View across the US-Mexico border, looking toward San Diego from Tijuana, November 2016. The border consists of two barriers. The first is an older fence, made of corrugated metal. The second, built after 2001, cuts into American territory, ceding a significant amount of land for the sake of tightening the border. Top: The San Diego–Tijuana border, with its doubled barrier, includes a road used by US Customs and Border Patrol vehicles. Dramatic topographic variation prevents fencing from tracing the actual political borderline, thus thickening the border's spatial presence and obscuring the precise edge of American territory. All images by Elisa Iturbe.

Elisa Iturbe

The Border Is Not a Line

The United States–Mexico border exists as both fact and fiction. The physical border is a stark sequence of walls, fences, barbed wire, dogs, border patrol agents, checkpoints, and searchlights. Its militaristic character projects an image of inevitable and uncompromising authority. Yet its location is arbitrary, the product of negotiation and war. Its function is to mark the perimeter of a jurisdiction, its fiction a narrative of security and sovereign power. At the border, physical constructs and social structures intertwine and materialize in space, combining into a single practice of power.

Since 2001, the US government has increasingly militarized this border, giving it material presence where a line on a map had previously sufficed and using the rhetoric of security to change the way the American public imagines it. This portrayal has been so successful that in 2016 it was possible for the entire border, which encompasses tremendous variation in terrain, population density, and activity, to be metonymically replaced with a single image, "the wall," and for that image to drive a national election. But a crystallized, unequivocal image of a single continuous wall is a grossly inadequate way to conceive of the border. The seemingly practical image of a giant fence is a marvelous trick, making the underlying assumptions about space, territory, and politics on which it is based to seem inescapable. Through an emphasis on material reality, it produces a semblance of fact while occluding the fictions that both precede and follow its construction. The foundations of these assumptions, however, can be revealed and shaken through a spatial analysis of the border. By framing the analysis through a spatial lens, we can gain perspective outside of the given discourse and perhaps preempt simplistic imagery from bolstering archaic and destructive forms of power.

Contemporary borders are rooted in the complex global history of political boundaries. The spatial dimension of these boundaries is shaped not only by the physical borders themselves but also by the social practices that determine who gets to cross them and by the beliefs that structure those practices. The Roman Empire, for example, attached enormous ritual