural and geographic surround, that border studies scholars can gain a more complex appreciation for the figurative and material implications of this construct.
- Border art and other material and discursive productions relating to the border can be understood as complex and interrelated fragments (our own criticism included), that at once produce the things that are under investigation while also deconstructing their workings.
- Where *mestizaje consciousness* breaks down the subject-object duality that exists in colonial Western logics and provides a mechanism to reframe individual and collective consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2007), new materialist bordering provides a critical rhetorical praxis for accomplishing that end.
- In a space like the U.S-Mexico border that continues to be contentiously used, claimed and occupied, methodological tools that **decenter the production of knowledge**, sense making, and the nature of being, are deeply valuable and necessary for social justice and diplomacy.

#### **TRANSITION TO FINAL SLIDE (Thank you)**

- To conclude, I would just like to reiterate the ongoing importance of border studies scholarship.
- When the border becomes the mode of evidence or the rationale for national exclusion, rather than an example of our own symbolic sense-making that functions to defend our own political and ideological commitments, we too easily displace our own responsibility to/for other human beings.
- Projects such as JRs are a refreshing reminder to remain **critically conscious** of the world around us and to always remember **our own ability to transform** what often seems to be structures much larger than our control.
- Thank you so much for your time and consideration. I look forward to any questions or comments you might have.