

Slab City: Adapting to a Porous Border

Brodie Quinn

Research Question: How is community cohesion maintained and a homeplace constructed when the borders of Slab City are so porous?

My project looks at the off-the-grid encampment in the Southern California desert called “Slab City.” This is a place that residents call “the last free place in America,” a place where a community of squatters, artists, migrants, survivalists, digital nomads, travelers, and retirees call home—some for the entirety of the year, most others only in the winter months. Slab City is “unofficial” in many ways: there is no official electricity, law enforcement, taxation, or governance. What was once Camp Dunlap, a military training camp, is now a place where people come and go, make community, and try to find freedom, however they imagine that to be. The borders of this community are more porous than others; without land ownership and oversight, people are free to come and go, and many do. The porousness of the community border is something highly valued by this community, contributing to their ideas of freedom and alternative lifestyle—an important and visible contrast from what they call “Babylon,” that is, the stationary, capitalistic, private property-owning society outside the 1-mile square area of Slab City.

For this research, I wanted to know how a community can be maintained when the border here is a place of constant, unpatrolled flow. And I wanted to know how a sense of place is constructed in this desert where people value, perhaps more than anything else, this freedom of movement.

Overview of Findings: I propose that there are three main ways that Slab City residents create a sense of community and place, maintain a peaceful existence, and welcome others into their group. These are:

1. **Boundary Building.** Barriers are constructed within Slab City’s borders. These boundaries, built around camps, are important in carving out private space in a desert area that is unownable. While this community promote and try and live a life of openness and acceptance, these internal territory markers are important in creating separate home spaces and reducing community conflicts.
2. **Policing.** Conflicts, though, do happen. The community have established an unofficial but nonetheless effective governance structure to either reduce these instances from happening or to deal with them when they arise: the “elders.” The makeup of this group is vague—often depending on who is at the Slabs at any given time—but Slabbers are careful to consult these figures on certain matters. When conflict happens or antisocial behavior is felt by the majority of the community, a “burn” is sometimes performed where a camp is burnt down in order to drive someone out of Slab City.
3. **Anti-Babylon Discourse.** To mark when someone is entering Slab City, and to designate if someone is a Slabber, community members embrace what I call an “Anti-Babylon”

discourse. This discourse is shared in community gatherings and in private conversations. When crossing the first guard shack by the canal —the unofficial border to Slab City—locals attempt to follow the core tenets of Anti-Babylon thinking. Key features of this are: freedom of thought and movement; reduction of stress; an emphasis on inclusion and non-judgment; live for today, not tomorrow; and living in “harmony” with each other, the land, and with other living creatures.



Background Facts About Slab City

- After WWII the military disbanded Camp Dunlap, removing everything except the concrete foundations—hence the name Slab City.
- Recreational vehicle (RV) travelers soon started visiting the site, attracted to both the hard level ground the slabs provided and the chance to stay somewhere free of charge.
- By the 1970s and 80s, Slab City was bursting in popularity and population.
- Slab City has remained a relatively stable community since then, rising to several thousand in winter and dropping to one or two hundred in the summer.

Today there are four main groups of people who make up the Slabbers population:

1. Permanent residents, or “homesteaders.” These people stay year-round, either in their own solo camp where they build permanent structures surrounded by borders constructed out of things like old bed frames and tires, or in established camps—e.g., “Camp Flamingo” or “Camp Darkside”—that can have up to twenty or thirty people in them at the height of the season (mid-Winter).
2. “Snowbirds,” named because of their southern migration in the winter. This group typically arrive when the day-time temperatures drop below one hundred degrees Fahrenheit (usually in November), and then leave when the snow thaws in the northern states (April). This group are recognizable by their lack of permanent structures around their camps and their large and relatively expensive homes: RVs, trailers, and high-top vans.
3. Nomads, vagabonds. This is a smaller group, often men in their twenties, who travel light, either with only a car or by foot, living out of a backpack. They typically stay for shorter periods of time than the other groups.
4. The outcasts. This group was described to me as people “not there by choice.” Drug addiction, mental health struggles, and lengthy experience of homelessness before arriving at Slabs are common amongst this group. On rare occasions, sex offenders can be in this group. They can sometimes be disruptive community members.

Terminology: “Borders” & “Boundaries”

With respect to terminology, I use “borders” when referring to the outer edges of this space, where the Slab City meets “Babylon.” This is an area that is both physically marked (see image above) and imagined. This is the porous border, where people are constantly coming and going.

I use the term “boundaries” to mean the internal territories and perimeters—both of the physical and the ideological kinds—that are constructed within Slab City’s borders. Below is one example of this:



Slab City is not a legally designated area but a place where people have set down roots and successfully established a home. They have marked the border to this area with signs, artwork, and by their embodied presence. This border is continually reperformed to the community and outsiders through discursive acts and a shared ideology of “Anti-Babylonia.” The boundaries inside the community are important for people to construct a homeplace and to keep the peace. Located outside any legal frameworks, these perimeters designate where one camp begins and another ends, and these boundaries are fluid and contested as camps are constantly being built and abandoned.

1. Boundary Building

When walking around Slab City, one of the first things you’re likely to notice are the various types of boundaries that people construct around their camps. In perhaps one of the most detailed studies on Slab City, Charlie Hailey and Donovan Wylie (2019) devote a great deal of attention in photographing and studying these boundaries, including the material used in their construction (bed frames, tires, liquor bottles, etc.) and how they carve up the desert landscape to form homeplaces. In my research, people spoke at length to me about how building perimeter fences are important to not just their privacy but also their safety. Whitehorse Bob, the owner of the Slab City Hostel, detailed how he had come to acquire neighboring camps over the years, expanding his compound and protecting this space with a 6-foot-high mesh fence, topped with barbed wire and even security cameras—a striking feature in a community where the entrance sign says, “The Last Free Place.”

These elaborate, cherished, laborious, and expensive boundaries are how Slabbers have adapted to the porousness of their community border. The Slabs is a transitory place with the population constantly in flux and no one ever sure who is on site, nor who will be coming back for each season.

Homesteaders build perimeter fences to not only protect their property but also to mark out their home, to themselves and others.

For Snowbirds and nomads especially, most people are not able to build elaborate structures in the desert because as soon as they depart these structures are quickly (very quickly, sometimes within hours) picked apart and dismantled by others—materials are expensive, after all. So, when moving in for another season, these groups typically mark out their desert camp with bottles, tires, and other debris collected from the large trash piles on the outskirts of Slab City called “Slabmart,” seen below.



2. Policing

Even when boundaries are built and home space is marked out, disputes, thievery, and outright conflict can happen. Slabbers have created a system that relies on two main parts: the role of elders and the act of burning.

Whitehorse described how he recently came to acquire the camp next door after his neighbor, Garry, was accused of sexual misconduct toward some women in the Slabs. One day Garry just packed up and left. Whitehorse said:

And he ain't been back since, that I know of. So I kind of ended up, I talked to some other people, elders here and stuff, and I said, "Would it be alright if I took over that camp just to protect my border and everything," and they said I had a right to do that, so that's what I did. And then I put Poppy over there and she's cleaning it all up. It was filthy dirty over there.

Whitehorse's description of the elders is a key part of the policing system. While fences, whether that be tires or a 6-foot-high fence, are effective at alerting people to what parts of the desert landscape you are claiming possession of, sometimes this is not respected and thieves—typically drug users that are desperate for money—will enter your camp to steal things. At Slabs, the community of elders, formed gradually over the years, are occasionally tasked with settling disputes.¹ At other times, like in the case with Whitehorse and his neighboring camp, the elder system is a functional way to legitimize an activity, to ensure the most respected and longest members of the community are aware of your plans and have given their approval. Zig, a Snowbird of nine years, explained it to me like this:

Is there a hierarchy? We have elders, we have people who have been out here a long time who deserve their place in Slabs. And the community as a whole expects people to respect those folks, not only because they've experienced so many miserable summers out here, but because they're just older. ... It's not like we *have to* ask them permission or anything, but we might ask their advice, we might ask if it's going to impact them negatively if we were going to do this or do that. Because we do respect them. They've been out here a long time and they've helped shape this community into what it is today.

The elder system is effective in maintaining order most of the time. Still, when walking around Slab City it is hard not to notice the many burnt out camps. These large burns are often caused by accident—perhaps a stove left on or candles unattended—or by drug users, especially methamphetamine users who are notorious for accidentally burning down their camps. Still, on some occasions, these burns are lit deliberately. Roger, someone on the periphery of the elder group (he was a law clerk and he has advised the elders on legal matters) described the burns to me:

If there's ... some legal stuff going on, maybe you're disrespecting a person in your camp or another camp and you can't seem to settle a feud, sometimes there is an event where they get burned out. Maybe they won't leave. And there's people that all decide that the group is correct, without a trial, the trial is the elders and the people. They try to get both sides of the story, either way, so they know that the approach is correct, they try to get to the truth. And sometimes, either one or both parties don't agree to the truth, usually the truth lies somewhere in between. And there's events that go on, they just get burned out. Who does it? I don't know. I don't personally, you don't hear people say, "I burned them out." Some fires happen by accident, there's a burnout. Something's going on between some camps, some individuals in those camps, they can't seem to organize with communication so they take the law into their own hands, which is deadly. Is that right? Getting to the truth is right. How we handle that truth and the consequences behind it is precarious at best.

Burns are clearly a violent and destructive act. And Slabbers are typically reluctant to talk about them (I never once met anyone that said they had any first-hand knowledge of one, nor that they were

¹ No one could tell me who, exactly, is in the elders group. This is likely because no one really knows. As a very transient place, it is impossible to predict who exactly is there in the Slab community at any one time. Also, since the COVID pandemic, many of the older Snowbird population have stayed away. I was told about people who had devoted many years to living at Slabs and shaping the community that had not been back for several seasons. Nevertheless, the elder system still exists and still functions even with this sense of ambiguity.

involved in one). Yet, the act continues. Many residents admit that they are not proud of burns but insist that it is the most effective way to warn and drive out unsavory characters, typically people accused of sexual misconduct, pedophilia, and people discovered to be registered sex offenders.



Compared to nearly any other place, it is easy to settle down and start a life at Slab City. This is a place that allows for, even encourages, new residents. And the openings into this community are wider and easier to traverse than, likely, anywhere else: there is no cost involved to claiming land, there are no checkpoints, no paperwork, no legal process, no need to register, and the community (generally) welcomes newcomers quickly and warmly. But people are wary of dangerous acts and disruption. The elder system not only minimizes this, it also encourages respect amongst Slabbers and instills a sense of history. But the elders have no legal power to enforce rules. What has arisen in this grey area is burning people out—an act that is highly visible on the Slab City landscape yet is largely spoken about quietly and often only amongst established residents.

3. The Anti-Babylon Discourse

The final way I see people adapting to the porous border between Slab City and the rest of America is by reproducing what I term an “Anti-Babylonian discourse.”

To understand this, we need to know what Slabbers mean when they call the world outside of Slab City, and outside of their nomadic traveling community, as “Babylon.” Zig described it to me as:

It’s cities, its towns, it’s everywhere. ... Back before we had farming, human beings were hunters and gatherers. ... they would go north and south with winter and summer until we learned how

to farm. And once we did that, we didn't have to travel with the seasons anymore, we could grow our food and be stationary. And then ... because of that, I think we started living out of tune with our environment, with our planet, and we are more destructive because of that. It's not a balance anymore because we figured out how to just cultivate the Earth into what we want. And the first place we ever figured out farming, that we know of, is Babylon, Mesopotamia ... and they stopped being nomads around that time. So we call it Babylon for that reason because they're not nomads, they're not travelers, they're stationary and they live in destruction with the earth, which we all have to participate in because of the way that everything is set up. But we call it Babylon. That's why.

It is hard to overstate the ubiquity of this language and worldview at Slab City. In everyday discussion people talk about Babylon—e.g., “I have to go into Babylon to buy some things,” “I need to sell my truck which means I'm going to have to head to Babylon.” Slabbers have embraced a way of talking about the world beyond the border of Slab City through a self and other, them and us dichotomy. So, then, what is Anti-Babylon? The key features I see are:

- Live for today, not tomorrow.
- An emphasis on *communitas* and a rejection of hierarchical structures (but, of course, there are “elders”).
- Attempting to live a life free of, or at least maximally reduced, stress.
- An emphasis on inclusion and non-judgment.
- Living in harmony with the land, animals, and other humans.
- Freedom of movement.

The last point is perhaps one of the most desired attributes of the Anti-Babylon discourse. Slabbers often told me how they feel sorry for Babylonians because they have no freedom, their mortgages and jobs making them stationary and saddled with twenty-year contracts that they cannot escape. Also, their capitalistic and consumerist impulses have led them to desire more and more belongings, things they must work harder and harder to afford. Conversely, Slabbers reject these things in favor of fewer belongings, giving them the ability to move whenever they want. This, they argue, means they live a life with less stress, more aware and attentive to immediate concerns, and, crucially, more in “harmony” with the world.

I see Anti-Babylonia as a community-building discourse. Anyone who comes into the community who reproduces this discourse in their speech acts and is seen to embrace this discourse in how they live is deemed to be a local, even if they have only just arrived. I met travelers who had only been in Slabs for two or three days who had adopted this language. Sounding like experts, they told me how Slab City allows for a rejection of the Babylonian lifestyle yet they themselves had been at the Slabs for fewer days than me. But these new people were indeed seen as Slabbers (albeit, new ones) because they embraced Anti-Babylonian attributes and were seen by the community as exemplifying this way of living. Moreover, Anti-Babylonia allows people to leave for six months or ten years, and when they return, they are greeted with, “Welcome Home.” If someone espouses these ideals, and if

they are seen as rejecting Babylonian life, they are likely to be considered a Slabber, or at least on the way to becoming a Slabber.



The image above is the unofficial entrance to Slab City, the border between Babylon and Anti-Babylon. On the back of this guard shack are the words: “Warning, now exiting reality.” The effect of this is that when driving past this point, driving out of Slab City, people are understood to be—and many told me they actually feel it in their bodies—entering a world that is chaotic, destructive, and lacking in purpose. Leaving this point is to enter a fake world that sits in contrast to the reality of Slab City.

This Anti-Babylon discourse brings the community together around a shared set of ideals and way of living. And this is important. The image above shows the physical place where the Slab City border is porous; people pass through here often, constantly, and with freedom. But there is also an ideological and discursive border here, such that as people cross this point they are understood to be crossing into a new way of being, talking, and seeing. In a community that fluctuates so often—in population size and individual personalities—the people have adapted to this flow by uniting under a shared Anti-Babylon ideology that they follow, promote, and embody. The effect of this is that newcomers can be quickly become insiders, and those who leave this community for extended periods of time, whether that be for one summer or for several years, can quickly be welcomed back into the community fold. To illustrate this, and to conclude, I’ll leave the final word to Zig who told me how he feels when he leaves every year, and then what’s it like to come back:

So when I leave here, it's bittersweet because I'm bummed that I'm leaving but I know it's getting too hot to stay. And it's also excitement because now everything up north is starting to thaw out and it's about to get real accessible and beautiful up there. So it's a little bittersweet. And then when you come home, when you come back every year, ... you usually get here in the Fall. ... I'll be hovering around the area somewhere that's comfortable and I'll be watching the weather, waiting for it to drop below 100 degrees. And when it gets below 100 degrees, I'll drive down here. And as soon as you get back, everyone's saying the same thing, they're all saying, "Welcome home." And it is nice to be home, like, it starts to feel like home after a while. It's just one of those homes that you don't want to stay at all the time [laughs].