

# An Archaeology of Borders: Qualitative Political Theory as a Tool in Addressing Moral Distance

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# An Archaeology of Borders: Qualitative Political Theory as a Tool in Addressing Moral Distance<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Interviews, field observations and other qualitative methods increasingly are being used to inform the construction of arguments in normative political theory. This article works to demonstrate the strong salience of some kinds of qualitative material for cosmopolitan arguments to extend distributive boundaries. The incorporation of interviews and related qualitative material can make the moral claims of excluded others more vivid and possibly more difficult to dismiss by advocates of strong priority to compatriots in distributions. Further, it may help to promote the kind of perspective taking that has been associated with actually motivating a willingness to aid by individuals. Illustrative findings are presented from field work conducted for a normative project on global citizenship, including interviews with unauthorized immigrants and the analysis of artifacts left behind on heavily used migrant trails.

\* \* \*

Cosmetics case, black mesh  
Pair of socks, women's, Mickey Mouse print  
Black rucksack, canvas, partially buried in sand and swarming with red ants  
Bar of green deodorant soap  
Disposable diaper  
Can of baby formula, full  
Jeans, slacks, button-up shirts, brassiere, child's boxer shorts printed with map of London  
Underground  
Tins, empty and full of tuna, beans, processed meats, jalapeno peppers, bags of pastries, sliced Bimbo brand bread, cookies  
Plastic milk jugs half full with murky brown water  
Makeshift stretcher, fashioned from tree branches and clothing.

Political theorists increasingly have been conducting original qualitative research, including interviews, participant observation, and the collection of field data, to inform and enrich their normative accounts (see Nussbaum 2000; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007;

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Ackerly 2008). I argue here that the incorporation of specific kinds of qualitative material is particularly appropriate for addressing issues of perceived moral distance, and for strengthening cosmopolitan arguments to extend distributions of resources and opportunities across national boundaries. Such material can help to make the lives of excluded others more vivid, their interests and plain humanity more present in the theoretical frame. It can challenge common-sense understandings about the depth of duties to noncompatriot others, and perhaps most importantly, it can help to make more difficult the blithe dismissal of their claims, or the theoretical treatment of their concerns or deprivations as self-evidently less pressing than those of individuals who are perceived as closer in geographical or relational terms.

The intervention intended is both methodological and substantive. It is my immediate aim to make the case for a broader adoption of the methods of qualitative political theory, in particular within the areas of trans-state distributive justice, immigration ethics, and related sub-fields which address the exclusions inherent in the current global system. The substantive intervention is aimed at both highlighting and challenging ways in which some cosmopolitan skeptics, or those arguing for relatively strong priority to compatriots in distributions of resources and membership, often only superficially acknowledge the interests or human standing of the globally impoverished and excluded. I draw on insights from social psychology to argue that the incorporation of specific kinds of qualitative material can shrink the perceived moral distance that figures in many such non-cosmopolitan accounts, and that it may serve as an important step toward more concrete inclusions of those excluded from distributions. To reinforce these claims, I present some findings from a normative project on conceptions of global

citizenship which has incorporated significant qualitative research, including interviews with scores of activists advocating both more and less restrictive immigration regimes, and of particular salience, interviews with unauthorized immigrants and the analysis of artifacts left on migrant trails near the U.S.-Mexico border.

### **The Problems of Moral Distance**

A cosmopolitan approach is understood here as one in which individuals, rather than states or other groupings, are viewed as morally primary (Pogge 2002, 169; see Caney 2005, 3-4), or more precisely, as possessing equal standing as addressees of moral justification (Beitz 2005, 17). At minimum, actions deeply affecting individuals' interests must be justifiable to them, irrespective of the interests of any group in which they may hold membership. Thus, a cosmopolitan approach presumes that duties to tend to the needs or interests of those who share our citizenship or national context are not categorically stronger than those to noncompatriots, and in fact some duties to absolutely impoverished noncompatriots may be far more pressing (see Beitz 1999; Brock 2005). A distinction generally is drawn between moral cosmopolitanism, in which the justice of institutions in the global system are assessed according to how well individuals, rather than groups, fare within them, and institutional cosmopolitanism. The latter emphasizes forms of institutional transformation and creation above the state that could help to better secure cosmopolitan aims. It has been associated with proposals for comprehensive global political integration, i.e., the world state, but it also has more immediate implications for possible regional integration, as in moral arguments for some

democratically accountable political integration in the North American region (Cabrera 2005).

The specific problem of moral motivation addressed here, that of securing the acknowledgment and discharge of duties to distant others, is of central importance to the cosmopolitan political theorist. It is generally framed as a problem of moral distance. In fact, it may be more appropriately framed as two problems or sets of theoretical and practical concerns. The first, related to the acknowledgment of duties, is the problem of where to set moral boundaries, i.e., to which set of persons our duties are primarily owed (Chatterjee 2003). It is most often discussed in terms of whether strong duties are owed to those who are geographically distant (Kamm 2000; see Waldron 2003), or those who are relationally distant (Singer 2004), and if so, how strong those duties should be presumed to be. Relational distance is most often explored in terms of duties to compatriots versus duties to those with whom we do not share state citizenship, though familial duties may also be highlighted.

The second problem of moral distance begins by presuming that individuals do owe some relatively strong duties to all others, and it is concerned with how to overcome challenges to actually seeing those duties discharged (Lichtenberg 2004; see Meyer 2000). Such challenges would include to some minor extent any remaining transportation or logistical issues in distributing resources across borders, but especially information problems and challenges of ordinary human psychology that can serve as barriers. I presume that cosmopolitan and other political theory arguments are most concerned with the first problem of moral distance, but that such arguments have implications for the ways that practical problems arising in the second category should be addressed in public

policy. I presume also that the audience for qualitative political theory accounts is not limited to political theorists. Thus, references to actually motivating helping behaviors or attitudes of inclusion here are focused on the actions of a more general audience, including audiences for non-technical public discourses informed by political theory accounts.

Finally, I will note that my primary emphasis is on relational distance, rather than plain geographic distance. There are cases certainly in which sudden close proximity has led to mercy or aid, at least for some individuals (Glover 1977, Ch. 20; see Waldron 2003). Yet, other cases highlight ways in which proximity appears to have exerted little influence on the treatment of those perceived as relationally different, especially when they are in abject circumstances. We can consider horrific examples such as intercultural genocide, or more routine and perhaps more generalizeable examples, such as the way in which most individuals within even very affluent states may pass daily by the homeless without being motivated to offer aid or, alternately, without pressing their public officials to more vigorously address the causes of homelessness and related ills. Abject individuals, however physically near, may be viewed by the relatively affluent as relationally quite distant (Hamblet 2003).

Further, an emphasis on relational distance is appropriate because of recent trends in human mobility that have served to shrink physical distances between many affluent and less-affluent global regions. Nearly 200 million individuals are reported to be living in a country other than that of their birth, and roughly one-third of those have migrated from developing states to developed states (UN 2006). In terms of unauthorized immigration, in the United States alone, some 11.8 million persons are estimated to be

living without regular status, either as a result of clandestine entry or overstaying a visa (Hoeffler, Rytina, and Baker 2007). Of those, more than 80 percent had emigrated from Mexico and other relatively impoverished states in Latin America. At minimum, the phenomenon of massive unauthorized immigration complicates questions of geographic moral distance, while it also provokes a host of relational distributive issues. Those would include issues as varied as distributions from the pools of public resources to which unauthorized immigrants contribute (Goldberg, Simmerling, and Frader 2007), to distributions of the good of membership in the form of guest worker provisions or the right to petition for citizenship in the host state over time.

\* \* \*

Birth certificate, Socorro Araceli Natividad Limon, November 26, 1979, Teepeteopan, Tehuacan, Mexico  
Letter, young woman to estranged partner  
Waist-high, circular shelter in dry creek bed, fashioned from sticks, thatch, black plastic bags  
Thousands of empty plastic water jugs, discarded along trails  
Blue jeans, flannel shirts, knit caps, socks, shoes, boots, padded coats strewn amongst brush near dead-end desert road  
Pair of women's briefs tied to the branch of a tree

### **Barriers to Effecting Distributions**

Commentators on moral distance and related issues have identified a wide range of barriers to the acknowledgment and discharge of duties to distant others. Those would include psychological tendencies to favor members of one's own perceived in-groups (Brewer and Gardner 1996), and tendencies toward avoiding the direct contemplation of acute need or suffering (Mayerfeld 1999, 189-93). Related tendencies are identified toward blaming individuals for their own plight, as well as reinforcements to looking inward provided by nationally focused media, educational and governing institutions. I

am most concerned here, in the context of both the first and second problems, with barriers related to the lack of voice, the lack of formal input mechanisms, or the plain lack of visibility for those who are relationally or geographically distant.

In regard to the first problem, the setting of moral boundaries, it is often the case that those offering arguments for limiting the scope of distributions to compatriots almost exclusively (Richard Miller 1998), or to a lesser but still significant extent (David Miller 2007), take steps toward including the perspective of noncompatriots, but that they engage in very incomplete such exercises. Consider the following observations from David Miller, offered within an extended, explicitly non-cosmopolitan argument for a conception of global justice that would mandate relatively strong priority to co-nationals in distributions. Miller relates his emotions as he views television news reports addressing cases of suffering by individuals in developing states. He notes being moved by the suffering, but also wondering in each case whether much of the responsibility for it shouldn't be ascribed to the individuals themselves, or members of their local or national communities. For example, when he considers a report on would-be unauthorized immigrants being shot and beaten while trying to rush the fences between Moroccan territory and Spain's north African enclave Melilla in 2005,

I find my sympathy for the young African men who are trying to cross the fence tempered by a kind of indignation. Surely, they must understand that this is not the way to get into Europe. What clearer indication could there be of the proposition that illegal immigrants are not welcome than a double fence up to six metres tall with rolls of razor wire along the top? Do they think they have some kind of natural right to enter Spain in defiance of the laws that apply to everyone else who might like to move there? ... Although I can understand their plight, which must indeed be desperate if they are willing to try, time and again, to risk life and limb to get across the border; I also think they are deluded and are responsible for their delusion (2007, 2-4).

We can observe in this account a nod toward an appreciation of the dire circumstances in which any individual presumably must be to attempt such a potentially dangerous entry. There is little evidence, however, of any attempt to fully understand those circumstances, the individuals' motivations and considered choices. Several questions are raised by Miller about the mindset of those scaling the walls, yet they are left as rhetorical questions, with the implication that it should be obvious that such individuals do not act rightly when they jump the queue, as well as an implied refusal to weigh such individuals' understandings of their own rights claims more clearly against the moral values associated with maintaining a robust national community. In short, there is some movement toward trying to understand the lives of excluded others, but it remains a very limited attempt, in large part because their own voices remain excluded.

In the current global system, those arguably most in need of being able to press their own distributive claims to the global surplus are not generally at the table. While states may jointly discuss distributive or relief efforts in such fora as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals meetings, they independently and internally determine the depth of their own external distributive obligations. I have discussed at some length elsewhere how this feature of the Westphalian states system can reinforce a tendency toward own-case bias, where individuals or groups, in the absence of impartial adjudication, tend to strongly favor their own interpretations of appropriate obligations, etc. (Cabrera 2004, Ch. 4). Recent findings in social psychology reinforce that such a tendency is widespread, and that individuals are subject to a kind of naive realism, where they tend to perceive their own actions or interpretations as unbiased (see Ehrlinger, Gilovich, and Ross 2005; see Pronin, Gilovich and Ross 2004). Further, individuals often

perceive that members of their own group will be able to make an unbiased judgment on the resolution of particular issues, including allocations of valuable resources, while members of other groups are expected to demonstrate bias in favor of their own group members (Ehrlinger, Gilovich and Ross, 2005). The fact that the voices of those in need in the current system are generally excluded from internal debates over possible global duties means, in part, that biases inherent in understandings within affluent states about external duties will not be open to robust challenge by those outside, and solipsistic understandings of very limited duties will be reinforced. That can be viewed as a significant barrier to possibilities for securing the acknowledgment of such duties by those within affluent states.

\* \* \*

Baby carriage, folding portable style, wheels worn by desert travel  
Photo, young man and woman in church plaza  
Certificate of confirmation, Diocese of Texcoco, Mexico, for Guadalupe Santos Perez  
Certificate of good conduct for Guadalupe Santos Perez, from Secretariat of Public Education, Tlacotepec de Benito Juárez, Mexico  
Certificate of civil registration, Julian Santos Perez, brother of Guadalupe Santos Perez, born September 22, 1983  
Baby bottle, imprinted with red 'Elmo' character, cracked by exposure

## **Empathy and Helping Behavior**

One potentially important step toward the kind of distributive inclusion advocated by cosmopolitan theorists is to make excluded individuals more present in arguments for it. For insight on how qualitative political theory specifically could promote a fuller acknowledgment of the potential claims of the excluded other, I will consider recent work on empathy and altruism in social and cognitive psychology. First, however, I will consider another proposed use of psychologists' insights on altruism for actually

shrinking moral distance, particularly in terms of the second problem identified above, of how to overcome barriers to distributions even when moral obligation has generally been acknowledged. Difficulties encountered by this argument should highlight the importance of focusing first on ways to promote the perspective taking and other factors highlighted in the empathy-altruism literature for motivating helping behaviors.

Judith Lichtenberg discounts possibilities for making human suffering on the whole less abstract, or higher among the priorities of those in affluent states, saying 'Most people only have so much psychological room to feel each others' pain' (2004, p. 88). Instead, she notes experimental findings that individuals are more giving, as well as more fair in an allocation of resources, if others know how much they are giving, or if it is known how they are dividing the resource (2004, p. 87). The solution to actually motivating overseas giving, she argues, is the promulgation of a norm of such giving reinforced by publicity about who gives how much. Thus would a sort of shame reflex be activated in those who failed to give at a level matching that of their peers. Lichtenberg does acknowledge the difficulty of motivating the initial launch of such a scheme, and she suggests it would need 'freethinking, free-acting individuals who set an example that others are inspired or otherwise motivated to follow, or else think about new ways to design our institutions' to encourage giving according to the psychological principles she outlines (2004, p. 94).

I will note again that such an argument operates within the framework of the second problem. Lichtenberg presumes that the case for making overseas distributions is essentially self-evident, given the contrasting affluence and deep deprivation in separate regions of the world. It is difficult, however, to see why individuals would feel compelled

by some shame reflex to give overseas specifically. In the absence of a fairly compelling initial argument or set of arguments for giving stronger priority than at present to overseas giving, it would seem more likely that such giving would be conditioned by common understandings of compatriot priority and be directed inward. That is, the first problem of moral distance, of determining where the outward boundaries of the distributive set should be placed, has yet to be overcome. I believe Lichtenberg does point us in a very fruitful direction when she notes the need to move away from a reliance on the altruistic impulses of individuals to address overseas poverty, and toward an emphasis on whatever kinds of normative or especially institutional changes conceivably could routinize distributions. An important prior stage to such institutional transformation, however, will be finding ways to motivate a deeper consideration for the interests of the excluded other.

A significant separate psychology literature has explored the circumstances under which individuals will be willing to engage in genuinely altruistic behavior, i.e., take action in behalf of others that cannot be said to be rooted in self-interest. Reported levels of empathic concern, while not proposed as the sole cause or predictor of actual helping behavior, have been consistently associated with a willingness by participants to aid subjects, including when the subject is a stranger (Batson 1997; Eisenberg and Miller 1987; see Duan and Hill 1996; Preston and Waal 2002). Empathy is measured according to scores reported by participants in reference to how strongly they feel toward a subject, e.g., by a 1-7 ranking on such adjectives as sympathetic, compassionate, moved. Further, empathy *for* the subject is distinguished from sadness or distress caused *by* a subject's suffering, where participants can be motivated by egoistic reasons to end the suffering

and thus end or lessen their own distress at witnessing it (Dovidio, Allen and Schroeder 1990).

Among factors contributing to empathic concern, experiments dating back several decades have highlighted the importance of perspective taking. Those study participants instructed to imagine how a subject feels in a given situation are observed to develop increased concern and willingness to aid. More recent work has emphasized also the significance of a participants' positive valuation of the welfare of the subject in need (Batson et al. 2007). The importance of such welfare valuing is underscored, for example, in a series of experiments conducted by Batson and colleagues, in which participants are asked to consider the case of a young man whom they were told had been seriously injured running through traffic while late for class. Some subjects were told the young man had been late because he stopped to help an elderly woman who was lost and disoriented. Others also were told that he was late because he had been approached by the woman, but that he rudely rejected her request for help (Batson et al. 2007, p. 69).

Participants reported higher empathic concern for the nice subject than the rude one, in other words, for the one whose welfare they had greater reason to value. Further, those also instructed to perspective take, or imagine how the young man must be feeling, reported significantly higher empathic concern.

Of central importance here, higher empathic concern was associated with a much greater willingness to help the young man. Participants, who were told the events had actually happened and the subject was temporarily confined to a wheel chair, were asked if they would render aid to him in the form of regularly delivering notes to an office. No contact was expected with him, to ensure that any motivation to help would be intrinsic,

rather than based on some extrinsic benefit to the participants such as gratitude. Those who had reported higher empathy were significantly more willing to take on the task (Batson et al. 2007, 266-68).

Such studies provide key insight into factors that can encourage a willingness to render aid. When individuals are provided with information that helps them to understand the life circumstances, actions and motivations of others, it can promote a willingness to adopt others' perspective, to develop concern for them, and to be more inclined to aid them. Batson and colleagues note that the role played by the valuing of the other suggests that empathic concern—and the prosocial motivation it produces—can be increased if we increase valuing of others' welfare. Such valuing may be increased through strategies designed to reduce prejudice; to improve attitudes toward out-groups; or to produce more positive, cooperative social interactions' (Batson et al. 2007, p. 73).

I will note that an emphasis on the underlying bases of empathy-related altruism does not necessarily commit my account to an externalist neo-Humean, or related 'sentimentalist' position on moral motivation. Such positions presume generally that even after one accepts the correctness of a particular moral position, some additional factor such as sympathy for the other must be present to motivate action in accordance with that position (Slote 2006; see Dreier 2000; Finlay 2007, p. 105). Opposing 'anti-Humean' or internalist positions presume that to believe that something is morally appropriate is to also have the motivation to act on that belief (Nagel 1978; see Rosati 2006). For example, Nagel has argued that an essential characteristic of altruism is that it 'depends on a recognition of the reality of other persons, and on the equivalent capacity to regard oneself as merely one individual among many' (1978, p. 3). Altruism properly

understood is not, he emphasizes, motivated by some bare feeling of sympathy or generalized affection for the human race,' (1978, p. 3) but is one possible outcome of a rational process, part of which involves a willingness to fully consider the reality, or in terms of the present discussion, humanity, of the other.<sup>2</sup>

The empathy-altruism path, where information about the other can lead to positive valuation of welfare, attempted perspective taking and some willingness to aid, is consistent with such an emphasis on considering the humanity of others, and would be prior to the actual setting of moral boundaries described in the first problem of moral distance. Further, and where both the first and second problems of moral distance are concerned, we can note that even if moral reasons for acting can by themselves motivate action, many such reasons or considerations may compete for our attention. As Thomas Scanlon has argued, 'One's state of mind, the state of one's body, and the content of one's immediate experiences strongly affect the reasons one attends to' (1998, 34). The motivational effects or weight of given moral considerations may change in part, he notes, because changing circumstances bring particular considerations more vividly to mind.

### **Narratives and Perspective Taking**

My claim is that the interests of excluded others can be brought more vividly to mind through the promotion of perspective taking and related positive valuation. In fact,

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<sup>2</sup> That is not to claim that Nagel sees his approach as grounding extensive duties to noncompatriots. He has argued elsewhere that global distributive justice should be viewed as at best an impasse, where the relatively affluent can reasonably reject the full demands of the less-affluent, and the less-affluent can reasonably reject the distributions the affluent might be willing to give (Nagel 1991, Ch. 7). In fact, the sense of reasonable in such a claim might more accurately be read as the kind of naive realism, or sincerely held belief in the objectivity of one's own opinion, described in the psychological literature. Individuals may be acting in good faith in considering the depth of their own obligations, but their judgments likely will be subject to the kinds of biases identified above.

the importance of perspective taking in particular has been emphasized in a range of social and institutional contexts. For example, on a relatively small scale, a perspective-taking strategy commonly is adopted in the training of physicians, when they view and discuss dramatic films focusing on patients' experience of illness (Shapiro and Rucker 2004; Benbassat and Baumal 2004). On a somewhat larger scale, Martha Nussbaum has highlighted the importance of perspective taking in arguments for a fundamentally multicultural and global approach to university education, as well as for a more comprehensively informed approach to passing legal judgment (Nussbaum 1997; 1999). Both education and judicial reasoning, she suggests, should be informed in part by a model of engagement with texts that emphasizes the 'participatory identification' with agents or literary characters. In such a model, 'the reader, following the author's lead, comes to be inhabited by the tangled complexities and struggles of other concrete lives' (Nussbaum 1999, 170). In the courtroom in particular, salient details from a defendant's life can help to promote understanding and perspective taking, which can lead to more informed decisions about the mitigating factors that should be considered in passing legal judgment. As in the model emphasized here, Nussbaum does not recommend a deliberation based on pity or other unreflective emotion for the other, but one informed by an identification with the other based in a fuller understanding of that person's life circumstances.

On a larger scale still, the power of written narratives has been displayed in those works that have moved readers to moral outrage, helping to promote substantive social change. Elaine Scarry notes E.M. Forster's *Passage to India* as turning the tide in British willingness to allow Indian independence, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's*

*Cabin* as a work that 'made Blacks—the weight, solidity, injurability of their personhood—imaginable to the White population in pre-Civil War United States' (2002, p. 104-05). Scarry asserts that such influential works likely are too rare or singular for their power to be generalized. We could note, however, Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* for humanizing the U.S. Dust Bowl emigrants of the 1930s, the Victorian social novels of Dickens, Hardy and others for the ways in which they helped bring the plight of Britain's working class to light, and so on. This is not to suggest that political theorists must develop the narrative genius of the great novelist, but to illustrate how identification with individuals through texts can help to make more vivid the interests and humanity of excluded others.

We also can consider the power of a global media, in particular television, to help identify others in need, make their need more present to individuals in a position to render aid, and generally to promote the transfer of such aid. The power of TV cameras to so shrink moral distance arguably was demonstrated in the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s, the Somalia intervention of the early 1990s (Mandelbaum 1994), and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (Inderfurth, Fabrycky, and Cohen, 2005). As media scholars have emphasized, one of the fundamental characteristics of news coverage that has proved most influential on foreign aid and intervention is that it has sympathetically portrayed suffering people (Robinson 2000; see Half 1987).

It might be asked then why portrayals of the distant needy should not simply be left to journalists, especially if their media have such power to effect actual transfers. This can be answered both on a theoretical and practical level. In terms of theory, while television accounts in particular may have great power to motivate charitable responses

by viewers in the near term, they do not constitute careful arguments about where moral boundaries should be set. They do not interrogate distinctions between presumably charitable – meaning also optional – transfers, and transfers that may be required by general duties or specific obligations of justice incumbent on all. Further, underlying a concern with moral boundaries is a concern with the way in which television accounts of crisis may motivate transfers. That is, rather than promoting the kind of valuing and perspective taking that is grounded in insight into the life of the other, they may promote a more ephemeral emotive response, e.g., pity for those in an abject state. That is not to say that such transfers should be discouraged, but rather that the television portrayals of individuals in need do not cover the same ground as rigorous political theory arguments concerned with moral distance that also would include such portrayals. The same would be true of an exclusive focus on portrayals in narrative non-fiction accounts, though some may provide powerful supporting material (see Nazario 2006).

In practical terms, i.e., in terms of the second problem of moral distance, it can be noted that media coverage of global crises actually can contribute to a skewed allocation of aid resources, even a diversion of resources from other chronic needs in the global South (Jakobsen 2000). That is in part a function of how instances of need are selected for specific coverage emphasis. Factors that can come into play include the ‘emergency’ character of the need, the skill with which it is publicized by NGOs and other advocates, and some calculations of short-term political costs and benefits by officials in intervening or aiding states (Mermin 1997; Bob 2002). Thus, while the response to intensive media coverage of a famine or other episode of desperate can help to demonstrate the power of one type of narrative or portrayal to promote transfers, the media ‘crisis response’ model

would seem inappropriate as the sole or primary means of providing information aimed at setting appropriate moral boundaries. There is a potentially significant role for qualitative political theory to play.

### **Qualitative Political Theory**

Qualitative research in general is commonly employed in the generation of hypotheses, especially in its grounded theory variant (Strauss and Corbin 1998), as well as to explore more deeply the understandings of participants in a phenomenon under study, and to investigate social phenomena that may not be so readily explicable within approaches focusing on formalizing, quantifying, and statistically testing variables (Babbie 1998, 279-306). Qualitative methods can include the conducting and thematic-content coding of interviews with participants or elites in a set of events or an organization (Weston et al. 2001; Aberbach and Rockman 2002). They can include field observations and artifact analysis, participant-observation within specific groups, the linguistic analysis of salient narratives or texts, structured field experiments, and a range of other means outside of the strict quantification of data points.

The use of qualitative methods in political theory arguably was pioneered by Jane Mansbridge (1983), who drew on her extensive observations, interviews and other research at a Vermont town meeting, as well as a participatory workplace, to inform her models of adversarial democracy and the more consensus-based unitary democracy. Mansbridge noted the range of ways in which conducting fine-grained empirical research had contributed to a fuller understanding of the elements at play in the democratic theory arguments she was attempting to make, in particular in illuminating the moral

understandings of participants themselves. More recently, theorists have used insights from qualitative research to provide essential building blocks for the construction of their normative accounts. Brooke Ackerly, for example, draws on semi-structured interviews and interactions with human rights activists at major international meetings such as the World Social Forum to develop an immanent theory of human rights, one that would have universal application but is aimed at being highly attuned to difference (2008, 149). Qualitative, or experience-based modes of inquiry are foundational, Ackerly argues, in helping the theorist of human rights understand the importance of adopting not a totalizing but destabilizing epistemology connected to often radically different conceptions of rights espoused by activist-practitioners (2008, 144).

Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit (2007) likewise incorporate extensive interview research with social service providers and disadvantaged persons to inform their revision of Martha Nussbaum's list of essential human capabilities, toward developing a rubric for identifying and addressing social disadvantage that could be adopted by policy makers. Roxanne Doty (2006) adopts a qualitative case study approach for her defense and elaboration of Derrida's (2001) conception of unconditional hospitality in a cosmopolitan frame. She draws on field research with the Humane Borders group, which maintains water stations along trails heavily used by unauthorized immigrants in desert of southern Arizona, where more than a thousand have died in the past decade of thirst and exposure, among other causes. Separately, Doty (2007) has used field research among civilian border-patrol 'Minuteman' volunteers to test claims embedded in a Schmittian conception of state sovereignty.

In recent work, I have used data from field interviews, participant-observation and some formal surveys to inform normative arguments for a specific approach to global citizenship (Cabrera 2008; Cabrera and Glavac forthcoming). I have collected and systematically coded qualitative data from interviews conducted with members of migrant-rights and immigration-restriction groups in the United States, Mexico, and Western Europe. Coding has involved the identification of recurring themes and phrase patterns in interviews, and comparing theme-coded responses among the different subject groups to determine how members of those groups understand their own actions or attitudes toward the non-citizen other (see Weston et al. 2001). Extensive data from interviews with unauthorized immigrants from Mexico and Central America in the United States, and from Central American in Mexico, also have provided insight on the experiences and motivations of migrants themselves.

I want to focus here on one portion of my qualitative research that may have particular salience to the problems of perceived moral distance. This portion of project, titled an 'Archaeology of Borders', has focused on a phenomenon where, piece by piece, those who cross into the United States through southern Arizona drop their possessions. Seeking to lighten their loads in the broiling sun, or overcome by the incongruity of bearing high-heeled shoes, bottles of cologne, or a store of school certificates and other personal documents on a trek stretching into days, they transform the desert trails into archaeological troves of sorts (see Doty 2006; Hyatt 2007). These artifacts have been collected both at random by myself and others on some high-use trails, and more systematically with research teams at migrant pickup sites, where crossers are ordered by

their guides to drop all of their possessions in order that as many people as possible can be crammed into a smuggling vehicle.

Teams documented hundreds of items at two pickup sites in April 2006, and other items were found on more than a dozen Arizona routes from June 2005-March 2007.

Throughout the project, I have been struck by the ways in which a mute, dusty trail so often reveals more about the sufferings endured than individual crossers are willing to tell in an interview or even repeated close interactions. A full accounting of items found is not possible in the space of this article, but a discussion of some key ones should be suggestive of the insight that can be gained, and ways in which the analysis of such artifacts can help to make others' lives more vivid. For example, volunteers for Samaritans and No More Deaths, southern Arizona groups that conduct humanitarian patrols in search of stranded crossers, report finding the most personal of Spanish-language correspondence left in the desert. One letter, apparently never delivered, was written from a mother to her child, explaining why she had been forced to leave him behind to try to improve both their lives. A notebook was discovered containing the extended musings of a young woman discovering her feelings for a man. The following letter from a distressed young woman was found at a rest site on a heavily traveled migrant trail near Arivaca, Arizona, some 15 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border:

*(December 29, 2004)*

*For: a very special person...you*

*I hope that you reflect [obscured]... because that's really what I feel toward you and I don't want you to get offended, but it's the truth. You know that you have failed me and I forgave you and have tried to trust you, and I have but every time I do, you do something that disappoints me and erases everything again. I don't know what you really want; if you don't want to be in this house, leave and we will understand even though it will hurt. ... My character is very strong like yours but you hurt me and you know how I am, and unfortunately I'm very prideful just like you are. And what you did to us two years*

*ago I will never forget because my heart is hurt and I don't think that it can heal and much less that I forget with your ---- desire to change. Every time you drink, I get mad because like we say now you act like a goat' [idiomatic expression] and you don't even know who you are or what you're doing here. ...<sup>3</sup>*

Photographs have their own stories to tell. In one, found on a desert trail in southeastern Arizona, a young man and woman are standing in a tree-shaded plaza before a white, mission-style church. His right arm is around her shoulders, and he holds in his left hand an 8-x-12-inch, framed photograph of a robed Christ in welcoming pose, hands at sides and open. Documents chronicle years of schoolwork diligently performed, births in the tiny mountain villages of southern Mexico, the names of parents and grandparents left behind. Blankets, bottles, and tiny articles of clothing bear witness to babies being carried by their parents through cactus and the clawing thorns of mesquite trees. Older children leave behind toys, soccer cards, and novelty cards that come inside packages of sliced bread. One boy left a notebook in which he had been practicing sketches of zany card characters such as 'Juan Mucho-pus,' a skinny muchacho with acne the size of golf balls.

The desert can tell stories of compassion, even heroism, as in a stretcher found at the bottom of a steep hill, fashioned from sticks, shirts, and a leather belt imprinted with the letters 'USA'. Some group of crossers had refused to leave a companion behind, instead taking the time to construct the stretcher and bear him or her over the hill, on a trail that is treacherous with rolling rocks under the best of circumstances. Other artifacts are more grim. Teams at the two pickup sites found 14 separate packets of powerful pseudoephedrine pills, allergy medicine commonly given by 'coyote' guides to their charges to increase walking speed and endurance. The medicine has been found to

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from the Spanish by Esmeralda Gonzalez.

aggravate hypertension and cause other cardiovascular ill effects (Juhn 2003), and it likely contributes to desert deaths. The pair of women's briefs tied to a tree branch, noted above, is widely understood in the borderlands to represent a trophy of rape, and assaults on female crossers in remote areas are all too common. For example, a woman, six months pregnant, aided by Mexican federal authorities in the border town of Nogales after a failed crossing, reported that both she and her nine-year-old daughter had been raped by a gang of men who abducted them from their crossing group (Author interview, Grupo Beta, Nogales, February 2007).

A more complete accounting of the field research would offer additional detail on the objects found, their uses and significance to the crossers. It also would include the voices of the dozens of crossers interviewed, their insights on the hardships they had endured on the trail to the United States or Europe, on the reasons why they felt compelled to journey north and what they believed would be waiting for them. For example, a young Nigerian woman, Gloria, contacted in southern Spain, said she had been determined to escape the deep poverty of her home village and move to a place where she could make more use of the English-language and other skills she had gained as a child under the tutelage of a female missionary. After leaving, she spent six years living in the shadows of Northern Africa, including around the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, and its sister city Melilla, noted by David Miller above. Interviewed in an immigrant-women's facility in the city of Algeciras, where she was being sheltered with her six-month-old daughter, Rosio, she recalled initially crossing the vast desert of Algeria on foot, trying to reach Europe. 'In the desert, many perish walking. I saw a baby die, and many other people. It was many kilometers walking, many'. In Algeria, she huddled with

fifty others like her. 'We were afraid to go out. The police would beat you'. Later, in Morocco, she adopted fully body coverings and veil and begged in the streets. There she was beaten harshly by police, she said, making clubbing motions, showing a still-shiny scar running the length of her right cheek. 'They beat me when I was pregnant. They don't care. They have no respect for life'.

Respite arrived in the form of a smuggling-gang broker who had ties to her home area in Nigeria and was willing to arrange her transport for a promise to pay 1250 Euros after arrival. After false starts, she finally was crowded into a small boat with many others, bound for the Spanish coast near Algeciras. The water was very rough. The boat started shaking, she said, recalling the other passengers bailing madly while she clung to the side, hugely pregnant and struggling not to vomit as water slapped against her face and entered her mouth and nostrils. 'I thought we were all going to die.' Then, just as they seemed to cross the international boundary to Spanish waters, the seas calmed. The boat motored to the coast near Tarifa, where Spanish authorities captured them and took her to the shelter. There, Rosio was born and given a Spanish name to promote her acceptance, while her mother struggled to gain permission for a work permit (Author interview, March 2006).

Stories and artifacts from the lives of those who are excluded from some distributions of resources and opportunities do not by themselves constitute an argument in defense of any principle of global justice. Again, however, they can help to make more vivid the humanity of those beyond the razor wire. Presenting the life circumstances of those others, and giving them voice with which to share their own perspectives, can make it more difficult to blithely dismiss their claims for forms of inclusion. Further, it can

challenge a form of own-case bias that is prevalent in non-cosmopolitan distributive arguments that would emphasize shared national sentiment (D. Miller 2007), or sacrifices made in behalf of compatriots by compatriots (R. Miller 1998; see Blake 2001). The latter kinds of arguments constitute a form of discussion about distributive obligations that is solipsistic by nature, generally considering only sacrifices already being made within a group, while ignoring the deprivations that can attend exclusions from membership, as well as the fundamental question of whether such exclusions were initially justified. In the words of an Algerian man who had made it past the fence and was being detained as an unauthorized entrant to Ceuta: ‘We know in Algeria that Spain was like us. Until it joined the EU, people had to leave to find work. Now everyone wants to get into Spain. Why can’t we have that?’ (Author interview, March 2006).

This question, far from being rhetorical, would seem to demand a reasoned response that does more fully consider the interests and plain humanity of such excluded others. It implies an argument for formal inclusion, one that would move far beyond exhortations to charity across borders. In fact, Scarry (2002), like Lichtenberg (2004), criticizes approaches to promoting noncompatriot distributions that would rely solely on exhortations to charity. As we saw, Lichtenberg aims to move us toward a structure of norms that would promote publicity about giving and motivate it largely through non-altruistic means. Scarry moves one step farther, emphasizing the potential for suitably constructed or reformed domestic constitutions to mitigate conceptions of ‘foreignness’ or exclusions of outsiders. I have argued elsewhere that such institutional transformation should be advocated, but that it should be more fundamentally supranational in nature, in order to better meet the challenges of own-case bias (Cabrera 2004, Ch 7; Cabrera 2005).

It could include, for example, movement toward a form of North American union, broadly similar to the European Union, where development aid would be more intensively distributed across borders and the movement of labor would be freed over time (see Manley, et al. 2005; Fox 2007, 101). In moving toward such a system, individuals from less-affluent states would have more opportunities to tell their own stories, press their own interests, and demand formal standing in debates about where to place moral boundaries.

We need not presume, however, that qualitative political theory is applicable to questions of moral distance only if it is incorporated into an institutional cosmopolitan account. Those cosmopolitans demanding less comprehensive institutional changes also could strengthen their accounts through making the perspectives and actual welfare of the globally excluded more visible, making their lives more vivid by enabling them to relate their concerns in their own voices. Such inclusion would help to better ensure that those in affluent states, who are being asked to share the resources, opportunities and other goods they have understood as belonging to them by birthright, are encouraged to fully appreciate needy noncompatriots as discrete individuals whose welfare should be valued, and whose claims for distributive inclusion cannot be dismissed out of hand. Finally, the inclusion of the voices and lives of excluded others could enhance not only accounts based primarily in positive duties toward all others, but also those grounded in negative duties to mitigate harms ostensibly caused by those in affluent states through the imposition of global institutions (Pogge 2002). Each kind of account could be strengthened by making more vivid the impacts of deprivation or impositions on

excluded individuals, and most centrally, by engaging with those persons' own understandings of the appropriate extent of moral boundaries.

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