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Maps of America:

Borders and the Construction of the American Identity

Daniel Immerwahr states in *How to Hide an Empire* that “only by including [all United States territory] in the picture do we see a full portrait of the country — not as it appears in fantasies, but as it actually is” (19). However, reflections on the borderlands between the United States and Mexico in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* challenge the idea that the United States as an empire can be accurately represented within the borders of any political map. When placed in conversation with one another, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* and Immerwahr’s *How to Hide an Empire* reveal how visual representations of the United States do not function as historically accurate divisions of nations, but as delineations of who America values.

Anzaldúa’s account of borderlands and Immerwahr’s criticism of the “logo map” both reinforce the idea that the United States does not exist in a vacuum within its political borders as represented on traditional maps. Immerwahr argues that the logo map does not accurately represent the influence of the United States from its founding: “[The logo map] suggests that the United States is a politically uniform space: a union, voluntarily entered into, of states standing on equal footing with one another. But that’s not true, and it’s never been true…. it’s been a collection of *states* and *territories*” (Immerwahr 10). The American “logo map,” which Immerwahr identifies as the “union of states bounded by the Atlantic, the Pacific, Mexico, and Canada,” functions as a visual representation of a false American narrative that serves to suppress ideas of the United States as an empire (8). By including the additional states and territories, Immerwahr reconstructs a United States map that encapsulates America as a global empirical power.

While Immerwahr nods to the changing nature of the influence of the United States as an empire when speaking about how the United States replaced “colonization with globalization,” but Anzaldúa suggests the connectedness goes beyond what can be represented on a map with a border altogether (18 Immerwahr). Anzaldúa highlights how “Mexico and her eighty million citizens are almost completely dependent on the United States market,” testifying to the interconnectedness of the places on an economic level (10). Maps, while providing a visualization of state boundaries, do not encapsulate in their political boundaries the intricacies of historical and contemporary American involvement in the global economy and politics. Mexico’s economic dependence on the United States nods to a greater connectedness of the two nations. Further, maps and their outlined borders erase images of past relationships to territory: Anzaldúa comments on how, as Mexicans cross the border into the United States for work, “North Americans call this return to the homeland the silent invasion” (10). Anzaldúa challenges the superficial understanding of the border as natural delineation of Mexico and America and the rhetoric suggesting a Mexican crossing is an “invasion.” By redefining this migration as a “return to the homeland,” Anzaldúa rejects the idea of the territory naturally belonging to the United States and the corresponding visual representation of the border that solidifies this delineation. While Immerwahr criticizes the nature of the logo map for its “suggest[ion] that the United States is a politically uniform space,” his addition of American territories fails to confront other factors within America’s relationships that prevent it from being politically uniform.

Immerwahr and Anzaldúa both engage in analyses of the territorial divisions of the United States, ultimately suggesting that maps result from narratives intended to exclude people from being constituted as American. Immerwahr analyzes Roosevelt’s rhetoric surrounding the Philippines against that surrounding Hawaii, both of which were United States territories at the time of attack: “[Roosevelt] deleted prominent references to the Philippines and settled on a different description [highlighting the attack of ‘American island of Oahu’]... [he] no doubt noted that the Philippines and Guam, though technically a part of the United States, seemed foreign to many” (6). Immerwahr’s analysis of the narrative (or lack thereof) surrounding the Philippines reveals that a “perception of foreignness,” more so than technical possession of territory, determined whether it would be included in a speech regarding an attack of the United States. Anzaldúa prompts a similar conversation, as she describes Reagan’s characterization of the U.S.-Mexico border as “a frontline, a war zone,” starkly contrasting with her own image: “Beneath the iron sky / Mexican children kick their soccer balls across, / run after it, / entering the U.S.” (2). The language surrounding the relationship between the United States and these places separates them from the American identity. Borders drawn between the United States and Mexico and the exclusion of United States territories serve to make this separation visible, and projects the exclusive understanding of who is American onto territory.

Immerwahr and Anzaldúa highlight how the designation of who constitutes America — and consequently, what maps reveal as American territory — largely stems from internalized racial and economic power structures. Anzaldúa describes the role of borders beyond their division of nations: “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*… A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (3). The division between *us* and *them* ultimately relies on what Immerwahr calls the “perception of foreignness,” creating a map whose justifications follow a logic of perception rather than reality. Roosevelt’s and Reagan’s language reveals how Americans in positions of power have strategically constructed narratives that decide where America is, and consequently, who America includes. Immerwahr recognizes race as a key component of this division: “race has not only shaped lives, it’s shaped the country itself — where the borders went, who has counted as ‘American.’ Once you look beyond the logo map, you see a whole set of struggles over what it means to inhabit the United States” (Immerwahr 12). Individuals in power have designed the shape of the United States with indifference to the territorial spanse of the United States Empire. However, their internalized considerations of who upholds the American identity is projected onto the inclusion and the exclusion of this territory. The maps themselves do not accurately represent the spanse of America, but they accurately demonstrate who is considered American and who is considered of value to the United States. The militarized nature of the intangible U.S.-Mexico border and the exclusion of United States islands and military bases from maps of the United States serves as a representation of not where, but *who* America values — and race plays a significant role in this designation of value.

Anzaldúa defines the borderlands as “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa Preface). In this case, the concept of Borderlands is not exclusive to borders as represented on maps, but the divisions between racial and socioeconomic divides becomes more ambiguous. In a globalizing society, maps provide a representation of these divisions as drawn by the powerful. Immerwahr suggests that “it is only the United States that has suffered from chronic confusion about its own borders” (Immerwahr 19). However, Anzaldúa’s understanding of borders challenges Immerwahr’s comprehensive map, as maps only function effectively on the assumption that territory functions as an accurate representation of nationality. Anzaldúa’s testimony of the existence of borderlands themselves challenges the idea that the United States and Mexico exist as completely separate entities, where their mere division becomes ground for the characterization of a “warzone.” However, Anzaldúa speaks to her possession of both cultures: “I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexico border, and others, all my life” (Anzaldúa, Preface). While she cites it as “uncomfortable,” the existence of a place and a population where cultures, economies, and politics bleed into one another, even Immerwahr’s reconstructed map cannot encapsulate the influence and ambiguity of the United States Empire. The map continues to suggest that the United States remains inside of a set of boundaries. Anzaldúa’s account of the borderlands highlights how this confusion may stem not only from a United States attachment or detachment to territory, but from people’s ambiguous cultural, racial, and socioeconomic identities.

Immerwahr’s cited “fantasy of the United States” in the logo map eliminates and divides American territories incongruent with the historical and contemporary expanse of the American empire. However, his proposal to include United States territories does not change the ambiguous nature of United States’ Empire, whose power structures exist within and beyond delineations of the continental United States, as testified by Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*. These borders, while vague, have transcended into a reality that excludes those who do not conform to a limited understanding of the American identity.

Works Cited

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