



TO BUILD A WALL

Imagineries of Identity in Yucatan, Mexico

IMAGINING A WALL

The two of us (Steffan Igor Ayora-Díaz, publishing on food in Yucatan, and Gabriela Vargas-Cetina, publishing on music in Yucatan) have written before about how some Yucatecans have expressed a wish for a wall that would encircle the Yucatan peninsula, to keep *Mexicans* at bay and stop them from “corrupting” Yucatecan culture and values.¹ In recent months, the discussions and press items about a larger wall between the United States and Mexico have fostered much thinking and pondering on border walls and their effects. Whether this wall would cover the entire border between Mexico and the United States or only parts of it, as the US President recently accepted (see Rascoe’s report on the US President’s change of heart). From the point of view of the 45th US President and his administration, the wall would have magical powers, in that it would stop illegal immigration into the United States for good. Somehow stopping this flow will help make the United States a better country.

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From past, historical experience, we see that walls, as great as they can be, such as the walls in Maya cities of the past and in Feudal cities in Europe, or even as in The Great Wall of China, have not been able to either contain the flow of immigration, nor the military attacks they were designed to resist. Neither have they held the formidable powers necessary to stop the decay of empires. Seen from the angle of their materiality, walls are always penetrable, so it is uncertain what their actual use could be, beyond their symbolism. Walls have to have doors, or bridges, or both, lest they become a permanent liability not only for those outside of them but also for those they are expected to protect within them. Walls may be thwarted by going over them, as a 2016 advertisement for *Aeromexico* highlighted in response to then-candidate for US president Donald Trump's rhetoric (<https://youtu.be/-8vDwiwlnml>). They can also be overcome by going under them, through tunnels. A cartoon by Barcelona-based animation company *Casi Creativo* which circulated via social network applications, also in response to Donald Trump's declarations about the Mexico-US border wall, showed a group of Latino bricklayers working above ground singing "we are building Trump's wall," and then working underground, singing "we are building Trump's tunnel" (<https://youtu.be/decgtRdNNaw>). But whatever lighthearted fun may be made of border walls on cartoons and clever videos, these walls are an aggressive, violent gesture toward those they are expected to bar from entry, and have characterized many imperial cities and nations, as the papers in this collection show.

Here we reflect on ideas related to walls, roads, bridges, doors and tunnels, especially because most of these have been associated with the discourse on the wall currently espoused by the US administration, and because theoreticians and the public also have tended to see these types of structures as related. We use these concepts and the materialities they name as a general frame of reference to reflect on the manifold relations between imagined *insides* and *outsides* generally implied when discussing the wall already splitting Mexico and the US, but also regarding Yucatecan identity.

WALLS, ROADS, DOORS, BRIDGES AND TUNNELS

Georg Simmel (in Frisby and Featherstone, 170–174) saw walls as related to roads, doors and bridges. The wall, he thought,

is a mute, non-communicative structure that separates one space from another. Since the two spaces are contiguous, the wall is also a point of union between an *inside* and an *outside*, but the stress is on separation. The road and the bridge, he argued, are momentous expressions of the human spirit, since they direct movement. The door makes it possible for an inside to open into the unlimited wealth of possibilities in direction, purpose, and travel that are outside, and for the outside to be shut out of domestic space. Today we know that doors, besides the happy instances of Simmel's world of infinite possibilities of direction, can also be *loci* of violence, since those who get to control a door may decide they are going to stop others, or at least certain others, from going through.

In our societies of the twenty-first century, doors and their opening and closing qualities have figuratively extended into highly regulated spaces, such as immigration offices and document check wickets at airports, train, and bus stops at most points of international departure and arrival, and control posts at long-distance public transport stations. The recent and ongoing refugee crises of the world also show how governments are intent on creating walls and closing doors to people whose only hope is to escape the conditions of violence and despair in which they are living in their countries of origin. We also see that, although borders between nation-states can be, in some instances and by some people, traversed without difficulty, walls and their regulated doors create an environment of violence on both sides, and this violence often extends to all individuals wanting to pass through the existing doors. At all airports, for example, the violence exerted over most every passenger, even if they have all their documents in order, is now considered a normal part of air travel. At the immigration posts along the Mexico–US border there are regular reports of symbolic violence being exerted on those wishing to cross from one country to another, on both sides, and physical violence is also common. The border between Israel and Palestine, which is crossed every day by hundreds of people, is also known as a locus of quotidian violence. Following Ariela Azoulay and Adi Ophir, who write on the situation along the Israel–Palestine border, Wendy Brown (30–31) surmises that these walls and doors separating national

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borders create along them a status of permanent suspended law whereby state of emergency measures and violence override political solutions.

The imaginary of the wall as demarcating the boundary between an *us* and a *them* lends itself to the constant play between two poles that Azoulay and Ophir identify as “spectacular violence” and “suspended violence.” These authors propose that spectacular violence is visible and kills many innocent people, and that suspended violence is less visible but it is there to exercise control through menace. Brown (83–90) also describes the ways in which the state has surrendered to at least some civilians the responsibility for guarding the border, often through the exercise of actual violence, along the Mexico-US border wall, as part of the permanent state of exception. She discusses the role of the Minuteman Project, a group of civilians who have taken in their own hands the vigilance of sections of the US-Mexico border. Formed in 2004, the Minuteman Project patrols the border and conducts, as its President Jim Gilchrist explains on their website (<http://baesic.net/minuteman-project>), “very aggressive Citizen Activism” campaigns regarding immigration issues. Brown also mentions (85) the *Angels*, groups of US citizens who leave water and maps along the paths known to be frequented by migrants, with, if not the support, at least the tolerance of border authorities, who thus share with civilians the responsibility of both enforcing and palliating the worse effects of the border fence and its surrounding imaginaries and legal issues. This results in a blurring of boundaries between legality and illegality that surrounds not only the migrants, their human rights, and their bodies, but also those of the civilians who have undertaken either to humanely help or to aggressively attack those trying to cross the border wall. Suspended violence, as Azoulay and Ophir define them, is ever present, along with its constant transformation into incidents of more or less spectacular violence.

While the road demarcates the space of human movement from the rest of space, and points at the start and the end of traffic, the bridge unites two spaces into a single conceptual match: we only build bridges, Simmel suggested, between two spaces that we have already seen together in our minds. This is clearly the case in the US-Mexico border, where the geographical limits

between the two nation-states have been mobile and subject to negotiation and military force since the beginning of their existence as colonial spaces. Vazquez-Lozano and River describe how thanks to military and economic might, during the nineteenth century the US administration was able to displace the border southwards, encompassing larger territories and groups of people with Mexican ancestry who then became placed in a perilous position. Throughout history, despite disagreements, authorities and citizens of both countries have built structures of separation and communication, including gates, bridges, and tunnels.

Conceptually related to walls, roads, bridges, and doors, is the idea of the tunnel. Although somewhat similar to caves, tunnels are in fact underground roads and bridges that connect two separate spaces, at least in theory. In this sense, Simmel's ruminations about roads and bridges would apply, with the added undertones of secrecy and trespass if the tunnel is made to bypass illegally one or more walls, and of subversion, as when it is used for hiding from people and the state(s) above.

Today, as Cohan, McKernan and Taille have documented, many people around the world live inside tunnels, in countries such as the United States, New York, China, Romania and Australia. Inhabited tunnels, in popular imagination, are dark places where the morals and the law regulating life on the surface are relaxed and those who choose to inhabit them have an unlimited freedom to do as they please. However, Marc Singer's documentary *Dark Days* and Matt O'Brien's book *Beneath the Neon* about life in the flood drains beneath Las Vegas have shown that people who live in tunnels establish communities with unwritten but equally recognizable rules, making life more predictable in the dark. In some cities, tunnels connect city buildings and are widely used by urban dwellers. In Montreal, for example, an extensive underground city provides shelter from the heat of summer and the cold of winter, with stores, restaurants, movie theaters, and food stands offering most services that can be found above ground. In other cities, as in Washington D.C., extensive systems of tunnels help people move between different government buildings and city sections. Tunnels, then, are part of the regular life of many people who either inhabit them or use them every day to get from one place

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to another without having to face the cold, the extreme heat, or the regular city traffic.

Tunnels, then, are not necessarily places of surreptitious crime and debauchery. Singer and O'Brien, however, have shown that people living in them have found themselves unfit for living with dignity elsewhere in society and often suffer from addictions and disease. With regards to the U.S.-Mexico border, and at most international borders marked by walls, all tunnels are treated as suspicious, because people most often construct them in order to overcome the barrier that the border wall represents, often for the displacement of people or illegalized commodities. We are interested in the idea and the image of the tunnel because it not only bypasses walls and connects spaces, but also because, even when people use them as their home and establish underground communities in them, they represent spaces where people can hide and where things can be hidden from view, but still offer the traffic advantages of roads and bridges, as well as the domestic qualities afforded, as Simmel points out, by walls that demarcate and doors that communicate. Here we will use the idea of the tunnel to discuss the flows of secret things within the channels of illegal and para-legal circuits. Certainly, the image of the tunnel in this context relates to those illegal tunnels that have been built along the Mexican border in order to cross underneath the wall, but we will also draw from research on tunnel inhabitants' ideas of subversion, order, and escape.

REGIONAL IDENTITY

Up until the 1970s, the state of Yucatan was often seen as a region closed within itself. Anthropologists, including Moseley and Terry, wrote about it as "A World Apart," and most Yucatecans could certainly speak of their region and their culture as very distinctive and different from all other regional cultural complexes in Mexico. A single Maya language, Yucatecan Maya, was spoken by the majority of the population every day, in both the countryside and the cities. Yucatecan Spanish, spoken mainly in the cities, was heavily marked by Maya syntax and vocabulary. The colonial province of Yucatan, which then comprised the states of Campeche and Yucatan and the Federal Territory of Quintana

Roo, had lived through great economic wealth and the growth of regional elites supported by a system of haciendas growing sisal for export to the United States and Europe. As Morrison shows, between 1870 and 1920, the export economy had produced a regional system of railroads which, at 4500 Km, was then one of the most extensive in the world, completely owned and controlled by regional entrepreneurs. Communication with the island of Cuba, with the south of the United States, with Europe, and with Veracruz in Mexico took place by boat and, as of 1928, by plane. The first railroad connecting the Peninsula's *Ferrocarriles del Sureste* with the state of Veracruz was built in the 1930s, and finally connected with others beyond the peninsula in 1958, when the railroad stretch from Coatzacoalcos to Campeche was inaugurated (Domínguez Valencia, 24). Then, as Vargas-Cetina describes, in 1968, just in time for Yucatecans to travel to the Olympic Games in Mexico City, the first road allowing commercial traffic finally connected Yucatan to the rest of Mexico, through a bridge crossing the Grijalba river. The Mexican Revolution and synthetic fibers had ended the Sisal plantation era, but Yucatecans produced corn and cattle in the countryside and retained the control of most industrial and commercial ventures within the peninsula, and, save those overtaken by Televisa and by the national government, of most of the television and radio stations broadcasting from within.

The 1970s brought, through the road and through new mass media broadcasts originating elsewhere in Mexico, new cultural changes that began to make themselves noticeable. Until the 1970s the production of most everyday necessities purchased by the Yucatecan population either took place in Yucatan or was handled by Yucatecan entrepreneurs in *Casas de Importación* (Import Business Houses). Yucatecan companies manufactured regional bread, sweets, beer, soda drinks, clothing, rugs and hammocks, clothes, plastic goods, and leather bags and shoes. Local power plants, using gas, powered electric appliances, as well as record players and radio and television sets. The appliances themselves, as well as radios and TV sets, cars, boats, and motors of different types, were imported by local entrepreneurs who had built wide distribution networks across the cities and towns. As of the 1970s, however, national and international capital began to take hold

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of local industry, and national television finally took over local TV stations and viewers' selection of channels. National bureaucracy also replaced most regional offices, and "*escuelas federales*" (Federal schools) began to take over regional education. The full Mexicanization of Yucatan accelerated in the 1990s, when Governor Victor Cervera Pacheco helped national and international corporations take over Yucatecan industry and expand their franchises throughout Yucatan state. It was precisely at the end of the 1990s, probably partly because of the increased connection between Yucatan and the rest of Mexico, that Yucatecans began to migrate to the United States in larger numbers than before. Cornejo Portugal and Fortuny Loret de Mola explain:

Yucatecans began to leave [for the United States] with the Bracero program (1942 to 1964). However, it was not until the 1990s that migration became more visible not only at an international but also an interstate scale. In 2000, 5,839 Yucatecans left for the United States. At that time, the average national [Mexican] rate of emigration to the United States was 1.6%, but in Yucatan it was only 0.4%. Between 2000 and 2005 [Yucatecan] migration to the United States increased by 450%, from 0.4% to 1.8% of the total population.

However, while encouraging Mexican businesses to take control of Yucatecan factories and distribution outlets, Governor Cervera Pacheco fueled Yucatecan regionalism. During his tenure, he even declared Yucatecan congress' independence from central Mexico. Since his economic policies had brought Yucatan close to full and perhaps even surplus employment, people in the state began to dream again of a politically independent Yucatan peninsula, forgetting to acknowledge that economic dependence on Mexico and on multinational corporations was complete at that point.

One of the most important ways in which the Yucatan peninsula has become part of a system of international "tunnels" in the form of hidden traffic, has been through the Peninsula's geographical entanglements first with pirates' routes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then with the smuggling of food and appliances coming in via the Free Trade Zone in the Federal Territory, and later state, of Quintana Roo in the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, as Hernandez describes, the Peninsula has been a stop-over location for drugs smuggled from South and Central

America to the United States with the help of the United States' Drug Enforcement Administration. Now Mexican drug cartels are increasingly operating, with great violence, in the state of Quintana Roo, and especially in the cities of Cancun, Playa del Carmen, and the area known as *Riviera Maya*.

Captain George Spurre is one of the earlier pirates whose name has been associated with the Yucatan peninsula. Spurre operated within the Caribbean, with docking points in Jamaica, Cuba, and the Yucatan peninsula, first assaulting Campeche in 1678 and, five years later, the Mexican port of Veracruz (Marley 365–368). Davis and Marley point to Henry Morgan, Jean Laffite, and Lorezillo as pirates known to have kept their ships in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, and used Isla Mujeres and Cozumel as base camps in the 1800's. Laffite, in particular, was well-regarded by the locals in Isla Mujeres. Nineteenth century explorer John Lloyd Stephens (243) reported that "Monsieur Laffita, as our skipper called him, bore a good character in these parts; he was always good to the fishermen, and paid them well for all he took from them." In 1902 the section of the Yucatan peninsula that is today the State of Quintana Roo was made into a Federal Territory by President Porfirio Diaz, and it remained as such until 1974. In the 1970s it began to be promoted as a tourist paradise. Since it was a frontier state, local entrepreneurs were allowed to import goods from Belize, the United States, and Europe. Appliances, stereo sets and, in particular, foreign foods were freely imported into Quintana Roo and, through what people in Yucatan called "contrabando hormiga" (ant-like smuggling), imported edam cheese continued to feed the regional appetites for Queso Relleno (stuffed cheese), a dish that required the family to carve away at the wheel of cheese over many weeks and then stuff the hollowed out wheel with meat, capers, raisins, and olives, and cook it in a white maize or wheat flour broth.

Journalist Anabel Hernández, who has won several national awards for her investigative reporting, places Yucatan within the circuits for drug smuggling between Colombia and the United States during the 1980s. The US government assigned Ernest Jacob, a pilot who worked as a double agent of the Drug Enforcement Administration and Medellin Cartels, the mission to set

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up an airstrip corridor with a base in Yucatan state between 1984 and 1986. Jacob apparently asked the U.S. government for bigger planes, which he wanted in order to expand the Medellín Cartel's operations in the United States. The U.S. provided him with a Fairchild C-123K plane dubbed "The Fat Lady," which he used to fly cocaine from Colombia to Yucatan, and then to the United States. It is unclear whether the Colombian drug traffic has continued through the same routes, but now in the twenty-first century the state of Quintana Roo has certainly become, at least on the regional news, an area controlled by Mexican drug cartels and gangs that are killing the tourist industry through repeated and very publicized incidents of violence. The violence, however, seems to follow pre-established patterns already described by Pino Arlacchi and others in the ethnography about the regional and international mafia in Italy, and particularly the *families* originating in Sicily and Calabria.

YUCATÁN: WALLS AND BRIDGES

In addition to the lack of efficient transport between the Yucatán peninsula and the rest of Mexico, during the nineteenth century Yucatecans attempted to secede from Mexico on three different occasions. In retaliation, the Mexican Government imposed a marine wall: a navy blockade of trade between the peninsula and central Mexico. During this time, Campos García and Careaga Vilesid tell us, Yucatecans built bridges that connected local entrepreneurs and politicians in the cities of Yucatan with Texas, Louisiana, and Florida in the US, and strengthened their ties with Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Colombia in the Caribbean. According to Evans, Yucatecan economic connections reached the Canadian plains as well.

One effect of these ties is a more receptive disposition toward English in the everyday life of middle and upper class urban Yucatecans, in contrast to other Mexican regions where people resist English as a form of imperialism. Many visitors have noted that English is common in street signs and businesses' names, such as car dealers that are called "centers" instead of *centros*, the Spanish word. There is, for example, a *Restaurant Week* (branded and advertised in English) in which restaurants across

the city offer special discounts. Words like garage, porch, clutch, and other Anglicisms are part of everyday Yucatecan Spanish. And everyday language also builds a wall *vis-à-vis* other Mexicans. While Spanish in much of Mexico has incorporated Nahuatl words, in Yucatán it is Maya words, syntax, and speech intonation that characterize local Spanish, making communication with other Mexicans sometimes difficult and misunderstandings common. The differences are continuously emphasized so as to symbolically separate Yucatecans from Mexicans. Some of the clearest examples of this are showcased on t-shirts with legends in Yucatecan Spanish contrasting them with their Mexican counterparts. Some of these t-shirts also sport either an explicit refusal of the status of “sister republic,” a phrase many Mexicans use to refer to Yucatán, or announce in large letters “República de Yucatán” (Republic of Yucatan).

In our own research we have found that Yucatecan food is all the time contrasted and its identity differentiated from Mexican cuisine, whereas cookbook writers, cultural brokers, and journalists readily recognize Lebanese, Caribbean, and European influences. The same happens with Music. Yucatecan Trova is presented as the creation of Yucatecan and Cuban artists, with the help of other Caribbean composers, and the French and Iberian romantic traditions are also recognized as influential in regional songs. Despite the fact that Yucatecan food and music have a national presence in Mexico today, and they have often been appropriated in other regions, they remain distinct from other Mexican traditions.

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WALL FANTASIES

Wendy Brown posits that nation state sovereignty is on the wane, and it is the attending effects of their crumbling that bring up fantasies around what a border wall could accomplish, re-instating “fantasies of national purity and national innocence” (115). Brown identifies four distinct types of fantasies that are expected to be fulfilled by border walls (115–123): “The fantasy of the dangerous alien in an increasingly borderless world, the fantasies of containment, the fantasies of impermeability, and the fantasies of purity, innocence and goodness.” We see that these fantasies are all applied repeatedly to the border wall between Mexico

and the United States, especially now during the tenure of the 45th President of the United States. The wall between the United States and Mexico is now being imagined by its proponents and supporters as having magical properties to stop unwanted lawless aliens, mark the limits of a territory under siege by foreign menaces of many types, protect the United States against the forces of globalization, and uphold the virtues of a chosen, “good” people against the failings of others who are to be kept outside (especially “bad hombres”). These kinds of fantasies have also played a part when Yucatecans desired that a wall be built around the three states of the peninsula, namely Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo.

It was precisely the idea that the specificity of Yucatecan culture and “Yucatecan values” were waning that people in Yucatan began to speak of walling the peninsula. Brown makes the point that the figure of the “dangerous alien” takes on specific contours, as someone who is radically different and can pose a threat to locals. In Yucatan this is commonly expressed, still today, in the local newspapers. When a major theft or a crime is committed, the journalists report that witnesses saw “a foreign-looking person” in the area. When convicted felons are from outside the state, and especially if they are from outside the Yucatan peninsula, journalists keep referring to their out-of-state origins, while local thieves and murderers are often given the benefit of the doubt and even declared innocent by the local press. This has the specific effect of creating an illusion of safety when in the presence of Yucatecan-born people, who nonetheless are part, judging from the everyday news, of the population engaged in felonies and criminal acts, from sex offenses to theft and murder.

Regarding the fantasies of containment, Brown (118) believes that the image of the border wall extends the image of the household. A wall would limit the horizon of the household and provide an imagined finite terrain for fantasies of borders, where there are no possible internal borders any more. Along with a fantasy of impermeability or impenetrability, these constructs of imagined or actual walls call on the nation or, in this case, the region, as a representative of a religious or religious-like entity manifested

as a chosen people, who hold the right to determine who is part of the chosen and who is not. These two particular fantasies are already untenable in the case of Yucatan, even in the local imagination of possibly contained horizons. There are hypotheses among many locals and outsiders that the low criminality in Yucatan is the result of the money from drug cartels being laundered in the state, and/or that the families of the drug cartel bosses all live in Yucatan, so the state is protected by all the major criminals themselves. None of these two hypotheses can be proven, and the state police proudly and constantly announce that many drug *capos* have been caught as soon as they entered Yucatecan territory. However, even in the local imagination, the very conditions of endemic criminality obtaining elsewhere in Mexico could be directly related to the very peaceful life we enjoy in Merida and elsewhere in the state of Yucatan. A wall would not and could not change the flows of migrants, the flows of national and international culture, or the regional impact of the social conditions for the configurations of drug traffic and other forms of organized or disorganized criminality in Mexico.

The fourth fantasy, that of the purity, innocence, and goodness of those inside the imagined or actual wall brings the set of related fantasies full circle: In this view, Yucatecans, as already explained above, would be purer, more innocent, and better than non-Yucatecans. It is very easy to debunk this pretense. In recent memory, at least one serial killer was from a local village family. As the online publication Radio Motul reported, he died in jail after having been convicted of killing at least three young women along the coast of Yucatan between 2007 and 2008. Also, in 2014 two local psychiatrists were accused, and one of them convicted in 2016, for killing a third psychiatrist; and as *Diario de Yucatan* reports, the one who was released in 2016 because of “reasonable doubt” has now been indicted as the “intellectual author” of the murder and is sought by the Mexican and the International police. All three were Yucatecans, including the two accused of murder. There is very little evidence to support the view that Yucatecans are better, less evil, or less lethal in any way than other Mexicans.

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As we have discussed in *Cocina, música y comunicación*, the contemporary transformations of Yucatán related to larger numbers of immigrants from other Mexican regions and abroad, as well as the availability of newly arriving commodities used in the kitchen and in music composition, recording, and interpretation, are gradually eroding the walls of Yucatecan culture. For example, the neoliberal transformation of education has allowed the proliferation of private universities and the multiplications of schools of gastronomy. The oldest of these schools for chefs are situated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico, both in the central highlands. Chefs teaching at schools are introducing ingredients, techniques, and technologies proper to Mexican cuisine and until recently alien to Yucatecan gastronomy. New restaurants of Yucatecan food opened by non-Yucatecans, and Yucatecans trained as chefs, are changing recipes that have been long considered part of the regional “tradition.”

Although trova music continues to be the source of lyrics and music, the introduction of and access to new technologies in the regional-global market and new musical curricula at schools of arts are introducing rhythms, musical genres, and sounds from other Mexican regions. For example, norteño band music, until relatively recently confined to the north of the country, now has a foothold in some rural areas of the state. The same has happened with rap, hip-hop, salsa, and what in orientalist terms is called “tribal” music and dance (used both to describe belly dance done in stereotypical Middle Eastern costume but also a specific, very different type of digitally-generated music that emerged in the north of Mexico and is associated with the norteño fashions of *botas picudas* [pointy boots], big belt buckles, and Texan cowboy hats).

To conclude, walls, doors, tunnels, and bridges, are conceptual instruments that can be materialized and highlight the unity of what they aim to divide. Their violent consequences are becoming more frequent, as exemplified by both rhetoric and facts surrounding not only the Mexico–US border, but also the state

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of Yucatan and its surroundings. However, learning from history, it is possible to affirm that these and other walls, including those Yucatecans have tried to build around themselves, will fall, and that the imagination sustaining them will fail.

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