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How can we understand the implications of the Trump administration’s promise to build a border wall between the US and Mexico for Latin American Geography? This question demands recounting the constitutive elements of critical and progressive scholarship. For the sake of economy, I paraphrase Noam Chomsky: Our role as scholars and teachers is to find out and tell the truth as best we can about things that matter and communicate that truth to the right audience (Chomsky 1996).

At a surface level, that task requires replacing misinformation in a ‘fact-free’ universe with reliable data. More deeply, it means attention to the continuity and discontinuity of borders. Border scholarship continues to be theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich (for an overview of this literature see Sidaway 2015; Walker and Winton 2017). But, I advocate here for a systemic approach which highlights the similarities replicated through security-based strategies (i.e., continuity), along with the multi-scalar cacophonous contradictions of fortification (i.e., discontinuity). Walls are not simply about blockage. They are also about movement and spatial relationships. It is crucial to document that complexity in the current political climate. Incorporating the lessons from robust debates within and beyond Latin American geography (e.g., Monsiváis 1981; Berger 1995; Blomley 2008; Escobar 2010; Gaffney et al 2016; Mollett 2017) ensures: 1) attention to the “…unequal power structures throughout the region” (Finn and Hanson 2017: 1); 2) awareness of the geographical and discursive mechanisms at work in the construction and maintenance of regions; and 3) continued motivation to
interrogate who wins and who loses. My experience on Mexico’s northern and southern borders serves as a poignant reminder of these three points and informs my argument here.

By now we are familiar with the threat of a “big beautiful wall” through the Executive Order “Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements” as well as the Department of Homeland Security’s litany of ambitions. Proposed plans include publicizing crimes by undocumented immigrants, enlisting local law enforcement as immigration enforcers, the construction of new detention facilities, and increased deportations. Quite obviously, fortifying political boundaries is nothing new. However, border walls are experiencing a renaissance (Jones and Johnson 2016). This, in spite of evidence that such constructions are ineffective and, in the US at least, a paradoxical response to the fact that more Mexicans voluntarily departed the US for Mexico than entered the country from 2009 to 2014 (Miller 2014b).

At the national scale, we see little acknowledgement of borders as interrelated systems. The wall is a perfect example. The border exists at the edge of US territory as a stable entity that can block out flow and movement. But, of course it doesn’t work that way. Mexico is imbricated in a complex dynamic of geopolitical hierarchies operating at multiple scales. On the northern border US policy mechanisms dominate, and on the southern border with Guatemala and Belize, an historically porous area is becoming increasingly fortified and controlled. Pre-Trump, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto launched the Southern Border Plan (Programa Frontera Sur) in July 2014, under pressure from the United States amidst the flows of Central American youth traveling to the US-Mexico border (Miller 2014a). That plan can be read as a useful corollary to
current fortification practices in the US. Politically, Mexico’s borders have become strongly interconnected. To draw on work by Mexican writers and scholars, Mexico is our wall; acting as a buffer between the US and much of Central America’s “Northern Triangle” (Porter 2017; Castañeda 2017). In crude abbreviation, Mexico has been doing the dirty work for us. Whether or not the US-Mexico wall materializes as Trump envisions it, the message has trans-scalar systemic reverberations.

The deteriorating relationship has received significant coverage in the press. In a recent interview with *Here and Now’s* Jeremy Hobson, Mexican Senator Armando Ríos Piter characterized the wall as a hostile, unfriendly act. The senator cautioned against alienating Mexico as a partner, and highlighted the security work Mexico has performed on behalf of its northern neighbor (Here and Now 2017). Last year, Mexico sent back nearly twice as many Central Americans as the United States (Semple 2016). Promises of deepening securitization with the insinuation of the possible return of millions of deportees have resulted in speculation as to whether Mexico’s southern border will continue to act as a deterrent to US entry. What is more, analysts have commented that recent rhetoric around border security and migration has provoked a surge in nationalism bolstering presidential hopeful Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s candidacy. AMLO (as he is known) is vowing to end a relationship of “subordination” with the US. Within the administration, the Mexican economic minister has a list of deal-breakers related to commercial trade and cooperation (Flannery 2017).

Understanding borders as systems punctuated by continuity and discontinuity urges us to be cautious towards grand narratives of explanation but leaves room to comprehend how interrelated processes on different borders produce similar effects. As
geographers, we should be wary of the discursive trick of propagating the current political climate as indicative of a fundamental paradigmatic shift. For one, that is a fallacy that absolves Democrats and previous administrations policies and pronouncements. Certainly this is not to argue that President Obama’s model during the first years of his presidency as “deporter in chief” is undifferentiated from Trump’s signature project. There are many important distinctions. However, situating border policy under the current administration as a profound epistemic break is illusory. In my own research (Walker 2015), I have found it helpful to examine the emergence of various “realities” and “facts,” forcing us to wrestle with broad ontological questions: What are the logics upon which policies are built? How are US interests/actions continuing to foster the internalization of conformity, bolstering the status quo and minimizing alternative scenarios? At the risk of sacrificing nuance, I suggest some foundational premises. The “border industrial complex” (Dear 2013) has remained intact while the players have changed. Borders continue to be conjured up in simplistic ways as sites of threat. The people who are geographically situated next to borders tend to be closest to the effects of fortification but farthest from the decision-making process.

If we have learned something from the history of our own discipline, it is that Geography is about examining and disrupting both material and metaphorical boundaries. At this historical moment, when fortification seems inevitable, our job is to facilitate—in the classroom, in our research, and in the media—different kinds of border thinking. Perhaps then we can re-envision Ursula Le Guin’s powerful words from The Dispossessed: “There was a wall. It did not look important” (1974: 1).
References


