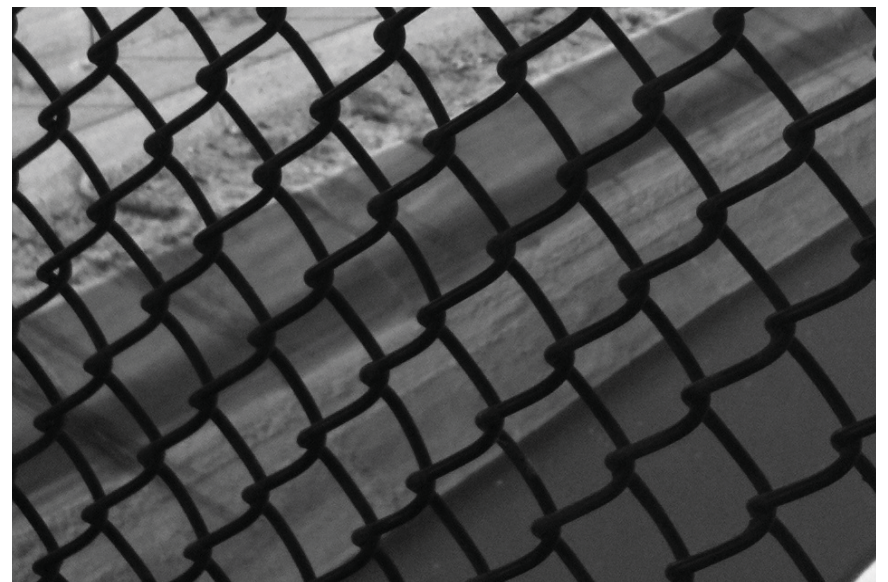




# Race and Border:

The Two-Headed Ogre of  
White Supremacy





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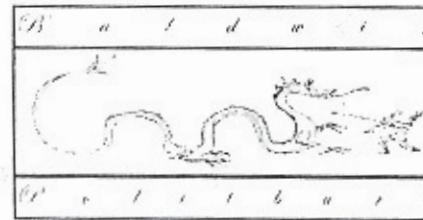
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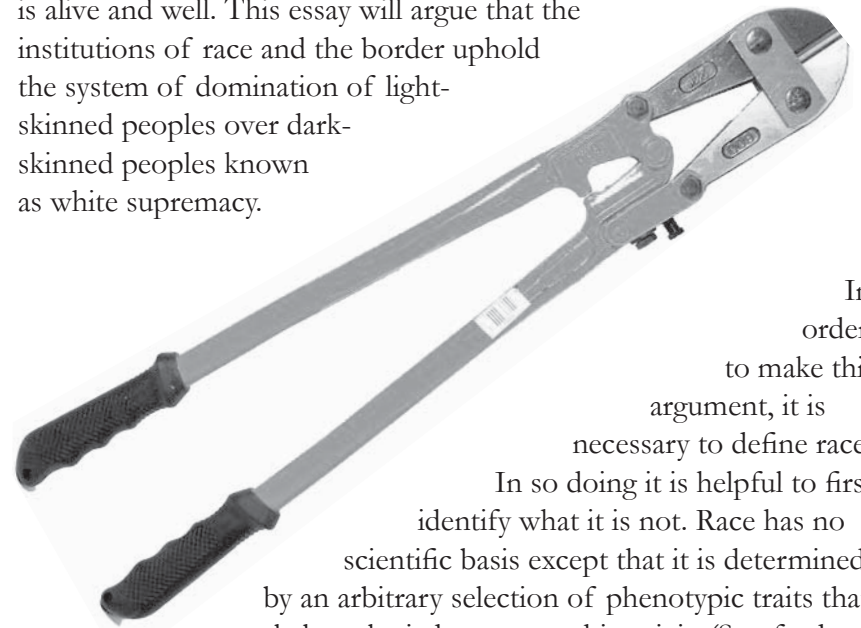
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## INTRODUCING A NEW ABOLITIONISM

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It is of the utmost importance to consider the effect of race on border issues. Since the signing of NAFTA in 1994, the southern boundary of the American nation-state has been the focus of what has been coined an “immigration crisis.” Crisis or not, immigration has become one of the most hotly debated issues in American politics and everyday life. Despite the controversy, neither side seems willing to even mention the issue of race—that is, of course unless it is to insist that race has nothing to do with the issue. This is in part due to the post-Civil Rights Movement taboo on racism. The operative myth is that thanks to the struggles of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks et al., racism is a thing of the past. While the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement are not to be downplayed, the reality is that while racism is no longer talked about (as if not acknowledging it will make it go away), it is alive and well. This essay will argue that the institutions of race and the border uphold the system of domination of light-skinned peoples over dark-skinned peoples known as white supremacy.



In order to make this argument, it is necessary to define race. In so doing it is helpful to first identify what it is not. Race has no scientific basis except that it is determined by an arbitrary selection of phenotypic traits that are only loosely tied to geographic origin (Stanford, 136). Skin color, the main indicator of race, is not a good indicator of geographic origin because dark-skinned people are found in Africa, India, and Melanesia, though these people do not share a recent common ancestry (ibid.). By the same token, light-

skinned people range from the Mediterranean and the Middle East to Northern Europe, yet these peoples are not necessarily genetically similar (ibid.). Most striking is that there is more genetic diversity within the African continent than there is in the entire rest of the world, yet people of African origin are generally considered to be one race (Stanford, 443).

Nor does race have an ethnic basis. Ethnicity is distinct from race in that it is a self-identification based on cultural similarities (Meeks, 4-5). This distinction can be seen in the fact that American Blacks and traditional Southern whites are culturally similar, yet racially divided (“Other Races”). Similarly, the Amish and Hasidic Jews maintain fiercely distinct ethnic identities, yet both are considered white (ibid.).

Race then, is a historically constructed, hierarchically imposed social status. Its existence necessitates unequal social relations between people because it partitions people into groups, one of which receives preferential treatment, while the others are subordinated. By definition, race is a system of discrimination, hierarchy, and power—race presupposes racism (Olson, xvii).

If race is the arbitrary assigning of social status based on phenotypic traits, borders are the arbitrary assignation and partitioning of space based on military conquest. Aside from the Rio Grande, the U.S.-Mexico border has no geographical basis, being made up of glaringly artificial straight lines. Nor does it have ecological basis, as it bisects rivers and migratory paths of various animal species, including humans. It has been historically determined through imperialist aggression as justified by the theological concept of Manifest Destiny. Just as the existence of race presupposes the unequal and antagonistic relations between people, the existence of borders presupposes unequal and antagonistic relations between nation-states. This is because declaring and defending borders are essentially acts of aggression and exclusion. Additionally, the maintenance of borders defines the foreign “other,” a process necessary for the assurance of international enmity and xenophobia.

Together, race and border form the dual heads of the ogre that is white supremacy. Elizabeth Martinez succinctly describes white supremacy as a “historically based, institutionally perpetuated

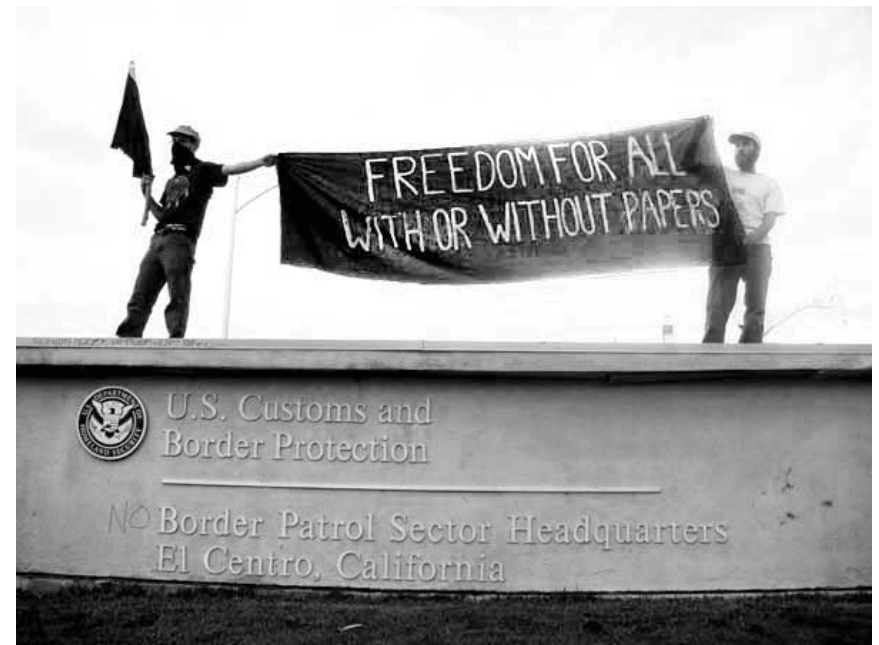


prevent it from making its yearly migration into southern Arizona. The Tohano O'odam people are indigenous to the land the colonizers refer to as southern Arizona and northern Sonora. They have lived in this area since time immemorial but now the border bisects their homeland and divides families.

But despite the immense damage it is causing and despite the looming power of the forces that defending, the border seems fleeting, impermanent. Migration is a natural process that cannot be stopped, no matter how high a wall is built. Therefore the goal of the abolitionist is to merely facilitate what is natural. The division of people based on skin color is also unnatural. It is but a parlor trick, a conniving ply that can only go unexposed for so long. Race and border are manifestations of an alternate reality that, like a dream, will be forgotten upon awakening. There is, outside of this dream reality, no race other than the human race. And there exists through the infinite scope of eternity no nation-states. Instead there is simply the planet Earth, whose surface as it appears from space is unscarred by the boundaries of nation-states. **Let the dream end! Unity between all peoples and harmony with the Earth!**

system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege (51).” She continues by asserting that the U.S. nation-state is based on white supremacy through military conquest (the seizure of indigenous land and the elimination of indigenous peoples), slavery (which provided the labor necessary to build the U.S. nation-state), and military expansion (the seizure of one half of Mexico’s land base through warfare) (53-54). Today, white supremacy manifests itself worldwide, through what is known as the global assembly line of production, in which white nations are the consumers and non-white nations are the producers (59).

Succinctly, race maintains white supremacy at the national level while borders and the institutions that enforce them maintain white supremacy at the international level. The implications of this are clear: if white supremacy is to be stopped, race and border must be abolished!



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF WHITENESS IN THE UNITED STATES

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In order to understand the role of race in contemporary society, a familiarity with its history is necessary. During the colonial period of what would become the United States, the aristocracy feared a unified rebellion of African slaves and European servants. This fear was justified as numerous rebellions of this very sort did in fact occur. They were the natural outgrowth of the realization on the part of African slaves and European servants that they were both oppressed peoples who scarcely had the immediate necessities of survival while their masters lived a life of pampered luxury. In order to remedy this situation, the aristocracy began administering differential treatment to the two groups. Harsher punishments were administered to Africans for trying to escape while Europeans were awarded bounties for turning in runaway slaves. Additionally, servants were given property, cash, and arms after their indentured time was up. This administration of privilege was the genesis of an alliance between poor whites and the ruling class that persists today (Zinn, 23-39).

Soon after the United States gained independence from Great Britain, it began instituting laws that equated citizenship with whiteness (Chomsky, 78). The first of these statutes was the Naturalization Law of 1790, which restricted citizenship to “free white persons” (ibid.). Then came the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required residents of non-slave states to assist in the arrest of former slaves seeking sanctuary (79). In 1857 the Supreme Court ruled that a person of African descent could not become a citizen (81). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 excluded Asians from citizenship (84), while the 1917 Immigration Act barred anyone originating from the area between Afghanistan and the Pacific Ocean from obtaining citizenship (85). The 1921 and 1924 Immigration Acts created immigration quotas based on the national origins of people residing in the United States at the time (86). Coincidentally, only the white population was taken into account when determining these quotas (ibid.). The 1924 Immigration Act also effectively closed the southern border by creating the Border Patrol, which was granted

## CONCLUSION: GOALS OF THE NEW ABOLITIONIST

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The main result of abolishing race and border will be the creation of a unified exploited class that will be able to rise up en masse against its oppressors. White privilege is the mace force preventing this because it serves as a consolation for poor whites that ensures that they will never be at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Olson, xxi). In exchange for this consolation, they form an alliance with the elite who both provide them with privilege and exploit their labor (ibid.). White privilege then, does not exempt people from exploitation but rather reconciles them to it.

If enough people renounce their privilege and essentially defect from the club of whiteness, the entire white supremacist system will fall apart. This is because white supremacy is a game that requires all players to participate. When people break the rules and act in ways that the racial order says they are not supposed to act, the ability to gauge a person’s actions based on perceived race breaks down. An example is the abolitionist John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in an attempt to in fact part of an isolated minority of Northern whites, Southerners portrayed him as a representative sample. Therefore, they overreacted with hostility, to which the North responded with a hostility of its own. In this way, Brown’s actions served as a spark that set off a series of explosions essentially turning the Civil War into a war against slavery (“Abolish the White Race”).

While race represents exploitation at home, the border represents exploitation abroad. Race restricts us from creating balanced and reciprocal relationships with other people and acquiring the materials we need to survive and the border serves as the geographical manifestation of white supremacy that allows the Global north to exploit the Global South. Therefore a unified struggle against white supremacy requires the abolition of both.

Both race and border are unnatural and arbitrary. The Arizona Jaguar, whose migratory path is bisected by the U.S.-Mexico Border, has lived in this area long before nations even existed. But now it faces extinction because the proposed border wall would

percent reported back pains, physical disorders, skin rashes, mouth and throat irritations, and headaches (Peña, 297-298). An additional survey conducted in Tijuana and Juárez found that compared to the general population, maquila workers reported a disproportionate number of such ailments as hypertension, optical nerve disorder or stigmatism, menstrual irregularities and external vaginal bleeding, skin rashes and sores, chronic coughs, and sore throats (Peña, 299).

Water is another important issue in the borderlands. The border region is hot and dry and therefore access to water is a top priority for survival. However, people living along the border, especially on the Mexican side, often find it difficult to acquire water that is both quantitatively and qualitatively adequate. This is in part due to contamination and other realities of an urban landscape. Because clean water is so scarce, it is a contested resource, one which those with the most wealth and power have top claims to.

This unequal distribution of water manifests both locally and, because the border bisects several major rivers, internationally. The most vivid example of the latter occurs in the Mexicali Valley. There, water from the Colorado River is hoarded for agricultural use on the U.S. side of the border while only a trickle makes it into Mexico (Ward, 66). The water that does make it south of the border often has high salinity levels that result in permanent damage to crops and soil (67). Because the U.S. government sanctions the hoarding of water north of the border, Mexican farmers are all but powerless to improve the situation (73).

the authority to deport “illegal immigrants” (98). It wasn’t until 1952 that citizenship and immigration laws began to shift towards inclusivity. That year all racial and national restrictions on citizenship were lifted (87). This reform came none too soon, as prior to it the only country outside the United States with such restrictions was Nazi Germany (ibid.).

One cannot talk about immigration in the United States without also talking about assimilation. Toni Morrison summed up this process by asserting, “the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of Blacks as the real aliens” (Chomsky, 103). Another way of putting this is that assimilation means finding one’s place in the racial order (105). Because a white supremacist democracy requires the majority of the population be extended white privilege, whiteness is a flexible category (“Other Races”). It has historically been expanded to incorporate non-Anglo-Saxons, particularly people originating from Southern and Eastern Europe (Chomsky, 106). For non-Europeans, assimilation means becoming non-white, and being treated accordingly (107). Interestingly, a study conducted among Latino adolescents in Los Angeles found that most recent immigrants have the highest aspirations and the strongest belief in the “American Dream” (ibid.). The reason for this is clear enough: they have not yet been educated into the U.S. racial order (ibid.).

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

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The history of the U.S.-Mexico Border is characterized by military expansion as justified by the theological concept of Manifest Destiny. This arcane philosophy stated that the United States was destined by decree of God to seize all land in North America from

the Atlantic to the Pacific. It is essentially the notion (and one that persists today) that whites have the right to dominate everything around them (Martinez, 58).

The white supremacist destiny began manifesting itself in the southwestern portion of North America shortly after Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821. Mexico welcomed Euro-American immigrants into Texas to provide a buffer zone against hostile Indians to the north (Spickard, 145). These white immigrants brought slaves, although slavery had already been abolished in Mexico (ibid.). In order to defend their right to subjugate and dehumanize Black people, the white immigrants fought a war of independence against Mexico, which they won in 1836 (146). Texas remained an independent nation until it was annexed by the United States in 1845 (147). Shortly thereafter, the U.S. army began squabbling with Mexico over land. In 1846, the U.S. blockaded the Rio Grande and, after a few brief skirmishes on contested territory, declared war on Mexico (ibid.). Two years later, the war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which granted the United States fifty-five percent of Mexico's territory (Chomsky, 94). The U.S. nation-state's southern boundary was finalized in 1853 with the acquisition of what is today southern Arizona and New Mexico in the Gadsden Purchase.

With the addition of this new land, the U.S. was faced with

## HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THE BORDERLANDS

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There are a number of health and environmental concerns that surround the issues of border and race. Environmental racism is the concept that people of color are more likely to be targeted by environmental health hazards and that they are disproportionately affected by the location

of uncontrolled toxic waste sites and other sources of environmental degradation in workplaces and communities (Peña, 303).

Environmental degradation in the border region, whose inhabitants are largely non-white, falls under this category.

In 1992, fifteen cases of anencephaly, a condition in which infants are born with missing or severely deformed brains, were recorded in Brownsville/Matamoros. The occurrence of anencephaly has been linked to the illegal dumping of toxic waste by maquiladoras. Under the 1983 La Paz Agreement, all hazardous chemicals imported into Mexico must be disposed of in their country of origin. In 1989 however, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that only one percent of maquiladoras were in compliance with this and other environmental regulations (Peña, 280–281).

The mismanagement of hazardous wastes also results in outbreaks of liver and pancreatic cancers, chronic pulmonary infections, and other diseases of the respiratory and lymphatic systems in communities surrounding maquiladoras (Peña, 301). Most at risk however, are the maquiladora workers themselves. A survey conducted at the Solidev Mexicana maquiladora in Tijuana found that eighty percent of workers reported eye irritations while thirty-five



and the danger of succumbing to heat stroke or dehydration. In fact, since 1994 the death rates of people attempting to migrate to the U.S. via Mexico have increased five-fold (372). This amounts to 3,800 in the past five years (Nevins). Additionally, since 1994, Border Patrol funding has tripled (Spickard, 372) and border militarization has intensified with the stationing of armed personnel and the implementation of such wartime technologies as night vision scopes, underground sensors, and pilotless drones (Nevins). These are clearly not the actions of a benevolent nation welcoming economic refugees, but of a nation at war that will take all measures to keep a foreign menace out (Nevins).

Prevention of terrorism is often cited as the reason for such action, but if this is the case, why have there been no actions to secure the Canadian border? It would make more tactical sense, as the only two incidences of people being arrested for accusations of terrorism along a U.S. international boundary occurred there (Spickard, 438). Nor does the case of Timothy McVeigh fall into this line of reasoning. McVeigh crossed state lines to commit the Oklahoma City Bombing, which resulted in the deaths of 167 people in 1995 (Nevins). Yet there were no moves by the U.S. government to secure state boundaries (ibid.). Why the discrepancy? Simple. There is no need to secure the Canadian border because Canada, like the U.S., is a white, consumer nation. By the same token, McVeigh's actions did not provoke a crackdown on inter-state travel because he was a white citizen (Nevins).

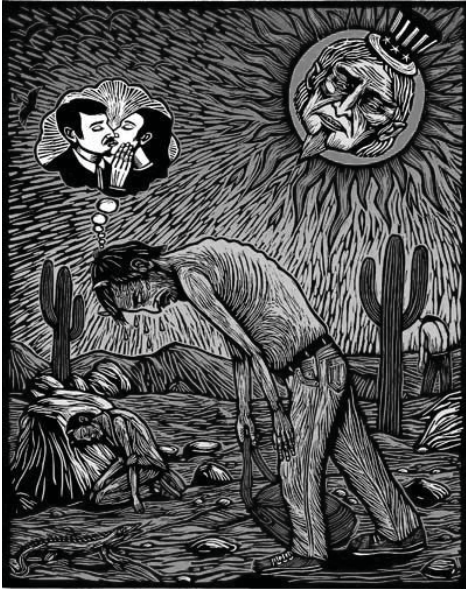
The ironic contradiction is that the intention of such border militarization projects as Operation Gatekeeper are not to keep immigrants out of the country *per se*, but rather to make the process extremely difficult and to criminalize border crossers. The result is precarity — immigrants have very little room to stand on because not only are they desperate for jobs, they are also viewed as criminals in the eyes of the state and its citizens. This is the ideal situation for capital because it provides a class of exploitable workers with very little political power to which employers have virtually no obligations.

the problem of assigning a racial status to the people who lived there. While many never actually received it, in theory, the Mexicans living in the seized territory were granted citizenship if they so chose (Spickard, 149-150). Thus “Mexican” became a distinct race that had some elements of whiteness such as citizenship (150), but also had social elements of non-whiteness such as exclusion from land ownership and from certain jobs, schools, public facilities, and residential areas (Chomsky, 96).

It is interesting to note that prior to the Mexican-American War, the people living in these areas had an entirely different racial status characterized by the Latin American system known as *sociedad de castas* (Wade, 29). In this system, whites occupied the top rings of the racial hierarchy; Blacks and Indians the bottom, and the middle area consisted of various mixed races (ibid.). *Mestizaje*, or mixing, is in and of itself a complex racial system with specific labels such as *mulato* (black and white), *zambo* (Black and Indian), and *mestizo* (Indian and white) (28). Within this middle area, there is some degree of mobility based on color, descent, occupation, and status of spouse (29). After the seizure of the southwest by the United States, however, this system was essentially scrapped and people became, with few exceptions, simply “Mexican.” This is not to say that the Latin American racial order is favorable or justified, but merely to point out that race is the arbitrary social designation of those in power.

## WHITE SUPREMACY AND THE GLOBAL ASSEMBLY LINE OF PRODUCTION

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Now more than ever, white supremacy has taken on a global character. Its primary manifestation is in what is known as the global assembly line of production in which nations of color are forced to produce commodities for white nations. The U.S.-Mexico Border, perhaps more than any other international boundary, illustrates this sharp contrast because it is one of the few places in the world where the Global North comes into direct

geographical contact with the Global South. This distinction between Global North and Global South is also conceptualized in that there is a geographical divide between nations that are made up largely of consumers in the global economy and nations that are made up largely of producers in the global economy. The former are generally white while the latter are generally non-white. Just as the privilege of whiteness presupposes the oppression of non-whites, the prosperity of the First World depends on the exploitation of the Third World. The U.S.-Mexico border then, being the most powerful representation of this global divide, is an important symbol of international white supremacy.

Increasingly, this partitioning of the world's people is taking on the form of neoliberalism, an ideology that seeks to create a global free market by deregulating trade. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is a prime example of this. NAFTA, which was signed in 1994, essentially eliminated tariffs between Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Because the United States had relatively efficient production processes (in part due to subsidies from

taxpayers' money), especially in the agricultural sector, it was able to flood Mexico with cheap goods. This effectively enslaved Mexico to the U.S. market and, because Mexican farmers could no longer compete with cheap American goods, forced massive migration to find jobs in the U.S. and in border cities.

Along the border, migrants largely find work in maquiladoras, or assembly plants. Maquiladoras began sprouting up along the U.S.-Mexico Border in 1965 with the Mexican government's signing of the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), which provided subsidies to foreign companies to build factories in the region. The U.S.-Mexico border is ideal for these production plants because it allows companies to exploit cheap labor in Mexico and then ship their products mere miles away where they are devoured by the voracious appetites of American consumers. The border region became even more attractive to foreign investors with the signing of NAFTA, which with its elimination of tariffs, made the shipping of products to the United States even more economical.

While those in power seek to open up international borders to the flow of goods and capital, they also seek to limit the freedom of people to move across these same boundaries. This dichotomy can be conceptualized under the framework of Global Apartheid – the reality that poor and generally non-white people have fewer rights and access to resources because of their geographic location and that based on the chance location of their birth, those from the Global South have less freedom of movement than those from the Global North (Nevins).

1994 was a significant year in the proliferation of Global Apartheid in that it saw both the signing of NAFTA and the passing of Operation Gatekeeper (Spickard, 372). While NAFTA made it easier for corporations to ship goods across the U.S.-Mexico Border, Operation Gatekeeper sought to limit people's ability to migrate from Mexico into the United States by constructing barbed wire topped steel fences across the border in urban centers of Tijuana/San Diego, El Paso/Juárez, and Brownsville/Matamoros (372).

Rather than curb immigration, however, Operation Gatekeeper merely forced people attempting to cross the border out of the cities and into the deserts, where they face harsh conditions