Beyond Surveillance and Moonscapes: An Alternative Imaginary of the U.S.–Mexico Border Wall

MARGARET E. DORSEY AND MIGUEL DIAZ-BARRIGA

This article argues that visual representations of the U.S.–Mexico border wall in the popular media, including Time Magazine and National Geographic, portray the border region as lifeless and desolate. These representations negate the possibility of viewing the border as a dynamic and diverse area, that is verdant in places, home to communities and rich cultural histories. The article begins with an overview of popular representations of the U.S.–Mexico Border, focusing on the ways that this imagery reinforces calls for militarizing the U.S.–Mexico Border. The authors then offer an alternative representations of the border through their own anthropological photo-essay of the U.S.–Mexico border wall.

In July 2008, Margaret Dorsey and Miguel Diaz-Barriga began an ethnographic research project on the construction of the border wall along the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas. At that time, polls (Pew 2007) indicated that a majority of U.S. residents favored the construction of a border fence, but strong opposition existed in South Texas. Our initial research questions focused on why a majority of border residents opposed the fence and how they strategized and organized to halt its construction. South Texans view the border wall as another example of national policymakers lack of understanding of the Rio Grande border region. Our research, based on interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation, examines border residents' perceptions of the wall in relation to national policy and popular renderings.

When outlining this project in Philadelphia, we thought that the visual component would be an easy element to add. Upon our arrival in South Texas, however, we immediately learned that visual documentation of the wall would be a more difficult proposition. Both the Border Patrol and construction crews discouraged this undertaking. On one trip to a prospective construction site, the following occurred: as soon as our white minivan drove over the crest of the levee and we looked to the southern horizon, we encountered a Border Patrol SUV racing toward us (Photo 1).

On that occasion, we were approximately one or two miles north of the U.S.–Mexican border. On another trip, a Border Patrol vehicle filled with four agents stopped us and told us that we were on private property, implying that we were driving in a place where we did not belong. Another time, the Border Patrol parked and sat behind our minivan in such a fashion that blocked us from moving. The challenge of visually documenting border wall construction is not unique to our experience. The politics of representation in this case of the border wall are real, reaching beyond the frame of a photo and into the lives of border residents.

PHOTO 1. Future site of the border wall near Granjeno, Texas (photograph by Miguel Diaz-Barriga, June 1, 2008).
Beyond the difficulties associated with taking the photographs, we found this project a challenge because we did not want to replicate the border wall imagery circulating in the popular press. They typically hail from the nameless “illegal,” desolate border town, brave Border Patrol genre or a combination of the three. Most of the photographs published in major U.S. news magazines tend to fetishize the U.S.–Mexico border as an uninviting locale (Photo 2).

Lived experience at the border includes surveillance, but it is not limited to it. Such depictions contradict our everyday experience of the border in the Rio Grande Valley where one is as likely to see a field of corn growing as a family picnicking at a neighborhood park beside the river. In this photo-essay, we challenge popular media representations of the border by providing photos that depict this region as a verdant space where people create community and celebrate family.

Our sequential footage of the border wall area from week-to-week during construction captures the transformation of the landscape from greenspace to brownspace as private contractors build the wall (Photo 3).

Visual testimony adds dimension to our research as a piece of public anthropology, particularly given the central role that visual culture plays in the imaginary of the border—and implicit justification of the wall. We also engage in this project as public anthropologists by making our research accessible and almost instantaneously available through our blog (http://blogs.swarthmore.edu/borderwall/). We should note that while visual anthropologists have successfully used photographs to create public dialogue (Pink 2001), these instances are few and under theorized.

The use of photography to represent the border as a site of surveillance and as an area where people live raises a series of theoretical issues for visual anthropology. How can photography simultaneously represent surveillance and lived experience? Indeed, such a dual understanding of the border region—surveillance and lived experience—calls for a definition of culture that integrates a Foucauldian (1995) perspective on surveillance with an understanding of culture as practice (Ortner 2006). On the one hand, residents experience the border as a panoptic space where sensors, video cameras...
and border patrol agents monitor and regulate movement. Borderlanders, on the other hand, produce their own symbols that contest a normalization of that experience and, more generally, challenge popularized media representations of border life. The Rio Grande itself provides an instructive case in point. Is it merely a barrier or a possible site of ecotourism and binational understanding? A fuller understanding of the border requires that anthropologists start to theorize the surveillance apparatus of the state and the multiple ways that social actors signify the border.

Media attention on the U.S.–Mexico border wall primarily focuses on the border as a desolate site of federal surveillance and often neglects the ways that border residents conceptualize and live its meanings and possibilities. Photo-essays on the border wall by magazines such as Time and National Geographic frequently focus on the border wall as it resides in a desert and a deserted area (California and Arizona) (Photo 4). They rarely focus on Texas, and we find it more rare for them to show a greenspace in Texas, be it a palm forest or a river park. Photographic essays generally fall into one of two themes:

1. Border as moonscape.
2. Poverty and militarization of the border.

These photo-essays, a series of images and their captions, provide ample room both to represent the wall standing alone and portray it in its broader social context. Charles N. Bowden’s (2008) National Geographic essay, “Our Wall,” naturalizes violence on borders: “Borders everywhere attract violence, violence prompts fences, and eventually fences can mutate into walls.” The accompanying photo-essay, entitled “Our Walls, Ourselves,” (Cook and Jenshel 2007) consists of 15 photographs: eight in Arizona; five in California; one in Texas and one in Mexico. The majority of the photos focus on rust and dust in Arizona (Photo 5).

The Time photo-essay, “The Border Fence Rises in the Southwest” accompanies David Von Drehle’s (2008) article, “The Great Wall of America” and continues the rust, dust, and death theme. Time’s piece, unlike National Geographic, then takes a militaristic turn with nine photographs of either immigrants being apprehended by the Border Patrol or of heavily armed Border Patrol agents, including members of the Border Patrol’s Special Operations Unit. Overall, Anthony Suau’s (2008) photo-essay in Time contains 18 photographs: seven in California; six in an unnamed desertscape; and five in Arizona. None of the Time’s photographs were set in Texas, which includes approximately 66% of the U.S.–Mexican border.

Because we found it difficult to obtain permission from Time and National Geographic to reproduce their images, we will quote the captions and allow them to stand in as a partial representation. We, clearly, do not intend for the captions to replace the photograph, following Barthes dictum: “It is impossible . . . that the words ‘duplicate’ the image” (1982:205). We suggest that the captions found in these national magazines do, in fact, direct the readers’ interpretation of the image, providing points of stress and amplification “already given in the photography” (Barthes 1982:206).

**Border as Moonscape**

We start with a photo that indeed looks like the moon: vast, empty, and ashen. The photographers capture this otherworldliness in their caption: “The border wall winds through moonscape, following the demands of
terrain rather than the political boundary that lies several hundred yards south.” The only difference from our popular imaginary of the moon is that in this one a rusted green wall bisects the desolate terrain.

Another caption reads: “A metal wall and a concrete fence impassively bar illegal entry in a floodlit no-man’s-land where Border Patrol agents keep close watch.” This photograph of the concrete and metal fence in San Diego takes advantage of the crosscutting shadows cast by floodlights pointing in various directions. The lights, fencing, and emptiness make the area seem remote and forbidden.

In a beautiful photograph of the sky and hills, the photographers cannot help but contrast the “dreamlike” quality of the landscape of a weathered border fence with a padlocked door built into it. The caption of the photo titled, “Otay Mesa, California” reads: “The hills of California appear dreamlike beyond a section of steel mesh wall with a door that opens only for Border Patrol agents.” We find this photograph absolutely otherworldly. It looks like it would accompany a Salvador Dali exhibit or could be placed as a photo in a textbook explanation of Freud or Jung. We say this because the heavy metal door seems to almost float in a limitless expanse, dwelling in a place beyond where we live.

Poverty and Militarization of the Border

There are many ironies in calling this section “poverty” because many of the photographs that show the presence of border residents and their neighborhoods are devoid of people. When the photos include people, they usually depict Border Patrol agents either patrolling the border fence or capturing dark-skinned men.

Those representations of the border wall that focus on border residents, in California for the most part, draw the eye to encroaching Mexican poverty and lawlessness. The caption of one such photo from National Geographic reads:

An improvised wall of military surplus steel cuts a rusty slash toward the horizon. In Tijuana, where poverty is rising and half of all new residents live in squatter communities without clean water, the wall is hard to ignore: Houses push up close to the border. On the U.S. side, development is far removed from the barrier.

There are no people in the image. The photograph makes it clear that the rusted out fence contains the encroachment of poverty onto barren U.S. land, though viewers might wonder if this flimsy fence is up to the task.

Another National Geographic photo titled “Backyard Fence” reads:

A homemade fence decorates a backyard in the Sonoran border town of Naco, across the road from the barrier that separates it from the Arizona border town of the same name. The Naco area has been one of the major entry points for undocumented migrants heading north.

There are no people in the image. The photographers take the picture in Mexico. The viewer immediately sees the bed of a pick-up truck overflowing with empty Tecate beer cans. Such imagery potentially reinforces the enduring racist U.S. stereotype of the “drunk Mexican.” While the photograph touches upon the lives of border residents, the caption reinforces the border as a site of deviance and illegal activity. The writer could have used the caption above to discuss a moment of agency; for instance, exploring why a border resident constructed this “homemade” fence. Instead, the writer makes a generalized statement about the area as an entry point for undocumented migrants.

Another caption from a photo titled “Tracks in the Sand” reads:

Vehicles abandoned by smugglers dot the landscape in the Tohono O’odham Indian Reservation in Arizona. Usually stolen from the US, the cars are left to the elements when they break down or run out of gas.

There are no people in the image. This photograph’s perspective places the viewer literally in the position of “seeing like the state” (Scott 1998): the photo itself is taken from a helicopter providing a birdseye view of desert sand and two discolored vehicles.

A fourth representative photo image focuses on the U.S. security presence along the border. The captions and photographs provide an overall portrait that gives Border Patrol agents voice, individuality, agency, and a sense of import. The migrants do not receive the same treatment. It is almost as if the photographer took on the perspective of the Border Patrol in his work. He, for instance, calls the non-Border Patrol people “illegals.”

Another photo, “Deployed” speaks in a military tongue; it iterates a masculine poetics of warfare, lionizing the militarized presence:

Two agents from the Special Operations Group are dropped into the mountains near San Diego. Once they take up positions, they will spend the night watching for smugglers and other illegals.

The photo itself could just as easily be from Afghanistan. It features two soldier-like figures, actually
members of the Border Patrol’s Special Operations Unit, kneeling on a craggy mountain with a gray helicopter hovering in the background. The captions and photos of the agents also include biographic information, giving the agents agency and identity.

Time’s and National Geographic’s otherworldly representation of the border alongside its militarized component, one can argue, reinforces a perceived need for the border wall while simultaneously de-emphasizing the impacts of a border wall. These photos contextualize the border as inhabiting a deserted and far away place where the construction of a border wall represents yet another unnaturally naturalized otherworldly intrusion. In other words, readers do not view the border wall—or the border for that matter—in neighborhoods or in greenspaces that replicate the common trope of the United States suburbs. In addition, these captions and images of the border and the border wall do not portray border residents and the positive vision for broader possibilities which residents themselves articulate for their home (Photo 6).

PHOTO 7. Settlers founded Granjeno in the 1700s as part of a series of Spanish land grants. Initially, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) proposed building the border wall through Granjeno, which included demolishing homes. After meeting resistance, DHS met with county leaders and agreed to construct the wall as part of a modified wall-levee system. Residents of Granjeno express mixed opinions about this plan because they are against the wall but they want their homes to be safe from floods (photograph by Margaret E. Dorsey, July 1, 2008).

PHOTO 8. Pylons for the construction of the border wall rise up behind a backyard in Granjeno, Texas. After completion, the wall will stand 18 feet in height and top of the wall will extend approximately eight feet, wide enough so that Border Patrol vehicles can drive on top of it (photograph by Isabel Diaz-Barriga, August 30, 2008).

PHOTO 9. Reynaldo Anzaldua drives a vintage U.S. Army jeep in the Granjeno Friendship Festival. Mr. Anzaldua, a veteran of the Vietnam War and a retired U.S. Customs Agent, speaks publically against the border wall. In his testimony against the construction of the border wall to members of the Mexican-American Legislative Caucus at the Texas State Capitol in Austin, he proposed securing the border through more traditional law enforcement methods (photograph by Margaret E. Dorsey, December 22, 2008).
We wrote this photo-essay on the border wall to provide a corrective at this historical moment when corporate media, including television through shows such as “Homeland Security USA,” envision the border as a lawless zone in need of surveillance. The U.S.–Mexico borderlands thrive not only as deserts but also as binational communities, wildlife refuges, and nodes of hemispheric trade. While the border region presents a set of law enforcement challenges, it is also a community and a place where many people choose to live and love. In their activism to preserve the region’s forests and greenspaces and in their political organizing against “the wall,” many residents create their own...

PHOTO 10. A group of dancers participating in the Granjeno Friendship Festival stand in front of a climbing wall. The Border Patrol erected the wall as part of a campaign to attract recruits. The Border Patrol agents we spoke with did not appreciate the irony of the activity’s location: a sport climbing wall standing in close proximity to the actual border wall (approximately 250 yards). When asked to compare the two walls, they simply said that the border wall lacked grips. The wall climbers in the background are members of a high school ROTC program. Border Patrol agents distributed informational brochures and other publicity material to the climbers (photograph by Miguel Diaz-Barriga, February 7, 2009).

PHOTO 11. First-time kayakers enjoy the Rio Grande River at the Big River Festival. The event organizer, Eric Elman, instructs onlookers on kayaking. On the other side of the Rio Grande, Mexican participants in the festival launch their kayaks. This binational event includes a healthy cooking competition, mountain bike rides, and information booths about the Rio Grande as a site for outdoor activity. The annual Big River Festival occurs at Anzalduas Park, one of a number of parks and refuges that form the Rio Grande Wildlife Corridor. Some of these wildlife areas, such as the Nature Conservancy’s Southmost Preserve and Audubon’s Sabal Palm Center, might close because they reside on the projected south side of the wall (photograph by Miguel Diaz-Barriga, November 1, 2008).

PHOTO 12. Images provided by the Time photo-essay would lead the reader to believe that Border Patrol agents are the only government field officers found along our international boundary. In fact, federal parkland accounts for approximately 70 percent of the property along the border. Twenty years ago along the border, we would more likely have run across a park ranger than a Special Operations Unit. This photo captures a couple of Fish and Wildlife Park Rangers taking a break from the Big River Festival to prepare a couple of hotdogs—what most of us expect to see at a park on the weekend (photography by Miguel Diaz-Barriga, November 1, 2008).
significations of the border, sending a counter statement to the common tropes that pundits repeatedly feed the nation.

PHOTO 13. The border wall as it winds from the town of Hidalgo toward Granjeno. This section of the wall bisects the World Birding Center at the Hidalgo Pumphouse. The wall prevents tourists from accessing the majority of the World Birding Center’s hike and bike trails. This portion of the wall is almost two miles north of the Rio Grande River, the international boundary between Texas and Mexico (photograph by Miguel Diaz-Barriga, January 18, 2009).

PHOTO 14. Margaret and her daughter, Lizzie, at an overlook near the Rio Grande River at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Parks with similar scenic overlooks and goals of preserving rare animal habitat in South Texas such as the Sabal Palm Audubon Center and Sanctuary and the Southmost Preserve might be forced to close because of the border wall. In other words, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) plans to construct the border wall north of Sabal Palm and Southmost, which isolates the sanctuaries from the rest of the United States, making it difficult—if not impossible—to visit (photograph by an anonymous tourist from Minnesota, March 25, 2009).

PHOTO 15. The border wall in South Texas cuts across a verdant area that is home to small towns and cities, wildlife refuges, parks, ranches, and farms. We took this photograph standing on private property from the bank of the Rio Grande River—the official international boundary marker between Texas and Mexico—looking from the Texas side onto the Mexican side. Descendants of the legendary patriot Juan Nepomuceno Cortina own the land where we stood to take this picture. Their property was once part of a vast tract of land, reaching a distance of approximately 150 miles south to north. Today, members of the owner’s family avoid visiting this property due to possible harassment from the Border Patrol. The family member who gave us the tour of his property told us that the Border Patrol feels more entitled to his land than he does. The owners of the ranch are in negotiation with Department of Homeland Security (DHS) over the sale price of land where DHS will construct the border wall. Once contractors build the border wall here, the landowner does not know how he will access his property (photograph by Miguel Diaz-Barriga, November 15, 2008).

An Anthropological Photo-Essay?

When we started this project, we paused to answer a seemingly simple question, what constitutes an anthropological photo-essay? Unlike theorizing of ethnographic film (Ruby 2000), anthropologists neither differentiated the anthropological photo-essay from documentary and media representations nor vigorously debated its role within the discipline. And, while the photograph received wide attention as a methodological tool (Pink 2001; Ruby 2000; Vila 2000), anthropologists rarely, if ever, employ a series of photos as a tool for eliciting information from consultants about cultural processes. Given the central and powerful role of photo-essays in informing public imaginaries, we advocate that anthropologists consider experimenting with the genre’s possibilities for the expansion of disciplinary knowledge and for the production of an alternative public dialogue.
from that of corporate media monopolies. This critical dialogue must include a discussion of the role of fieldwork in producing visual knowledge. As in the case of ethnographic film, photo-essays based on fieldwork can arguably provide a richer perspective on social processes than a journalistic or documentary approach. In what follows, we present a series of photographs taken in the South Texas border region (Photo 7–15).

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Following a recent talk that we gave at the University of Texas Pan American, members of the audience began a lengthy discussion about strategies for photographing the wall, including the best times and places to visit the wall.

2 The Texas Observer, an alternative progressive magazine, is a notable exception to this statement. The Texas Observer covered the story in-depth, more than once and their stories included a series of photographs that focused on South Texas as a greenspace, a wildlife habitat and as a place where most of the residents oppose the construction of the border wall. In addition, on the margin of Time’s web edition of the photo essay, we located film that told Eloisa Tamez’s story of fighting the wall in and near Brownsville, TX.

3 This genre also includes a requisite photo of the fence running into the Pacific Ocean.

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