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The border isn't as scary as you think

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I am from *la frontera*, meaning “frontier” in Spanish but translated in English as “border.” The news over the past few weeks might make you think that places such as my hometown — McAllen, in the Rio Grande Valley — are under siege from waves of undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers, a crisis of lawlessness so extreme that drastic measures are needed. Tearing children from their parents, or, when that proves too unpopular, corralling families in tent cities. Then there’s the \$25 billion wall that’s needed to safeguard the United States from the threat of being overrun.

The view from down here is different. In a 2018 rating of the 100 most dangerous cities in the United States based on FBI data, no border cities — not San Diego, not Texas cities such as Brownsville, Laredo or El Paso — appeared even in the top 60. McAllen’s crime rate was lower than Houston’s or Dallas’s, according to Texas Monthly in 2015. The Cato Institute’s research consistently shows that immigrants, both legal and undocumented, are markedly less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans.

In the U.S. borderlands with Mexico, our inherent duality is what helps our communities thrive. We work hard, attend school and worship just as Americans do all across the nation. Yet we are overwhelmingly Latino, and a quarter of us are foreign-born. We are here and there. Some of us were born here, and some of us were not. But it doesn’t matter — *pero ni modo* — all are welcome.

Maybe it is the composition of the humble communities already established in the borderlands, not the new arrivals, that so alarms some politicians and pundits. Maybe that is why militarizing a region supposedly in crisis has come to be seen as an acceptable idea. In 2016, Texas deployed 250 state troopers to our region, and in 2017, Gov. Greg Abbott signed off on an \$800 million allocation for border security (yet vetoed nearly \$860,000 for the Colonias Initiative Project, a long-running state effort to help poor communities on the Texas border obtain drinking water, wastewater service and roads).

This year, Congress approved 100 miles of border wall, and federal authorities are beginning the process of seizing land for it in my hometown. In April, the Defense Department began sending National Guard personnel to the border with Mexico, with as many as 4,000 troops authorized for deployment. The number of U.S. Border Patrol agents at the border is also rising.

The government has a responsibility to police the nation’s borders, and I am grateful for the people who keep us safe. But today’s military presence and stepped-up law enforcement remind me this isn’t the first time politicians have used Texas’ southern border to burnish their tough-on-crime credentials.

In 1915, the Texas Rangers were sent to establish control of the border when the Mexican Revolution prompted an increase in Mexican immigration and a threat to Anglo dominance in the region. Rangers and civilian vigilantes massacred hundreds of Tejanos with no repercussions.

Nothing so extreme is conceivable today, but killings of immigrants by law enforcement in the borderlands still happen. In South Texas, we are still waiting to find out why a U.S. Border Patrol agent in May shot to death Claudia Patricia Gomez Gonzalez, a 20-year-old Guatemalan. According to news reports, she was trained as an accountant and, unable to find work, had traveled 1,500 miles in search of a better life. She was killed a mile into U.S. territory, in Rio Bravo, about 130 miles from McAllen in the same region where hundreds were massacred before.

The heavy-handed law-enforcement presence in this region creates a climate of fear and mistrust. Residents are routinely stopped for no clear reason. Texas law now encourages local law-enforcement officers to hand over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement people who are in the country illegally. Border Patrol agents are known to ride with state troopers; in an area that is 88 percent Latino, routine traffic stops are regarded as a tool for implementing federal immigration law.

Enforcement is ripe for the intimidation of non-citizens and citizens alike. At a Border Patrol checkpoint 74 miles from the actual border, agents have asked my purpose for leaving the area.

I wonder what will finally placate the fearful people 1,500 miles away who sent these border agents and National Guard troops to the borderlands. More checkpoints, more families detained, vaster tent cities? Maybe the wall they dream of? For most people, or most open-minded people, a simple visit might be enough to be reassured that this is not a scary place. It's my home. *Mi frontera*. My frontier.