

Crossing the Line: Traveling into an Open Wound

DORIS EINSIEDEL

RESUMEN

Este ensayo de la crítica alemana aporta una visión testimonial de la frontera en dos sectores específicos: las ciudades de Tecate y Tijuana; la primera mediana de unos 100,000 habitantes y la segunda enorme de más de 1.25 millones. En parte, ilustra cómo la frontera funciona en forma de una “herida”, concepto que Gloria Anzaldúa ha propagado en muchas de sus obras teóricas. A la vez sirve para darnos una perspectiva de la frontera con muchas de sus cualidades híbridas, contradictorias e incluso inesperadas. Las múltiples auto-reflexiones de la autora/testigo sirven para encaminar a cualquiera que no conoce tal mundo por dentro, topándose con sus rarezas como sus virtudes redentorias.

The winter 2004 excursion to Tijuana confronted a group of highly privileged students from UCSB with the grave monumental materiality of the border between Mexico and the United States. When the taxi stopped at *la línea*—the final destination of the trip—it was as if a curtain were drawn from one’s eyes, as we peeked through rusty metal plates at the desert of hopes beyond the vast graveyard of the nameless ‘casualties,’ whose growing number is recorded on the fence.

It was a reverse trip, from the dream-destination of the multitude back to one of the starting-points. Our baggage was full of questions: what is it like to live in Tijuana? What are the underlying motivations of mass-migration? How does the material border look like? What could it be like to cross into the United States? What kind of barriers would we encounter during our trip?

For the majority of U.S. Americans who visit the border, the passport control posts, one encounters when going South, resemble the ticket control at the gate of an

Doris Einsiedel is a junior researcher at Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

amusement park; as we were able to witness upon our return from Tijuana, even an invalid passport is sufficient for certain Americans. With the exception of one student in the group, whose mother and father had apparently spared their American daughter the particularities of the parent's crossing, the students who partook in the excursion are from Western middle class families. Due to this background, our ability to re-imagine the border as a dead serious obstacle is reduced to witness accounts, reading, observation, and empathy. Faced with some of the obstacles on the way from South to North, it was still hard for the six of us to imagine what it could be like to realize—or even to desire—the dream of those people who feel fenced in.

Our group traveled very comfortably. We enjoyed *pan dulce*, music and good conversations. Most of us slept a few hours or made cell-phone calls to plan the remainder of a carefree weekend in Santa Barbara. In San Diego, we stopped for a break beneath the Coronado Bay Bridge in order to see the murals of Chicano Park. When it was built in 1970, the noise and ugliness of the Coronado Bay Bridge intruded into San Diego's Logan barrio. Subsequently, the Chicano community claimed the land beneath the bridge and planted it with trees and flowers. In 1971, the first pillars of the bridge were spray-painted by artists from all over California.

An early image by José Montoya and the Royal Chicano Air Force, for instance, shows an uprooted tree and a Chicano standing on terra firme with his arms



(“How Many [Deaths]?” the letters on the fence in Tijuana, Mexico, ask)

stretched out in a demonstration of strength. Next to the man, the mural portrays a Native American woman in jeans who wears a look of pride and rests her hands on her son's shoulders. The large eyes of the boy show a sincere look. He holds a law-book that reads "*Leyes.*"

The image illustrates that both the heritage of Chicanos (symbolized by the tree and the mother figure) and Chicano culture (in this image symbolically represented in the clothes, the apparent family ties and in the book) are rooted in the USA and in Mexico, as well as in indigenous cultures. The uprooted tree points to communal and individual identity struggles as well as to the Chicano community's historical fight for acceptance by dominant cultures.

The statute book in the young boy's hand underlines his position as a person on whom the hopes of his family (his mother and his father as well as the larger Chicano community) are pinned. The law book also emphasizes the importance of education. It turns the young boy into a person who embraces U.S.-American culture as an advocate of the American Dream, but does not neglect the Mexican component of his past, as apparent in the Spanish title of the book. San Diego's Chicano Park is still frequented by artists and locals today.

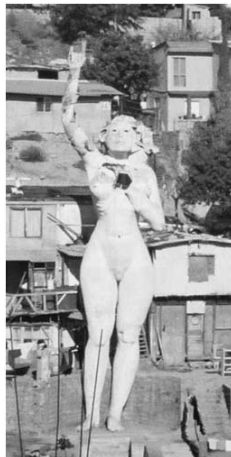


(Border patrol cars on the U.S.-side of the border)

¹As the group of UCSB students was riding through San Diego after the stop at Chicano Park, the university van passed the same prosperous but uniformly gray residential areas one encounters everywhere in the United States, with its countless fast-food chains and shopping areas all neatly and artificially arranged along the road. As we approached the border, we drove through sparsely settled hills, frequented by the pick-up-trucks of the border patrol. Perhaps it was only later, on our way back, that we wondered what it would be like to wear the shoes of an immigrant; to *walk* all that way to the relative safety of San Diego's metropolitan atmosphere.

When the hills of Tijuana with their colorful, scattered barrios came into view, I recalled my first visit to the U.S.-Mexican border, when I traveled to Tecate with American friends from San Diego, and how I was struck by the beautiful colors of Mexico. During this 2001 visit, our experience was limited to familiar patterns of travel-behavior. Our only conversation with local people had been a brief encounter with a man who opened our eyes to the fact that unlike in the North, as students we were considered rich people in Mexico.

Walking into Tijuana in 2004, like during my previous visit to Tecate, at first did not feel like crossing any kind of national border: going from North to South, the Americas appear to be post-national, especially since the settlements immediately North of the border roughly resemble those in the South. A shocking indication of contrasts, however, was the sight of the absent-minded eyes of begging children on the bridge leading towards the tourist-pleasure-land in Tijuana.² As a living image, the children's misery certainly remains to be the most powerful *souvenir*³ for any perceptive guest in this city.



(La Mona, Tijuana, Mexico)

Throughout the excursion, a vague sense of ‘mutual exhibition’ did not escape the keen eye: all of the students curiously observed the locals, salespeople, beggars, and travelers we passed. However, with the exception of some self-absorbed tourists who did not appear to take notice of anyone around themselves, we were also being watched: as possible customers and—as in any tourist destination—also as intruders. Between the busy traffic and the crowds of the Calle de la Revolución more tourist attractions awaited the group (including the (in) famous hats, donkey-zebras and toys), but we escaped into the cool air of an atmospheric basement restaurant where we enjoyed a delicious lunch.

After the meal, the group split into two taxis. The first destination of the taxi-ride through Tijuana was “La Mona” (literally the name suggests “the doll,” the “maiden figure” or “the beauty”). La Mona is a large statue of a naked woman that juts out approximately 20 meters from the ground of a poor barrio rather close to the border. Her bosom serves as the habitation of the artist who created her.

Given the setting, the statue sticks out from her surroundings in both senses of the word. Metaphorically speaking, the figure rises above its surroundings but remains to be part of the neighborhood at the same time. Her feet are firmly planted in the barrio but her eyes are fixed skyward and appear to look beyond every-day-



(La Mona's neighborhood)

struggles. Her right hand reaches for the sky as if aiming for a standpoint of transcendence, or possibly ironically simulating the Statue of Liberty of New York. The question that beckons is: freedom from what? The answers can be infinite, if any at all.

La Mona does not glance at the land beyond the border. She faces Tijuana and its inhabitants. She provokes the viewer to question whether she is a bizarre, naked answer to the French statue shedding the light of her eternal torch on New York City; and if so, one has to wonder what kind of force robbed La Mona of her robes: the appearance in her birthday suit evokes a sense of the figure's natural rooting in the landscape, but it can also be referred to innocence, or even to deprivation and need.

Although we had already paid him for the whole trip due to a misunderstanding, our taxi driver was kind enough to wait for us at La Mona in order to take us to our final destination in Tijuana. The view that confronted us at our next stop alongside the Tijuana highway forms a grave contrast to the places usually



(Warning sign for poisonous animals on the border fence in Tijuana, Mexico)

frequented by visitors of the city. Tourists avoid this spot; it has nothing in common with amusement, excitement or relaxation. Although criticism in Border Studies emphasizes the difference between the metaphorical borderlands and the material

border, the mere sight of the numerous hurdles that protect the U.S. from the immigrants it attracts is overwhelming. The great expanses of the security installations, which outdo any prison walls, could certainly be better spent on



(Tecate, Mexico along the border)

development projects. *La Línea* is an open wound that swallows individuals who seek their share of the American pie—or maybe simply want to survive.

As a mass-grave, the border is sometimes compared to Auschwitz. In the light of this comparison, our group asked the rhetorical question if people were in fact forced to leave Mexico. The comparison was dismissed. It resulted in a discussion, however, that led to the following realization: push-and-pull tendencies along the walls of the Western world are an often underestimated fact. It is, therefore, a misleading—though popular—position in U.S. politics and a dominant belief of large sections of the American public that migration is based on choice.

Saskia Sassen explains such sentiments with the notion that since “... immigration is thought to result from unfavorable socioeconomic conditions in other countries, it is assumed to be unrelated to U.S. economic needs or broader international economic condition.”⁴ As Sassen goes on to point out, “...U.S. policymakers have ignored the broader international forces, many of them generated

or at least encouraged by the United States, that have helped give rise to migration flows.”⁵ Among these factors are economical policies as well as the mythology of the American Dream. The latter often implicitly works as a control mechanism of the poor, who are led to believe that they have equal opportunities, while their labor largely adds to the profit of the rich.

In addition to general explanations of migrant flows, the specific history of the American Southwest shows the Mexican case in a special light and explains why Chicanos usually give both Mexico and the United States the status of a homeland. The geographic proximity of the two countries additionally strengthens the push-and-pull tendencies in the Mexican-American borderlands. In his reading of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, José David Saldívar explains that “the *frontera* culture, stretching from the shanty barrios of Tijuana and San Diego to the rich surf and turf of Santa Barbara (dominated by the megaspace of Los Angeles in the middle), is an enormous ‘desiring machine’” in the sense that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari used this concept in *Anti-Oedipus*.⁶



(Tijuana, Mexico)

As Deleuze and Guattari have argued, desire cannot be reduced to the individual drives. Rather, it is *produced* by a network of influence factors. Today the intertwining of different causes, that breed desire, is complicated by an increasingly

active corpus of global powers. Migrants can thus be compared to the movement of the actors in a computer game: their destination is predetermined by the manual; and although the figures/migrants encounter many obstacles on their way, they seldom get discouraged because they are steered by external forces.

Our Tijuana trip ended much too quickly: we returned shattered but comfortably from the vista of crosses...

... and the sight of a lonely outfit, nailed to the metal plates of the border next to the crosses, like an absent Jesus figure whose body has escaped into the nirvana of the borderlands, or into the consumerist paradise beyond. On the way to the official crossing point, our taxi driver, understandably annoyed by the questions of a gringa such as myself, misled us in stating that Tijuana looked "*lo mismo en todas las partes.*" He mocked our indignation about what we had just witnessed by his ironic comment about "*los pobres mexicanos*" whom we presumably pitied naively. Mere pity would indeed be out of place. What was important for us, however, was the immediate illustration of an arrogant gesture of exclusion in the shape of the security installations we saw in Tijuana. Nevertheless, to our driver we probably appeared like people who form a curious crowd after an accident.

It is one thing to watch a disaster (such as the maintenance of *la frontera*) and an entirely different matter to understand one's own participation in this occurrence. Contextualized by background knowledge about the history of Mexicans and Chicanos in the Southwest, by a dialogue about different kinds of borders and through an assessment of the presentation of Chicanos in the media, the excursion to Tijuana was an attempt to gain a better understanding of realities which silently interact with our personal worlds in Santa Barbara and elsewhere. The immediate sight of the border was an important annotation so to speak, to the analysis of the theoretical discourse on *la frontera* which, as Markus Heide points out, "...opens ... a transnational perspective on the cultural history of the USA."⁷

On the way back to Santa Barbara, the group was quieter than on the way to Tijuana. Some students were wondering about their personal history. Others asked for the first time why so much money was wasted on a somewhat dubious, so-called 'security' installation. The contrast between the colorful barrios of the South and the more prosperous but more standardized settlements of the North appeared even more prominent than it had seemed on our way to Mexico. Our impressions of the border shed a different light on familiar surroundings and allowed for a more critical reading of the ideological environment.

Nevertheless, it is dangerously seductive to return to long-rehearsed patterns of behavior and lines of thought, after having moved back into one's usual setting. All too soon one might disappear behind the walls of a gated community, get distracted not only by daily tasks and assignments but most of all by the many comforts one has long taken for granted in the West. The feeling of powerlessness may also contribute to a policy of ignoring every-day injustices, in spite of one's better judgment. In the light of such thought traps, one may wonder if the taxi driver in Tijuana was right in his cynicism that everything will remain "*lo mismo*" not just in Mexico but also in the United States. In other words, one could fear that disillusion and illusion may dominate the imagination of U.S.-Mexican relations on both sides of the border respectively.



(A spray-painting of the golden rule at the border in Tecate, Mexico)

Yet the reality of migratory movements and the growing audience of Chicano and Latino voices in cultural criticism and the arts exemplify another trend, and rather suggest a slow but persistent rapprochement of the two spheres. Today, traces of Latin American cultures can be encountered all over the United States (as well as in the major cities of Europe) after all.⁸ Lionel Jospin voices an optimistic conclusion to this observation: the fact that “[t]he United States as a people is changing ... [and becomes

less] European and more Latino, African-American, and Asian ... [—apart from possible] new problems [—,] ... can make the United States more open to the world.”⁹ This reading of the salad bowl as a rich cultural asset in a globalizing world stresses the advantages as well as the importance of intercultural contact in fostering mutual understanding and peace.

If, in spite of its geographical proximity, the conceived distance to Tijuana from Southern California appears much greater than to San Francisco and perhaps even to New York, and if UC(SB) students know “everything” about Tijuana, without ever having confronted the sight of the material border, much catching-up remains to be done. There obviously exists a need to “foster[...] an examination of U.S.-Mexico relations, and [to] posit[...] an understanding of the role played by language in constructing the spiritual and political borders that divide and corral one’s thoughts.”¹⁰ For its participants, the 2004 excursion to Tijuana provided at least a point of departure for the formation of an intercultural perspective and a better understanding of one’s immediate neighbors.

REFERENCES

- Barnet-Sánchez, Holly and Eva Sperling Cockcroft, eds. *Signs From the Heart: California Chicano Murals*. 4th Ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001.
- Brookman, Philip. “The Temple as a Mirror,” in Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes, eds.. *Temple of Confessions: Mexican Beasts and Living Santos*. New York: Power House Books, 1996. 6-7.
- Elizondo, Sergio D. “ABC: Aztlán, the Borderlands, and Chicago” in: Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco Lomeli, eds. *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland* 3rd Ed. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1997. 205-18.
- Heide, Markus. *Grenzüberschreibungen: Chicano-Erzählliteratur und die Inszenierung von Kulturkontakt*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2004.
- Jospin, Lionel. “Solidarity or Playing Solitaire.” *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*. 5.1 (2003) 32-44.
- Saldívar, José David. *Border Matters: Remapping of American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1997.
- Sassen, Saskia. *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*. New York: New York Press, 1998.
- Urrea, Luis Alberto. *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1993.

NOTES

¹ See Eva Sperling Cockroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez, eds., *Signs From the Heart: California Chicano Murals*, 4th ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001) 11, 14, 40, 52.

² “If I would be homeless, I’d do it in Los Angeles” a friend of mine told me a couple of years ago, when we passed a street full of box-homes on a downtown L.A. boulevard: “here you don’t have to worry about the cold.” This carefree statement takes on a whole different meaning when comparing homeless people in the U.S. with the kind of poverty we witnessed in Tijuana. The effects of the poverty-problem South of the U.S.-Mexican border are, for instance, addressed in a reference to Tijuana in Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Across the Wire*: “I have avoided presenting the people who live there as ‘noble savages.’ Poverty ennobles no one; it brutalizes common people and makes them hungry and old” (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1993)

³ The word “souvenir” here has a strong connotation from the original meaning of the French as “memory.”

⁴ Saskia Sassen, “America’s Integration ‘Problem,’” in *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: New York Press, 1998), 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping of American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1997), 95.

⁷ *Grenzüberschreibungen: Chicano-Erzählliteratur und die Inszenierung von Kulturkontakt* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2004) 48. My translation.

⁸ Consider for instance the following description of superficial interculturality by Sergio D. Elizondo: “[w]e watch with some degree of satisfaction as the English-speaking monolinguals approach our group to partake of our traditional foods and even our language resources, albeit for commercial purposes. The Anglo is becoming Latinized” (*ibid.*, “ABC: Aztlán, the Borderlands, and Chicago,” in Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco Lomelí, eds., *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, 3rd ed. (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1997), 213).

⁹ “Solidarity or Playing Solitaire,” *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, 5.1 (2003) 32.

¹⁰ Philip Brookman, “The Temple as a Mirror,” in Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes, eds., *Temple of Confessions: Mexican Beasts and Living Santos* (New York: Power House Books, 1996) 6-7.