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Border Media, Near and Far

Iván Chaar López, **The Cybernetic Border: Drones, Technology, and Intrusion**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024, 248 pp., $26.95 (paperback).

Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, **Border Tunnels: A Media Theory of the U.S.–Mexico Underground** (1st ed.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023, 272 pp., $28.00 (paperback).

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A new federal administration is flexing muscles bulked by years of domestic military spending funneled into the form of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The U.S. border—we are reminded as our neighbors are arrested and deported under bare pretense—is everywhere. As a settler colony, the national project of the United States has depended on a border whose precise form and porosity remains responsive to state needs. Like a cellular membrane open to selective osmosis, the United States breathes in labor and expels bodies. The two titles in this paper try to answer questions of how that is done and what it looks like.

In ***The Cybernetic Border: Drones, Technology, and Intrusion***, Iván Chaar López uses historical episodes to undermine the idea that 9/11 is a definitive turning point for understanding U.S. border control. His "technoscientific scenes" run from early U.S. military experiments with testing pilots on unmanned Firebee target drones to exploring how the "McNamara Line" method of technological intrusion detection traveled from Vietnam to the U.S. borderlands. These episodes then tie into both contemporary efforts by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to prototype a "smart border" and ensuing artistic expressions of political dissent. Those efforts, like Postcommodity collective's "Repellent Fence," make the border visible, but for its unraveling rather than reinforcing. (I confess a frustration with academics' insistent equation of conceptual art with effective political resistance.)

To explain this dialectical relation, Chaar López makes the strong claim that cybernetics and sovereignty have become inextricable: "The point is not that sovereignty is a timeless constant that is now articulated through a cybernetic border regime. Rather, since the mid-twentieth century, the cybernetic border and sovereignty are mutually contingent" (p. 13). He does not mean, specifically, cybernetics as a continuous academic project, as it was at one point, but instead as a reinforcing pattern of relations and communication required for sovereignty in a Foucauldian, biopolitical sense:

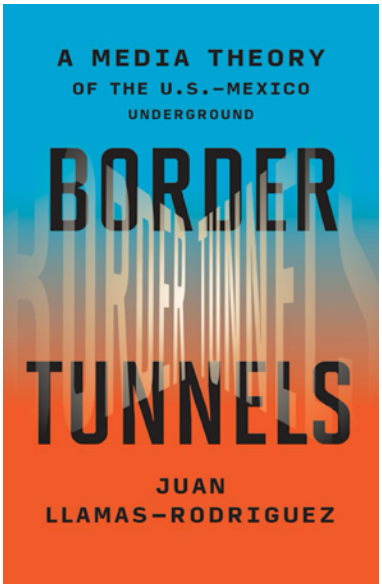
> Cybernetics in this sense is the product and producer of a border technopolitical regime that submits the world—its human bodies and nonhuman entities—to the abstract

> language of engineering and the drawing of exceptions that prescribe some to play the role of enemies of the nation. [. . .] It is a knowledge formation affecting the differential management and administration of life and death. (p. 17)

(I struggled with this extremely broad theorization; "cybernetics" felt more like a framing metaphor than a coherent subject throughout the book.) In the United States specifically, as a settler colony and nexus of racial capitalism, the action of perceiving and discriminating with "race as a technology of distinction" (pp. 11) is tied to ideas of national sovereignty. U.S. border agents and their "drone empire" use "situational awareness," social sorting, and violent abstraction to demarcate who exists beyond the edges of the nation and appropriation of indigenous practices (e.g., "sign cutting," or tracking) to reimagine an authentic relation to the land they stand on.

The intruder who slips past a furiously maintained border, however, leaves their own trace in this system, even as it tries to catch them whole. Drawing on sociologist Avery Gordon's (2008) *Ghostly Matters*, Chaar López theorizes the gap between the data and the living haunt that produced it:

> Data haunts name that which is segmented from what was made into data, that which exceeds the property attributed at a specific moment to signs, traces, and inscriptions. If data are the initial transformation of nature in the assembly line of knowledge, data haunts are what gets cordoned off from entering this chain of production. Where data in the cybernetic border optimize the operations of the regime, haunts register the harm, the trauma, and loss produced through such optimization. (p. 135)



As Chaar López explains, historical practice of drones and dummies for targeting and tracking in military and border exercises itself unmade intruders by "unmanning" them, which "makes human actions spectral by privileging the mechanical operations of the drone" (p. 44). The agents of the border recognize in their own proxies a route to perceiving migrants, but that operation itself prevents direct perception and understanding. The result are "data haunts" that weigh on the entire cybernetic border—the log of a power failure, the blurred figure on a CCTV feed, the statistics made out of the missing.

The Cybernetic Border follows how technology shapes the border as a social object for migrants and state agents, while ***Border Tunnels: A Media Theory of the U.S.–Mexico Underground*** does the same for media and a much more distant audience—the U.S. media-consuming public. Through a series of discourse analyses and close readings, author Juan Llamas-Rodriguez uses *Border Tunnels* to explore media representations of U.S.–Mexico tunnels. Its central project is understanding how those removed mediations are integral to building public consent for the borders as social objects at all. If, in *The Cybernetic Border* "systems of

systems" struggle to bring state control to a fine enough granularity, *Border Tunnels* shows how their representations need to be opaque and confused.

To explain, Llamas-Rodriguez offers what he calls a "media theory of the border tunnel" (p. 3) in exegeses on television news coverage of border tunnels, reality television dramas of U.S. border enforcement, and the "plastic infrastructure" (p. 100) of digitally rendered border tunnels. He justifies tunnels as a center of public knowledge of the border by arguing that since "tunnels are hidden and inaccessible to most of the public, even those who live close to the border, tunnels come to matter in public discourse through their mediated representations" (p. 3). The corollary of that theory is that seemingly innocuous media representations of border tunnels serve to shape public understandings of what the border *is* materially.

Llamas-Rodriguez's work shines most in analyzing the social implications of cinematography. The first two chapters on news and reality TV draw critical attention to how the documentary tendencies of those forms—which strive to create a sense of authenticity—struggle when confronted with representing border tunnels. Tunnels resist news-making through their mundane nature: "A new tunnel may have been found, but there is rarely much to report beyond the basic facts about it, such as location, size, and structural features. [. . .] More so than stories about migration, border tunnels actively refuse liveness" (pp. 36–37). How, then, does repeated news coverage and sensationalism justify border security?

Llamas-Rodriguez looks at how, in the genre of tunnel news coverage, reporters themselves often do not enter the tunnels themselves—they watch police enter or hear their reports, validating state mediation as a prerequisite for access. They provide a visual proxy for the audience, who themselves are even further from the subject of tunnel media. The repeated examples of constructed distance are a compelling argument for *how* tunnels are made into spectacles. Then, when coverage does enter the tunnels themselves, their material affects the video itself. Video quality drops as polished shots from the exterior are replaced with cramped cell-phone video with obstructed angles. Masculine reporters like Anderson Cooper assert themselves in the tunnels by crawling through cramped spaces, even as the narrative and cinematography of the segments emphasizes the enigmatic nature of the tunnels and reporters' physical vulnerability. These tensions are inherent to reality television renditions as well: "From the television producer's perspective, more surveillance technologies meant less-compelling drama. The coordination between these two aims—reality TV drama and border-security promotion structures most of the production decisions on the show" (p. 76). Llamas-Rodriguez argues that these shifts reflect a history of Cold War anxiety over national borders (undermined, for example, by the Berlin Wall) and the imperatives of U.S. media consumption for soft power.

In contrast, the later chapters, on the *Fast and Furious* movie and first-person shooters like *Call of Juarez: The Cartels*, develop the ambiguous geography of border tunnels:

> The border tunnels created through special effects in Fast and Furious are plastic infrastructures in the sense that they expand vertically the space of the border underground into a malleable zone. In doing so, they also shape and circumscribe ways of thinking about the possibilities lying underneath, or beyond, the border-enforcement infrastructure. (p. 123)

This should be the place where *Border Tunnels* digs into developing odd details for one of the theoretical constructs of Llamas-Rodriguez's media theory of tunnels, but this part of the project was not compelling. *Border Tunnels*, unfortunately, suffers from an academic language that seems overwrought for the concepts it is dealing with—words like "tunnelicity" and "corridic" add unneeded jargon in an attempt to shore up the specificity (and therefore validity) of the underlying argument. In one odd segment, Llamas-Rodriguez describes someone who has just been shot in a movie as "convalescing" (p. 139).

This theoretical specificity—why do we need a term like "tunnelicity"?—reveals a weakness in *Border Tunnels* when we step back. The central problem that Llamas-Rodriguez outlines, the problem of mediated knowledge about border tunnels, is actually a general problem of almost all media studies. Walter Lippmann opened *Public Opinion* in 1922 by asking how we should think about the fact that French, English, and German residents of an island in 1914 were at war with one another without knowing it. For academic readers of *International Journal of Communication*, I would expect we learn almost everything about almost everything through media rather than direct experience. This is part of the problem we are facing now, under a deluge of disinformation and large-language model slop—the stability of knowledge formation through media representations is being shaken. Llamas-Rodriguez rejoins in his conclusion that "the central challenge lies precisely in breaking apart mediations that are so taken for granted that they seem natural and unremarkable" (p. 191). But he admits that the best use of those analyses is when they result in new perspectives for thinking of their subject, as he is attempting to do with his *Ambos Nogales Repair* game-design project (Llamas-Rodriguez, 2023).

The concept of control looms over both books as they try to nail down how their subjects—the operational media of border agents in *The Cybernetic Border*, and the popular U.S. media of *Border Tunnels*—make up a larger, even ghostly, whole. To draw in a more contemporary exemplar, both *The Cybernetic Border* and *Border Tunnels* use Anduril's Lattice system. Chaar López sees in Lattice a continuity with his history of the electronic fence, of "operational technologies that record, store, process, and communicate racialized behaviors" (p. 11). By contrast, Llamas-Rodriguez focuses on Lattice as a conglomeration of materials, "an artificial intelligence system consisting of high-tech, low-cost sensors networked together to detect human presence at the U.S.–Mexico border and send push alerts to notify CBP agents in real time" (p. 129). Llamas-Rodriguez refocuses, however, on the promotional materials for Lattice itself, how Anduril represents its actions, and more broadly "how Silicon Valley speculators and the state agencies they court conceptualize the space of the borderlands" (p. 129).

Taking cybernetics seriously as a process, however, we can imagine the two media systems these scholars describe as holistically interlocked. There is even a moment where this interlocking appears within these two books. Llamas-Rodriguez is describing an "orchestrated" drama in a reality TV segment with CBP agents, who see something, succumb to fear, and flee the tunnels (camera angles reveal there was never any danger). The agents produce one of Chaar-López's data haunts:

> In the span of twenty seconds, the tense ambient music intensifies over a montage of six different shots of Pittman as he explains that he smells someone smoking, then abruptly declares, 'I hear voices. Let's get the [bleep] out of here.' [. . .] We briefly see a flutter of a shadow, but there is no indication of who that shadow might be, or even if it is another

> human. [. . .] The shadow that Pittman [the CBP agent] fears could be a narcotrafficker engaged in smuggling through the tunnel or a person trying to cross the border through the underground structure. By virtue of their location, both of these figures come to embody the same level of threat for the border agent. (pp. 85–87)

The viewer is given just enough sensory information to have the sense of perception without the ability to invalidate it. Security media technologies produce representations of claimed dangers to national sovereignty—the data haunts—that are then polished (into the appearance of *vérité*) and reproduced in the broader media ecosystem, as validation of those technologies' utility and funding. All that is needed to make that transaction function is the right framing.

Although, perhaps it is better to consider that moment as a representation of a data haunt itself. These artifacts, which border agents attune to in their work and reproduce outside those contexts, become part of the public justification for funding and extreme violence ("Don't you see how scary that shadow is?"). We can recognize the police riots in Los Angeles following ICE's arrest of labor leader David Huerta in summer 2025 as product of the same kind of nervous fragility produced in the documentary drama shows Llamas-Rodriguez analyzes. Police riots—rarely framed as such in the United States—enflame class conflict as residents and state forces rally to their respective sides. Protest and revolt, however, undoes the obfuscation work of border media. Social geographer Don Mitchell describes them as illuminations: "The lightning strike of revolt illuminates the social structure at a particular, precise moment, but, like time-lapse photography, the succession of lightning strikes shows how some structural forces persist, while others rise and just as quickly disappear" (Mitchell, 2018; for an example of police riots, see Smith, 2018).

I bring in this example because both Chaar-López and Llamas-Rodriguez seem to have the abolition of their subject as an ever-present undercurrent in their work—their tone is critical. In drafting this review, it has become excruciatingly clear that border enforcement and masked vigilantes claiming to do its work are a primary vector through which U.S. democracy will be dismantled. Our need to understand where their support comes from, how it was secured, and through what channels it flows is urgent. As ICE and the Department of Homeland Security burn through public funds and attempt to secure even more, they are depending on a base of public support (Kilander, 2025). That support is not inevitable, and in the coming years, the priors of border security will be renegotiated in a million ways. Academic work often struggles to align with current events. But we can turn to scholarship like that of Chaar-López and Llamas-Rodriguez when we hear lightning strike but still await the thunder.

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