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Miguel Diaz-Barriga, Margaret Dorsey & Abou Farman

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Miguel Diaz-Barriga and Margaret Dorsey, interviewed by Abou Farman

Anthropology Now presents an interview with anthropologists Miguel Díaz-Barriga and Margaret Dorsey following their 2016 exhibit, “Fencing In Democracy.” The exhibition at **apexart** in New York City brought together work by artists, activists, architects and other public intellectuals. More information about that exhibit is available online at <https://apexart.org/exhibitions/diaz-dorsey.php>. They speak to Abou Farman, Books and Arts Review editor at Anthropology Now.

Abou: You started early on this topic — border walls and art — but when I think back, border wall art goes back to the Berlin wall. It wasn’t called that but people were doing stuff on it and around it. And then at the U.S.-Mexico Border, in a kind of really eerie premonition of what the wall was going to become, there was Richard Lou’s “Border Door.” It was in 1988, six years before they started building parts of the actual wall. It’s kind of haunting to think there was a door there without any supporting structure. You can’t have a door without a wall, but he was in a way saying, “the wall is there, we just don’t see it.” And then a few years later the wall was actually there. So, for me that’s kind of an icon that I

have in my head as the beginning. And then border wall art has become a *thing*. It’s proliferated, and writing about it has proliferated. So, I wanted to ask, “what kind of a thing is border wall art?” What would you say about it as a contemporary phenomenon?

Miguel: If you think of Alfred Quiróz’s art as well, one of his early works was to paint what he called “the invisible wall;” he actually, literally painted the landscape, and this was on the Mexican side of the wall, so that when you looked at it from Mexico, it appeared that the wall was not there. Ana Teresa Fernandez also painted the wall — the Tijuana-San Diego border — in such a way that it was as though the wall disappeared into the sky.

Margaret: I want to return to Quiróz since his work was in our exhibit. We wanted to include a piece or photograph of the painted border wall in our exhibition, but Quiróz only had a low-resolution photograph of the work, quite ephemeral. Quiróz’s invisible wall was profound because it was almost like he had printed out a billboard and then put it on the border wall so that the border wall was there and it disappeared into the landscape and then it was there again. And so, it was this play on the presence and lack thereof in the morality of the wall.

Miguel: And of course, you see playful moments in this kind of politics, about breaking down boundaries. Some people call it “artivism” (Celeste De Luna). Also with Banksy, with some of his art, especially with Israel/Palestine, he’s creating literal openings in the wall through his art. Now there’s a playfulness there too because often times it’s not

revealing a scene you would normally see behind the wall ...

Abou: Banksy and others have been criticized for making the wall into something it's not. I'm thinking about the strategies of painting the wall out of visibility. I remember when I was in Palestine, and sometimes when you were on the Israeli side of the settlements, the walls were camouflaged; the settlements were built on higher ground and the wall was camouflaged by a manufactured hill that was planted and felt like a garden and that was meant to make the settlers feel like there was no violence there, that it was just a landscape. From the other side, you saw a horrible barrier. So I'm wondering what you think of these strategies of rendering the wall falsely transparent or invisible. What are the politics of visibility and invisibility here?

Miguel: I'd like to make one simple point here. I think it's hard to generalize the strategy overall. One has to look at individual pieces. But I do think that in the case of Banksy there is a playfulness about these renderings of the openings. In specific cases, this playfulness can be read as trivializing conflict and violence.

Margaret: I would like to add that Quiróz's project was binational, and so Mexican artists were part of it, it was very much about a conversation, and in fact the low-res photo he gave us was by his Mexican collaborator.

But going back to your aesthetic of the wall vis-a-vis the state, there is an interesting comparative dimension. The cover photo on our brochure was done by Lupe Flores,

and it says, "in resistance and solidarity from Rio Grande 2 Palestina, no border walls, no apartheid." And this graffiti on the wall is just as you describe it for Israel/Palestine, this is the view from the South *looking North*, or if you will, from the Mexican side looking into the United States side. I want to complicate that dynamic in a minute, but my point is that in South Texas they built the border wall on levees. When you are looking from North to South, you don't see the wall. They built these hills up to cover the border wall so that you cannot see the border wall from the U.S. side but it's quite present when you're looking from the Mexican side. I don't know if this was their input or not, but of course the Israeli contractors for border security are also used by the U.S. federal government.

Miguel: The other thing to mention is that most of the art that attempts to cut holes through the wall or render it invisible is painted on the side facing Mexico. It is almost impossible to put art on the U.S. side of the wall given the presence of U.S. border patrol.

Abou: One of the interesting things about these objects and the political aesthetic regimes they produce around themselves is that it's not the same object. Depending on which side you're on, it's a different object, right?

Margaret: Most of the Texas international boundary is a river and so the border wall is not built on the actual international boundary line, and that goes into our work on aesthetics and sovereignty. International imaginaries of border walls are reproduced visually by



Figure 1. Lupe Flores, *Hugs Not Slugs/Abrazos no Balazos*, 2016, Digital image. Courtesy of Lupe Flores.

professional photographers, reinforcing the notion that borders are static when, in fact, borders are constantly flowing and moving. In South Texas, the wall in many places is two miles north of the river and so the “Mexican-facing side” of the wall is still inside the U.S.

Miguel: Walls primarily follow a military aesthetic. We find globally that there is very little to no discussion of what borders could be other than militarized zones of violence. One of the things we find curious about border wall design is that while walls are key elements of state sovereignty — in other words, they are binding the nation and holding it together, protecting it from external threats — they are not treated as monumental projects; so wire, rusty fencing, concrete slabs are the main design elements. We find it interesting

that the state is not investing as it has in other monumental projects. So the walls emerge as being key to sovereignty but marginal at the same time, in the same way that border regions are treated as central to sovereignty but also at the margins of the state.

Margaret: If you think of the Grand Coulee Dam or other federal works projects that involve this level of federal expenditure, there is a sense of beauty, a desire to show the glory of the U.S. as a nation. And when you look at the border wall, especially the first border wall constructed in the U.S., it felt like it was the flotsam and jetsam of U.S. imperialism: let’s throw out some Vietnam-era landing mats that we have a surplus of; let’s use some WWII Normandy barriers. It’s ironic because Trump is saying he wants to see this

as “a big beautiful wall” with gold, and while people say this with irony, with a wink, there is something to that.

Miguel: One way to think about this is that in most cases, these walls are zones of violence, places where people are killed and states do not want to own them. So, there’s not a lot of attention to design and aesthetics.

Margaret: Well, the aesthetics of militarization and death.

Miguel: Right. In fact, Spain is pressuring the Moroccan state to control immigration and engage in violence *for* them. So, the move Trump is making, talking about an aesthetic wall, is to claim that he wants to take ownership of this policy of exclusion and death and transforming it into *the* state project of the U.S.

Abou: Right. The wall is quite irrational. To me it feels like this is a big stand-in for the racist imaginary that keeps finding new ways to materialize itself and inscribe itself on the world. Can we talk about the wall as a racial project, especially in the Trump era and the new racist aesthetics?

Margaret: Absolutely. In our book, Miguel and I analyze the discourses surrounding the justification for the construction of the wall. It’s not as though no one protested the wall. Mexican Americans from the borderlands protested, particularly people in positions of power. They were immediately labeled as unpatriotic; yet these people were making highly rational and reasonable arguments using FBI statistics, using the federal gov-

ernment’s numbers, and the response was a constant chorus of “you are unpatriotic, you have no right to speak ...” People were firing back incredibly racist commentary, and it was scary to hear and read.

Miguel: Margaret and I argue that walls do two things: first they are about normalizing a regime of exclusion and death that is primarily racial, that reinforces global inequalities. Also, they are about ending and diminishing the kind of hybrid identities and cultural exchanges that one often finds at borders by transforming border regions into zones of death. One of the major issues that we had to wrestle with in our exhibit was that, on the one hand we have states invested in transforming borders into war zones, militarizing them, turning them into zones of exclusion; but also doing so within culture, *articulating* them as war zones. For example, in the U.S. you see shows like *Border Wars* or *Homeland USA* that have this as a major theme, capturing dark-skinned men. But I’m going to add that we live in the border region, and we see thriving communities and a robust transnational culture. So one of the challenges of our exhibit was how do we represent these complexities?

Margaret: In building the U.S.-Mexico wall, the state created a state of exception and waived between 30 and 50 laws, depending on how you count them. That foreclosed on democracy: it foreclosed on having a robust exchange about what the border could or could not look like. While we are not advocating wall building in any way, we are trying to create a dialogue about what the wall would have looked like had community

members and the rest of the United States been able to have a real conversation about walls. So many things are lost when you don't allow democracy to work as it should. That, I think, exemplifies how racism hurts everyone, not just border communities.

Abou: I know you're not advocating for building walls, but in saying that one should have opened this up to conversation, one is legitimizing the wall with green technology on top of it. I don't know if we have the proper language to intervene *on* the wall. I wonder if the real language shouldn't be the language of the bulldozer, but we don't have access to such things.

Miguel: If you look at the Real ID Act (2005), which allowed the Department of Homeland Security to build the wall by waiving laws, that is a major moment in U.S. democracy and the failure of U.S. democracy. I think that in a hundred years from now, if our democracy continues to devolve, this Act will be seen as a historical turning point.

Margaret: We haven't seen this kind of legal waiver since the civil war and Abraham Lincoln's presidency. Part of what's so frightening is, if you watch FOX, they are portraying this area as in the midst of a civil war. They are contextualizing it in that way so that these extraordinary, extralegal measures seem justifiable.

To go back to what we were saying about whether we have a language to talk about an intervention beyond or in addition to the bulldozer, I think that's part of what we show: how public forums were anemic. They would hold one or two public forums, but then they

would shut them down. There were instances when people were opposed to the wall: these hardcore Republicans, United Farm Worker activists, centrists, lobbyists, people of all political orientations, all against the border wall and they did not have an opportunity to voice their opinions on the construction of the wall or on *not* building it at all.

Abou: By creating an exhibit, you too have intervened on an aesthetic level. What was your experience of mounting a show about the border and the border wall not there at the U.S. Mexico border but here in New York, one of the artistic and cultural centers.

Margaret: We have been writing about citizenship and the aesthetics of the wall for about eight years and speaking about it even longer. One of the things that astounds us is how, not only our colleagues in anthropology but people in other disciplines ask: "Why have we not heard this before?" That's in part why New York was perfect, because it is an international aesthetic capital and there is a need for our message to spread beyond the borderlands and beyond anthropology. We have always conceived our project as public intellectual work.

Miguel: We love engaging with the arts, and especially as social scientists, it gives us a kind of traction on critical discourse that may not be normally available to us. But come on, Abou, who would not want to curate an art exhibit in New York?

Abou: Haha. I'm just asking what are the political or aesthetic decisions you had to make in order for this to happen here?

Miguel: New York City *is* a border region, but it tends not to think of itself that way. What if there were border checkpoints by the Holland Tunnel where you'd need documentation? What if border patrol could stop you on the subway and ask for your citizenship documents? Those were some things that I would discuss with my students at Brooklyn College and of course what they didn't realize is that at least legally there is this state of exception where border patrol does have wide-ranging powers within 100 miles of the international boundary. This includes New York City.

Margaret: It is part of the constitution-free zone. It's just not fully applied there. So we want people to think about what this could mean if it was in their backyard.

Miguel: And our message would be about what's happening with the securitization of the border, both physically as manifested in walls and in increased police protection everywhere. One piece in our exhibit was this person just talking about the presence of law enforcement agencies on the border ...

Margaret: ... the machine guns, the helicopters, the drones ...

Miguel: ... and on top of that now the technologies that are being applied, video cameras, license plate readers, facial recognition software ... and the important point is that this is not only present near the border but extends 75 miles north of us, with internal



Figure 2. "Fencing In Democracy" installation view. Courtesy of apexart.

checkpoints. So, the goal is to say, “Hey, this could be your future.”

Margaret: With the recent presidential election, it’s even more of a reality.

Miguel: At the entrance to our exhibit, we recreated a checkpoint with video cameras and then we had the Celeste de Luna piece portraying going through a checkpoint with all the video cameras and technology there. That’s also an issue that we write about. One of the things we find interesting about this is that we are only guessing what kind of data is being collected on all these sensors and cameras and what it is being used for, how it’s being stored. There is a feeling that we are under a constant state of surveillance and with the exhibit, we were trying to capture, “What does it mean to walk into a space of surveillance?” I recognize that it’s a live issue for everyone in the U.S. and for New Yorkers, but I think it is at a different level on the border. When you see an aerostat or drone flying over you, that sort of escalates the issue.

Margaret: Aerostat is fancy for a blimp with camera.

Miguel: The reality of the borderlands is that we are a testing ground for surveillance technologies.

Margaret: And I think for the law, too, and how it can and cannot be applied legally in a racist way.

Miguel: One thing we see is that the border patrol can stop people and they don’t need probable cause. What we recently found was

that now border patrol agents are driving around with state troopers.

Margaret: In some communities, if you go near the border wall — again, the border wall is two miles north of the border — within five minutes you will see six border patrol agents, three Department of Public Safety agents, who are state of Texas but are acting as immigration agents; that’s just vehicles passing by. Then you’ll have a few people get out and engage you in conversation and they will tell people that they cannot be near the wall and that they need to leave, which is incorrect.

Miguel: The other difficult issue we faced in putting together this exhibit was, on the one hand, representing the securitization and militarization of the region, whilst also representing it as a zone of life and community. We had to make some difficult decisions on how to get that balance. We didn’t want people leaving the exhibit with a normalized attitude toward the border. We wanted to show the tensions.

Margaret: We wanted a dialogue about this tension between the theoretical construct of “necro-citizenship”¹ and of life and the verdant. Many of the artists featured are from the borderlands. It’s important not to lose track of the aesthetic innovation that this region has known for a century now and to realize that there’s agency here, and it’s unfortunate that the national media and conservative media are steamrolling border residents’ voices. But people *are* talking back. They’re creating art; they are creating songs. We hoped to feature, like Miguel said, the tensions between the two and to generate a conversation about it,

about how people are categorizing the borderlands and borderlanders into these simple slots.

Abou: In a way, one of the political aesthetic effects of the wall is precisely to render the border zone as an already-dead area, right? It's uninhabited. It's lifeless. And the only thing crossing back and forth are coyotes of both species. How did the show echo back down there where you are and with artists who live on the borderlands?

Margaret: The surprising result of the exhibition was the coverage by the Mexican press. I think we had approximately 12 reviews by various outlets in Mexico about our art exhibition.

Miguel: We incorporated borderland artists and our students into the exhibit because we saw the exhibition as not only an opening for us but also an outlet for younger artists, providing them with a space to enhance our own understanding of the border and border art. There was that reverberation of supporting the artistic community here in South Texas and Latino and Latina artists. The exhibit was featured on our university page, and our local newspapers picked it up because there is a large interest in our work and the work of others in representing this region as culturally and economically dynamic, especially on a national stage. Our exhibit in New York was one way of engaging this national level of dialogue. Border residents feel their voices have been muzzled or not heard.

Margaret: People from this area went to New York and went to our exhibit and the associ-

ate director [of apexart] would let us know that people from the borderland region saw our exhibit and wanted to provide back feedback. It is easy to forget that borderlanders move in these international circles too. Many people from outside of New York came to see the exhibit.

Abou: Did all the pieces come together the way you wanted them to? What did you learn and what would you do different?

Margaret: We did not want this to be what some people think of when they go to an art museum, which is a work on canvas; we did have paintings and professional photography. But the exhibit also included sound recordings that we curated, so you could listen to people talking about how the state generated and re-created fear in the area from multiple voices. We tried to include different kinds of media. As educators, we know that everyone learns and experiences the world with different senses and in different ways and we saw that unfold at Fencing In Democracy on opening night.

Miguel and I have young children, and we wanted the exhibition to speak to scholars like you but also to children so that children could go in and listen to audio or watch a video. We actually wanted to have objects they could touch. To me that's one of the things I liked the most and found the most difficult: with something so devastating as the border wall and the militarization of cultures, how do you bring children into dialogue in a productive way?

Miguel: First of all, we had a grand plan that we would have someone dress as a border

patrol agent and stand at the door, so when anybody walked into the exhibit they would be asked whether or not they were a citizen. On opening night, the gallery director wore the costume. With black heels. Ultimately, apexart put the costume on a mannequin. To dramatize the interior checkpoint, we also installed fake security cameras. As it turns out, sometimes people thought the cameras were part of the building, not part of the exhibit! We had ten security cameras pointing straight at *visitors*, and they would think, “Oh, you guys have some sort of crime problem or something.” That was an important element of this exhibit. In hindsight, we needed to more fully address the tension between creating a space where people felt that their citizenship was under question and that they were being surveilled, while creating a productive atmosphere for learning about border culture and communities.

Margaret: I remember the other side of that was, with our knowledge of the Latino communities, we wanted people to feel welcome. That was a part of the conversation too and how you negotiate all sides. We wanted to make sure that undocumented community members would also visit the exhibit.

Miguel: The other issue that we addressed in the exhibit and probably needed to explore more in-depth was cybersecurity and privacy. Margaret and I reference this at the end of our brochure for the exhibit. The ways in which our identity and our movements are being tracked and monitored is a major element of border life. If we could have done this differently, we would probably more fully engage technology throughout the bor-

der region, the use of cameras and sensors, the storage of data, and the diminution of our rights through data collection. All of those are tied to the border wall and militarization.

Margaret: Yes, the interweaving of corporate fear into the fear of government.

Miguel: The third thing is the materiality of the wall. In hindsight, we would have loved to bring a chunk of the wall up to New York City so people could actually engage it physically. I’m not sure how that would be done.

Miguel: Can I talk briefly about the Chicanos and Chicanas that are incorporated into what we are doing?

Abou: Yes, yes.

Miguel: Well part of it comes from where we talk about Gloria Anzaldua and the politics of *rajando*, which is splitting or cutting. That comes from Gloria Anzaldua, who sees borderlands as sites of hybridity and cultural creativity as well as closure and danger. We were also working off of what Chicano and Chicana artists call the *rasquache aesthetic*. And the word *rasquache* means “looked down upon, excluded.” This was the aesthetic that was developed by Chicano and Chicana artists out of the 70s and 80s as a counter to the modernist aesthetic. Their art would challenge decorum, would use everyday objects and instead of being about universality and art for art’s sake, Chicano and Chicana artists produced work that engaged communities. I think we see that tradition of *rasquachismo* especially in the art of Celeste de Luna and Alfred Quiróz though their art clearly pushes

the boundaries of traditional rasquachismo. Now we see their art, their aesthetic as being — and I want to use a military word here on purpose — redeployed against the security state. There is room there to think about the aesthetic that emerges from this engagement of rasquachismo with securitization. Border wall art should not be seen as standing on its own, as expressing a unique aesthetic, but rather as engaging particular cultural and geographic aesthetics, in this case Mexican-American artistic expression.

Note

1. The term *necro-citizenship* references both citizenship claims based on military service (i.e., belonging through willingness to die for the nation) and state-driven militarization efforts that render the border region violent and lifeless.

Miguel Diaz-Barriga and **Margaret Dorsey** are faculty at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. In 2014–2015, they were visiting professors of anthropology at Brooklyn College (CUNY). Their research focuses on border security, state formation and border studies more generally. In 2016, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga co-curated an exhibit titled *Fencing In Democracy* at apexart Gallery (New York City), and in 2015 they resided in Santa Fe as Ethel-Jane Westfeldt Bunting Fellows at the School for Advanced Research. They have won several grants (National Endowment of the Humanities, National Science Foundation) and published numerous articles on borderlands politics and culture. They are currently completing a book manuscript on border security titled *Militarization on the Edge: Necro-Citizenship and the U.S.-Mexico Border Fence*.