3

Constructing a Border

On February 2, 2007, a group of about fifty people in fifteen cars, led by the San Diego–based pro-immigrant organization Border Angels (Angeles de la Frontera), gathered in San Ysidro, California, at the westernmost point of the U.S.-Mexico border. A fence made of rectangular bars spaced just far enough apart for an arm to pass through separated the two countries. Now, those spaces between the bars are covered with metallic mesh that barely allows a finger to pass through. This site is popularly known as “la esquina de Latinoamérica,” or “the corner of Latin America”: the northernmost point along the continent that those of us growing up in Mexico and all points south of it were taught to call ours.

The group was about to start the Migrant March, a two-week trip making stops at the main border cities in both the United States and Mexico, ending in Brownsville, Texas, at the easternmost point on the border. The goal was to gather stories from people who lived on one side of the line or the other, talking about how immigration reform could benefit them and how a wall between the two countries would affect their daily lives. A few months earlier, the numerous pro-immigrant marches of 2006 had put the immigration issue back in the political spotlight. As a result, in 2007 Congress was debating a legislative initiative that would permit the construction of a contiguous wall running along the entire length of the U.S.-Mexico border. [1]

The imaginary line that begins at the Pacific Ocean runs for 3,326 kilometers, or 1,989 miles—according to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed by the two countries in 1848—and ends where the Río Grande empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Passing through water, over mountains, and through the desert, and often marked by sections of cement wall topped with razor wire (remnants of different moments in history), the border is a long, meandering scar tarnishing landscapes, forests, and neighboring communities that have never been divided in practice. One could stop anywhere along the border and see that on both sides, the water does not change color, the dry land gives rise to the same dust, the wind sweeps from one side to the other, seeping through the bars, drifting back again. The longer one travels along it, the more senseless the imaginary line becomes.

As we know, hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants come through the border every year, as well as 350,000 people who cross legally. One way or the other, this line has the power to erase or recreate one’s identity. Tell me how, why, when, where, and in which direction you crossed the line, and I will tell you who you are.

The group participating in the Migrant March chose February 2 to begin their journey: the day of the celebration of the Virgin of Candelaria in Mexico. It is also the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which marked the end of the Mexican-American War (1846 to 1848). With the signing of the treaty, Mexico ceded to the United States territory that included present-day California, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, and parts of Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming.

The treaty established arbitrary dividing lines between California and Baja California, Sonora and Arizona, New Mexico and western Chihuahua. It was decided that the Río Grande would serve as the border between Texas and the Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and eastern Chihuahua. Areas like Paso del Norte, which for centuries had served as an intermediary point, providing protection, rest, and supplies to travelers heading north to New Mexico or south to Chihuahua, Zacatecas, or Mexico City, suddenly became border towns.

But the border between Mexico and the United States is more than just a line on a map, and its construction did not begin with the signing of a treaty. It is the product of a long chain of actions and complex relationships affected by political, cultural, racial, economic, military, and security interests, and by the dynamics of social groups living on both sides. The border is a laboratory that legitimizes and excludes; one side defines the other, reaffirming and reinforcing differences.

Historian Carlos González Herrera has studied the phenomenon of the border’s construction more than perhaps anyone else. In his book *La frontera que vino del norte*, the author explains how, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the geopolitical dividing lines between the United States and Mexico were established as the binational relationship between the two developed, designating people as “legal” or “alien.” Herrera starts his analysis in the El Paso—Juárez border region.

Like other old cities in the southwestern United States, the area around what is now known as Juárez–El Paso was named in reference to a geographic point, and in honor of a Catholic figure. Nuestra Señora de

Guadalupe de los Mansos de El Paso del Río del Norte was established in 1659 as a Franciscan mission. It was known informally as Paso del Norte, and it became the primary access point to New Mexico, a jurisdiction on which it was dependent until 1823, when the area was added to the state of Chihuahua. In 1824, the Congress of that Mexican state made the name Paso del Norte official.

Because of its strategic location, the region—and, in particular, the Santa Fe trail in New Mexico—was key to commercial trade between the cities of Chihuahua and San Luis Missouri. El Paso de Norte sits exactly at the point where the states of New Mexico and Texas meet on the Mexican border. This factor compelled a group of foreign merchants to settle in the region on the northern shores of the Río Bravo, which after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo would fall into the hands of the United States.

Shortly thereafter, the county of El Paso was formed in Texas. The settlement to the north of the border was called Franklin, while the area on the Mexican side was still known as Paso del Norte, until September 16, 1888, when it was renamed Ciudad Juárez in memory of President Benito Juárez, who had been forced temporarily by the invasion of French troops to relocate the seat of government there between 1865 and 1866. Franklin, which was home to a powerful, striving Anglo-American elite, then changed its name to El Paso.

In the coming years, the border area, with El Paso on the U.S. side and Juárez in Mexico, took on a practical character. It was a place of exile for dissidents, of whom the brothers Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón were perhaps the most well-known, protesting dictator Porfirio Díaz's regime from 1876 to 1911. It was a natural arms market before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910. Aside from creating a rupture in relations between the United States and Mexico, that conflict generated a U.S. concept of the border charged with classism and racism. Militarization after 1915 brought increased alcohol consumption and prostitution to the zone, and the region became synonymous with immorality and disease in the collective imagination. For the rest of the decade and into the 1920s, the city could not establish security and stability.

The border between Mexico and the United States as we know it today began to take shape at a time when both countries were going through critical, defining stages. Once internal U.S. cohesion was consolidated, the nation began to test the limits and reach of its transnational power. For its part, Mexico constructed a post-revolutionary identity with Mexico City as its epicenter, some 1,100 miles to the south of El Paso–Juárez. Even though several leaders of the new regime were originally from the northern Mexican states (Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Sonora), the border area was rugged, desolate terrain that functioned more as a distancing buffer than a link.

Paso del Norte became a testing ground for the border's identity and its broad implications. There began to be a differentiation of conduct and popular culture "to make it clear to Mexicans on both sides that this point was a haven for civilization and Western democracy," writes González Herrera, "which they clearly were not a part of." He emphasizes that "the legal framework, international treaties, and the body of regulations that the United States established to distinguish the alien-other-foreigner" were in no way "internalized within the consciousness of actual citizens on the ground."

The professor's description reminded me of an episode that took place on the El Paso–Juárez border around the time of the Migrant March, shortly before a conversation I had with John Cook, mayor of El Paso from 2005 to 2013. In February 2007, when Mexican president Felipe Calderón had recently assumed office and no one could yet foresee the consequences of his war on narcotrafficking, Cook—who before being the mayor had been a professor, a businessman, an army intelligence agent, and a city councilman—led a group of twelve mayors of border cities in Texas and Mexico to Washington, D.C., to meet with legislators and Secretary of National Security Michael Chertoff, express their opposition to the border wall construction project, and explore alternative solutions. Cook's motto at the time: "If the federal government has money to build a wall, give it to me and I'll build a bridge."

"We told them we didn't want a wall in Texas because our main business partner is Mexico," explained Cook. He had surprised me with his openness and willingness to meet even though I did not have an appointment. I showed up at his office, told a security guard the reason for my visit, and ten minutes later, I was talking to the mayor in his office. At that time, before Joint Operation Chihuahua would wreak havoc in Juárez, the mayor said that for every ten jobs generated in the manufacturing industry on the Mexican side, one more job was created in El Paso. "There could be a devaluation of the dollar, and it will take months to be felt in El Paso," he pointed out. "But when the peso is devalued, we feel it the same day."

Two months earlier, the mayors of Del Río, Texas, and Cuidad Acuña, Coahuila, had taken a trip to Eagle Pass to meet with the mayor of that city on the U.S. side, and the mayor of Pedras Negras on the Mexican side. The message was clear: Our communities are sisters. They can't put a wall between us.

"Our community is very pro-immigrant, so what we need is a reform that resolves immigration problems, so workers can come in legally," Cook told me before I left his office. "There's no reason to have a father living on the other side of the border who can't see his children on this side. That is not humanitarian, and it's not what our country is about."

The day after my meeting with the mayor, I crossed the border south into Juárez in the morning. That day, on Paso del Norte, one of the bridges that spans the cities, what we had discussed was on clear display: people rushing this way and that; people from one side blending with people from the other. When I was halfway across the bridge, a man walked right up to me, smiled, and said, “You’re the journalist from California, right?” Even though he was not wearing his uniform, I recognized him as the security guard who had let me into Mayor Cook’s office. He was a cheerful *juarense*, a Juárez native, who crossed the bridge every day to go to work in El Paso’s mayoral office.

The construction of the border with Mexico followed two guiding principles that dominated the overall vision of bilateral relations in the United States at the turn of the century. The first principle defined the country to the south as a source of cheap, unskilled labor that could be easily expelled because of Mexico’s geographic proximity. The second principle characterized Mexicans as permanent strangers. This served, among other things, to reinforce Americans’ self-perception. These principles allowed a system that vigilantly tracked the movement of people from south to north to emerge along the border. To this day they are registered, classified, and labeled according to a hierarchy of values in order to be controlled.

This control, rather than preventing Mexicans from crossing into the United States, was the original, primary objective of the border in its early days. The practices of observing, asking, touching, and, in the case of some immigrants and workers (e.g., the members of the Braceros Program, seasonal farm workers “imported” from Mexico), bathing, disinfecting, and vaccinating began to form part of a series of increasingly restrictive, intrusive, and violent protocols.

The border, which registered the entry and geographic location of the thousands of workers arriving in the southwestern United States, hardened after Congress passed the Immigration Act in 1917. With regulations in hand, the Immigration Service was armed with the legal justification to classify Mexicans as foreigners who could be subjected to numerous obstacles to freely crossing the border, including an eight-dollar tax imposed on any foreigner entering the country. This was followed by the bureaucratization of border control: by 1923, 300 employees were dispatched to border crossing points from Tijuana to Brownsville. In 1924, the border patrol was officially formed; by 1940, it had 1,500 agents. This number continued to rise in the decades that followed, reaching 20,000 agents by 2014. [2] Today, land border crossings are equipped with technology that can scan an entire car, with the passengers still inside. The passport card, the size of a credit card, contains a chip which allows it to be read by a scanner several yards away, before the traveler even reaches the checkpoint. And in an unspoken agreement, everyone knows that the words “gun” or “bomb” must never be uttered anywhere near a border checkpoint, or at customs inspection or in an airport, because the authorities are always listening.

In spite of everything, people inhabiting this extensive region over the centuries, including a significant population of Mexican or Hispanic descent, have not been able to cut ties completely according to strict international boundaries. Border areas are accustomed to a stream of constant communication and mobility, where daily life has gone on for decades far away from the governments headquartered in Washington, D.C., and Mexico City. Communities on both sides of the line have remained connected by tradition, family and personal ties, and strong economic interests.

Another scene from the Migrant March of 2007 illustrates this concept well. At one of the less-traveled border crossings, where Del Río, Texas, meets Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, around eighty people gathered to greet the marchers. Sitting around tables at a Mexican restaurant on the U.S. side, under a sign that read, “Welcome to our Del Río–Acuña Community,” the group talked about the two cities as if they were one, as if they were not divided by a river marking a border, where the U.S. government planned to construct a wall. “That’s like building a wall right through a house, with one family living in it,” explained Jay Johnson, an activist and founder of the Border Ambassadors project, and Del Río resident.

Small towns on both sides have been friends, neighbors, and brothers and sisters for centuries. There is nothing to indicate the difference between one country and the other. Before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, people routinely went back and forth across the border.

But with the changes in border security measures, the reality for people on the border has become absurd. At the exclusive Lajitas golf resort in Texas, an expensive destination, virtually all of the workers come from small towns in Mexico—like the security officer working in the mayor’s office in El Paso. On the U.S. side, there are no towns for miles around the resort, so the relationship benefits both Mexico, which lacks jobs, and the United States, which lacks labor. But after regulations were changed, people living in Mexico were only allowed to cross into the United States at official gates, and the closest official border gate for these workers was two hours away. Of course, the workers continued, illegally, to cross over where they always had. In a symbolic protest, the owner of the resort installed a hole on his golf course in Mexican territory.

The day after Del Río, the Migrant March reached Laredo, Texas, just as the city prepared for its most important celebration of the year: February 17, George Washington’s birthday. The day’s festivities would culminate in a special ceremony known as Abrazo, or “hug.” The ritual is as simple and beautiful as its

name suggests: residents of both sides of the border, Laredo in the United States and Nuevo Laredo in Mexico, walk over the bridge that joins the two cities, and, at the midpoint, exchange hugs to express their friendship.

“Local authorities, senators, deputies, lots of people come from the other side, and practically the whole city goes from this side,” explains Juan Ramírez, vice mayor of Laredo. “A little boy and girl from Mexico dressed in traditional Mexican clothing lead their group, and the same on this side, a little boy and girl in traditional Texas clothing.”

This ritual of friendship renewal has been celebrated at the border crossing for 119 years. There were plans to build a wall there, too.