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On U.S.-Mexico Border Culture

Josiah McConnell Heyman

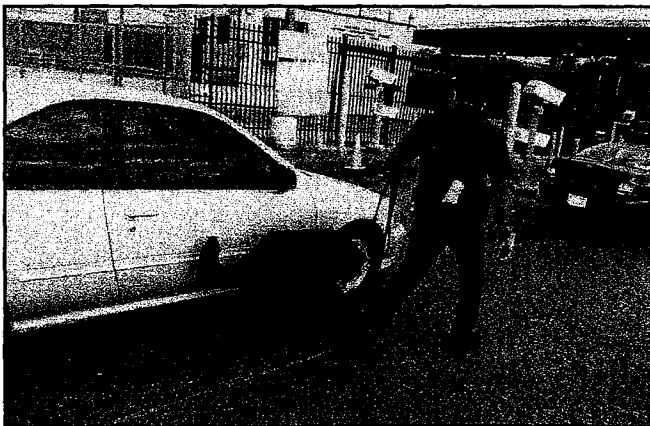
AROUND 1900, the then-young field of anthropology started to use “culture” for the learned way of life of a group of people. That usage has gained widespread acceptance among scholars and the general public. We unhesitatingly refer to Mexican, U.S., or Tohono O’odham “cultures.” Implicitly, one culture corresponds with one people, a notion that fails in a border situation. At borders, people meet, exchange ideas and resources, change identities, and alter or meld their cultures. The border provides yeast for the ferment in recent anthropological thinking about culture. Scholars now emphasize the historical making of culture, its inflection among those of differing social status and power, and its fluidity in daily life. The notion of one group with one definite set of customs is rendered more complex, but also more realistic and alive. The vision of culture offered in this paper is no longer simple and comfortable — density of analysis and sharpened social commentary inevitably accompany deepened consideration of relationship and process — but it is meant to be welcoming and illuminating, for I am convinced that new ideas do not have to be pedantic and unapproachable.

Joel Garreau’s clever book, *The Nine Nations of North America* (1981), posits “Mexamerica,” blending two cultures on the U.S.-Mexico border, among his novel “nations.” In support, he cites mass U.S. consumption of salsa and other Mexican-styled goods, Spanish-language billboards and storefronts in new immigrant business districts, the gradual rise to political and social prominence of established Mexican Americans, and the tremendous growth of the *maquiladoras* (export assembly factories) in Mexico’s border cities. A grab bag of trends and activities mis-

leadingly suggests social and cultural unification. As Franz Boas — anthropology’s first great exponent of the culture concept — pointed out, a cultural feature in one context does not necessarily mean the same in another. The “Mexicanness” of salsa to customers at Taco Bell hardly conveys the depth of sentiment that the rediscovery of *Mexicanidad* does for the Mexican Americans Robert Alvarez discusses in this issue. And *maquildoras* are an economic system and can only be considered as a U.S. cultural penetration of Mexico by carefully tracing the influence of work experiences and money for people as different as wealthy, border industrial park developers, middle-aged U.S. engineers, and adolescent Mexican machine-tenders.

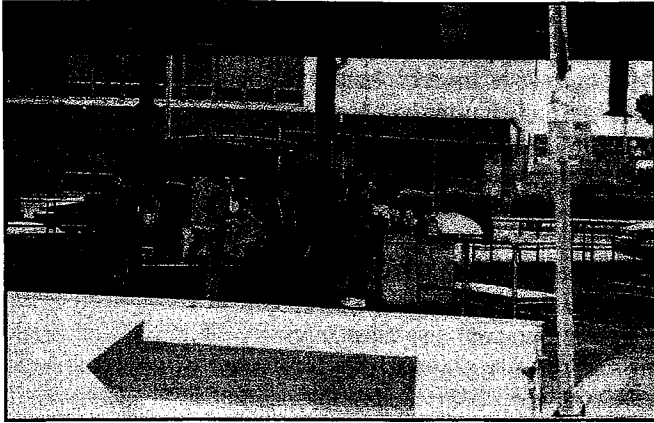
There is no special accomplishment in picking flaws in Garreau’s book, which was meant to be provocative and accessible. But it is helpful as a way of introducing some of the cautions with which we apply “culture” to the border.

First, we cannot be satisfied with the idea that border culture consists of the collision and merger of two pre-existing national cultures. Some cultural features of the border certainly do stem from a synthesis of the historical traditions of northern Mexico and Southern and Western United States, but the two nations did not arrive at the border with neatly identified cultures shared by nationals of all social classes and political persuasions. Indeed, such unity and purity of place and culture probably never exist. Nor are the trajectories necessarily to merge — important forces for polarization continue to operate. To understand the neat trick of simultaneous synthesis and separation, we should distinguish the vast body of unconscious practices in everyday culture, where one might indeed encounter considerable mixing



Immigration and Naturalization Service officers with drug-sniffing dogs checking vehicles from Matamoros, Mexico, at the Gateway International Bridge in Brownsville, Texas, March 2000.

Scott Cook



INS officers at work with arrivees from Matamoros, Tamaulipas, at the Gateway International Bridge in Brownsville, Texas, March 2000.

Scott Cook

of sources, and the relatively few items that consciously convey affiliation with one cultural "tradition" or political "nation," or realignment among them.

Second, we need to recognize different kinds of cultural phenomena, and in whose power it is to create them. The global search of banks and stock investors, via corporate managements, for lowered costs and intensified labor productivity account for *maquiladoras*, although such investors might live far removed from Ciudad Juárez or Tijuana. Conversely, the inclusion of English catch-phrases in northern border Spanish is a display of humor and skill in wordplay almost entirely dependent on personal border-crossing experience and a face-to-face audience. My model of culture envisions sets of people — poorer, richer, recently arrived from Mexico and Illinois, or long settled on the Rio Grande — equipped with great expressive, interpersonal, and business creativity, moving about a cellular structure provided by the workings of global economics and binational politics. When watching the structure mutate and the people move, we are inevitably drawn to a historical view of culture.

The Mexico-U.S. boundary, drawn after bitter conflict, split the lower Rio Grande Mexican community in half, and yanked other northern Mexican regions (*e.g.*, California, San Antonio, New Mexico) abruptly into the United States. The struggles that followed exacerbated nationalism on both sides, so that the border was born amid a polarization of conscious affiliation, even if in practice important cultural features merged, such as northern Mexican/Tejano *vaquero* (cowboy) technology and customs combining with barbed wire and southeastern U.S. cattle farming.

A simple story might exemplify our era as a partial reconciliation of that initial divorce. However, a different moment in the border's history, the 1870s to 1910, draws our attention. During that epoch, the two sides of the border resemble each other surprisingly more than they do today. Both southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico felt the first convulsions of capitalist development centered on the industrial extraction of commodi-



ties from nature — cattle, cotton, copper, silver, and lead — and their shipment on railroads that readily bridged the boundary. (ASARCO and Smelertown, as described in this issue by Scott Cook, remain an icon of that era, surrounded by the detritus of our own time: interstates, brick factories, and systematic border policing.) A dynamic, forceful, and quite racist Anglo-American upper-class dominated both sides of the boundary, sometimes in alliance with wealthy Mexican landowners and politicians. The disparity between these alliances and the racial biases of the day was reconciled by thinking of the Mexican upper-class as culturally "Spanish." The reigning metaphors were race and civilization, not national identification; poorer Mexicans were "more Indian" and "less Spanish" in both countries. Facing discrimination in both nations, it mattered little to common Mexicans whether they were north or south of the border. A Mexican copper miner in Cananea, Sonora, or Morenci, Arizona, earned less than an Anglo American; his family lived in a segregated neighborhood; his children attended a segregated school; and so forth.

The boundary in 1910 was far more porous than today. Differential citizenship posed no barrier to entry and work. The U.S. required only a minimal head tax and a nominal check for literacy — both frequently evaded — while the Border Patrol, upon its establishment in 1924, focused on liquor smuggling and lacked the capacity to cover the boundary. Genealogies collected in Arizona and Sonora show a constant binational shuttling, peasant villages to construction camps to smelter cities and back again. People spent money in dollars as often as they did in pesos; peddlers hauled a constant stream of new consumer goods from Tucson and El Paso. If ever there was a non-national border society and culture, this epoch had it — differently experienced, of course, for the upper-class and the common folk. The irony is that in a society that strictly dismissed the worth of laboring Mexicans, their contribution particularly endures in modern border culture. Especially influential were the novel occupations and materials of industry. Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez's father, Adalberto, for



INS toll stations at International Bridge No. 1, Laredo, Texas, March 2000.
Scott Cook



U.S. Border Patrol bus preparing to disembark Mexican deportees at International Bridge No. 1 in Laredo, Texas, March 2000.
Scott Cook

example, turned his family's Sonoran horse-caravan background into a career — repairing automobiles and trucks. From that moment forward, cultural creativity in the maintenance and modification of cars has marked the Borderlands — but one of many such examples.

Echoes of this era are still heard in remnant rural Anglo-American prejudice and the persistent reliance of the U.S. West on Mexican working folk. Still, in the last 90 years the two sides of the border have drawn apart — never separated, but more distinguishable today than in 1910. The process began when Mexico's revolution (1910-1920) launched a long and never-completed project of nation-building in contradistinction to the United States. An exemplary figure was José Vasconcelos, a northern border Mexican who attended school in Texas, but whose concept of the *raza cósmica* (the "cosmic race") rejected North American models in favor of a Mexican national ideal compounded of Indian and Spanish roots. After Vasconcelos, the northern border continued to worry centralizers in Mexico. They strived to bring it under control, in politics and economics (the *maquiladora* factories were initiated in 1965 as part of a Mexican governmental initiative, PRONAF, the national border program), and also in culture. In the 1960s and

1970s, people in Agua Prieta, Sonora, watched U.S. (English-language) television stations, but in 1981 the Mexican government planted a transmitter that broadcast in Spanish popular Mexican programming. By 1984 to 1986 most people had televisions on which this channel chattered constantly. Whether drawing on variety shows or news, people talked about ideas, concerns, and styles that were shared by the entire republic. The Mexican government knew what scholars have recently found out: television unifies fractured nations.

To understand the contemporary Mexican-side version of border culture, then, we need to envision two contradictory influences, nationalist culture-building and persistent economic dependence on the U.S., tugging and pulling on a growing social organism, the great Mexican border city. Tijuana, with a population of less than 20,000 in 1940, inflated to nearly 1,000,000 in 1990; Ciudad Juárez, Mexicali, and other border metropoli have grown comparably. Dual influences are evident in the physiognomy of these cities, as Daniel Arreola and James Curtis have shown in *The Mexican Border Cities*: the Mexican plaza as a patriotic focus of the city, together with U.S.-style shopping centers and suburban housing tracts stretched along boulevard spines. Delineating the "culture" of entities of such size and dynamism takes some care. People even in the most apparently uniform situations are varied, diverse, and interwoven so that their culture likewise is made of disparate but also interrelated parts. In Mexico's northern border cities, social class is an important source of differentiation.

The Mexican upper-class (an alliance of more political and business-oriented networks) is characterized, like other Latin American elites, by intense striving to preserve privilege and power for the next generation and to close doors of entry to almost all strivers from the lower ranks of society. They conduct this subtle game of reproduction in no small degree through the device of North American culture: schooling on the U.S. side, frequent shopping and vacation visits, and carefully honed English-language skills. Yet the aim of this "borrowing" from the U.S. is distinctly Mexican, providing signs of societal power and sophistication for the persistent patron-client pattern that marks the height of their political-cultural skill. Among the key clients of this Mexican upper-class are members of the professional and technical "middle-class," who burgeon in the active border economy. This middle group aspires to the cultural style of the upper-class, mixing Mexican national culture with the scattered bits of U.S. style they can afford; but the problem of Latin American middle-classes, in this region as elsewhere, is their economic fragility, facing declining buying power and insecure employment. With bad luck, or perhaps crossing a powerful patron, they might be exiled to the vast working or "popular" class.

That group is a complicated story all its own, ranging

from people facing tenuous survival as day-laborers to large, prosperous blue-collar families, the husband perhaps a carpenter, the sons his assistants, several daughters working in assembly plants, and the wife a manager of all these diverse incomes, and a petty store-owner on the side. Except for some distinctive settlements, such as colonies of indigenous people from Mexico's south, most glaringly impoverished folk are connected to more stable families who are their neighbors, friends, and kin. For this reason, stereotypes of border-city poverty are misleading. A blind woman and her children, whom I knew in Agua Prieta, lived in a small two-room house and were indeed quite poor but received considerable support, economic and personal, from her brothers, one of whom had a large firewood business and another who was a labor leader. She was a highly respected and influential Catholic layperson and block leader, her slightly disheveled appearance notwithstanding. More will be said later on the popular classes; here it suffices to contrast their version of U.S. borrowing with that of their upper-class compatriots. While the common border folk also consume in the U.S. to the extent they can afford, and often encounter North American managers while at work, they are immersed in the culture of Mexican state-building, the patriotic routines of elementary school, and the glitzy variety shows of Mexican television, rather than orchestrating and conducting such cultural constructions.

In this context, the Mexican upper-class is most likely to grasp U.S. culture as an object, a possession to be owned, consumed, and displayed. This orientation to the U.S., however, does not negate their intense commitment to economic and political rule in Mexico. The middle-class is little understood, but probably quite ambivalent toward the U.S. Its aspirations are certainly affected by the elite's facade that directs its attention northward. Likewise, Mexican professional-technical education is deeply oriented toward North American curricula, standards, and technology. Educated middle-classes, however, often have a bent toward nationalism, and one would expect this to prove true in border

Mexico also. The popular classes are the least likely to grasp U.S. culture as an object; they are the least likely to learn English in school or have the resources and political capacity to work as binational "brokers." The working people's relationships with the U.S. are of two sorts: domination by specific institutional powers, such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service or U.S. multinational corporations; and personal relationships across the border with siblings, children, or friends who have migrated to the States.

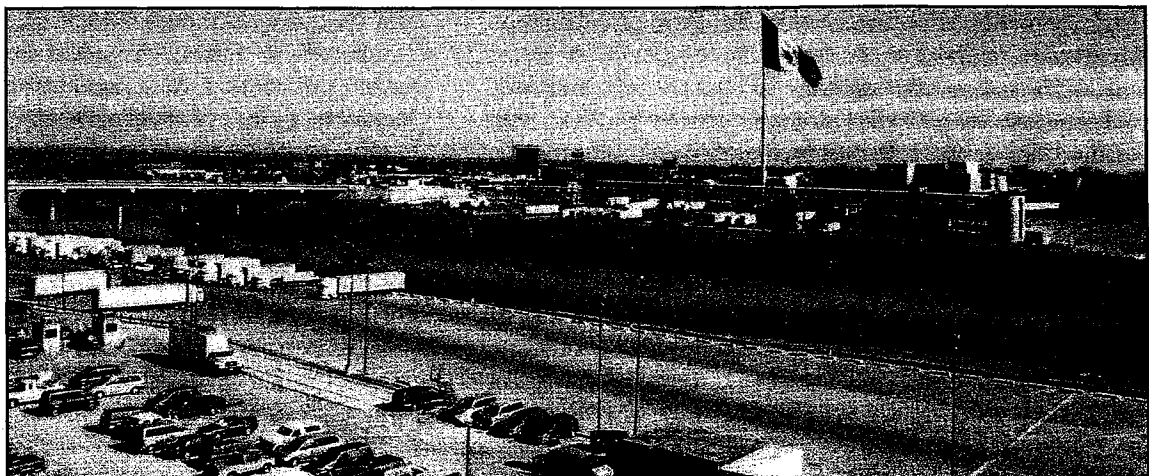


Just as has happened with Mexican nationalism, events have conspired to differentiate U.S.-side Borderland culture from the shared tradition of the early 20th century. Ironically, this has involved the rise to power of Mexican Americans (using that term for want of a settled ethnic label) who forced open the doors of government, employment, business, and education. The story begins in the 1940s, when working- and middle-class Mexican Americans struggled to tear down Anglo-American domination and racial segregation in search of a more ample democracy. They cohered on the basis of distinctly U.S. experiences (veterans in the aftermath of World War II and college students in the 1960s), and they insisted on fair participation in distinctly U.S. institutions, like public school boards and civil service jobs, though in education, the racist paternalism and neglect of the past have plagued these Borderlands and ethnic succession alone has not been enough to overcome the legacy of third-rate services.

At the same time, it is unjust to view Mexican-American culture as purely assimilationist; the interpersonal alliances that made liberatory politics possible arose in culturally distinctive meeting places such as the *conjunto* (small band) dances sponsored by clubs, unions, and veterans' organizations. A more subtle view of culture allows for apparently contradictory attitudes and practices, in this case the subtle balancing of community codes and dominant-society knowledge

View of Mexican Customs station in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, across the Rio Grande from Laredo, Texas, March 2000.

Scott Cook



practiced by generationally deep, politically savvy Mexican Americans.

The Mexican-American struggle remade the U.S. Borderlands in critical ways. By insisting on equality among ancestry groups, the Mexican-Americans tore down the racist capitalism of 1900 and made way for the liberal capitalism of the 2000s. In this brave new world, prejudiced language is looked down on and a globally tolerant attitude is encouraged — at least as long as tolerance makes money. This is expressed in the inclusion of Mexican style in U.S. consumer culture, as embarrassingly superficial as that may be. The fraying fabric in U.S. tolerance today is class rather than race. The older Anglo-American border elites knew many Mexican Americans, understood them to belong to a lower class and race, and treated them badly; the prosperous new elites, still mostly Anglo Americans (some are Mexican Americans) of the near border suburbs like north San Diego County, know few working-class folk of Mexican origin, and fear them as the bearers of lower property values and crowded schools, not to mention diseases and drugs. Liberals indulge the same stereotypes, but dwell on them in hand-wringing concern and benevolent do-gooding — much well-meant journalism about the border reeks of this. In an ironic turn, class prejudice plus would-be tolerance equals renewed racism, because the veritable folk devil of the prosperous in the contemporary U.S. West is the poor, sheepish, Mexican migrant, particularly if cold, hungry, and without documents.

As a description of the actual Borderlands, such worries are largely paranoid fantasy; but ideas have force. Whether fearful or sanctimonious, or both at once, these anxieties invite the U.S. federal government to micro-manage the border. The U.S. Borderlands used to be ignored by the central state, perhaps because regional elites already had it in hand; today the U.S. government monitors toxic waste, plans water and sewage facilities, checks commercial cargo, surveys the air from giant electronics-bearing balloons, glimpses into the night for undocumented migrants, and collects information and rumors at the Drug Enforcement Administration's El Paso Intelligence Center. It is hard to know if the border was better off neglected or so minutely taken care of! Indisputably, the nation-state has strengthened on the U.S. side of the border, and it brings to the regional cultural mix both committed state employees and the rewards and punishments embodied in governmental policy that they deploy. But the view of the border as a "problem region" is largely imposed from the U.S. interior. It informs us of the thinking and workings of power, but does not give us a feel for contemporary U.S. Borderlanders and their daily lives.

Who are they?

The vast majority of U.S. Borderlanders are of Mexican ancestry, though one must take into full account the Native Americans, Anglo-American ranchers, and the scatter of individuals of varied origin drawn to the border for personal reasons. It would be a mistake to take all Borderlanders of Mexican ancestry as uniform carriers of a border cultural synthesis. Perhaps it is more helpful to think of them as complicated individuals, stretched between two competing cultural affiliations, one being close identification with U.S. citizenship and the other being a strong sense of Mexican-origin community networks and trust. The construction of Mexican national culture, deliberate and defensive on the part of a weaker country, does not compare in cultural effect to that of a powerful centralizer like the U.S., overtly through patriotic schools, military service, and jobs such as police and immigration officers, and covertly through the general denigration of things Mexican by associating them with poverty, corruption, and third-worldness. Furthermore, while Mexican relationships to U.S. culture play out across a full range of class positions, Mexican-American relationships to dominant U.S. and subordinate Mexican culture subtly fracture and rank a people who, on the whole, fall within one class, being blue-collar workers and small-business owners. A characteristically combined economic, political, and cultural gap would be between the family of a Mexican-American police officer and that of a recent immigrant seasonal packing-shed worker, though a schematic example underestimates the highly personal way in which individuals strain toward different self-images. While remaining aware of both individual choice and the broader context of U.S. institutions, inequality, and cultural ranking, a first approximation of differing Mexican-American orientations toward their Mexican heritage might be had by considering historical generations of settlement within U.S. territory.

Mexican labor migration to the U.S. is a long-standing pattern (a fact often forgotten in the political fuss over immigration policy), but it is important to recognize the demographic fact of steady and substantial Mexican settlement in the U.S. in every year since 1965, and its cultural impact. Much of culture is learned in childhood, so when new adult immigrants operate in terms of Spanish-language, ethnic businesses, and Mexican styles of interpersonal relations, it should hardly surprise us. Nor should we think that their transnational criss-crossing, sojourning in the U.S. for a while, departing, and returning, is anything out of the ordinary, for it is a pattern that has been seen among every group of U.S. immigrants except those politically prevented from visiting home. New arrivals contribute substantially to the expanding *colonias*, settlements of self-built housing along the Rio Grande, and in agricultural regions of the West that give the contemporary Borderlands a bit of the landscape personality of Mexico. Similar observations can be made about the urban



Street scenes from the new border boom town of Nuevo Progreso, Tamaulipas, serving Texas' Rio Grande Valley, March 2000. *Scott Cook*

barrios (Latino neighborhoods) where these new residents cluster.

But will this florescence of recent migrant culture continue, or will it gradually blend into the U.S. mosaic? This yet-to-be-decided question is the focus of a fascinating debate, in which some scholars emphasize economic, political, social, and cultural incorporation in the U.S., while others propose that unlike past Mexican immigrants in "transition," current border-crossers are perpetually "transnational" because of the intensified flux of the contemporary world.

On the other end of the generational time-line are those Mexican Americans whose ancestors were included in the boundaries of the U.S. in 1848, or who moved from Mexico before 1929. (Because of the Great Depression and coerced expulsion of a half-million Mexican Americans, there is a migratory gap in the 1930s.) They form the backbone of the U.S. version of border culture, not only literally mixing languages and culture traits, but being the populace with the most enduring involvement in the affairs of the border region. It is their commitment to place, whether that be the lower Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio, la Mesilla, or Tucson, that provides this group with the power to crystallize disparate phenomena into a conscious awareness of borderness. In the middle (and there are no neat boundaries here) are the migrants of 1940 to 1965 and their children, most of them working folk from the interior of Mexico rather than "ur-borderlanders." For this reason, José Limón refers to them as *fuereños*, outsiders — relative to the oldest populace, of course.

For the *fuereños*, Limón demonstrates with sensitivity and depth how cultural analysis can hang on this skeletal framework of culture that I have described. The common working folk of south Texas are buffeted by the contemporary domestic and global economy, aware of the shimmering, beautiful images of contemporary American prosperity, but undermined by dead-end service and construction jobs that pay little and disappear overnight. Their expressive culture surges onto the nightclub dance floor, as they artfully spin out polkas

and *cumbias*, creating fulfillment and completeness in a life that otherwise accords little of either. Still, violence between men over minor offenses — a bump on the dance floor, a spilled beer — remains a perilous possibility. Men, whom the larger society degrades, retain in a defensive stance their intense pride. Meanwhile women torn between runaway men and family pressures to marry seek a dream dancing partner — maybe even the handsome old devil himself — who will treat them romantically, generously, with beauty and style.

Border culture, then, does not reside with any single populace, nor even with two national cultures blended together. Border culture happens *between* people, in exchanges among coalitions and clusters, sometimes between Mexicans and North Americans, but also within each nation. Anthony F. C. Wallace, arguing that culture is not the "replication of uniformity" but rather the "organization of diversity," directs our attention to how cultural schemes help people communicate across social boundaries. Each person has only a partial command of the total set of potential culture in a given time and place. The collective performance of culture, like an orchestra, requires people to connect different pieces of their incomplete knowledge into an operating whole. How we connect our little part of culture to that of others is particularly telling. Wallace refers to the recondite rules for doing this as a "mazeway." Critical symbols, such as "the border," guard the vital junctions in the maze. At each junction, enough signs and meaning are shared so that both parties usually, but not always, succeed in the mutual construction of a social edifice.

But a single symbol certainly does not mean the same thing to all parties in the cultural transaction. "*Lo mexicano*," the "Mexicanness" of particular border practice connotes very different meanings to an upper-class Mexican in her U.S.-worshipping mode or her nationalist mode, to the "remexicanizing" Mexican Americans Alvarez describes, or to the U.S. colonia dweller narrating how she left Mexico in the aftermath of violent factional politics. In tandem with the social inequality of wealth and power, there is a trapping effect in cultural

transactions when a shared symbol signals mutual agreement despite the evident imbalance in whose meaning reigns. The border witnesses both valiant efforts at communication and inescapable fields of battle.

What cultural synapses regulate this border communication and conflict? The symbols "Mexico" and "U.S." are obvious candidates. Each summons up cultural traditions, Latin and English-American, and likewise echoes the various struggles of the two nations. In addition, these two national words symbolize the stunningly large economic inequality at the boundary. Mexico's economy seems perpetually underdeveloped; even as the nation industrializes and agro-industrializes, its common people and public institutions remain stunted by poverty and inequity. The industrial growth and demographic explosion of the border stems precisely from the unequal average wage in the two nations. That permits, for example, the *maquiladoras* to reap enormous labor cost advantages when assembling goods.

The cross-boundary imbalance churns in everybody's mind, though not with the same implications. There is, for example, in the U.S. liberal anxiety and the conservative fear of Mexico a moral instability from knowing deep down of the tremendous poverty nearby; to entrepreneurial upper-class Mexicans there is in the wealthy U.S. both a glittering object of development to be admired and a rival to be deftly frustrated and overcome. Inequality subtly pervades the terms "Mexico" and "U.S." as they are used on a daily basis. Pablo Vila finds among El Paso Anglo and established Mexican Americans that the term Mexico is synonymous with poverty, and that this stigmatizes recent migrants from that country. The unconscious border disparity also finds mutated expression in other conscious words, including "progress," "development," and various legal labels for U.S. immigration and citizenship. Because these symbols regulate the junction of many meanings and practices in a diversified social landscape, this brief article does not attempt to delineate what they signify to every group in both nations. Instead, it offers two case studies, one of the symbolic synapses important to non-wealthy northern Mexicans (the so-called popular class), and the other of cross-border brokers, who might be seen as the true possessors of syncretic border culture, but are better understood as the true masters of border mazes.

The great mass of Mexican border city dwellers of mixed blue-collar, white-collar, and marginal occupations tends to elude attention. Unlike migrants who have crossed to the U.S., they are solidly in the domain of Spanish-language and Mexican institutions, so they negotiate no obvious cultural borders. They participate in affairs and institutions that draw a great deal of press coverage, positive or negative — working in *maquiladoras* or colonizing new hillsides — but though these "social problems" constitute their daily struggles, they are not the people and their culture. We might ask, what do *they* make of the world? And one interesting angle is,

how do they understand the U.S., the colossus to their north?

The connotations "progress," "modern," and "advanced" are superficially important qualities of the *maquiladoras*, in turn associated with their owners, mostly U.S. corporations. Assembly-plant work organization aims to squeeze out effort at the maximum physically bearable speed in industries where intensive labor retains an important role in production. *Maquiladora* front offices apply sophisticated management techniques toward this goal, often expressed through symbolism of progressive rationality. U.S. home companies and top *maquiladora* managers often do not speak much Spanish and hence operate through Mexican or Mexican-American intermediaries. This insulates their "rational" and "evenhanded" symbolic aura from the nitty-gritty of daily workplace struggles. Speeding up work while maintaining high attention to quality requires intensive shop-floor surveillance, persuasion, threats, and coercion. This devolves onto the Mexican working people, pitting supervisors, quality control inspectors, and mechanics — middle-aged men — against the women and young men who work directly on the line. Piece rates and other competitive pay schemes also set up rivalries among the operatives themselves.

In performing amidst these conflicts, working people make considerable use of the Mexican repertoire of social relationships, of trust and distrust, alliance and factionalism, debt and obligation, hierarchy and solidarity. Sometimes Mexicans themselves represent "Mexico" as interpersonal conflict. This might appear as self-hating symbolism, in which the U.S. is always valued over Mexico, but the reality is more complex. Mexican working folk are quite capable of excoriating analysis of Mexican society; yet they also depart after exhausting years in the factories shorn of the U.S.-dominated symbolism of "development" or "advancement." As Devon Peña demonstrates, in *The Terror of the Machine*, the constant little struggles at work continually teach lessons, most importantly that Mexican progress in the North American system is not quite what is promised, not quite the path toward shining modernity — or at least that shining modernity comes at a harsh physical and psychological toll.



The popular Mexican view attributes to U.S. immigration no qualities of rationality or fairness. Here I do not speak of personal immigration narratives, which sometimes are harrowing but other times favorable to the U.S. experience, and often mention individual advancement, modernity, and progress. Rather, I speak of Mexican generalizations of U.S. treatment of migrants as an archetype of injustice, danger, and ingratitude. Tomás Durazo (a pseudonym) had spent a number of seasons working without documents in the U.S. He

expressed satisfaction with his treatment in the U.S., and his few encounters with the Border Patrol had left him with no complaints, although he had been forced to depart from the country. One day, however, when I was visiting his house, he excitedly pointed out a headline in a Ciudad Juárez newspaper about INS sweeps in Texas that resulted in large numbers of undocumented migrants being expelled to Mexico. He vehemently criticized the ungrateful U.S. that gladly welcomes Mexican labor but denies Mexican people dignity and security. The U.S. is, in his view, unfair, prejudiced, and treacherous. Tomás, and common Mexican working people like him, see the United States as a source of income; but by delimiting the symbolic valuation of the “colossus of the north,” they preserve autonomy, maintaining personal dignity and a sense of national independence.

Many Mexican border families, especially those long established in the region, have close kin living in the U.S. The symbolic confrontation of U.S. and Mexico is intertwined with the cooperative and conflicting, and always emotion-laden, relations between family members. Perhaps a relative working in the U.S. has not been sufficiently generous to his immediate and/or extended family. They are aware of the disparity in standards of living. And to the relative in the U.S., the border town was a place where he could live inexpensively, and Mexico represented a source of constant family demands, a place with “too much family.” Rather than border culture being embodied in a discrete set of practices or mastered by a distinct set of persons, in these relationships border culture happens in interactions between people bearing two very different sets of meanings. Much “transnationalism” consists of negotiated social relationships spanning the boundary in situations of partial family migration. The transnational process of combining national cultures and creating new syntheses is confounded by the particular kinship/interpersonal relationships involved, especially the parceling out of income and family duties; sensitive observers will take both dimensions into account.

This is not to say that there are no true binationalists and biculturalists, following Oscar Martínez’s characterization of border types. Border biculturalists master the communicative ramifications of symbols in two languages, on both sides of the boundary. Such biculturalists often have dual-national backgrounds that contribute to their repertoire of skills, but making use of these abilities to broker international relationships (often economic ones) is a specific life choice. Alan Klein’s study of the Owls/Tecolotes baseball team shared by Laredo, Coahuila, and Nuevo Laredo, Texas, stars Larry Dovalina, a Mexican-American culture broker who handled the U.S.-side games of this Mexican-owned team. Despite Dovalina and other highly capable cultural brokers and a long tradition of cross-border baseball in the two Laredos, the international sharing arrangement broke down. In its collapse, both sides, including the bicultur-



Main Street of Nuevo Progreso, Tamaulipas — a lower Rio Grande border boom town — showing sign for Vicente Fox during his successful campaign for the Mexican presidency, March 2000.

Scott Cook

alists, made polarizingly nationalistic criticisms of the other. Nationalistic anger on both sides drew strength from the peculiar inequalities of the U.S.-Mexican border, including the unequal pay and treatment of Mexican professional ballplayers compared to U.S. players, the poorer quality of facilities in Mexico, and the differing commitments to profit versus civic pride in the two cities/nations. In other words, nationalism was as much an option as biculturalism, deployed by the same people.



Culture, as we have come to understand it, is not a fixed set of practices or traits. Rather, it is a “fluid improvisation” in which “loose structures . . . will guide people’s everyday improvisation but never determine them in a strict sense.”¹

The U.S.-Mexico border both stimulates and requires such new approaches to culture. Culture, first, has to be studied historically. The history of the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands — Vélez-Ibáñez pungently designates this place “the Greater Mexican Southwest” — impresses us with the time-depth of transnational/transculturalism. The historical perspective addresses not only the origins and transmission of culture traits, but also the evolving patterns of society. Cultures are distributed across unequal social groups, both classes within each nation and class alliances extended across both nations. Hence, to understand culture one must keep one eye on political and economic arrangements, rather than seeing it as a domain of folk customs somehow separate from societal interests and powers. This does not mean that culture is neatly reduced to pantomimes of people’s interests. Rather, as Limón’s sensitive analysis of Mexican-American dances reveals, cultural acts are expressive and fluid improvisations done by people facing constraining economic and political realities. Key historical coalitions often make culture — in other words, culture

is partly unconscious but also partly designed. State-centralizers rein in the centrifugal Borderlanders by promoting, with considerable effect, the nationalistic option in regional politics and culture. Nevertheless, economic transactions combine with personal commitments to create opportunities for the binationalist, biculturalist masters of cross-boundary negotiation and brokerage. Hence, one cultural practice, the sharing of border traits, offers divergent meanings to diverse groups at differing times.

One conclusion is that societies possess considerable internal cultural complexity and external cultural influence. This is unquestionably true. But another angle is more subtle, even unnerving: culture is not the traits of a group at all, but an evanescent happening, fractured mazes that come and go, open and close, joining disparate people at every level of aggregation, whether father-in-law/son-in-law, anthropologist/truck driver, Laredo/Nuevo Laredo, or all Mexico/all U.S. This relational quality of culture enables communication and cooperation across the border, utilizing the symbols of wealth and poverty, U.S. and Mexico, impersonal efficiency and the personal touch, modernity and development; but it also leaves considerable space for misunderstanding, misrepresentation, tension, and outright battles for resources and power. This is, perhaps, the most important lesson that the border teaches anthropology and other new fields of cultural study: the relational character of culture is as prone to polarization as hybridization, much as we fondly wish for the latter. Why polarization? In view of the U.S.-Mexico border, I suggest this: in achieving honest and open communication, the justice of social and economic relationships is as important as the act of cultural synthesis.

NOTE

1. Cristoph Brumann, "Writing for Culture: Why a Successful Concept Should Not Be Discarded," *Current Anthropology*, 40 Suppl. (1999): S9, S6. The author refers to Pierre Bourdieu (see bibliographic essay).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

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The book that I gently criticize is Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), but there is much stimulation in reading it. I draw my historical framework from Raul A. Fernandez, *The United States-Mexico Border: A Politico-Economic Profile* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977); other important overviews are Oscar J. Martínez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988) and Carlos Véllez-Ibáñez, *Border Visions: Mexican Cultures of the Southwest*

United States (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996). That was also my source for the story of his father. Many works demonstrate the parallels in racist capitalism on the two sides of the border: for example, compare the Sonora depicted in Ramón Eduardo Ruiz's *The People of Sonora and Yankee Capitalists* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988) and Miguel Tinker Salas, *In the Shadow of the Eagles: Sonora and the Transformation of the Border During the Porfiriato* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997) with the Arizona documented in Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), Thomas Sheridan, *Los Tucsonenses: The Mexican Community in Tucson, 1854-1941* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986), and Joseph Park, "The History of Mexican Labor in Arizona During the Territorial Period," M.A. Thesis, Department of History, University of Arizona, 1961. The similarity of experiences in industrial towns on the two sides of the border is brought out vividly in Josiah McConnell Heyman, *Life and Labor on the Border: Working People of Northeastern Sonora, Mexico, 1886-1986* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991). Heyman, cited above, and Robert R. Alvarez, Jr., *Familia: Migration and Adaptation in Baja and Alta California, 1800-1975* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987) document cross-border genealogies.

On José Vasconcelos, see his opus magnum *Ulises Criollo* (Mexico, D.F.: Ediciones Bota, 1945), a small but telling part of which appears in translation in Oscar J. Martínez, ed., *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 103-106. The Mexican central state's long struggle to nationalize its Borderlanders is touched on by Martínez's *Troublesome Border* and Fernández's *The United States-Mexico Border*, both cited above. A fascinating anthropological study of television in Brazil also sheds light on Mexico: Conrad P. Kottak, *Prime-Time Society* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990). The study of Mexican border cities' forms is Daniel D. Arreola and James R. Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities: Landscape Anatomy and Place Personality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993). It is a fine introduction to variation among border cities, a topic that regrettably had to be passed up in the present essay.

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