



Under the Shadow of the Wall

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ABSTRACT

This photo essay focuses on the landscapes of the Sonoran Desert—and the imperialist project of a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico—as a way of investigating the manner in which something as generic as a wall takes on particular and discrete politico-affective forms. This short provocation explores the ways that violent and distasteful objects create, and subsequently come to characterize grotesque spectacles.

KEYWORDS

Arizona, border wall, borderlands, desert, Sonoran Desert

The Stinging Sound of Silence

My sub-compact car rattles and knocks as it bounces along a dirt road that snakes its way through the desert near Douglas, Arizona. Through my passenger-side window, I start to see the recently installed, massive copper-colored border wall peeking out from the space between the hills of this rolling landscape dotted with ancient rock, small cacti, twiggy trees, and dry brush. As I get closer to the San Bernardino Wildlife Refuge, I pull my car off the road and squeeze it into a small clearing between two spindly mesquite trees and step out into the mild but dry winter air.

About 100 yards ahead of me is a tightly packed series of vertical steel beams that reach 20 feet up toward the clear sky and stretch off horizontally in either direction. I hear quails gently cooing in the creosote bushes next to me and in the distance, the gentle drone and slight glimmer of semi-trucks can be seen and heard slowly crawling across the *Carretera Federal 2* (Federal Highway 2) that winds its way along the border of Mexico and the United States. Other than that, it's quiet; dead quiet.

I begin to cautiously walk toward the wall, continually checking over my shoulder for any sign of workers or Border Patrol agents. I feel like I'm trespassing—which I probably am—but there are no posted signs or obstructions other than the massive wall itself. I glimpse through the narrow bars at the Mexican side and the landscape looks the same—the same dirt, the same rocks, the same mountains, and, as the details retreat into smudgy infinity, the same gradient of dull browns and greens so indicative of the Sonoran Desert.

Machinations of "Security"

A border wall on the U.S./Mexico border is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the early 20th century, around the time of the Mexican Revolution, the United States began to fortify its border with barbed wire fences and steel obelisks, starting in the divided city of Nogales, Arizona/Sonora (St. John 2011). While the Mexican Revolution was feared for its social initiatives, its violence was consumed as a grotesque spectacle by the American public—with there being some instances of platforms being constructed along the border so that battles could be watched as a form of entertainment (Romo 2005).

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However, it was not until the 1990s—following decades of U.S. initiated neoliberal programs in Latin America which forced many to begin moving north—that extensive walls began to appear. Border militarization only accelerated throughout the 2000s and 2010s, fueled by an increase in defense spending following the declaration of the War on Terror and the renewed intensity of the War on Drugs. From its inception, the southern barrier in the United States has always been a bipartisan project in Washington.

Arguably the most damaging legal invocation that has accelerated the wall’s expansion is Section 102 of the Real ID Act of 2005, which enables the waiving of existing law in order to accelerate border wall construction. In no uncertain terms, this allows the Secretary of Homeland Security to waive any state and federal laws—a legal imperative usually reserved for the Attorney General—when it comes to matters of wall construction. This includes restricting any court’s ability to review waiver decisions.

This provision was used fastidiously by the Trump Administration following Executive Order 13767 in 2017, which mandated the enormous expansion and refitting of the border wall. The wall’s construction accelerated the violence and death that the United States has long wrought upon the humans, wildlife, and landscapes of the Sonoran Desert; for example, Section 102 has been invoked to bypass environmental impact studies, cultural heritage considerations, and the Endangered Species Act. A large part of the Arizona border runs through unceded Tohono O’odham land, which exists independently, and on either side, of the international border between the United States and Mexico (see Lucero 2014); many sacred plants, animals, burial grounds, ritual sites, and springs have been destroyed or desecrated due to the wall’s severing of their traditional territory (Romero 2020).

Additionally, the wall has further funneled human migration routes into the deadlier parts of the Sonoran Desert and the Baboquivari Mountains, a staple strategy of the Border Patrol’s creed known as “Prevention Through Deterrence.” This scheme implements a variety of tactics to push humans into wilderness areas with little water sources and no protection from the elements, thereby allowing the desert to do the dirty work of killing migrants and refugees on behalf of the state (De León 2015). Sadly, Joe Biden has quietly continued most of Trump’s immigration policies.

A Grotesque Spectacle

The wall itself produces an unnerving hum. As the wind whips over the hills in the Coronado National Memorial, the steel bars act as the reeds in a sort of large, malevolent harmonica. The sound that is produced is somewhere between a groan and a whistle.

Being in the presence of the wall stirs feelings of being in front of Stanley Kubrick’s obelisk in *2001: A Space Odyssey*—it is eerie in a similar way that Mark Fisher (2016, 11–12) defined it: “A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? ... Why is there something here when there should be nothing?” The contrast between a brand-new megastructure and a desert seemingly emptied of human beings makes it difficult not to trot out science fiction tropes.

However, I believe the reason the wall stands in such terrible uncanny magnificence is not because there exists a landscape seemingly *emptied* of humanity, but rather, all around this twisting auburn structure of vertical steel, there exists the biodiverse *vitality* of the desert. The wall is eerie because there is an abundance of life that surges all around it. People *are* there; they just exist in smaller numbers. They are less seen. But you can find their traces, their memories, if you look hard enough.

This liveliness is anathema to the anesthetized megastructure, and it attempts to render these vital landscapes into something inert, nondescript, and all encompassing. The border wall is literally designed this way—the structure looks identical

in Guadalupe Canyon in the far eastern corner of Arizona's border with New Mexico as it does slicing through the border towns of San Luis, Arizona/Sonora near the border with California. It is an attempt at plastering over and making homogenous a place that is so obviously its opposite. The wall itself is attempting to make generic a landscape that is filled with such undeniable vivacity. It is—as Leo Chavez (2008, 42) has referred to the border—"a symbolic ritual of surveillance." Instead of a political demarcation that has historically been quite fluid, the "border theater has become social violence" and "actual violence has become inseparable from symbolic ritual on the border" (Rosaldo 1997, 33). But there continues to be resistance: hawks continue their lazy spirals above it, rabbits sprint across the dusty access road to squeeze through its rusted bars, people continue to walk across it, and hardy desert flora begin to push their way out of the dry, impacted ground in defiance of it.

There remains a tendency within North Atlantic anthropology to view the category of "place" as a bounded container of culture (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). This instinct promotes an historical, colonial continuity which turns the discipline's gaze toward the exotic Other, who always seem to reside in a space outside of the West. The border wall, as an expansive political object that anthropologists can leave "home" for, travel to, and study as an "other," has the potential to become an interesting way to "unsettle" this assessment through a transfiguration of the Othering gaze, turning it back on Western artifacts (Manuel and Derrickson 2015).

Yet, the wall is also a Janus-faced monstrosity. It towers like an enormous mirror for us as (white) American anthropologists. We help(ed) build and maintain this barrier, even if it is tacit or implicit. We extract the many privileges that served as *prima materia* for this structure, and which are infused into its steel and concrete. We have the ability to board planes and soar over this copper scar, pulling down our window shades so as to avert it from our gaze, and proceed to record other "exotic" cultures before returning home as the "enlightened observer." The wall is a rather pure distillation of who and what Americans symbolically consider "us" and "them," "home" and "exotic" (Alvarez 1995; Anzaldúa 1987).



FIG. 1 The sun peeks over a section of the border wall which carves through the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge, about 20 miles east of Douglas, Arizona, 2020.

Ultimately, the construction of a border wall (and the very idea of a border for that matter) is a grotesque homogenizing endeavor—and, unless we completely tear it down, make reparations to Indigenous communities, and restore the environment, it will continue to be a towering, colonial relic that churns life into death and vitality into desolation.

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FIG. 2 Top: The wall looms just outside of a playground in Gadsden, Arizona, a very small community close to the border with Baja California, Mexico, 2020.

FIG. 3 Bottom: A migrant's backpack and water bottle lie bleaching in the hot Arizona sun. According to the "archeology of the contemporary" typologies proposed by Jason De León (2015, 176), and due to its proximity to a parking lot, this appears to be a "pickup site" where "migrants dump all of their desert supplies and get picked up by smugglers in vehicles," Coronado National Memorial, 2020. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]





FIG. 4 Prior to the 1990s, border fences and policing in this area was limited, and ranchers from the U.S. and Mexico moved—and built houses—on either side of the international border.

Now access to buildings and land are clearly defined, Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, northeast of the border towns of Sasabe, Arizona/Sonora, 2020.

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FIG. 5 Top: Every day, workers are forced to negotiate with the contradictions of the U.S.' dependency upon the fluid movement of people and material across international boundaries and the enormous physical wall that is meant to halt it, San Luis Port of Entry, San Luis, Arizona/Sonora, 2020.

FIG. 6 Bottom: Support beams hold a section of wall that is under construction. Construction crews have used dynamite in conjunction with heavy bulldozers and backhoes to cut their way through the middle of mountains in order to erect the wall, Coronado National Memorial, 2020.



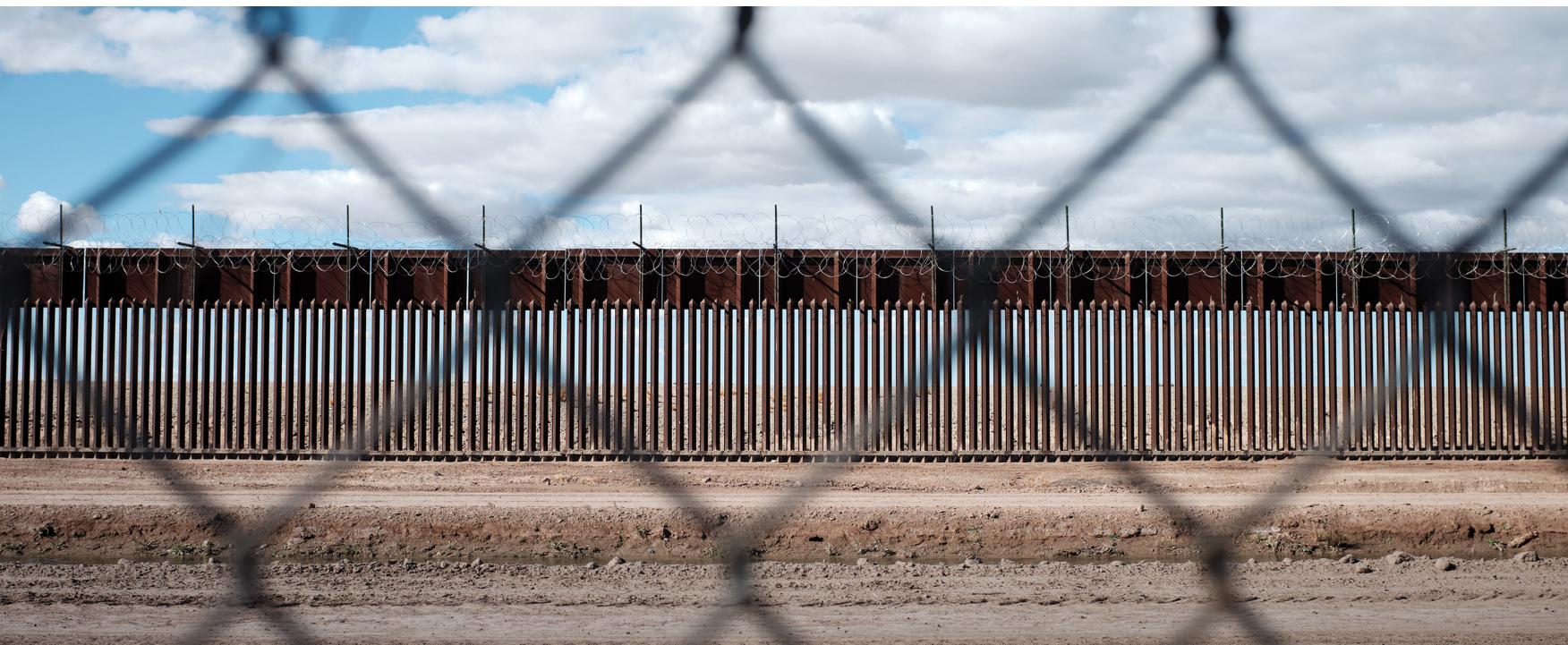


FIG. 7 Top: Concertina wire was recently added to the top of this section of the wall, which is significantly shorter than most of the new barrier construction, Gadsden, Arizona, 2020. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



FIG. 8 Bottom: Many Indigenous peoples along the border have struggled against the construction of border fortifications for decades and some tribes have found success in asserting their sovereignty. This has been the case with the Xawiil kwñchawaay (Cocopah/Kwapa), who have stopped the wall from being constructed through their land, creating large gaps between wall segments, Somerton, Arizona/Cocopah Indian Reservation, 2020. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

FIG. 9 Closing Spread: The wall ignores all existing landmarks and natural barriers in order to demarcate "us" from "them." This section of the wall cuts off the migration routes of not only humans, but also gray wolves, ocelots, and the elusive North American jaguar, among many others, Coronado National Memorial, 2020.

