

C. J. Alvarez

Jan 3, 2020

## Border Land, Border Water

A History of Construction on the US-Mexico Divide

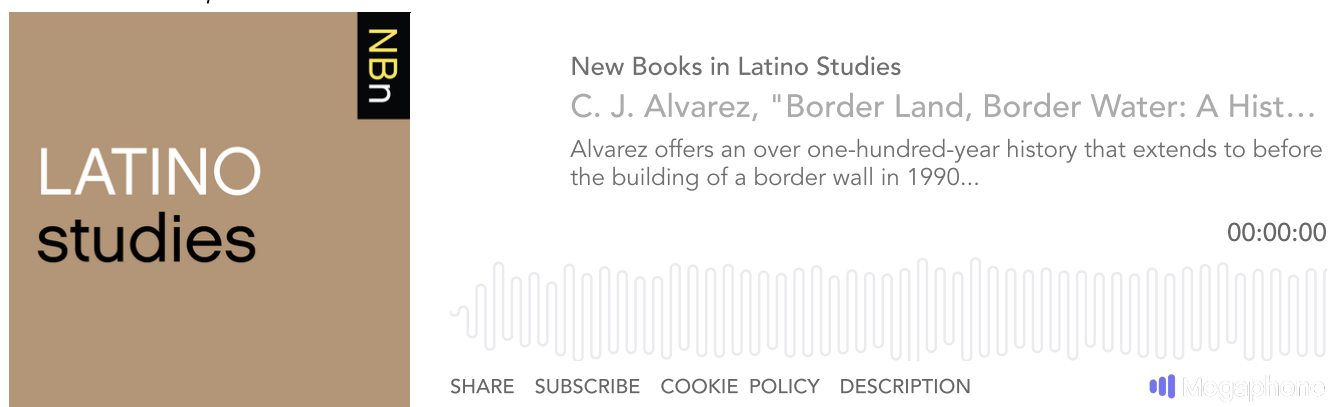
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS 2019

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Recent debates over the building of a border wall on the U.S.-Mexico divide have raised logistical and ethical issues, leaving the historical record of border building uninvoked. A recent book, written by UT Austin professor [Dr. C.J. Alvarez](#), offers an over one-hundred-year history that extends to before the building of a border wall in 1990. *Border Land, Border Water: A History of Construction on the US-Mexico Divide* (University of Texas Press, 2019) recounts the history of how both US and Mexican government agencies surveyed, organized, and operationalized land and water from 1848 until 2009. By centering the relationship between government agencies and border policing, Alvarez clearly shows how construction and manipulation of the border space's natural features maintained the political and geographical form of the nation-state, how it reproduced the notion of the border space as something needing to be controlled and dominated, and how it transformed the border space into one of economic possibility and growth. The history of construction and hydraulic engineering on the divide is largely about the opposing forces of border building to keep certain people and things out, and border building to let certain things in. Alvarez lays bare this tension between tactical infrastructure and trade infrastructure both as forces that have organized border life. During the 1960s and 70s, "the ports of entry began to embody the ever-deepening contradictions embedded in policies designed to accelerate sanctioned economic exchange on the one hand while seeking to decelerate black market commerce on the other," Alvarez writes (143). By the turn of the 21st century, Alvarez argues, most of the police construction on the border was designed to manage the negative effects of previous building projects and policies. In regards to the completion of the 2009 border fence, Alvarez writes, "It was overbuilding designed to compensate for an unsustainable

immigration system, unsustainable ‘drug wars,’ and an unsustainable politics of scapegoating noncitizens. Far more successful at achieving its stated goals, however, was the infrastructure of cross-border commerce” (222). Dr. Alvarez utilizes extensive government records from the binational agency International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC)/ Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas (CILA), records from Army Corps of Engineers, the INS, and the prodigious W.D. Smithers photograph collection from the Harry Ransom Center. The number of photographs included in the manuscript shows the vastness of the US-Mexico divide's natural landscape, shows how agencies attempted to make sense of such vastness, and shows what they constructed. *Border Land, Border Water* is a must-read for historians of the US-Mexico divide, environmental historians, and anyone interested in better understanding from a historical perspective current calls construction on the border. [Dr. Alvarez, “Chihuahuan Desert History” School for Advanced Research Colloquium Talk](#)

*Jonathan Cortez is a Ph.D. candidate of American Studies at Brown University. They are a historian of 20th-century issues of race, labor, (im)migration, surveillance, space, relational Ethnic Studies, and Latinx Studies. Their research focuses on the rise of federally-funded encampments (i.e., the concentration of populations) from the advent of the New Deal until post-WWII era. Their dissertation, “The Age of Encampment: Race, Surveillance, and the Power of Spatial Scripts, 1933-1975” reveals underlying continuities between the presence of threatening bodies and the increasing surveillance of these bodies in camps throughout the United States. Jonathan is currently a Ford Predoctoral Fellow as well as a curatorial assistant at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. You can follow Jonathan on Twitter [@joncortez](#) and on their personal website [www.historiancortez.com](http://www.historiancortez.com)*



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