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Border Fetishism: Decolonizing of the Imaginary Border Ideology and Discourse

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Abstract

Then Presidential Candidate *Toxic Orange*, during his political campaign for president, promoted his xenophobic and racist ideology by stating that all immigrants crossing the US imaginary border without inspection were *rapists and drug dealers*. The vitriolic speech and vivid language used to demonize and dehumanize individuals seeking a better life and to contribute to the US economy, found acceptance and support in a significant portion of the population and mainstream media. This article will describe the social construction of the Mexico-US border as an object and place for wild ideology and discourse based in white supremacist and racist premises. Additionally, a concept named the *Border fetishism* will be used to analyze this phenomenon that is at the same time, attractive and repulsive, for many US residents and where dreams, rejections, and aspirations live and compete, in the same space.

Introduction

I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans, that they have become one thing in my mind. The abject immigrant. I have bought into the single story of Mexicans... So that is how to create a single story. Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

– Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009)

International borders exist beyond imaginary lines in crisp and well-drawn maps. With access to the internet and many mapping applications, one can even virtually explore and visualize a border region without having to be physically there. In the public imagination, international borders are shaped by mainstream media propelling neoliberalism and promoting sanitized images of commercial goods in shiny ship containers, trains, commercial trucks, and busy people transiting forth and back between these borders. The US–Mexico Border, since before the Mexican–American War (1846-1848), has been a contested space. Hernandez (2018) describes it as such: “[There] is a need to recognize that and reconceptualize “border problems” that serve as proxies for social processes of power and inequality rooted in historical and racial divides” (4).

US-based popular culture has created a fantasy of the US-Mexico Border: novels, movies, paintings,

photographs, and any other cultural artifacts have contributed to the shallow and misguided construction of the region. With the US’s War on Drugs started in the 1980s and the War on Immigrants in the 1990s, the 1,933 miles long border has also become like a war zone. It is militarized beyond belief. For instance, military bases next to the border (i.e. Fort Bliss, in El Paso, Texas) has an international presence of domestic and international military personnel year round: Germans, Canadians, and many more. Foreign armies train their soldiers in desert warfare there, and their presence contrasts with Border Patrol Stations, Homeland Security Offices, and many Immigrant Detention Centers which are spread over the region. It is a show of geopolitical and military power. The border region serves as an initial and final point where discourse on immigrants begins and ends. It is both political theater and social tragedy; corporate economic booming and worker exploitation; environmental disaster and ground of resistance.

Also, there is a deployment of all kinds of technological surveillance systems being tested there. US Air Force drone pilots constantly use border areas as training grounds, following vehicles crossing to the US-Mexico Border as part of their training. Other advanced detection devices along the border assist US Border Patrol agents in tracking and capturing immigrants trying to enter the US without inspection. The US- Mexico Border looks and

feels like entering into a big surveillance prison with many guards deployed (by car, four wheeler, and horse), flood light towers, and low flying helicopters. In contrast, the Canada-US Border feels and looks like entering another dimension: there is minimal inspection (if any), no questioning, no interruption, no unforgettable inquiry, in the journey between borders.

The mythology of the US-Mexico Border exists as an artificial *in-between space* of lawlessness and transgression; a void filled by abnormality. However, it is also a space of regeneration, invention, resistance, and survival. People on the Mexican side survive knowing that behind a tall metal fence—or just metal wire in some areas—which superficially divides the region in some areas, exists a land where “wild dreams” come true. For those on the US side, a trip to Mexico is an escape from the mundane and highly stressful life in the US. Mexican border cities offer loud music, cheap liquor, spicy food, cheaper medicines without a prescription, and high tolerance to misbehavior. These views merge to form the region as an ever-changing and mixed contested space.

The region's fragile social and economic ecosystem adapts to the high need in the US and elsewhere, of cheap commodities made by low-wage workers. *Maquiladoras*, or mass manufacturing plants located in this region, allow US and other foreign transnational corporations to take advantage of the low-wage and relatively young labor supply in Mexico. Along with lower labor and environmental protections, minimal regulation allows for these companies to increase their profits while exploiting the abundant workers supply. These workers, from all over Mexico, Central America, and beyond, find higher wages in this region and even a chance to access the US with a border card visa, without having to risk one's life crossing it.

Important actors in this border stage are human beings. Desperate economic, political, and human rights conditions in their countries of origin, Mexico, Central, South American, and the Caribbean, trigger these individuals to become long-haul migrants and to start their journeys to the US, mostly by land, but also by sea and air. So, the US-Mexico Border is a complex landscape of infinite human possibilities. A place where both nightmares and dreams, criminals and honest workers, corruption and redemption, hate and love, despair and hope, live side-by-side. The region is now one of the most diverse places

where international migrants from all over the world converge with aspirations to cross the imaginary line.

I propose that due to the increased xenophobic and vitriolic discourse generated by Agent Orange and its supporters in the US, they have fermented the Border Fetishism that many white Americans embrace about the US-Mexico border. Let me unpack the many layers of this love-hate relationship, along with the attraction and repulsion of what is unknown. The analysis of this discourse has direct implication in how we decolonize this region and show others how to better understand it.

From Orientalism to *Border Fetishism*

Scholars who have contributed to our understanding of the construction of the “other” and illuminated how colonialism has influenced the social and cultural construction of international borders and, in special consideration, to the US-Mexico Border. Their work assists us in understanding the fetishism of the border, for both the place and people who live there. Said (1978) in his seminal work, *Orientalism*, described the attraction and repulsion of the far middle eastern colonies by the empire states and its elites. This contradiction in construction of the other and its promoting ideology assist us to understand how he understood this attraction and repulsion to the Middle East's people, culture and identity. Said's *Orientalism* is defined by the development of an European culture and identity based on the subjugation of its colonies' culture and identity. In the same token, the US culture and identity cannot be understood without the consideration of other countries' identities such as Mexico. And the US-Mexico border, with its unique identity and culture, depends on the mainstream cultures of both the US and Mexico. For many unaware visitors, the vitriol and xenophobia of migrants begin at the entry point at the border.

The Border: A Story and a Myth

Border Fetishism is the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of a symbolic and artificial construction of the border culture and region as unique and isolated. It is not only feeding an individual's imaginary image of the region, but a collective hysteria of fake reality. However, this culture exists in the midst of two or more mainstream cultures: US and Mexico, primary, but with increased international migration, more cultures and countries are represented and

contributing to the evolution of the border. So, there are multiple perspectives on how this fetishism developed in the last 100 years. For the public in the US, the discourse has progressed from a paradise from alcohol prohibition to the racist and xenophobic imaginary romanticism of *Agent Orange* and his supporters who continue to feed the myth of the border region as a lawless, modern *wild west*. For the public in Mexico, the border became at the same time a region where the Mexican mainstream culture disappeared and was greatly influenced by US-based culture, and where *maquiladoras*, imported vehicles and stuff from the US, and travel back and forth from the US are part of daily living.

A second read, a decolonial read, is that in the political, social, environmental, and cultural struggle to reclaim this geopolitical border, the contemporary definition of it is also a precedent of the claims of Indigenous Nations which continue to care for the border region. Who has the right to claim this space? How could it be shared? How will it continue to evolve to reject the colonial project of keeping migrants out? One applicable and appropriate metaphor is best proposed by the lyrics of rap underground group Aztlán Underground's *Decolonize* lyrics, *We didn't cross the borders, the borders crossed us!*

Decolonizing the Social Construction of the Borderlands

Borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a value and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary (Anzaldúa 1987, as quoted by Martinez (2011:210)).

The fourth read of the border culture and its contemporary discourse could allow us to imagine border regions and places where merging of language, culture, and identity are in constant flow due to the constant movement of consumer products and people.

From the perspective of Indigenous Nations, which have lived and cared for the borderland and other areas, from time immemorial, the physical restrictions along the border, or the incomplete wall, is a reminder that colonialism still exists.

Leza (2019) describes the US-Mexico Border region as the traditional and ancestral homelands of 36 federally

recognized tribes – including the Kumeyaay, Pai, Cocopah, O'odham, Yaqui, Apache and Kickapoo peoples – who many were split in two by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and 1853 Gadsden Purchase, which carved the modern-day states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas out of former Northern Mexico. The shadow of colonialism has obscured the resistance and struggle these nations endured to preserve their connection to their ancestral lands.

For instance, for the Tohono Oodham Nation, its traditional territory was divided by the creation of the new border and its restrictive border crossing. It gets in the way of people to transit forth and back to perform ceremonies and reconnect with relatives along to visit their ancestral sacred and ceremonial sites in the region. Even the simple visits among relatives is restricted by the everyday reminder of border patrol guards, army personnel patrols, and the increasing presence of armed vigilantes militias which patrol the area disguised under the false pretense of protecting national security and American sovereignty (Lawston and Murillo 2012).

One way the mythology of the violent and lawless border is represented by the construction of the Border wall, so called US-Mexico Border Fence. The wall is symbolic of the extreme violent attempts by the US to control drugs and human trafficking, Martinez (2011) who lived and worked less than a mile from the wall states, "As I looked at the repeating posts, I felt small. I could see the wall and my own feet planted to the ground. Yet, somehow I conjured up an image that expanded my view beyond the field I was" (217). The wall represents the fears, violence, and suspicion on the US side; on the Mexican side, the wall represents the limits of where the country ends. A reminder that the neighbor in the North wants a physical separation between the two countries. However, the wall itself has become an artifact of cultural and poetic resistance. It now contains critical and inspirational messages of hope on both sides of the fence. Ironic for a barrier that it was meant to divide. It now unites.

Dismantling the Rapist and the Drug Dealer Mythology

Using immigrants as scapegoats is not new. Hernandez (2011) also emphasizes the anti-Mexican racism as Anti-Indianism. He expands,

The U-S//Mexico border has been stereotypically associated with violence and conflict, which itself is often distorted by historical accounts and official information outlets alike...the discourse of “border violence” is constructed with U-S centered, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant emphasis on hyper-sensationalized stories of immigrant invasion and drug violence (162).

As described above in this work, the xenophobic discourse and rhetoric use is at first ignorance of those most far and second, the repetition of stereotypes of immigrants as criminals fit into the narrative of the lawless border. Scapegoating immigrants during the presidential campaign benefited those who wanted to increase US-Mexico border enforcement measures and increased the presence of armed militias along Border Patrol Agents, the Army, and countless officers from local law enforcement agencies along the border.

The dehumanization of immigrants, about those coming from Latin America, later was used to separate families and children, implement cruel and unusual punishment for those seeking humanitarian asylum in the US. Once immigrants are less than human, inflicting trauma and pain becomes less relevant for those wanting increased deportations and family separation.

So dismantling the discourse and stereotypes and the hate directed to immigrants is now a daunting process. First, society needs acknowledge that this new wave of attack on immigrants is distinct from others in the long history of racism and xenophobia. One dimension that made this phenomena unique is the global dimension of it: the scapegoating of migrants had an echo in other receiving countries such as Italy, Greece, and Norway, to name a few. The resurgence of right-wing and nationalistic movements across Western Europe are connected to the concerted efforts to target migrants. Second, the hate against immigrants was magnified by the new landscape of both alternative social media and mainstream social media. The spreading of hate via cell phones and other devices makes it difficult to counter when moving from social media to mainstream media. And lastly, due to the lack of a comprehensive immigration reform in the US since 1996, it is impossible for those who remain undocumented and even those who benefited via the Deferred Action for Children Arrival (DACA), without a recourse to regularized their legal status.

But immigrant communities are resilient, and even without legal status, these places are thriving and refuse to be dehumanized and defeated. Undocumented and DACAmented individuals continue to defy the definition of a *model migrant* and constantly organize direct actions to bring attention to their cause to gain a pathway to legal residency and citizenship. Their restless efforts to change the immigration system is an inspiration to us all.

Post-Trump: What is Next?

Countering the vitriolic xenophobic discourse of immigrants in the US with statistics and personal stories of success is futile. The discourse and images are rooted in racism and fear. No amount of counter arguments will be able to pursue those who vilified migrants to change their minds or accept them. But these concerted efforts have had real consequences even after Trump’s first term in office. Other right wing politicians at the local, county, state and federal level have taken this discourse and magnified it in multiple campaigns. The impact on immigrant and human rights have been horrific so far. But it could get worse.

The US-Mexico Border as a playground to the international attack against migrants will likely continue without a major overhaul of the US’s immigration industrial complex. Resistance to this wave of attacks need to be swift and direct: celebrating our communities in cultural and social gatherings, educate the new generation of children and youth who are from immigrant families about the painful xenophobia and racism against our communities, and reaffirm the right for human beings to migrate and safe their lives and futures.

As educators, we have a responsibility to provide resources and readings to our students to promote understanding and solidarity. Recommending books about the border such as Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway*, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Alfredo Corchado’s *Homelands: Four Friends, Two Countries, and the Fate of the Great Mexican-American Migration*, or even Fernando Flores’ *Tears of the Trufflepig* are a good starting point. Highlighting the work of El Colegio de la Frontera del Norte (Northern Border College, EL-COLEF) a Mexican higher education institution dedicated of the study of the border region (www.colef.mx) other highlight for those interested in learning more about this

region and the people who live, work, pray, play or go to school in this region.

Betita Martinez in her book *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century*, stated, "All points to the great need for radical force within each community of color to pursue liberating politics and combat conservative or reactionary tendencies within each community (1998; 253).

Conclusion

Along with the vitriolic and xenophobic public discourse propelled in our last presidential period, it brought a wave of misinformation and *fake news*. Global migrants face, with risks of losing life, physical or mental harm, the backlash of host nations. The US, a former receptor of a large number of political and economic refugees, has become a hotbed of hate towards migrants. Those years are gone and those migrants who have remained after many years of tight immigration law enforcement, arrest and deportations face many challenges to reach legal status. The price to reach the US without inspection in the most dangerous border in the world has already been paid with interest. The remnants of the Agent Orange presidency will continue to be felt by the migrant communities and the only recourse we have is to continue to resist, and fight back.

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