

México/USA Borders... el Otro Lado¹

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Abstract

This is a documentary work which is largely motivated by aspects of my own life. It deals with the many problems that are facing the people on both sides of the México and United States borders, but also deals with the great strength the border people have shown in overcoming difficulties and creating a multicultural world, full of vibrant colors, new sounds, poetry, and powerful economic processes, political and ecological challenges. There are many people participating in the hybrid border culture. For example, graphic artists, fashion designers and filmmakers have been inspired to shrug off the border's reputation as a cultural void and address the contrary realities of a place that's neither First World nor Third World; a culture that is neither Mexican nor American. There is an economy propelled by the dual engines of drug traffic and high-tech maquiladoras, and a large, stable middle class sandwiched between grotesque poverty and excessive narco wealth. One of the goals of the hybrid border culture is, simply, to transform the strangeness of the México-USA borders into art. The other goals include regeneration on a cultural level, as well as political and environmental levels. The México/USA Borders presentation concludes that there are no borders in terms of disease, crime, illegal immigration

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and pollution. We need to think about constructing new ways of perceiving the expanded world by incorporating the new men and women who are emerging in the border cities and beyond the border cities into our daily lives.

Introduction

The border always means The Other Side, el otro lado. The culture on either side of any border has always focused on the The Other Side, el otro lado. For the citizens of the United States and México, there will always be The Other Side. The Land of Nobody, the promised land to those of the south, and the object of prohibited desire for those of the north.

I grew up in a border town, Nogales, Sonora, and now, as an adult, I am living on the border of Canada and the United States. In order to arrive in Canada, I have had to extend, transfer and destroy many borders: linguistic, national, and cultural borders. This situation could explain my hybrid nature. As Facundo Cabral sings in a well-known Latin American song, “No soy de aquí, ni soy de allá... y ser feliz es mi color de identidad” (“I belong neither here, nor there... and happiness is my identity color”).

To live in the borderlands means...

To put chile in the borscht,
eat whole wheat tortillas,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by la migra at the border check points;

To survive in the Borderlands...
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads.

In the Borderlands...
you are at home, a stranger.

These quotations are from Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1987 masterpiece *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, a collection of stories and essays. In this book, Gloria uses a mixture of poetry and prose, English and Spanish, which is not traditional in Literature. She demonstrates that she is one of the best poets and philosophers to write on the policies that influence the lives of all colored women in the Third World.

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The New Border

Until recently, nobody was interested in border communities or their people. The Mexican side of the border was viewed as a wild frontier-cowboys town, full of poverty and cultural deprivation. Nobody looked at the border economy as vital to the economic well-being of either nation. Now, however, people are keenly interested in the border. Immigration has become a thorny issue, and those old stereotypes of the Mexican border make Americans think that militarization is the only way to control all the crime located around it².

The population along the border is growing by leaps and bounds. At one point, the greater border region was the fastest growing region in the world. Tijuana, Baja California, for example, is now the most populous city on the Pacific coast, with the exception of Los Angeles. But let's take a close look at the new border. Let's start with Ciudad Juárez, México and El Paso, Texas, USA. Two cities, one destiny.

Ciudad Juárez is the migration story that most Americans don't hear about: the one that stops just short of the border and grows and grows. The Juárez-El Paso population of 2 million makes up the largest border community anywhere in the world, expanding more than 5% a year. It is a big, wild experiment in what happens when two halves of one metropolis are governed by very different economic, civic and cultural rules. This is a place where two cities breathe the same air, drink the same water and share the same destiny³.

El Paso and Juárez offer a test to all the high-minded globalists who think that if you fix the economy, the other solutions will fall into line. Some 400 maquiladoras, or assembly plants, have all but eliminated unemployment in Juárez and have sown the seeds of a stable middle class.

However, all the problems that expanding trade creates are concentrated here as well; the potable water in the cities' common aquifer is expected to run out in 25 years; some experts predict both cities may be out of water within five to 10 years. The air quality is also imperiled; diseases are spreading, and they don't stop at the customs station.

Economy and Trade

Both border cities are currently booming economically, but they remain dependent on each other for this success, thanks to the NAFTA. This situation has produced a particular type of business person: The NAFTA man. He or she is a US citizen who does his business in México.

2. Cárdenas and Flukinger (1998).

3. Padgett and Thomas (2001). <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101010611/fcities.html>

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The NAFTA Man is not only bilingual, he's also bicultural. He speaks Spanish in the Maquilas or maquiladoras⁴ in México but yells in English at his kids' T-ball games.

These NAFTA Men —and a few women— are genetically engineered by the new border economy. Managers are taught to take a different route to work every day to foil potential kidnappers. They grow accustomed to training —and losing— an entire factory floor of workers every year.

Some people in Laredo, Texas say the strength of the economy can be measured by the number of trucks carrying merchandise across the border. About 10,000 trucks cross the border every day, the U.S. Customs Service and the city of Laredo report. According to a study by the U.S. Commerce Department and Texas A&M University⁵, about 38 percent of the ground trade that crosses between the United States and México every year comes through Laredo.

Immigration

Despite Mexico's emerging middle class along the border, there are still millions of people in México and Latin America living in extreme poverty. Hundreds of these people try to escape every year to what they hope will be a better life in the U.S.

According to the U.S. General Accounting Office⁶ the number of deaths reached at 472 last year. The report showed that there were large increases in the number of women and children who perished. Most died in Arizona because increased border security in urban areas in California and Texas forced immigrants to take the dangerous route across the state's desert. While immigrant deaths almost doubled in the 10-year period, there was no corresponding doubling of illegal immigrant entries, the report said⁷.

Despite the lack of humanity displayed toward these poor people by some American and Mexican citizens, some groups are nevertheless trying to help. Humane Borders (Fronteras compasivas) is a small volunteer group which last year began to erect emergency watering stations in the desert to help aliens stay alive as they try to enter the U.S. It was formed after a group of ranchers in Arizona and Texas began taking shots

4. *Maquilas* or *maquiladoras* are factories set up by US and other foreign companies to exploit cheap labour and favourable tariffs in the region near the US border. *El Diario de Juárez*, 24 February 1999.

5. U.S. Commerce Department and Texas A&M University (2004).

6. U.S. Government Accountability Office (2006) "Illegal Immigration: Border-crossing deaths have doubled since 1995; Border Patrol's efforts to prevent deaths have not been fully evaluated," GAO-06-770.

7. <http://www.miracoalition.org/press/general-news/immigrant-deaths-on-u.s.-mexican-border-double>

at aliens as they crossed ranch property day and night. Several aliens died in those encounters, and ever since, a backlash against vigilantism has been taking hold in the US. And now not only the ranchers but also the Migra are shooting and killing immigrants in the Arizona desert.

Drugs and Crime

The borders have many other problems besides illegal immigration. According to the Magazine *Proceso* (2006), 147 narco-executions (the execution of someone who opposes a drug dealer's interests) were committed in Nuevo Laredo. The failure of the "Safe México"⁸ program is already accepted even by the former Secretary of the Navy, Marco Antonio Peyrot González, who last September 19th, recognized that this program was outstripped by the violence and the insecurity.

Another example of the border's growing violence and insecurity is the case of more than 370 women, many of them maquila workers, who have been murdered since 1993, often raped, strangled and mutilated during their long, dark treks home to remote colonias. Most large maquilas have begun providing bus service, but it has failed to stop the killings.

The fact that the state authorities have not managed to clear up or eradicate these crimes has led to much speculation about who might be behind the murders. There is talk of the involvement of drug traffickers, organized crime, of killers coming from the United States, as well as rumors that those responsible are being protected. There are also theories suggesting connections with Satanism, the illegal trade in pornographic films and the alleged trafficking of organs. At the moment, however, since the investigations have so far been unable to confirm any of them, such hypotheses are simply helping to fuel even greater fear among Chihuahuan society.

Politics

Now, I want to add the element of the political background to this discussion. The visible minorities are becoming an invisible majority. The official numbers can never represent all the Hispanics who are present in the U.S. illegally (about 11 or 12 million people).

Mexicans are the predominant segment of Hispanics (58%).

8. "Safe México" was a program that former President Vicente Fox initiated. Its purpose was to frontally fight organized crime and violence.

The Hispanic population as a percent of total population by county:

Rupert, Idaho, 35%
 Los Angeles, 47 %
 Denver, 32%
 Dallas, 36%
 Dalton, Georgia, 40%
 New York City, 27%
 Dodge City, Kansas, 43%

But this visible minority has no representation in US politics. As an example of this political disadvantage we have the following situation: the U.S. Senate approved on the night of Friday, October 1st, 2006, the controversial construction of the double fence, with an ample majority of 80 votes against 19. Interrogated on the matter, Dean, the leader of the Democratic Party, justified their votes as a reaction against the attempt of “the Republicans to use immigration against the Democrats”. In the future electoral campaign, competition will be centered on the antiterrorist fight and against illegal immigration. Dean hopes to secure the conservative vote for the Democratic Party and win representation in the November election. The Democratic and Republican Parties are considering only their political interests and not the actual issues at stake. They don't really care about the situation of legal or illegal migrants; politicians only want to keep the power, without concerning themselves about the real necessities of people.

Culture

Although there are many artists and non-artists who are representative of the border culture, I can only mention 2 or 3 of them in the time we have today.

Maria Hinojosa is an urban-affairs correspondent for CNN and the author of *Raising Raúl: Adventures Raising Myself and My Son*. She says:

New York taught me that culturally I was more than a Mexicana. There were Puerto Ricans and Dominicans on my street; I went to school with them, along with Cubans, Argentines and Peruvians; I bumped into Salvadoran and Chilean refugees in community centers. I began to see that I was part of a continent—from Patagonia to el Caribe. I still called myself a Mexicana, but I came to consider myself something bigger, a Latina without borders.

There is also a predominant type of music that is emerging within border culture. Nortec Collective is a convergence of high-tech and low-tech, of North and South, of all things

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techno with all things norteño, of all the things that are a part of the rural and urban. These musicians created and perform a style of music called *Nortec*, a fusion of *Norteño* (“from the North”) and Techno, documenting the collision between the style and culture of electronic and traditional Mexican music.

Another important contributor to the Chicano and Latino movements in art is Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Gómez-Peña (2004) investigates intercultural phenomena using experimental language and other varied resources. His focus is on different perspectives between the Mexican and American cultures. Gómez-Peña has created something that the critics have happened to call “chicano Cyberpunk performance”. In his performance “Mexótica 2002” Gómez-Peña also invites others to participate and express their feelings, perception or whatever they experienced during the performance. He investigates, along with the actor and dancer Juan Ibarra, the multiple forms in which he perceives México and Mexicans from outside as objects as much of desire as of fear.

I’m going to read one of the anonymous confessions recorded during the Temple of the Confessions in the matter of desires during the Mexótica performance:

I desire to confess a recurrent fantasy to you: an encounter between Hernán Cortés and Moctezuma in downtown, Los Angeles, while the city burns. Cortés climbs the staircase of an Aztec temple. The blood slips down the steps. There are pieces of bodies mutilated on all sides. In the top of the temple a priest sacrifices to a blonde. Cortés says to his second in control: Good, we must be sensitive to cultural differences.

In conclusion

There are many people participating in the hybrid border culture. For example, graphic artists, fashion designers and filmmakers have been inspired to shrug off the border’s reputation as a cultural void and address the contrary realities of a place that’s neither First World nor Third World; a culture that is neither Mexican nor American. There is an economy propelled by the dual engines of drug traffic and high-tech maquiladoras, and a large, stable middle class sandwiched between grotesque poverty and excessive narco wealth. One of the goals of the hybrid border culture is, simply, to transform the strangeness of the México-USA borders into art. The other goals include regeneration on a cultural level, as well as political and environmental levels.

In conclusion, I have found that there are no borders in terms of disease, crime, illegal immigration and pollution. We need to think about constructing new ways of perceiving the expanded world by incorporating the new men and women who are emerging in the border cities and beyond the border cities into our daily lives.

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