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Thematic Review

Making Violence Visible at the US/Mexico Border: Review of the Exhibitions *Fencing In Democracy* and *State of Exception/Estado de Excepción*, and the Film *El mar la mar*

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Works Reviewed:

El mar la mar. Directed by Joshua Bonnetta and J.P. Sniadecki, 2017, 94 minutes, color. Distributed by Cinema Guild.

Fencing In Democracy. Organized by Margaret Dorsey and Miguel Díaz-Barriga. June 2–July 30, 2016. apexart. New York, New York.

State of Exception/Estado de Excepción. Curated by Richard Barnes, Amanda Krugliak, and Jason De León. February 3–April 16, 2017. Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, The New School's Parson School of Design. New York, New York.

The push to militarize the border zone between the United States and Mexico is hardly novel, and yet calls from President Donald Trump have given new life to militaristic, ethnonationalist, and xenophobic agendas. This thematic review considers three recent works addressing the US/Mexico border made by or in collaboration with anthropologists. The first two were public exhibitions, *Fencing In Democracy* at apexart gallery in New York City and *States of Exception/Estado de Excepción* at The New School in New York City, while the third is the film *El mar la mar* (dirs. Bonnetta and Sniadecki 2017).

These works help us to conceive of different approaches to the challenge of understanding and responding to US violence at the border. The two exhibits, *Fencing In Democracy* and *State of Exception/Estado de Excepción*, draw on different conceptual frameworks—limitations on democracy and the spaces of rightlessness—to think through how the border wall and region is a political process, rather than a thing or place. At times, the exhibits and the film eschew argument altogether in favor of evoking experiences and exploring emotion. In other moments, they combine analysis with the mobilization of sensory affect. We see dismembered and decomposing bodies; we glimpse the disorienting darkness of the Sonoran Desert; we smell the dust of abandoned backpacks. We read calls for justice in the face of this suffering.

The political process of bordering mobilizes fear about the economic and racial insecurity of whiteness, and it dehumanizes, dominates, and inflicts violence on those seeking to enter the United States without legal permission. Considered alongside each other, these exhibitions and film illuminate the unfolding character of assertions of US state power and denials of democratic decision making.

Fencing In Democracy

Anthropologists Margaret Dorsey and Miguel Díaz-Barriga won a place in the apexart Unsolicited Exhibition Program to curate a group show entitled *Fencing In Democracy*. The exhibit ran from June 2 to July 30, 2016, at apexart in New York City, and elements of it are archived online (Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey 2016). It brought together the work of artists, activists, anthropologists, and architects who contest both the militarized border infrastructure between the United States and Mexico and the mass-mediated spectacle surrounding it.

Upon arriving at the gallery, visitors passed by surveillance cameras and orange traffic cones. Crossing the threshold into the main exhibition space, visitors might have imagined themselves in the border zone, subject to US Border Patrol violence and surveillance. The cameras and the orange traffic cones mirror a painting in the exhibition, *North: The Checkpoint,* by Celeste De Luna (Figure 1).

The exhibition contained multimedia work, including woodcuts, paintings, aluminum sculptures, videos of interviews with undocumented residents of the border zone, photographs of the border zone, and digital images and video footage of border infrastructure.

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FIGURE 1. *Fencing In Democracy*, 2016, installation view. At right: Celeste De Luna, *North*: *The Checkpoint (Las Garritas)*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 24 × 60 in. Courtesy of apexart. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Many of the anthropologists contributed photographs of graffiti and interviews to foreground the perspectives of Latinx residents of the border region and migrants moving through it. The Spanish–English bilingual exhibition pushed beyond the monolingual norm of so many academic and political spaces, inviting visitors to listen and read in new ways. In these regards, this was a richly multivocal exhibition.

In the online and published brochure, Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey exhort visitors to "de-fence democracy," a phrase that demands that viewers defend and liberate democracy from an assault that, as this exhibit shows, predates the Trump administration. Just as importantly, this exhibition allowed its public to listen to and read the political analysis of people living near the wall. This is an important move especially because, as the brochure points out, 90 percent of the population of the border zone is Latinx, and poverty rates there surpass all other regions in the United States. Democracy, this show argues, is undermined by global militarism, colonialism, and patriarchy. While this exhibition focuses on the US side of the border, it hints that the same is true in Mexico.

Several works suggest that border structures are unnatural and imposed. Archeologist Randall McGuire's photograph *Downtown Ambos Nogales* depicts the thick border fence running down a city street in the middle of town. Cultural anthropologist Gilberto Rosas draws on his research about the effects of neoliberalism and US militarization on youth in the border zone (Rosas 2012) in his digital image of a graffito that reads "Fronteras: Cicatrizes en la Tierra" (Borders: Scars on the Land). Another contribution, Rosas's *Dying to not be Enslaved*, evokes the impossible choice that the border presents between risking one's life and bondage.

Artist Celeste De Luna similarly sees the border as a limit on love and a constriction of bodies. Her woodcut *Breach Baby* portrays a baby in a womb such that mother and child are both split between Mexico and the United States. The mother's body is framed (or truncated) by razor wire and a border fence. The division of the border endangers the lives of women and children and prevents the birth of healthy families, the woodcut suggests. This work challenges the very idea of an "us" and "them" by suggesting the indivisibility of people in border zones. It makes plain that the only way an "us" and "them" can be produced is through dismembering individual bodies, whole families, and communities.

These pieces widen our understanding of how the zone has been pervasively militarized. De Luna's painting *North: The Checkpoint*, mentioned above, grants the viewer a driver's-level perspective of a road near the border. We see an officer (depicted as only shoulders, badge, and gun), the surveillance cameras, and crosses marking the roadside as a site of death. Traffic cones and other barriers render the road as much a site of immobility as a means of mobility.

Grand messages against division are paired with more specific calls for justice or plans for change. One graffito, photographed by Randall McGuire, calls out, "Somos Un Pueblo Sin Fronteras ¡Justicia Para José Antonio!" (We are one people without borders. Justice for José Antonio!"). José Antonio was a Mexican teenage boy who was killed by a US Border Patrol agent who shot him through the border fence (see McGuire 2013). In James Brown's architectural plans for a park that is organized around building friendship, he imagines alternative border terrains that would build on the vitality of the zone. However, this is a measured vision, given that demilitarizing the border would not in itself challenge the economic and political structures that have compelled so many people to make the dangerous crossing in the United States. Photographs of lush green scenery or wildlife reserves are important rejoinders to widespread images of the border as lifeless and barren. As Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey have explored (2010), the border is a diverse region inhabited by many communities and, in some areas, is verdant and vibrant.

The increasingly visible white supremacist movements in the United States invoke the protection of "our borders" in the name of defending whiteness. On a global scale, fences and walls all too often become tools to promote racial, ethnic, and religious apartheid and assert the isomorphism of race, nation, and territory. In their introduction, Dorsey and Díaz-Barriga reference other border walls, such as those that divide India and Bangla-

desh, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and Spain and Morocco. The exhibit suggests that the response to walls should be global in scope. For example, one graffito in a photograph by anthropologist Lupe Flores reads, “In Resistance & Solidarity From the Río Grande 2 Palestina No Border Walls No Apartheid.” US policies at its southern border should be seen in relation to increased militarization abroad. In an interview conducted by Caroline Rocha, an unnamed undocumented migrant notes that the border became much more dangerous as the War on Terror escalated.

Fencing In Democracy invites visitors to listen to undocumented migrants, to Latinx artists, indeed, to people who do not sign their work at all, like the graffiti artists. They leave a great deal to consider. One of the many questions this exhibition raises is, what are the alternatives to a militarized border wall? There is some tension in this work about whether we should imagine more humane borders—such as the friendship park—or whether the answer is to struggle against borders entirely. In some of the work, it becomes clear, however, that any criticism made of the injustices perpetuated through the border wall and in a militarized border zone must also lead to a wholesale critique of borders, or as Reece Jones has put it, “the existence of the border itself produces the violence that surrounds it” (Jones 2016, 5).

State of Exception

State of Exception/Estado de Excepción is the result of a yearlong collaboration between curator Amanda Krugliak, photographer Richard Barnes, and anthropologist Jason De León to present the work of De León’s Undocumented Migration Project. Traveling across the United States, the exhibit’s most recent iteration took place between February 3 and April 16, 2017, at The New School’s Parson School of Design. This exhibit draws heavily on De León’s four-field anthropological research on the process of undocumented migration across the desert borderlands between the United States and Mexico. The show includes Barnes’s photographs and video, photographs by migrants, and the Undocumented Migration Project’s collections of things left behind by migrants attempting to cross the Sonoran Desert.

FIGURE 2. *State of Exception/Estado de Excepción* installation view, Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, The New School, 2017. Photograph by Marc Tatti. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

The exhibit's title evokes the responsibility of the state for the rising death tolls in the borderlands. In his book on the subject, De León draws from Agamben's effort to think through how the powerful declare emergencies in order to suspend legal protection and unleash state violence. He argues that border zones are "spaces of exception—physical and political locations where an individual's rights and protections under law can be stripped away upon entrance" (2015, 27). This multimedia exhibit presents viewers with evidence of what this space of rightlessness entails. Viewers come to understand how objects—hats, clothing, empty water jugs, and pictures of the Virgin Mary—left behind in the desert are intimately connected to the anguish of real people.

Upon entering, viewers immediately encounter an eighty-foot-long wall with more than 500 worn backpacks belonging to migrants (Figure 2). The child-sized ones are perhaps the most arresting. Corporate logos jump out, indexing the way that commodities, not people, flow freely across borders. The wall of backpacks can be viewed as a testament to the reigning inhumane logic of trade and migration policy in the contemporary United States. Krugliak, Barnes, and De León have embedded audio clips of De León's interviews with migrants into several of the backpacks, breathing the harrowing details of their desert crossing back into the things they carried on their journeys. In their absence, in their death, things are made to speak for migrants.

De León, Barnes, and Krugliak join other scholars and artists who have photographed, collected, and displayed the objects that migrants leave behind in the desert to evoke empathy. Geographer Juanita Sundberg (2008) documents how artists, activists, and scholars can use these objects to suture the gap between "us" and "them" created by antimigrant rhetoric and policy, whereas nativist activists have put these found objects to much different use by placing them in trash bags and presenting them to elected officials as evidence of invasion and threat. The impact of the presentation of lost and discarded objects in *State of Exception/Estado de Excepción* develops slowly as visitors begin to grasp how the owners of the objects faced violence, fear, murderous dehydration, hunger, and loneliness. Even knowing the exhibit's theme in advance does not fully prepare one for the chilling immediacy of facing the proof of intense human suffering. De León, Barnes, and Krugliak's evocative mix of images, sound, and objects connects us to the migrants who carried the heavy packs and sipped from the plastic jugs.

The exhibit makes clear that the desert is a killing machine, or that it can be to those who are unfamiliar with its challenging terrain. But what is less discernible is who has weaponized the desert against migrants and why. One clue is a pile of large pieces of worn black tires that interrupt the gallery floor. A text card states that the US Border Patrol drags these tires over the desert to create a smooth surface to best track migrant footprints. Like the backpacks, the curators situate these mundane objects in a complex system of movement and exclusion. While the tires suggest the cruelty of the US agents who treat migrants like animals for capture, the exhibition does not make clear how the federal government is responsible for pushing people into the desert to begin with. In his book, De León has argued that the US government uses the desert purposefully and knowingly to "kill border crossers in an attempt to deter other would-be migrants" (2015, 34). This murderous tactic has a clean policy name: Prevention through Deterrence.

The exhibit includes Barnes's photographs of the tattoos of several students involved in the Undocumented Migrant Project, directed by De León at the University of Michigan. These young people imprinted into their skin the GPS coordinates of spots in the desert that are meaningful to them, including the location where they found a migrant woman dead. The accompanying text on the gallery wall suggests the tattoos are to honor the dead. Still, the photographs have an openness that invites questions and a certain reflexivity. One may wonder, as we did, whose experiences do these tattoos center? Looking at the back of one student's tattooed neck, do we imagine someone looking over our shoulder and wonder if we, as viewers, use this gallery experience to appreciate the twisted beauty of suffering or to boost our own sense of being and doing good? What will we do when we leave the exhibition?

De León confronts these dilemmas directly in his book. Citing Sean Thomas Dougherty, he asks, "will the violence depicted here become nothing more than an 'aesthetic' capable only of evoking appreciation?" (Dougherty cited in De León 2015; Dorsey and Díaz-Barriga 2015, 214). This question haunts this exhibit.

In *State of Exception/Estado de Excepción,* we largely remain moored in the themes of suffering and resilience. Arguments about the state of exception are better at pointing toward crimes of the state and their victims than at looking at history or resistance. Yet in order to understand any response to the atrocity of the border, first we must feel the magnitude and the everyday character of the violence. De León, Barnes, and Krugliak do not shy away from this task.

El mar la mar

El mar la mar is an experimental documentary film by Joshua Bonnetta and J.P. Sniadecki about the Sonoran Desert on the Mexico/US border in Arizona. Shot on

FIGURE 3. Fence. Photo courtesy of Joshua Bonnetta and J.P. Sniadecki. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

16mm film stock and digitized for postproduction editing, the film foregrounds the voices of those trying to cross through the US desert, as well as those living in, volunteering in, and patrolling it. Sniadecki is a graduate of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, and this film bears the evocative, sensory-rich aesthetic characteristic of SEL productions. The exquisite attention to sound is the mark of artist Joshua Bonnetta's interest in sonic ecology. The film consists of three parts. The first is a single shot of movement through the desert; the second, and longest, consists of interviews and impressionistic shots of landscape and material culture of the border zone; and the third in grainy black and white shows a growing storm with narration of poetry by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Mexican poet who lived in the seventeenth century.

The film opens with an extended moving shot of the border fence. The length of the shot may give viewers, especially those familiar with the theme, time to register that the "big and beautiful" wall that Trump promises to build already exists across much of the US/Mexico border. The rushing sensation produced by this moving shot of the barrier evokes the pleasure of movement, while at the same time emphasizing the challenge of crossing. Depicting the harshness but also the beauty of the terrain (Figure 3), the film displays wide shots of the land and close-ups of scrub and flowers. We see campsites and headlights in the distance. Throughout, the film's soundtrack features testimonies of residents, migrants, and volunteers who recover remains of things—backpacks, eyeglasses, cross necklaces, cell phones—and the bodies of deceased migrants. In this way, the film creates a kind of inventory, somewhat like *State of Exception*; indeed, the film draws heavily on De León's research.

The film explores the idea that, like migrants, we must find our way through. The sparseness of the images grants every sound, every word, weighted meaning, but that meaning is open-ended. The first human voice is a young man recounting an encounter with an unexplainable beast "out there." In the background, there are the insects, and then thunder. What beasts do we live with, every day? We hear the voice of a resident of the Sonoran Desert explain how a half-frozen man arrived at her door pleading for warmth. "He thought he had someone to take him through the desert," she tells us. "That happens a lot. People lose their guide." While one reviewer suggested that *El mar la mar* resembles a horror movie (Cronk 2017), for us, the film suggests the slow and morally ambivalent ways that we live in the midst of systems of violence, when the scenery can be striking and the evidence of violence appears only occasionally on our doorstep.

In one scene, a train rolls effortlessly across the land. Does this evoke the way in which migrants, by contrast, are made to walk? Or does it suggest the uneven movement of goods across the border in ways that tend to benefit some groups while others are dispossessed into dangerous migration? *El mar la mar* faces the same challenge as *State of Exception*. How does one artfully communicate about the systems and actors responsible for death in the border zone? We hear the voices of US Border Patrol agents in snippets of radio chatter. We hear their feet sinking into the sand. Briefly, we glimpse them from behind, hunting for people, their heavy guns diagonal across their chests. We hear more radio communication, "What was the story with that female?" More effectively than the tires—an oblique reference to militarism—in Krugliak, Barnes and De León's exhibit, *El mar la mar* makes clear that US border agents are tracking and hunting migrants. The film also presents multiple positions with a humane depth. Bonnetta and Sniadecki include the testimony of a volunteer who explains how Border Patrol agents are sometimes also shocked by the death they encounter.

If *El mar la mar* evokes the terror of an "unexplicable beast," it also leaves open the question of naming it: Is it militarism? The state of exception? Settler colonialism? The sparse and poetic character of the film relies heavily on a viewer's knowledge of the stakes. The audio interviews look back on stories of encounter or migration, giving them a contemplative rather than urgent feel. Voices are not connected to images of bodies. Listening in the dark, we are drawn into what people are saying, to the fear, sadness, or awe in their voices. We consider the social cues we might attribute to the speakers' likely race, class, and gender identities. These are certainly not disembodied voices; yet, we are made to keep guessing about social identities. Unlike the exhibits reviewed above, this is challenging and less accessible material, but through its open-endedness, it can also evoke other landscapes and sites of militarization or endangered movement. It would work powerfully alongside De León's book.

The potential multiplying effect of the works reviewed here is tremendous; that is, *El mar la mar*, *State of Exception*, and *Fencing In Democracy* might best be understood together, and ideally viewed alongside engagement with anthropological writing about migration, nationalism, and violence. Given the conditions of our world, this is a good time for our projects to shift from promoting understanding to helping people learn to take action against white supremacist xenophobia. As always, creating space for contemplation can be emotionally, politically, and intellectually fertile. In a world of "alternative facts," this work makes visible how the US government's militarized bordering produces violence and suffering and, sometimes, resistance.

Notes

[1] This article is equally coauthored. Our names are listed alphabetically out of convention.

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