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Territories of Latin American Geography

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Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora are a city divided. The Mexico-United States border bisects what was once a unified community into twin cities, each is located in purportedly different Americas: one North, the other Latin (see Figure 1). When I worked for the University of Arizona Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology on projects in Nogales, Sonora, I would cross this border once a week. Upon crossing there are immediate differences between the two cities. Near *la linea* (the border) in Sonora, the street is alive with vendors selling goods from *tostilocos* and fruit popsicles to statues of Jesus or Santa Muerte. In the *colonias* where I worked with community partners to develop just housing alternatives, existing housing infrastructure was often precariously constructed on hills where the border wall rises and falls as it traverses the undulating hills (see Figure 2). On the northern side of the *la linea*, green and white U.S Customs and Border Patrol vehicles roam the streets, signs written in Spanish and English advertise shuttle services to Tucson or Phoenix, and fast food restaurants like McDonalds and Burger King are close walking distance to the main crossing. The Trump administration's recent addition of concertina wire to the northern side of the border wall makes the structure more menacing, thwarting any notions of connectivity between *ambos* (both) Nogales. The bifurcation of Nogales

has significant political economic, social, environmental, and material effects that echo what De Genova (2017) calls the “Latin/America partition.”

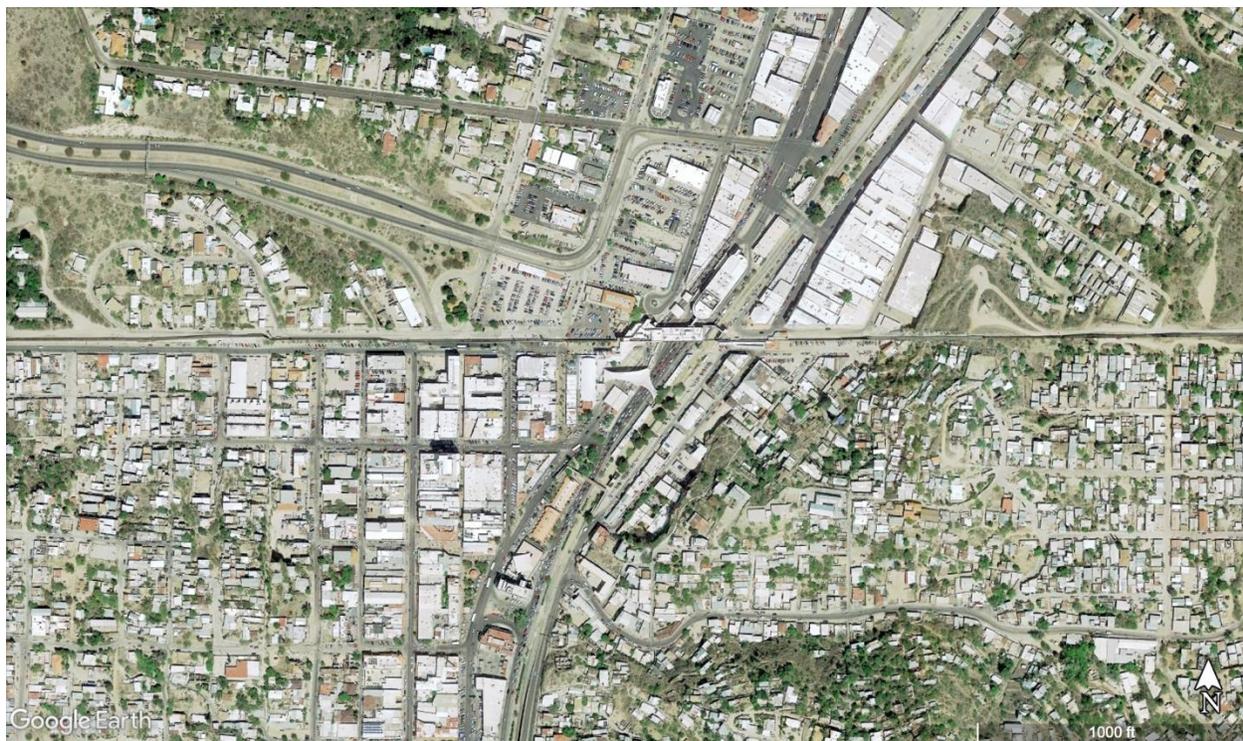


Figure 1. La línea cuts horizontally through the image and ambos Nogales (photo by Google Earth).



Figure 2. Looking north toward Nogales, Arizona from barrio Colonia Del Rosario in Nogales, Sonora (photo by author).

Despite the border, shared practices, traditions, languages, and kinship ties challenge the neat bifurcation of North/Latin America through connectivity, conviviality, and relationality that blur *la linea*, calling into question the territories of Latin American geography. There are many spaces like my birthplace in California, old home in Arizona, and new home in Florida that blur the boundaries of where Latin America begins or ends. Given the history of Spanish colonization and control over what is now Florida and Mexico's control until the mid-1800s of the territories that now comprise the U.S. southwest, at what point, exactly, did Latin and North America split? Was it merely the imposition of the U.S. southern border and territorial imaginary now materially reinforced by steel, concrete, and barbed wire barriers, militarized border patrol forces, and a weaponized physical geography that achieved this end? What of the fact that the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) reported that at least 58.9 million people—18 percent of the total U.S. population—identified as Hispanic or Latinx in 2017, or that by 2060 this population is projected to reach 111 million, 28 percent of the country's total? These questions do not suggest that the idea of Latin America is relative, but that critically evaluating the territorializing processes that maintain the North/Latin America bifurcation scrutinizes geopolitical imaginaries and their lasting effects—particularly their role in constructing notions of racialized “others” and enabling dangerous nativist tendencies.

The territories of Latin American geography must be understood beyond the racialized spatial imaginaries that reproduce the idea that Latin America begins, or ends, where Mexico and the U.S. meet. Critical scholars must actively dismantle the discursive fortifications constructed through virulent populist and racist rhetoric that intend to neatly demarcate where Latin America

begins or ends for the purpose of promoting nationalism. That is not to say that cultural and social difference should be ignored but to suggest that diversity and shared connections should be celebrated, that the territories of Latin American geography must be understood beyond the idea of a North/Latin America binary.

The idea of Latin America

As a geographer working in a Center for Latin American Studies, I find it important to evaluate the logics, histories, and processes that hold territories (and regions) together and with what effects. The Cold War-era was fundamental to the maturation of regional studies in the service of U.S. imperial interests (Escobar, 2006). Through geopolitical struggle and developmentalist epistemologies, Latin America was defined as a region lacking development belonging to the “third world” (Escobar, 1999) yet locked in a relationship of dependency with the “first world” (Gunder Frank, 1966). These histories are well known yet nonetheless valuable to highlight here because they continue to influence contemporary relations, particularly issues of socio-economic inequality and environmental injustice. New global dynamics now challenge mid-20th century categorizations of the world and binary, modernist logics from which regional studies arose (Barnes & Farish, 2006). As, Mignolo (2005) and others (Escobar, 1999; Quijano, 2000) argue, “the idea of Latin America” reifies racial and social difference through orientalist logics (Said, 1979) that construct North America as a space of colonial (white) supremacy while simultaneously circumscribing Latin America as non-modern and in need of development interventions. The idea of Latin America thus plays a key role in the hemispheric geopolitical dialectic that constructs Canada and the U.S. as a space of Anglo-European society and

everything south of la línea as territories of illegality (De Genova, 2017), informality (Varley, 2013), corruption (Gledhill, 2004), and other tired tropes. The North/Latin America dialectic thus implicitly situates Canada, and particularly the U.S., as distinct from, and superior to, neighboring countries known as Latin America (Grandin, 2006).

This essay is not a call to disregard regional studies. Rather, my intervention builds from Finn and Hanson (2017) to urge scholars to evaluate how categorizations, such as regions, have histories often constituted by racialized logics with material effects. In the case of Latin America, its discursive construction as a territorial “other” has long served colonial interests in resource provision that enframe (Mitchell 2002) the region as merely a constellation of extractive zones (Galeano, 1984; Gómez-Barris, 2017). While there are empirical, analytical, and theoretical uses to using the region as a frame of study (see Hale, 2014), it is important to bear in mind the territorializing effects of “the idea of Latin America” as Mignolo (2005) argued, especially with regard to the production of knowledge and role the *Journal of Latin American Geography* (JLAG) plays within that endeavor. How might embracing diverse understandings of *territorio* as it is lived, thought, and practiced across the Americas spur a reimagination of Latin American geography to break down barriers reinforced by binary logics?

JLAG is, by its very namesake, a territorial and territorializing entity. The term *Latin America* indicates and reproduces a colonial geographic imaginary that helps relate the works found among the pages of JLAG through a specific territorial frame that references and co-constitutes Latin America as a space denoted by its linguistic heritage and historical linkages with the Iberian Peninsula (Dussel, 2000; Quijano, 2000). Such a critique draws attention to how, despite perhaps espousing an emancipatory intention, research can serve to deepen colonial

power relations, particularly concerning the discipline of geography and its role in (re)producing spatial imaginaries or socio-cultural “others” (Martinet et al., 2018).

The recent, unambiguous positioning of JLAG to support scholarship attentive to the concerns I raised above, however, promises to provide a forum for critical analysis (Gaffney et al., 2016; Finn & Hanson, 2017). Or, as I understand it, at least that is the hope. In response to this reorientation, or perhaps indicative of it, JLAG has witnessed an infusion of scholarship that builds from the journal’s history to further situate it as an important site for intellectual debate and critical approaches to epistemic, social, and environmental justice. JLAG thus provides a venue to think with Latin America beyond the notion of a bounded territory or region and more as a dynamic site of socio-spatial relations influenced by political economic and historical processes that are not (over)determined by borders (De Genova, 2017). Exemplary of this effort, Finn and Hanson (2017) outline a critical agenda for JLAG that centers on three axes: 1) a commitment to justice through political engagement that actively breaks down inequality; 2) a more fluid understanding of Latin America that reflects its social, ecological, political, and cultural dynamism; and 3) a stronger connection or site of collaboration between scholars of and from Latin America.

This essay is, therefore, in part, a call to fellow scholars and contributors to JLAG to maintain focus on how historical dynamics of (settler) colonialism and U.S. imperialism have directly shaped the territories of Latin American geographies with attention to the social, ecological, political, and economic processes unfolding across the region today. Many of these processes lie at the heart of geographers’ concerns for social and environmental justice, constituting the empirical foci of many contributions to this journal (see, e.g. Meza, 2009; Villaseñor-Franco, Toscana-Aparicio, & Granados-Ramírez, 2017; Cervantes & Zalik, 2018). In

what follows, I briefly engage works in JLAG that demonstrate the importance of the journal for debates that center on territories of Latin American geography and justice, broadly construed.

Territories, *territorios*, and Latin American Geographies

Territory is a key concept in geographic thought, yet is used in widely different ways across English and Spanish-language scholarship (Sandoval, Robertsdotter, & Paredes, 2017). Due to the scope of my contribution, I forego a thorough discussion of the many ways that territory is defined in the literature, but highlight three *broad* trends in how territory is employed in theory and practice: 1) as a geopolitical construct (e.g., as a state; see Elden, 2013); 2) as a cartographic imaginary (e.g., as a map; see Sletto, 2006); and 3) as a space of life (e.g., as a socio-spatial-temporal relation; see Escobar, 2008). Although the three notions of territory are quite different from one another, they are not necessarily mutually independent and can be mutually constitutive—particularly concerning how cartographic imaginaries are used to convey control over resources, land, etc., in ways that advance the claims of states or communities. A brief search and review of all research articles published in JLAG since 2003, when it adopted the current naming, reveal that 145 contained the word territory and many more with its derivatives. While the concept territory is widely used, it is done so in distinct ways that gesture toward how JLAG can be a space to think across linguistic, political, and epistemic divides.

In closing, I highlight a handful of JLAG articles that exemplify a commitment to critical analysis and emphasize the plurality of the territories of Latin American geography. Analyzing the politics of Mexican migration, De Genova (2017) argues for geographies *of* not *on* Latin America that actively dismantle the political binaries that distinguish Latin America from the U.S. (see also, Finn & Hanson, 2017). In so doing, he argues “if we seek to elaborate critical

geographies in and, moreover, of Latin America, it is incumbent upon us to adopt the critical angle of vision that is made possible by Latino Studies” with attention to how histories of migration disrupt the territorial imaginary of divided Americas (De Genova, 2017, 35). While De Genova (2017) does not employ territory in the text, his analysis reveals the territorializing logics of academic knowledge production in the service of the geopolitics of (im)migration across the Americas. Sandoval, Robertsdotter, & Paredes (2017) on the other hand, center the use of territory in Spanish and Portuguese language—*territorio*—as their analytical point of departure to evaluate how the concept is employed differently across linguistic and academic traditions. By engaging Spanish, Portuguese, and English language scholarship, Sandoval, Robertsdotter, & Paredes (2017) open an important dialogue about the conceptual plurality of territory/territorio in Latin America that provides an example of how JLAG serves as an intellectual space to bridge epistemic diversity by interweaving scholarly debates that are all too often siloed by language barriers. Finally, JLAG scholarship on Indigenous rights (see, e.g., Offen, 2003; Runk, 2012; Correia, 2019; Tubbeh and Zimmerer 2019) shows how territorial assemblages bring together geopolitics, land struggles, and efforts to create spaces of collective wellbeing with uncertain or unsettling outcomes. Overlapping territories can exact everyday violence on the lives of those caught in the middle, calling attention to the importance of critical scrutiny of the many geographies we often refer to only as “Latin America.” As Gentry et al. (2019) show, settler colonialism and dispossessions operate with negative material effects that exacerbate social and environmental injustice against Indigenous peoples whose territories have been crossed by the “Latin/America partition” (De Genova, 2017).

Conclusion

The 50th anniversary of JLAG coincides with a time of unprecedented political, social, and ecological crisis, inviting a reflection on the histories of Latin American geography and impelling scholars to consider what the future holds for the region in an increasingly globalized world. JLAG plays a critical, if underappreciated, role in creating a space where scholars employing diverse territorial epistemologies move beyond the idea of Latin America as that which is merely “south of the border” to advance more nuanced analyses. While some might suggest that such an assertion is pedestrian, I counter with the notion that it is necessary to critically evaluate the discursive and material work that “the idea of Latin America” (Mignolo, 2005) enables. As the “Left Turn” in the Americas has swerved to the right, it is increasingly important to foster informed, critical analyses that actively dismantle racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination, including growth-oriented developmentalist logics that continue to destroy biophysical nature, forms of violence that are actively being deployed by top government officials from the U.S. to Brazil. The scope and scale of socio-environmental challenges found across the Americas and current political climate call for a deeper engagement on the part of non-Latin American scholars to build stronger collaborations with scholars in and from Latin America. Like JR’s “gigantic picnic at the US-Mexico border fence,”¹ we should reflect on the connections that abound in the face of deepening divisions. I hope the next 50 years of JLAG scholarship continues to dismantle the material, discursive, and socio-political walls that divide the Americas by cultivating the Journal’s current commitment to justice, solidarity, and collaboration through critical, engaged scholarship of Latin American geographies.

¹ See the Washington Post article “What it looks like when the border wall with Mexico becomes an art installation” by Samantha Schmidt at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/10/11/what-it-looks-like-when-border-wall-with-mexico-becomes-an-art-installation/>.

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