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Publication Date
2010

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Crossing the World’s Busiest Border:
Transborder Commuters, Performance, Culture and Superación

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

Latin American Studies

by

Jessica Cordova

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2010
The Thesis of Jessica Cordova is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2010
History is not a procession of illustrious people.
It's about what happens to a people.
Millions of anonymous people is what history is about
-James Baldwin
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to everyone who shared their stories. Their narratives guided the course of this thesis. I can only hope that I have stayed true to them. I thank all the people I interviewed for being so gracious and for all the laughs we had. My entire committee are inspirations for what professors can be; mixing teaching, activism and continually being available and supportive of students. I especially thank Professor Robert Alvarez for his guidance, expertise and love of this region. Professor Natalia Molina has been extremely helpful with her support, encouragement and understanding. A special thanks to Luis Martin-Cabrera for always believing in me, offering unconditional support, making all students a priority and influencing my interest in listening to people’s stories. I would also like to thank my friends and family who have provided unconditional support even through periods of self-doubt. My brother Danny was especially helpful in editing and taking apart my thesis when needed. Danny, thanks for all the great food and for not beating around the bush.
This thesis investigates the meaning of being a border crosser in the Tijuana-San Diego region. It presents a brief history of this region and a discussion of pertinent theory. The personal narratives of transborder commuters shaped and guided the research. This thesis focuses on the narratives of six transborder commuters and one person who was raised undocumented in the San Diego-Tijuana region but has crossed
borders throughout her life. This work parts from the notion that ‘border perfomativity,’
theorized by Nancy A. Wonders, plays a central role in the meaning of being a border
crosser. The border is performed everyday on commuters at the border crossing.
Commuters also participate in border performativity in the everyday, mundane things that
they go through in attempting to cross the border. The notion of ‘superación,’ bettering
oneself, is central to the search for freedom of mobility. This thesis also argues that in
order to discuss border crossing it is necessary to discuss the differential access to
crossing the border. Lastly, this thesis interrogates how people situate themselves and
construct their culture in the border region. This thesis does not purport to present a full
representation of transborder commuters but rather what it means to be a border crosser
for the people I interviewed.
Introduction

Tijuana ciudad transfronteriza/Tijuana no se mezcla
Aquí empieza la patria/Tijuana tercera nación

Tijuana transborder city/Tijuana does not mix
The nation begins here/Tijuana third nation (Montezemolo 2005: 1)

Among these population movements the best known and perhaps most important is that of the commuters, who are persons whose residence in one country but who move, sometimes everyday, to the neighboring country to work. But we also see another order of daily displacements of persons across the border that happens because of equally important reasons, such as to study, to get medical attention, to make purchases, to make use of different services and for recreation. Similarly, through frequent visits to family and friends who live nearby in the other country, they seek to satisfy emotional needs. (Ojeda and Lopez 1994:11-12)

The border between Tijuana and San Diego is famously known as the busiest border in the world. The United States-Mexico border region has filled people’s imagination with intrigue and legend. At the same time not much is known about how people live their daily lives along one of the most fortified and transited borders in the world. The San Diego-Tijuana region has become a flash point for larger national issues and tensions concerning security, immigration and drug trafficking. The Mexico-United States border is frequently described as the place where the North meets the South, the First World meets the Third World or where the Developed World meets the Developing World. All these terms carry the connotation that one side is more “advanced” and “modern” while the other is somehow backwards. What these terms never interrogate are the power relations between both countries.

Transborder commuters or transmigrants constitute a unique population in border regions that have access to both countries, move between two distinct social, economic, cultural and political systems, who experience border policies and the fortification of the
state on a frequent, sometimes daily basis. The theory of “border performativity” is fundamental to what it entails to be a border crosser on the U.S.-Mexico border. The border is performed everyday on commuters at the border crossing. And commuters participate in border performativity in the everyday, mundane things that they go through in attempting to cross the border. The intent of this thesis is to interrogate what it means to be a border crosser through the lives and narratives of transborder commuters.

Tied to border performativity and a central part of life in general is the idea of “superación” or bettering oneself. Superación encompasses economic motivations but is much more than the ability to subsist, it includes the desire to have more life chances and dignity in your own life.

Another important component of border performativity and what it means to be a border crosser is how people situate themselves and view their culture. The views of commuters towards their culture and border culture in general refutes generalized and essentialist ideas of what it means to be Mexican. Border performativity plays an important role in border culture. Border crossers are conscious of knowing that the views and experiences they have concerning their culture are not shared by all in Tijuana due to the border and the inability many have to cross it. How people view their culture is not static, it is influenced by positionality, people’s experiences and the social historical moment.

The presence of the border has been a central part of my life. I grew up in Chula Vista, in the South Bay region of San Diego and attended school with and worked with a great deal of friends living on the other side of the border. Growing up I did not really question the existence of the border, while I was conscious that the border was
militarized and I saw the inequality and exclusion of entire groups of people from crossing the border, in the end the border as a barrier and method of demarcation, separation and enclosure seemed “natural” to me. The need to question the naturalization of the border became much more apparent when I left the area and studied in Barcelona, Spain between the years 2000 and 2001. Some of the European borders I encountered reminded me more of the inland U.S. immigration checkpoint on the drive from San Diego to Los Angeles than the actual San Ysidro-Tijuana border crossing. In Europe, I was able to enter another country by solely crossing a lake or would wake up from a train ride without knowing that I had already crossed into another country. This completely shocked me since I was used to the highly militarized border between San Diego and Tijuana, where these types of crossings were impossible. These borders, before the consolidation of the European Union, were extremely different from the border I was accustomed to.

Where border enforcement in Europe was stricter the power of an American passport was made very evident, especially when traveling with a friend with a Mexican passport. Traveling throughout Europe brought home the idea that borders and state delineations are constructions but at the same time it underlined the issue of unequal access to mobility. The experiences with European borders, border policies and power relations caused me to think about the similarities occurring at home. Transborder activity, unequal power relations and the contradictions of living on what is considered one of the most militarized borders and one of the most transited borders in the world has become increasingly intriguing to me.

As border scholars Wilson and Donnan argue “The anthropological study of the

This work hopes to add to the growing literature on “lo transfronterizo,” the transborder, in the Tijuana San Diego border region. In a 1990 study on labor transmigration in the Tijuana San Diego region Mexican scholar Tito Alegría contends that “debido al tamaño que han alcanzado las ciudades fronterizas de ambos países, la transmigración es un fenómeno irreversible.” “Due to the size that border cities from both countries have reached, transmigration is an irreversible phenomena” (Alegría 1990: 10). Transborder processes such as commuting, shopping, visiting friends and family, and schooling shape an important part of life in the borderlands and are unique and specific to border regions.

“Lo transfronterizo” is defined as the material and cultural exchanges that occur on both sides of the border (Ruiz 1996). A defining factor of lo transfronterizo is that it is local in origin and destination. Olivia Ruiz, a scholar on the border and lo transfronterizo at the COLEF (Colegio de la Frontera Norte) argues that the local nature of this activity marks the difference between transborder and transnational communities. While some scholars (Stephen 2007, Glick Schiller 2005) are promoting the use of the
term transborder for activities that were previously considered transnational to include the many symbolic borders that migrants cross, those uses can have the effect of erasing and minimizing what is actually occurring on the nations borders. It is important to make a distinction between transborder and transnational as the people who participate in transborder activities do so along the political border. The distinction is not meant to minimize the many borders that migrants cross and are forced to navigate in their daily lives but rather to situate the processes that occur at the border.

Methods

A large part of my interest in oral histories stems from participating in an oral history project where I was able to interview survivors, victims and militants of the Spanish Civil War and Francoist repression. This experience was transformative, and I realized that I learned a great deal and felt especially connected to the Spanish Civil War and Spain in listening to people who experienced it first hand. I realized that I not only learn a great deal hearing people’s stories but that I am interested in conducting research that elicits information that quantitative data cannot. An interview that left me extremely impacted was with a woman living in Madrid who had spent the last seventy years searching for her father and closed the windows so her neighbors could not hear what she was sharing with us. Towards the end of the testimony she said “por eso no compro libros de guerra, no, porque sufro y que más libro que el que tengo yo, dentro de mi” “that’s why I don’t buy war books, no, because I suffer and what more book do I need than the one I have, inside of me.” The people that I interviewed for this thesis also carry

1 http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/speccoll/scwmemory/
a book inside and are the best sources for talking about what it means to be a border crosser.

Oral histories provide a way to delve into the motivations, thinking, and worries of people. Oral histories can provide a window into how people construct and view their history and experiences. Given that a great deal of misconceptions and anti-immigrant sentiment exist oral histories also provide an important method of bringing a human element into research on the border and displaying the complexity and heterogeneity of border life. When explaining his methodology in the book “Shadowed Lives” Leo Chavez (1997) argues that there is a need to look at real people when analyzing and talking about larger macro processes and advocates for research to be grounded in everyday life. Chavez uses a multiple methodologies approach, including unstructured interviews, surveys, observations and participation in various community events, which included various informal conversations. Similar to a multiple methodology approach I am grounding my oral histories in theory and earlier research on transborder commuters in the Tijuana San Diego region.

In the article “What makes oral history different” Alessandro Portelli states that oral history

tells us less about events than about their meaning... Oral histories tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did. Oral sources may not add much to what we know, for instance, of the material cost of a strike to the workers involved; but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs.” (1990: 50).

Oral histories can have the ability of revealing people’s decision-making processes and how they are affected and feel about certain events and experiences. Rosalva Aída
Hernandez Castillo, a Mexican anthropologist from Ensenada, conducted oral histories on the “other border,” the southern Mexican border, regarding indigenous Mam identity and their history in the Chiapas border region in her book “La Otra Frontera: Identidades Multiples en el Chiapas poscolonial” (2001). She explains her use of oral histories and the inability to ever provide a full representation of any identity or culture.

These personal narratives are not intended to be representative of ‘the life of the Mames.’ They are the experiences of four borderlanders who either have shifted from one identity to another or claim several identities at once… The testimonies presented in the interchapters also tell us about transcultural experiences, for some of the narrators have traveled to other countries and made contact with members of political or religious organizations outside the “community.” Their lives challenge any definition of “the culture” as an integral, unified, and homogeneous whole.” (Hernandez Castillo 2001: 10-11)

Similar to Hernandez Castillo I am not interested in a representative sample of the border or transborder commuters. Rather I am interested in diverse experiences of people from different backgrounds who share that they were or are transborder commuters and present a first hand account of living in the border region. Their narratives help provide a history and central narrative of the region. Their personal narratives help provide a picture to how these global forces are lived at the ground level from voices that are not always heard.

Transborder commuters’ or transmigrants’, a term used to defined people who live in Mexican border cities and move to work in U.S. border cities, status as a racialized group and at a certain socio-economic level, for example, can change once they cross the border. Some straddle the line between a subaltern, racialized group in the United States and return many times to a higher socioeconomic status in Mexico; possessing the documents to cross into the U.S. and some as part of the dominant non-racialized group
within Mexican society. I conducted six oral histories with people who are currently commuting from Tijuana to San Diego or have a history of commuting. I also conducted an additional interview with a woman who came to the United States as a child and moved to Tijuana while awaiting her green card after marrying a US citizen. Given her immigration status she was unable to cross into the US and because of her temporary deportation her husband began commuting to his job in San Diego while they lived in Tijuana. I included this interview to provide the perspective and history of someone who grew up in the San Diego border region, was excluded for a time from a transborder lifestyle and experienced border crossing in a different way.

The oral histories were conducted with people in their twenties and fifties. I choose to speak with these two age groups because they form two different generations of people in working age at different points in their careers and family responsibilities. Also they contribute different vantage points for the history of the region. The oral histories were gathered through personal contacts. Having lived in the South Bay area of San Diego for the majority of my life has created contacts and relationships with people who cross the border on a regular basis. These contacts have also provided referrals to other people who participate in transborder processes. I chose to focus on people who commute from Tijuana to San Diego because commuting from south to north along the US Mexico border is much more significant than commuting in the other direction. Also transborder commuting is tied to the history of migration from Mexico to the United States but there is a lack of literature on “legal” migration from Mexico. At the same time a main argument from Pablo Vila and his collaborators in “Border Ethnographies” is that most of the research on borders conducted by US-based scholars lack the viewpoints
of Mexican borderlanders. Vila further argues that this has an unintended consequence of privileging US centric theory and research of the borderlands (Vila 2003). I do not come from a Mexican borderlands perspective yet I hope that by conducting oral histories with Mexican borderlanders this thesis will be a small part of the attempt to move away from a U.S. centric theory and perspective.

To properly introduce the people interviewed for this thesis a separate chapter is dedicated to providing their background and a small part of their history in their own words. This follows the method used by Juan Flores in *The Diaspora Strikes Back* (2009). The introductory narrative does not reflect the sequence of the interviews as memory and thought processes do not usually tell a linear story. For clarity and due to the length of the interviews they were cut significantly to create a short initial introductory narrative. The people who participated in this thesis by sharing their stories can tell their story better than I can. All but one of the interviews were conducted in Spanish and the last interview is a mix of Spanish and English. In order to maintain the flow, original meaning and nuance the quotes are kept in Spanish with English translations appearing immediately after. Maintaining the original Spanish version is important because language and the use of terms is telling. Translations also are never quite able to fully capture and translate the original concepts.
Chapter 1: Situating the Tijuana-San Diego Region

In this chapter I first present a description of the San Ysidro-Tijuana border crossing from both directions. Then I will provide a short history of the Tijuana-San Diego region. Lastly I will discuss pertinent theory on borders and mobility. The border crossing into Mexico and the border crossing into the United States illustrate the contrast between the power differentials and difficulty of crossing into each country depending on which direction you move.

Heading south from San Diego on either the 5 or 805 freeways leads you directly into Tijuana. Signs are posted on the side of the freeway warning that firearms are illegal in Mexico. A green or red signal lights up when autos enter Mexico through Tijuana. If the light turns green you can go straight into Tijuana and if the light turns red you are directed to move to the right for secondary inspection by the Mexican immigration officers. Since July of 2009 the Mexican government implemented “Siave” (Sistema Integral de Aforo Vehicular) in order to detect and deter the smuggling of firearms and other contraband into Mexico\(^2\). In addition to cameras and electronic revision of cars Mexican agents have also been placed at the border crossing. In the last year, 2009, the lines to cross into Tijuana have become significantly longer, especially during rush hour. In the San Ysidro pedestrian crossing a person can either walk through a bridge or walk past Duty Free shops at the end of the huge Outlet Center immediately next to the border wall, Las Americas, and walk into Tijuana by going through a turnstile in a gate. Within

the last year U.S. immigration officials have begun to patrol the pedestrian crossing on both the street and the bridge leading into Tijuana. When walking into Tijuana people pass Mexican immigration officers and may have their bags checked but at no point are they asked for their documents to be able to enter Tijuana from San Diego.

Crossing from Tijuana to San Ysidro is extremely different. The line at San Ysidro can vary from a short wait to over three hours depending on the time and the day and if you possess a SENTRI card, Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection. The SENTRI program has specific designated lanes in the vehicle and pedestrian crossings and is intended to make crossing the border faster and easier. In order to get a SENTRI one needs to pay 122.25 dollars per person, pass a background check and have no criminal convictions. The line to cross into San Diego at the vehicle and pedestrian crossings are routinely substantially longer than the lines to cross into Tijuana. Lined next to the cars are stores, pharmacies, coffee shops and stands selling anything from blankets, jackets, plates, pottery, plastic Bart Simpson banks, jewelry, and other items. While waiting in the vehicular line US agents with dogs walk through the cars patrolling the line. At the same time people walk through the cars selling sodas, water, candy, chips, jackets, blankets, and offering to wash your car windows. Billboards have always lined the border crossing but during the last decade jumbotrons emerged advertising real estate in San Diego, recruiting people to join the police force in addition to other advertisements targeting people living on both sides of the border.

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3 Customs and Border Patrol: http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/trusted_traveler/sentri/sentri_eligibility.xml
When driving once you reach the white dots on the road that indicate you have reached U.S. territory various forms of inspection begin. At the stop sign an automatic photo of you and your car is taken and when the signal turns green you can proceed to the next stop sign and then the booth with the border agent. Once at the booth you must present your documentation; a border crossing card, visa, US passport, green card and answer questions asked by the border agent.

When crossing through the pedestrian crossing at San Ysidro you walk between the shops and line of cars and enter a gated area that leads to a building containing the pedestrian lines and inspection booths. At the front of the line you present your identification and answer a series of questions from the border agents and if you are granted entrance into the U.S. you place the bags you are carrying into an x-ray machine similar to the ones used in airports and then walk into San Ysidro.

The history of the United States-Mexico border region has been marked by power differentials. The economic discrepancies between San Diego and Tijuana are immediately noticeable when you cross between these two cities. The border line between the United States and Mexico is accepted as a natural and common sense way for both countries to delineate and protect their territories and sovereignty. Yet the construction of the border between both countries began in the relatively recent past. The Southwestern portion of the United States did not become a part of the US nation until the middle of the 19th century. Before Spanish colonization of the Americas the Kumeyaay indigenous group populated the current Tijuana San Diego border region of Alta and Baja California. The use of the terms Alta and Baja California by certain people are also indicative of the recognition that parts of the US and Mexico were once one and
have been separated. The Spanish conquest of Mexico was largely concentrated in central Mexico with its huge settlements and base of power (Piñera Ramirez 1985). In 1788 the "border" between Alta and Baja California was demarcated by the limit of the Misión de San Miguel which ended with a ranch in Rosarito. This "border" divided Franciscan control to the north and Dominican control to the south (Piñera Ramirez 1985). It is important to note that all these demarcations came from above, from the Spanish, and does not mean that the people native to this region agreed with or followed these boundaries. This was evident throughout the process of the creation of the US Mexico border after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Mexican American war. The creation of the border and separation of Alta and Baja California also did not take into account the people living in this region and forced a nation state on the residents.

The construction of the US Mexico borderline began after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and is a process that continues to this day. The border at the time was very porous with people moving back and forth with ease and frequency. One geographer goes as far as arguing that the border "was little more than a line on the map" (Ford 2005: 27). Additionally it has been demonstrated in earlier works that people and families moved freely between Alta and Baja California and created social fields that spanned both Californias for generations (Alvarez 1987). This relative ease of movement and the social fields generated laid the groundwork for the current transborder population and processes. The border fence between the US and Mexico is not a fixed, natural entity but rather has gone through a process of increasing fortification. Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, Operation Hold the Line in Arizona form part of the path the construction of the border has taken. In 2006 the United States Congress passed The Secure Fence
Act\textsuperscript{4} to extend the triple fence along the US-Mexico border and construction is currently underway to extend the triple fence through the Tijuana Estuary, a California State Park, which forms part of the Tijuana River Valley\textsuperscript{5}.

When the border was constructed what is now the Tijuana San Diego border region was not very populated but the cities and their subsequent development and growth were closely tied especially in the case of Tijuana. Piñera Ramirez argues in the book \textit{Historia de Tijuana: Semblanza General} (1985) “Podemos concluir que la parte más importante del actual municipio de Tijuana era el extremo sur de la provincia de Alta California y por tanto su historia, en la época misional y en los primeros años del Mexico independiente, está ligada a la historia de Alta California, particularmente a la de San Diego.” “We can conclude that the most important part of the current municipality of Tijuana was at the extreme south of the province of Alta California and therefore its history, in the mission period and the first years of Mexican independence, is tied to the history of Alta California, particularly to San Diego’s” (Piñera Ramirez 1985: 25).

Most border scholars argue that Tijuana's history, growth and urbanization has historically and continues to be tied to Southern California and San Diego (Alegría 2000, Bustamante 1992). The Tijuana San Diego area began as a region with similar structures and transformed into a region with two very different economic, political and legal structures (Alegría 1990). Alegría argues that because the border has become less

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\textsuperscript{4} Secure Fence Act of 2006, http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d109:h.r.06061:

\textsuperscript{5} In addition to further fortifying the border wall, there are ecological concerns that the triple fence will destroy important marshes, mesas, wildlife, sediment basins and archeological sites in the Tijuana River Valley.
permeable and has created more separation between the U.S. and Mexico this process in turn has exacerbated the economic differences and influenced an increase in transmigration from Tijuana. “En otras palabras, las estructuras que están impulsando la trasmigración, están frenando su crecimiento, conformando una dialéctica unidad de contrarios.” “In other words, the structures that are propelling transmigration, are stopping its growth, composing a dialectic unity of opposites (Alegría 1990: 9).

Baja California has had a history of foreign interest going back to the Spanish period (Alvarez 1987). During the period when Tijuana officially became a city in 1889\(^6\) the city was comprised of small cattle ranches and was sparsely populated with a population of 242. Unlike most other Mexican cities Tijuana's economy emerged as a service economy, specifically tourism, instead of an economy based on agriculture (Bustamante 1996). Due to prohibition and restrictions on gambling in the United States coupled with Tijuana’s proximity to the United States actors, celebrities and others from the U.S. looked south to Mexico, especially Tijuana to find what was prohibited in the U.S. Much of the myth and legend of Tijuana as a city of vice and illicit activity began during this time (Ford 2005). In addition to foreign interest Tijuana was also cut off from much of Mexico, whose government has historically been centralized.

Border cities such as Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez were sites where the majority of foreign maquiladoras were established during Mexico’s Border Industrialization Program (BIP) in 1965. The Border Industrialization Program was part of the liberalization and privatization of the Mexican economy that took place in the second half of the 20\(^{th}\)

\(^6\) Enciclopedia de los Municipios de Mexico, Tijuana, Baja California http://www.e-local.gob.mx/work/templates/enciclo/bajacalifornia/municipios/02004a.htm
century (Huesca 2003, Fernandez-Kelley 1989). The BIP paved the way for foreign companies to open factories or maquiladoras in the border region of Mexico. David Bacon in the book *Children of NAFTA* states that the maquiladoras were also created as a way to absorb displaced Mexican workers that had migrated to the United States and were deported after the Bracero Program ended (2004). Many scholars argue that the BIP catered more to foreign business interests than those of their citizens (Huesca 2003, Bacon 2004).

In the most comprehensive analysis of the program to date, Sklair (1989) found that maquiladoras failed to achieve most of the minimum criteria used to assess development strategies, including the creation of linkages to the national economy, genuine transfer of technology, retention of foreign currency, and equitable distribution of program costs and benefits. Furthermore, the area of clearest success—the creation of employment—is marked by low-wage, repetitive, and sometimes dangerous and unhealthful work” (Huesca 230: 2003).

The liberalization and privatization policies were not limited to the Border Industrialization Program, they also included the privatization of telecommunications and banking systems in Mexico.

The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 was a continuation of the liberal economic policies and business connections between Mexico and the United States. Many scholars argue that the passage of NAFTA has been detrimental to rural communities, has been an impetus for increased migration from Mexico and has not improved economic conditions for the majority of Mexicans (Cunningham 2004, Bacon 2004).

Moreover, living standards did not improve for many Mexicans after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). During the decade of NAFTA, the real incomes of Mexican wage earners lost twenty percent of their purchasing power as the labor market deteriorated and the national
minimum wage fell by nearly fifty percent. In addition, the standard of living fell farther away from that in the United States: in 1975, Mexican production workers earned twenty-three percent of United States wages, while in 2001 they earned eleven percent” (Cunningham 2004: 337).

Tijuana is also considered a “ciudad de paso” or a city that people pass through on their way to the United States. In reality Tijuana is also a destination for many people from other regions of Mexico and a large portion of the population growth in Tijuana is due to migration to the region. In 2000 60.3 % of the Tijuana population were immigrants (Anguiano Tellez 2005).

The San Diego-Tijuana border has changed and become more militarized with more restrictions to crossing yet despite these trends transborder activity has continued. People living along the US Mexico borderlands have a long history of moving back and forth between both countries. Transborder commuting has existed along the U.S.-Mexico border for over a century. In the 1920s the U.S. government created a special designation for commuters who are not U.S. citizens (Alegría 1990). People continue to cross to shop, work, visit family, go to the doctor, go to school and find entertainment on either side of the border. In his thorough analysis of “Operation Gatekeeper” Joseph Nevins (2002) argues that it should not been surprising that the fortification of the border through Operation Gatekeeper went hand in hand with the globalization of the U.S. economy. The encouragement of the movement of capital and commerce was never extended to the movement of people.

A distinguishing characteristic of Mexican border cities is that they are among the wealthiest cities with the lowest poverty rates in Mexico while U.S. border cities have the highest poverty rates in the United States (Bustamante 1992, Anguiano Téllez 2005).
San Diego is the huge exception, being one of the wealthier cities in the United States. Tijuana is among the wealthiest cities in Mexico yet the economic gap and income differential between Tijuana and San Diego is the largest along the US-Mexico border (Bae 2003, Bustamante 1992, 1996, Anguiano Téllez 2005). The wealth in Tijuana does not erase the poverty and socioeconomic divide within this city. Some scholars focusing on transborder issues agree that the economic asymmetry and wealth in San Diego separates itself from Tijuana but is also an impulse or catalyst for cross border economic, labor, and social interactions (Alegría 1990, 2000, Anguiano Tellez 2005, Ojeda 2005). An example of these asymmetries is the huge wage differential. The minimum wage established for 2010 is 57.46 pesos per day in Baja California\(^7\), which is approximately 4.79 dollars a day compared with a minimum wage of eight dollars an hour in California. This means that a minimum wage worker in San Diego earns almost twice as much for an hour of work as a minimum wage worker in Tijuana does for a full days work. The median wage per hour in Tijuana in the fourth quarter of 2009 was 35.9\(^8\) pesos per hour or about three dollars an hour\(^9\). The median wage in Tijuana is almost five times the minimum wage in Baja California, based on an eight-hour workday, but even earning four times the minimum wage is not enough to eat well and for those earning minimum wage it is barely enough to pay for one meal and transportation to and from work or

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\(^7\) According to a the Press Release by the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social http://www.stps.gob.mx/saladeprensa/boletines_2009/diciembre_09/conasami_diciembre_stps.htm


\(^9\) The current exchange rate is approximately 12 pesos per dollar. Source: Banco Nacional de Mexico http://www.banamex.com/
school\textsuperscript{10} (Garcia Ochoa 2009). Housing, food, transportation and other aspects of cost of living are significantly lower in Tijuana than San Diego. Yet clothing and electronics are many times cheaper in San Diego than in Tijuana and as such certain aspects of cost of living do not differ significantly from San Diego.

Even with the huge economic differentials many scholars consider the Tijuana San Diego region to be a transborder metropolis or “tercera nación,” to form one large metropolitan area and as the largest bicultural and bilingual urban area in the world (Bae 2005, Ford 1976, 2004, Escala Rabadán & Vega Briones 2005, Herzog 1990). In response to these assertions it has been argued that the notion of one large metropolitan area is false and misleading (Alegría 2000, Sparrow 2001). Mexican scholar Tito Alegría thoroughly critiques this idea in the article “Juntos pero no revueltos”

La conceptualización "metrópoli transfronteriza" para denominar a esas ciudades vecinas es de naturaleza impresionista y no tiene sustentación teórica. La idea de que cada par binacional de ciudades vecinas conforma una única ciudad o región, implica que ambas ciudades tienen futuros e intereses similares. Tal idea sustenta las propuestas de una coordinación en la toma de decisiones y en la elaboración de leyes… El enfoque a lo largo del texto consiste en que la idea de la "unicidad de ambos lados" de la frontera no toma en cuenta que el crecimiento urbano del lado mexicano, y en parte el crecimiento del lado estadunidense, dependen de las diferencias económicas entre ambos países y entre ambos lados de la frontera. Aquí propongo que el falso argumento de similaridad, además de la relación a través de la frontera, es la base del equivocado concepto de la "unicidad de ambos lados”; por el contrario, al centrarse en las características estructurales, que son diferentes en cada lado de la frontera (y que estimulan el crecimiento), es posible explicar la "unicidad de cada lado". (Alegría 2000: 90)

The conceptualization “transborder metropolis” to denominate these neighboring cities is by nature impressionist and is not supported

\textsuperscript{10} “Salario mínimo, para medio comer” El Sol de Tijuana, Sonia García Ochoa http://www.oem.com.mx/esto/notas/n1067069.htm
theoretically. The idea that each pair of neighboring bi-national cities form one city or region implies that both cities have similar futures and interests. Such an idea supports the proposals of coordination in decision-making and in the elaboration of laws… The focus throughout the text consists of the idea that ‘oneness of both sides’ of the border does not take into account that the urban growth on the Mexican side, and in part the growth of the US side, depend on the economic differences between both countries and between both sides of the border. Here I propose that the false idea of similarity, in addition to the relationship across the border, is the root of the mistaken concept of ‘oneness of both sides’; on the contrary, in concentrating on the structural characteristics, which are different on either side of the border (and stimulate growth), its possible to explain the ‘oneness of each side’.

Norma Iglesias, a scholar and professor at San Diego State University whose research focuses on the populations in the border region, explains the power dynamics and differentials between Tijuana and San Diego.

Aquí hay un norte que controla al sur, pero que al mismo tiempo lo ignora, y no lo reconoce como necesario. Y hay un sur que inevitablemente reconoce, mira y oye al norte. Un sur que estructura su vida cotidiana en función del vecino poderoso. Una relación en donde la cotidianidad del sur está marcada por el acontecer político y económico del norte. Dos sencillos pero poderosos indicadores de esta asimetría son, por un lado, el hecho de que San Diego no sea reconocida, por la mayor parte de sus residentes, y de una buena parte de sus visitantes, como ciudad fronteriza, y por otro lado, la facilidad de circulación de los estadounidenses por la frontera (sin necesidad de documentos o de visa) y lo restringido de esta circulación para los mexicanos (Iglesias 2004: 146).

Here there is a north that controls the south, but at the same time ignores it, and does not recognize it as necessary. And there is a south that unavoidably recognizes, looks to and hears the north. A south that structures its everyday life around the powerful neighbor. A relationship where the everyday life of the south is marked by the political and economic happenings of the north. Two simple but powerful indicators of this asymmetry are, on the one hand, the fact that San Diego is not recognized, by the majority of its residents, and a large part of its visitors, as a border city, and on the other hand, the ease of circulation of Americans across the border (without the necessity of documents or a visa) and the restrictedness of this circulation for Mexicans.

Iglesias makes two important points in describing some of the asymmetries
between Tijuana and San Diego, a huge difference being perception, as Tijuana is usually defined by its status as a border city and San Diego is almost never considered a border city. The only portions of San Diego County that are considered border cities and identify themselves with the border are in the South County or South Bay area. Chula Vista is nicknamed “Chula Juana” and while many people from the area use the term proudly it is used derogatorily by some from other areas of the county and points to the negative perceptions many San Diegans have of Tijuana and the South Bay. The other differential that Iglesias points out is mobility, possessors of U.S. citizenship and residency can freely move between both countries yet that same mobility is highly restricted and much more difficult to attain for Mexicans. This thesis focuses on transborder commuters, as such people who have access to mobility, but it is important and central to acknowledge that this mobility is not accessible to most Mexicans in the border region.

**Theoretical Frameworks in the Borderlands**

Movement and in turn limits to movement are central to the study of borders and transborder populations, especially on the Mexico-U.S. border. Anthropologists Cunningham and Heyman, specialists on the U.S.-Mexico border, argue for theorizing the border as a space of mobility and enclosure. “Our development of a mobilities–enclosures continuum is thus central to our attempt to return (after a period of considerable abstraction) to borders as sites where movement is structured within the context of unequal power relations” (Cunningham and Heyman 2004: 293). Mobility at the border is predicated on documents and proving that you are “worthy” of entry. Transborder commuting entails frequent mobility where inspection and the need for
documents occur on a day-to-day basis. The mobilities-enclosures continuum as such becomes heightened at the border. At the same time, for non-commuters and those who do not possess certain documents, proximity to the border and the constant presence and threat of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) further heightens this continuum.

A common theme in border studies is that the border is viewed as a liminal zone, an in-between or threshold. The border functions as a very real liminal zone where one has to prove through specific means that they have a right to cross into another country, yet even for people with the correct “papers” there is always a state of limbo and chance that one may not be able to fully prove their right to entrance. Mark B. Salter, who researches security, migration and border policy, takes Agamben's analysis of the "state of exception" and applies it to state borders, which he argues constitute a permanent state of exception. According to Salter the state of exception present at the border is fundamental to the creation of state sovereignty and the nation state in itself. The fortification and militarization of the U.S. Mexico border is based on the idea of “illegal immigrants” and those outside of the nation as threats. Fundamental to the view of the border as a state of exception is the acknowledgement that borders and nation states are constructs. The normalization of the border and the nation state institutionalizes the power of the nation to define who can and cannot enter and have access to the benefits of the protection of the state.

The border is a permanent state of exception, which makes the ‘normal’ biopolitical control of government inside the territorial frontier of the state possible… Governmental procedures of examination at the border institutionalize a continual state of exception at the frontier that in turn performs the spatio-legal fiction of territorial sovereign and the sovereign subject in each admission/exclusion decision. This argument is made not from extraordinary cases or even from the consideration of the
adjudication of asylum claims, but rather from the mundane, ordinary
evidence of the everyday passage of millions of normal travelers across
the border. (Salter 2008: 365)

Salter argues that at points of entry all border crossers are transformed into the *homo sacer*. Every border crosser is subject to inspection and must prove that they have the “right” to enter. The notion of “legality” and “illegality” are obvious examples of the State of Exception, where “illegal” residents are stripped of rights and protections under the law. This manifestation of the state of exception is justified by the discourse of illegal immigrants as threats. “The state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order” (Agamben 1998: 169).

The border as state of exception has gained importance after 9-11 and the current discourse of a state of necessity and war on terror. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security, ICE and passage of the Patriot Act were all created under the discourse of threat and the state of necessity. After 9-11 the discourse in the United States centered around the notion of a state of emergency tied to the threat of terrorism and a need to protect ourselves from this threat. Within this discourse of threat and necessity for protection, a largely uncontested argument, was the need for more border enforcement and to secure the borders from more attacks. The discourse emerged that terrorists can enter undocumented through the borders even though this has not substantiated. In the book the “State of Exception” Agamben reviews the historical and theoretical uses of the state of exception and argues that it is largely viewed as the suspension of law in what is considered an “emergency” or state of “necessity” and poses
the question of how the suspension of the law can function within law (Agamben 2005).

This is not to say that the border as a state of exception is new but that it has become intensified. Agamben argues that the “state of necessity” is completely subjective and invoked when deemed advantageous.

But the extreme aporia against which the entire theory of the state of necessity ultimately runs aground concerns the very nature of necessity, which writers continue more or less unconsciously to think of as an objective situation. This naive conception—which presupposes a pure factuality that the conception itself has called into question—is easily critiqued by those jurists who show that, far from occurring as an objective given, necessity clearly entails a subjective judgment, and that obviously the only circumstances that are necessary and objective are those that are declared to be so. (Agamben 2005: 29-30)

My only contention with Salter’s argument is that even though he acknowledges that the border is differently experienced by the “elite” and those who do not have papers, marginalized groups, refugees and asylum seekers he argues that all people crossing borders and facing inspection become a homo sacer, where they may or may not be granted access to enter, and hopes that an “empathetic, cosmopolitan ethic” can emerge under these commonalities. I believe that he overstates these commonalities;

In short, I argue that the politicization of the border is always already clear to the marginal, the excluded, the asylum seeker. Tactically, what is needed is a way to politicize the border for the ‘kinetic elite’, precisely those for whom the border does not seem problematic. What Enns and Agamben miss about the border is that all travelers pass through a moment of disappearance and examination when citizenship (being a friend) becomes our burden to prove (Salter 2008: 377).

Salter ends by stating “It could be that this cold experience of the international space of power without law might provide a moment of sympathy or solidarity with those for whom this position is permanent and question the basis on which those community boundaries are maintained” (Salter 2008: 378). Salter is making a political argument and
calling for an empathy of common experience yet he does not fully take into account how
crossing the border and attempting to gain entrance into a nation state is racialized,
classed and gendered.

Border scholar Alejandro Lugo argues for theorizing border crossings
as "‘inspection stations’ which inspect, monitor, and survey what goes in and out in the
name of class, race and nation" (Lugo 2000: 355). The notion of border crossings as
inspection stations is fundamental to the functioning of current state borders and the state
of exception. Race, gender and socioeconomic status are central to inspections.
Additionally these aspects of the inspection process become more apparent and
naturalized as part of the everyday process of crossing the border for transborder
commuters.

In his study of “Operation Gatekeeper” on the U.S.-Mexico border, Joseph Nevins
ties the creation and passage of Operation Gatekeeper to the construction of the “illegal
immigrant” as “threat” (Nevins 2002). According to Nevins, Operation Gatekeeper’s
“greatest significance is that it embodies the pinnacle of a historical geographical process
that has made the boundaries of the United States and their accompanying social
practices seem increasingly normal and unproblematic, thus placing them without
question” (Nevins 2002: 10). The notion of “legally” or “illegally” crossing the border is
predicated on the notion that one is entering into a contract and abiding by certain rules or
laws but without the guarantee of being covered by any of the state’s rules or laws. The
border is not performed and experienced by all in the same way. Even people of
Mexican descent who are holders of American citizenship or residency are treated
differently from non-racialized tourists when entering the US.
Nancy Wonders advances the theory of border performativity, which is influenced by Judith Butler’s theory of the performance of gender.

Border performativity takes as its theoretical starting point the idea that borders are not only geographically constituted, but are socially constructed via the performance of various state actors in an elaborate dance with ordinary people who seek freedom of movement and identification. The choreography for this dance is shaped by state policies and laws, but it is increasingly shaped by larger global forces as well. (Wonders 2006: 64-65)

Wonders argues that the border is enacted once it is performed by border agents, who make the decisions of who is granted entrance and believed to be worthy of entrance.

The performance of the border occurs on a frequent basis for transborder commuters who need to regularly prove that they can enter the other country. The “elaborate dance” between border agents and ordinary people is two-fold as it also contains the motivations, strategies and everyday struggles of people who seek to cross the border with or without documents. Transborder commuters engage in this performance on a sometimes day-to-day basis and this performance becomes naturalized and expected even though transborder commuters are aware of the sacrifices and difficulties they experience.

The theory of border performativity argues that it is embodied and performed differentially on certain bodies.

Border agents and state bureaucrats play a critical role in determining where, how, and on whose body a border will be performed… Thus, border performances are not gender-neutral, but are instead highly gendered (Wonders 2004b). Similarly, border performances are also classed and racialised (Driessen 1996). Indeed, those belonging to some racial groups and social classes may be welcomed by a country that strictly enforces borders crossings by ‘Others’. This is particularly true in the post 9/11 world (Wonders 2006: 66).

Wonders adds that who is viewed as an “illegal immigrant” is highly classed, racialized
and gendered; this view in turn affects how the border is performed by federal agents.

Thus, illegality is a forced identity category imposed upon some individuals and groups by nation-states reluctant to provide access and/or citizenship rights to those considered undesirable... Dauvergne (2004: 599) captures this contradiction:

Technically, anyone who is present in a nation state without either nationality or authorisation under law is an illegal migrant. Many people around the world who have no legal migration status have overstayed tourist, student or work visas. ... The term ‘illegal’ has escaped its legal, and even grammatical, moorings and now stands alone as a noun. It does not conjure British backpackers overstaying on Australia’s Gold Coast, or Kiwi’s working in London’s pubs. It conjures sweatshops and sex shops, poverty and race. The face of the imaginary illegal is poor and brown and destitute.

Thus, the construction of ‘the illegal’ reflects, not mobility or border crossing per se, but rather the identity of particular border crossers. The concept of ‘the illegal’ also represents an important technology of control in the construction of semi-permeable borders, particularly since it not only shapes border flows and citizenship, but also our imagination. (Wonders 2006: 78).

In order to be a transborder commuter one must have a way of entering the other country on a regular basis, either through citizenship, residency, a visa, pasaporte local, work permit, student visa but the notion of legality and illegality structures access to mobility. Additionally Mexican nationals who do not possess U.S. work permits or student visas are under extra scrutiny and inspection regarding their reasons for entering the other country and even with the necessary documentation inspections at the border are still based on race, class and gender. This inspection process happens daily in the lives of transborder commuters. The “dance” and performance at the border to enforce it on the one hand and the daily routine of crossing on the other is experienced first hand by commuters on a regular basis.
Chapter 2: Narratives

The oral histories and narratives guided and shaped the development of the arguments and in this thesis. It is essential that the people I interviewed introduce themselves in their own words through their narratives. Presenting the interviews in their own words is also done in an effort to not speak for others. The introductory narratives presented here have been shortened due to their length and to present a brief coherent narrative. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and it is important to keep the original language of the interviews. The mix of different languages and words is important to telling their stories of what it means to be a border crosser. Immediately after each Spanish narrative an English translation is provided for ease of reading by non-Spanish speakers. This being said it must be taken into consideration that some phrases and thoughts can be difficult to translate and reflect the original meaning.

Elizabeth:

I spoke with Elizabeth at her home in Chula Vista. We sat and spoke in the kitchen while her mom walked in and out of the room and chimed into the conversation to add something she felt was important or help Elizabeth tell a story. Elizabeth is in her early fifties and lives with her mom, son and husband. We spoke over coffee and cookies with a novela playing in the background on a television in the kitchen and a basketball game playing in the living room. Elizabeth was born and raised in Tijuana and commuted for about five years but decided to move to Chula Vista because she felt the commute was too difficult for her son who was attending school in San Diego. She is very talkative, funny and a great storyteller. We laughed through much of the interview.
and she seemed surprised and happy that someone thought her experiences and stories were important enough to audio tape and include in a paper. Her mom is from Queretaro, Mexico and moved to Mexico City where she met Elizabeth’s father, who is originally from Lebanon. Shortly afterwards they moved to Tijuana, Baja California. Elizabeth’s mother commuted to work in San Diego for over 40 years and Elizabeth grew up going to the United States frequently to shop, go out, and visit her family in California.

“Me llamo Lizzy y nací hace 51 años en Tijuana. Estuve en Tijuana hasta básicamente la edad de 31 años o 32 años. No precisamente viviendo allí sin cruzar, porque la gente que nacimos y crecimos en Tijuana somos como una identidad muy especial y diferente. Nunca pensé que yo iba a venir a vivir a Estados Unidos, no lo necesitaba. Mi mamá durante 40 años, cruzó diariamente la frontera a trabajar en Estados Unidos, regresaba por las tardes a su casa, pero en la casa había fluidez económica en dólares. Ella cambiaba su cheque en un mercado, haciendo las compras del mandado. Entonces comimos siempre comida de aquí. Vestimos de aquí. Afortunadamente pues nos íbamos a Disneylandia, a las tiendas o sea pero nos regresábamos a vivir allá (Tijuana). Yo crecí gastando dólares porque no manejábamos pesos, manejábamos dólares. Estábamos como en la clase media, existía una clase media. Muchos años trabajé para la industria hotelera. Entré a trabajar a otra empresa que es del ramo de las maquiladoras. Eso fue en el 91, del 91 al 96 por 5 años, yo seguía cruzando la línea. En el 91, 92 pusieron el piloto de la línea SENTRI. Yo tenía la facilidad de pagarle a mi hijo una escuela privada que fue en su primaria, entonces empezó a cruzar conmigo en las mañanas. Yo me iba a mi oficina, hasta que dije bueno y ¿por qué yo tengo que hacerlo
sufrir desmañarse?’ Yo porque es mi obligación pero pobrecito él se levantaba a las 5 de la mañana, chiquitito y decía no puede ser justo. Y entonces fue cuando decidimos venirnos. Extrañé mucho, mucho, mucho la cultura mexicana, somos muy calídos. En México saludas a todos de beso, abrazas y a mí me costó mucho esfuerzo a tener que reprimirme. He luchado mucho porque también mi hijo no pierda su idioma. Yo sé que con el paso del tiempo, el pochismo y eso pero él está conciente y más aquí en la frontera, tu sabes, hablando dos idiomas tienen mejores oportunidades de vida. Y no es justo que pierdas. Sí, yo me arrepiento mucho de no hablar el idioma de mi papá (Árabe) pero si el se murió hace tantos años, siendo un idioma que no practicas pues es más fácil que lo pierdas. Pero que triste, a mi me da tristeza que yo no hubiese podido conservar algo más de esa cultura para poderla transmitir a mi hijo.”

[My name is Lizzy and I was born 51 years ago in Tijuana. I was in Tijuana until basically 31 or 32 years of age. Not precisely living there without crossing, because those of us born and raised in Tijuana have like a very special and different identity. I never thought that I was going to come and live in the U.S., I didn’t need to. My mom crossed the border daily for 40 years to work in the United States. She would return home at night but at home we had dollars. She changed her check at a market, while she shopped for stuff we needed at home. So we always ate food from here. We dressed from here. Fortunately we went to Disneyland, to the stores but we returned to live there (Tijuana). I grew up spending dollars because we didn’t use pesos, we used dollars. We were like in the middle class, there was a middle class. For many years I worked in the hotel industry. I began working at another company that is in the maquiladora sector. That was in 1991, 91 to 96. For five years I continued crossing the border. In 91, 92 the
pilot of the SENTRI line was established. I had the ability to pay for a private elementary school for my son, so he began crossing with me in the mornings. I would go to my office until I said and ‘why do I have to make him suffer, waking up early?’ Me because it’s my obligation but poor thing he wakes up at 5 in the morning, and I said to myself it’s not fair. And that’s when we decided to come here. I missed a lot, a lot, a lot the Mexican culture; we’re very warm. In Mexico we greet each other with kisses, we hug it took a lot of effort to control that. I have struggled a lot so that my son doesn’t lose his language. I know that with the passing of time, “pochismo” and all that but he is aware of that and more here on the border, you know, speaking two languages you have more life opportunities. And it’s not fair to lose it. I regret a lot not speaking my father’s language (Arabic) but he died so many years ago, being a language that you don’t practice well its easier to lose it. But how sad, I feel very sad that I couldn’t conserve more of that culture to be able to transmit it to my son.]

**Luis:**

Luis was born in National City and raised in Jalisco and Tijuana. He spent a great deal of his youth in Southern California visiting family. A large portion of his family has been in the region for centuries and he is very knowledgeable about the history of the Californias. He commutes three to four times a week from Tijuana to San Diego to teach Spanish in a San Diego college. I met up with Luis after one of his morning classes in an empty office where he works. We met in the morning because Luis wanted to make sure that he did not hit traffic or a long line on the way home. Luis is in his fifties and lives with his wife in Tijuana. Luis is laidback person and enjoyed joking around a great deal.

“Yo nací en National City, y mi padre nos llevó a su pueblo en Jalisco, en
México. Allí estudie mi primaria, después quiso regresar mi padre para acá, para el norte de México. Resulta que mi madre nació en el Valle Imperial. Ella es hija de un descendiente de un vasco que esa familia vasca llegó a mediados del siglo 19 aquí a California, a San Bernardino, y en ese entonces antes de que fuera California parte de México la gente viajaba hacia la Baja, por eso es el nombre de la Baja y de la Alta California. Yo tengo muchos parientes en California por parte de la familia de mi madre. Parte de mi niñez la pasé en Valle Imperial, me pasaba veranos en Los Angeles, y ya lo único que me faltó fue haber estar en la escuela y no estuve en la escuela porque mi padre fue recalcitrante Mexicano. Entonces no le gustaba que estudiáramos acá. Yo estuve trabajando muchos años en las empresas relacionados a los alimentos. Dejé de trabajar para terceros e inicié una empresa particular. Regresé a el área de Ensenada porque allí es donde estaba los barcos de la pesca y allí estaba mi centro de actividades comerciales. Lo que hacíamos era el pescado, lo importábamos aquí a Estados Unidos. Aquí en Estados Unidos teníamos una pequeña empresa en Los Angeles donde recibíamos el pescado y el pescado lo vendíamos al este de los Estados Unidos. Pero desde el punto de vista comercial es muy difícil las empresas, uno de los barcos que tenía yo, se hundió y poco a poco me fui despegando de la pesca y lo dejé por completo. Tanto en Estados Unidos como en México dadas las circunstancias económicas y la estructura como está, existe ahorita en México una avalancha de nuevos profesionistas capacitados igual que yo en los que por menos cantidad de dinero van a hacer el trabajo que yo voy a hacer. Y existe pues siempre la preferencia de cualquier empresa de contratar a jóvenes y como no fácilmente puedo conseguir un trabajo pues ¿qué mejor, no? Estados Unidos. Y tengo ocho años cruzando. Mi hija, la que vive en Guadalajara ella se fue de teenager a la
universidad, entonces ya empezó a vivir en Puebla, en Mexico, se casó con un Mexicano, Mexicano. Entonces ella se siente más Mexicana que la otra hermana porque la otra hermana está casada con un fronterizo, que es ciudadano Americano, que estudió toda su vida en Estados Unidos pero vive en Tijuana y ella estudió aquí en California así que ellos son transfronterizos ja ja ja. Y mi esposa es de Sonora y ella pasó de ser Sonorense, Sonorense a hacerse fronteriza de Tijuana.”

[I was born in National City and my father took us to his town in Jalisco, México. I went to elementary school there, then he wanted to return here, to the north of Mexico. It turns out that my mother was born in the Imperial Valley. She is the daughter of descendent of a Basque, that Basque family arrived here in California, San Bernardino, in the middle of the 19th Century. And well at that time before California was part of Mexico people would travel to Baja, which is where the name Baja and Alta California come from. I have a lot of family, on my mother’s side in California. I spent part of my childhood in the Imperial Valley, I spent summers in Los Angeles and the only thing left was to have gone to school and I didn’t because mi father was obstinately Mexican. So he did not like for us to study here. I was working for many years in companies related to food. I stopped working for others and started my own business. I returned to Ensenada because that’s where the boats are located and that’s was the center of my commercial activities. We would import the fish to the United States. In the U.S. we had a small business in Los Angeles where we would receive the fish and sell it to the east coast of the U.S. But from a business point of view it is very difficult, one of the boats I had sank and slowly I started letting it go and I left it completely. In the U.S. as in Mexico given the economic circumstances and the current structure there exists in Mexico and avalanche
of new professionals qualified like me and who will do the work that I can do for the less money. And since I can’t easily get a job what better than the U.S., right? I’ve been crossing for eight years. My daughter, the one that lives in Guadalajara went as a teenager to attend the university, so she began living in Puebla, in Mexico. She married a Mexican, Mexican. She feels more Mexican than her sister because her sister is married to a fronterizo, who is an American citizen, who studied in the U.S. all his life but lives in Tijuana and she studied here in California so they are transfronterizos (laughs). My wife is from Sonora and she went from Sonorense, sonorense to become a Tijuana fronteriza.]

**Gabriela:**

I met up with Gabriela in a café close to downtown San Diego on a weekday after she got off of work. She had recently moved to San Ysidro a couple of years back but mentioned that she is planning on moving back to Tijuana and begin commuting again. Her husband is planning on opening a business in Tijuana and they are planning on moving back to help get the business off the ground. Gabriela was born in San Diego and raised in Tijuana. She began commuting when she was six years old and commuted through high school and once she began working. Her father and both brothers commute from Tijuana to San Diego for work. Gabriela is part of the thousands of students from Tijuana who attend schools in San Diego. She spoke to me primarily in Spanish with a couple of words sprinkled in English. Gabriela also joked around a lot but was the most critical about the United States.

“Yo nací en San Diego, California pero mi familia, mis papás y mi hermano mayor vivían en Tijuana. Y pues yo me crío en Tijuana. Fui a la escuela en Tijuana un
año, fue tercero de kinder. Y después de allí ya el primer año en adelante fue que yo empecé a venir a la escuela en Estados Unidos. Cursé toda la primaria en San Ysidro que es luego, luego cruzando la línea de Tijuana. Pero más nunca viví yo en San Diego, todos los días cruzaba y venía. Yo crecí básicamente en Tijuana pero toda mi escuela fue en San Diego y más bien todos los que iban conmigo en la escuela de primero a octavo hacían lo mismo o sea la mayoría eran estudiantes que también vivían en Tijuana y venían a la escuela a San Diego, también había menos pues que vivían en lo que es Chula Vista o San Diego. Entré a la universidad en San Diego y eran dos amigas más y yo que entramos a la universidad. Nos dieron para room and board y todo y dijimos ¿por qué no aceptamos y vivimos en la universidad? Entonces así empezó. Y para no estar cruzando y por los horarios vivimos en la universidad. Estábamos más en San Diego que en Tijuana. Fíjate yo no lo veía como que estoy viviendo en San Diego, yo no lo percibí así. En mi mente, la forma en como lo acomodé fue estoy viviendo en la universidad porque aquí voy. Lo veía así porque pues yo lo sentía como que tan cerquitas ¿me entiendes? Claro que ya después que me gradúe todo cambió, yo me regresé a Tijuana, a la casa de mis papás. Me regresé a Tijuana pero me pusé a trabajar y todos los días tenía que cruzar ahora yo sola manejando y de que era pesado, sí era pesado, sí. Como mi papá hacía eso toda su vida pues era como normal. Era como que a lo que yo estaba acostumbrada. Pero claro todo cambió otra vez cuando entré a la maestría, y fue igual, tus clases, muy diferentes horas, que muchos trabajos, muchos trabajos en equipo, hacer muchas investigaciones. Puedo estar aquí, sí está mi familia en Tijuana pero no los veo que están a miles de kilómetros de distancia. Allí van a estar y yo puedo ir y eso me hace sentir bien. Digo yo hijole que difícil es sabiendo que están allí tan cerquitas y que no puedes
salir. No porque no quieres pero porque legalmente no puedes, porque tu sabes de aquí puedes salir, no hay problema, pero ¿como la haces para regresar? Y era un va y ven, un va y ven, entonces eso ayudaba mucho a que conocieras, a que te sintieras que ya había cierta nivel de no sé si es la palabra correcta pero ya te habías aculturado. Ya para ti ya era familiar, no estabas este cien por ciento así como que asimilada porque tú sabías que era uno que era el otro pero te podías desenvolver bien en ese ambiente y en el otro ambiente porque había también más personas haciendo eso. Tu sentías que también eras como otras.”

[I was born in San Diego, California but my family, my parents and my older brother lived in Tijuana. And well I was raised in Tijuana. I went to school in Tijuana for a year, kindergarten. And from there starting from first grade I began to go to school in the U.S. I attended all of elementary school in San Ysidro, which is right after crossing the border from Tijuana. I never lived in San Diego, everyday I crossed and returned. I basically grew up in Tijuana but all my schooling was in San Diego and everyone who went to school with me from first to eight did the same, I mean the majority were students that also lived in Tijuana and went to school in San Diego, there were also less that lived in Chula Vista or San Diego. I entered the university in San Diego and there were two other friends that started the university with me. They gave us for room and board and everything and we said why don’t we accept and live on the university and that’s how it started. To not be crossing and because of the schedule we lived in the university. We were more in San Diego than Tijuana. You know I didn’t see it like I am living in San Diego, I didn’t understand it like that. The way that I arranged it in my head was I’m living at the university because I go here. I saw that it was because well I
sensed that it was so close, you understand? After I graduated everything changed, I
returned to Tijuana, to my parents’ house. I returned to Tijuana but I began working and
everyday I had to cross. Now I was crossing, driving by myself and that it was tiring, yes
it was tiring. Since my dad did that his whole life, it was like normal. It was what I was
used to. But everything changed again when I began the masters program and it was the
same, your classes, very different hours, a lot of projects, a lot of group projects, a lot of
research. I can be here, yes my family is in Tijuana but I don’t see that they are
thousands of kilometers away. They will be here and I can go and that makes me feel
good. I say dang how hard it is knowing that they are so close and you can’t leave. Not
because you don’t want to but because legally you can’t, because you know that you can
leave here, that’s not a problem, but how do you get back? It was a back and forth, a
back and forth and that helped a lot for you to get to know it. That you could feel that
there was a certain level, I don’t know if it’s the right word but that you had already
acculturated. It was already familiar to you, you weren’t a hundred percent assimilated
because you knew what was one and what was the other but you could get around well in
that environment and in the other environment because there were already other people
who were doing the same. You felt that you were similar to others.]

Maria:

Maria and I spoke at her home in Tijuana. She is in her twenties and lives in
Colonia Libertad, the community closest to the San Ysidro border crossing, with her
husband. She was born in Chula Vista and raised in Tijuana near the Otay border
crossing. Maria has been commuting for about the last ten years. We spoke at her
kitchen table over snacks. I knew Maria for about a year before we did the interview and
she became a little less talkative than usual when I turned on the audio recorder. As the interview went on Maria seemed to become more comfortable, she became more talkative and began joking around. At the time Maria’s husband was also commuting to school and work in San Diego.

“Nací en Chula Vista pero como a la semana de haber nacido nos venimos para Tijuana. Y crecí aquí en Tijuana. Como que no me concibo sin haberme criado aquí. Desde morra me imaginaba viviendo en una ciudad que no fuera frontera y era como ¿qué haría? Por ejemplo mi papá es de Chihuahua y cuando iba a visitar a familia en Chihuahua, Parral, era como ¿qué haría viviendo aquí sin poder cruzar al otro lado? Se me hacía algo muy básico aunque no es obviamente básico. Pero te acostumbras entonces no digo que no podría vivir en un lugar que no fuera frontera pero en algún momento sí lo pensé como ay no que horror. Veía como una ventaja el estar en la frontera. Bueno por lo menos te puedes salir de tu ciudad un rato. Incluso era como parte de Tijuana para mí. De otros estados me decían como ‘ay Tijuana está re feo’ y yo era como ‘ah pero tenemos San Diego’ (laughs). Que ya ni al caso ¿no? pero se me hacía como parte de Tijuana. Fuimos al kinder, a la primaria aquí en Tijuana, la secundaria, la prepa, toda la escuela la hicimos en Tijuana. Nunca nos faltó nada en la casa. Siempre hubo obviamente comida, todo lo indispensable pero llegó un punto en que pues yo ya me quería comprar ropa y ya quería tener un poco más de dinero para salir y era dinero extra que no me daban mis papás. Entonces me acuerdo que mi mamá nos cruzó en su carro al otro lado allí por la línea de Otay. Y fuimos a los lugares allí de Otay a buscar trabajo con mi mamá (laughs). Y ya nos dieron trabajo a las dos y empezamos a trabajar fines de semana nada más. Empezamos de meseras a los meses. Al otro lado nomás era
cuando necesitábamos ir de compras. Cuando estaba niña sí me acuerdo que era como casi cada fin de semana y luego ya en la secundaria y en la prepa era menos porque había pasado la devaluación y entonces ya como que no se prestaba mucho ir de compras. Yo era como ay no, nunca voy a ir a vivir a Estados Unidos, se me hacía muy aburrido San Diego y a mi claro que me encantaba Tijuana. No creo que siempre pensé que iba a trabajar allá. Pero era como pensar diferente porque estaba muy morra, bueno empecé a trabajar morra pero de niña sí me veía trabajando allá más que nada porque soy ciudadana Americana. Tengo que aprovechar y si trabajo allá me voy a poder comprar un carro del año (laughs). O sea ese era mi idea de trabajar allá. Que después ya no, fue cambiando. Porque bueno el trabajo aquí en general en Tijuana no es muy bien pagado. Y yo trabajaba de subdirectora aquí en esta prepa y comparando yo los sueldos por ejemplo de mis amigas que también son profesionistas con el mío yo era la que mejor ganaba. Sin embargo al compararlo con lo que yo hacia de mesera en el otro lado no me convenía. Y más que nada porque en realidad nunca me convenció ese trabajo. Si hubiera sido un trabajo que yo dijera este trabajo es lo que me gusta hacer igual y yo hubiera podido soportarlo y no me hubiera importado el hecho de ganar un poco menos. Pero no me encantó el trabajo por un lado y era muy demandante o sea tenía que estar mucho tiempo allí. Entonces sentía que estaba nomás allí estancada. Y de mesera trabajando poquito más de la mitad de horas gano más. ¿Si me explico? O sea de subdirectora trabajaba 40 horas a la semana. De mesera que trabajo como unas 20 de 20 a 25 horas a la semana y gano más.”

[I was born in Chula Vista but after a week of being born we came to Tijuana. Its like I can’t think of not having grown up here. Since I was little I imagined myself living
in a city that wasn’t a border city and I was like what would I do? For example my father is from Chihuahua and when I would visit family in Chihuahua, Parral, it was like what would I do here without the ability to cross to the other side? It seemed like something so basic, even though obviously it’s not basic. But you get used to it so I wouldn’t say that I couldn’t live in a place that wasn’t a border but at one point I did think that, ay no what how horrible. I saw it as a positive, being in the border. Well at least you can leave your city for a little bit. It was even like part of Tijuana for me. People from other states would tell me ay Tijuana is so ugly and I was like but we have San Diego (laughs). But it was like part of Tijuana for me. We went to kindergarten, elementary, middle school, high school, we did all our schooling in Tijuana. We never needed anything in our house. There was always food obviously, everything that was necessary but there came a time when I wanted to buy clothes and I wanted to have a little more money to go out and it was extra money that my parents didn’t give me. I remember that my mom took us across the border to the other side in her car through Otay. And we went to the places in Otay to find work with my mom (laughs). And then they gave both of us a job and we began working only on weekends. We became waitresses after two months. To the other side it was only when we needed to go shopping. When I was younger I do remember going almost every weekend and then in junior high and high school we went less because of the devaluation because we didn’t have enough to buy over there. I was like oh no I’ll never live in the U.S. San Diego seemed so boring to me and I loved Tijuana. I don’t think I always thought I was going to work there. But I had a different way of thinking because I was so young, well I began working young but as a child I did see myself working there mostly because I’m an
American citizen. I have to take advantage and if I work there I’ll be able to buy a new car (laughs). That was my idea of working over there. Because work here in Tijuana in general isn’t well paid. And I worked as a vive principal in this high school and comparing my friends’ salaries, who are also professionals, to mine I was the one who made more. Porque bueno el trabajo aquí en general en Tijuana no es muy bien pagado. However comparing it to what I would make as a waitress on the other side it wasn’t worth it. And more than anything because, in reality, I was never convinced by that job. If it had been a job that I would have said this is what I like to do then maybe I could have endured it and it wouldn’t have bothered me to earn a little less. But I didn’t love that job on the one hand and it was very demanding. I had to spend a lot of time there. I felt that I was just stuck there. And as a waitress working a little more than half the hours I earn more. I mean as a vice principal I worked 20 to 25 hours a week and I earn more.]

Alejandro:

Alejandro is in his fifties and has a very different history than the other people I interviewed. He was born in a small Mixtec village in Oaxaca and came to the United States before he began commuting from Tijuana to work in San Diego. Alejandro came to the United States without documents and moved to Tijuana after he became a U.S. citizen under Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). A couple of years ago Alejandro took a year off from his job and returned to his village in Oaxaca to serve as the municipal president for a year. I spoke with Alejandro in Chula Vista after he got out of work. He was very talkative, critical and passionate about Mexican politics. After the interview he thanked me for the talk and said that he hardly has the chance to talk
about these issues.

“La diferencia es la necesidad más que otra cosa, o sea si tu te vas para otro lugar es con la finalidad de superarte ya sea económicamente, ya sea por tu estudio, ya sea por X razones pero si sales de un lugar a otro es por un mejor situación. Todavía tengo dos hermanas y un hermano allá, sus hijos pues lo mantienen. Pero todos están de este lado pues. Todo lo que es la juventud, es que le digo nomás se crecen un poquito y ya se vienen para acá. Aunque como te digo pues allá el aire es puro, toda la comida es deliciosa, todo eso pero el problema es que no puedes estar allá. Cuando recién, recién llegamos aquí sin documentos, éramos trabajadores del campo, nos quedamos en el campo y sin papeles todo eso. Arreglamos los papeles en 87 más o menos cuando hubo la oportunidad de arreglar los papeles. Más o menos estuve viviendo como unos 5, 6 años en Tijuana. Me casé, trajé mi familia aquí, me compré una casita aquí en Tijuana. Y mientras estaba procesando los papeles, porque cuando me casé luego, luego metí las aplicaciones para la residencia de mi esposa y de allí pues ya ves que el proceso tarda, durante todo ese tiempo se quedó en Tijuana y por eso ya teniendo la familia no me podía quedar aquí. Poco a poco estuvimos yendo a la escuela de adultos, aunque ahorita no podemos decir que hablamos el cien por ciento pero por lo menos ya lo entendemos poquito. Una de las razones principales porque me vine acá, que emigré a mi familia y pensando el porvenir de mis hijos, pensando más que como yo recién llegué aquí batallé mucho por el desconocimiento del idioma, sufrí bastante, sufrí bastante, o sea se me hizo bien difícil. Y eso no quiero que a mis hijos les vuelve a pasar lo mismo. Ese es la razón primordial porque está uno aquí, porque dinero no se hace aquí. No, le digo y vivir en Tijuana en lugar de estar pagando renta, eso es lo que ahorraba yo cuando vivía en
Tijuana. Sí bien podrías tener algo más pero yo prefiero invertirlo en la educación de mis hijos. Eso es lo primordial para mi ahorita. Todas las personas rurales se tiran a las ciudades. ¿Por qué? Porque donde lugar su origen no encuentran lo que necesitan y llegan a esas zonas, podemos hablar específicamente la zona de Tijuana. Por lo regular Tijuana son gentes que vienen de diferentes estados de la republica mexicana y así se fue acomodando, engrandando lo que es Tijuana pero son diferentes culturas. No hay una que digamos una cultura específica.”

[The difference is necessity more than anything else, I mean if you go to another place it is with the objective of bettering yourself, be it economically, for your studies, be it for X reasons but if you leave from one place to another its for a better situation. I still have two sisters and one brother over there, their children support them. But they are on this side. All the youth, I tell you they barely grow a little and they already come here. Even though like I tell you the air is pure, all the food is delicious, all that but the problem is you can’t be there. When we first, first arrived here without documents, we were farm workers, we stayed in the fields and without papers. We fixed our papers more or less in 1987 when there was the opportunity to fix your papers. I was living in Tijuana for more or less 5, 6 years. I married, I brought my family here, I bought a house in Tijuana. During that time I was processing my wife’s papers be cause when I married I quickly put in the application for my wife’s residency and well the process takes a long time. During all that time my wife stayed in Tijuana and for that reason, already having a family well I couldn’t stay there. Little by little we went to adult school, even though now we can’t say that we speak English one hundred percent at least we understand a little. One of the main reasons that I came here, legalized my family and thinking of my
children’s future, thinking of how when I just arrived here I struggle a lot with not knowing the language, I suffered a lot, I suffered a lot, I mean it was very hard. And I don’t want that to also happen to my children. That’s the fundamental reason that one is here, because you don’t make money here. No, I tell you and living in Tijuana instead of paying rent, that’s what I saved when I lived in Tijuana. You could just as well have something more but like I prefer to invest it in my children’s education. That’s what’s fundamental for me right now. Everyone from rural zones head to the cities. Why? Because they can’t find what they need where they are originally from and they arrive in those zones, we can talk specifically about the zone of Tijuana. Tijuana is made of people from different states of Mexico and that’s how it shaped what is Tijuana but they are different cultures. There isn’t a specific culture.]

Brenda:

Brenda is in her twenties and she came to the U.S. without documents when she was a child. She grew up in Washington, San Diego and Jalisco, Mexico. Brenda has had very different experiences then most of the people I interviewed. She moved to Tijuana as an adult while awaiting the decision on her residency application. During this time her husband began commuting to San Diego. I met up with Brenda near her home in Chula Vista. She began speaking in English then would change back and forth between English and Spanish. At times she would use a few words in the other language or speak for around ten minutes in either English or Spanish. Her use of both languages is reflective of her experience growing up and attending school in both the U.S. and Mexico.

“I was born in Tijuana but I grew up a couple years in Washington State, a couple
years in Mexico, in Jalisco. When I was 2 years old my parents emigrated, they crossed
the border illegally. Nos emigramos a (we emigrated to) Washington. It was kind of like
a back and forth growing up between Washington State and Jalisco. When I first went to
Jalisco I had a culture shock with my own country. Cuando llegué a San Diego tuve otro
culture shock, en Washington casi todos eran white. Aquí en San Diego en esta escuela
todos eran mexicanos hablando ingles. Me sentía como un outsider. Pero yo creo de
todos los lugares me sentí más a gusto aquí en San Diego, me gustó más San Diego.

(When I arrived in San Diego I had another culture shock, in Washington almost
everyone was white. Here in San Diego in this school they were all Mexicans speaking
English. I felt like an outsider. But I think of all the places I felt most comfortable here in
San Diego, I liked San Diego the most). Mis papás volvieron a meter los papeles y era
una espera, nada más estar esperando. Yo estaba en high school y llegaba el momento en
que todos cumplían los 15 años, todos se iban a Tijuana a las quinceañeras y a veces me
invitaron pero yo no podía ir. En ese entonces me daba pena, me daba vergüenza, a nadie
en la escuela les decía mi situación migratoria porque sí me daba vergüenza, me sentía no
sé como que no pertenecía, you know? [My parents put my papers in again and it was a
long wait, only waiting. I was in high school and the time came when everyone turned
15, everyone would go to Tijuana to the quinceañeras and sometimes I would be invited
but I couldn’t go. At that time I was ashamed, I was embarrassed, I didn’t tell anyone
about my migratory situation because yes, I was embarrassed, I felt like I didn’t belong
you know?] Todos los muchachos al cumplir los 16 años [All the kids upon turning 16]
they were getting part time jobs and they were doing all this stuff que yo no podía hacer
[that I couldn’t do].
Yo quería ir a la universidad pero ya había visto la solicitud para la universidad, te pedían what’s your immigration status? Yo tenía back up plans, dije si por alguna razón no puedo entrar a una universidad aquí yo me voy a Tijuana a estudiar. [I wanted to go to the university but I had already seen the application; they ask what’s your immigration status? I had back up plans, I said if for some reason I can’t enter a university here I’m going to Tijuana to study].

Yo me casé, metimos papeles. Me dieron la cita para ir a agarrar mi visa porque cuando te casas con un ciudadano Americano es más rápido. Y la cita era en Ciudad Juárez, entonces nos fuimos para Ciudad Juárez y me tuvieron que hacer un físico y esperar en la línea y todo eso alboroto. Fui a hablar con el consulado y me dijo tu esposo no hace suficiente dinero para poderte pedir porque tienes que hacer una cierta cantidad de dinero para que ellos aseguran que tu los vas a mantener y que no van a pedir ningún tipo de servicio social al gobierno entonces nos salimos tristes por eso. Habíamos pedido a mi hermano que él hablaba por mi ¿me entiendes? Porque pues él ya más grande, you know, in his 30s, ya estaba haciendo mejor que nosotros, entonces él mandó documentos diciendo que él ganaba suficiente dinero para poderme mantener a mi. Fuimos al consulado entonces me dijo ¿sabes qué? Dice ‘es que tu te volviste en ilegal, entonces por esa razón tu esposo tiene que escribir una carta pidiendo un perdón al consulado, entonces vas a tener que permanecer en Mexico’ dice unos seis o siete meses te responden y ya entonces te van a hacer una cita si te aprueban el perdón no sé sabe dice, a la mejor no te la aprueben. Y si no me la aprueban allí termina todo. Nos regresamos a Tijuana y dijimos ¿que vamos a hacer? En ese entonces mi hermano da la casualidad de que tiene una casa en Tijuana. Y da la casualidad que para ese tiempo se quedó su casa
desocupada porque él la rentaba entonces allí nos quedamos en la casa de mi hermano. Fue entonces cuando pasó 9-11, se extendió. Mi esposo había establecido su trabajo aquí. Entonces él cruzaba diario de Tijuana para acá para ir a trabajar, diario. Estuvimos un año y medio en Tijuana y fue cuando me llamaron para la cita. Tenía que volver a Ciudad Juárez y ya me dieron la visa. Y fue un alivio, fue el 15 de marzo de 2002. Y entonces ya regresamos nos venimos para el lado de Estados Unidos. Y le dije a Billy pues vámonos a Tijuana allá dejamos las cosas, y me dice no honey yo ya no regreso para allá, allá que se queden las cosas. Total que poquito a poquito nos fuimos trayendo todas las cosas. (Se ríe) You know, para él nunca había vivido fuera de los Estados Unidos y fue un experiencia tan grande. Cuando llegamos allí a la casa de mi hermano no tenía boiler. Había estufa pero no teníamos tanque de gas. Para bañarse yo calentaba agua en una ollita chiquita, calentaba el agua y lo echaba en el bote, y luego lo volvía a calentar y lo echaba en el bote por fin que se bañara uno, que nos bañáramos era un proceso de una media hora, una hora para prepararlo. O sea de San Diego y Tijuana, es como día y noche. En Tijuana cuando estábamos allá, todos los vecinos nos conocíamos bueno aunque nosotros tratamos de hacer eso lo mismo aquí. Pero sí ese es la diferencia que notaba que toda la gente más pobre pero bien amigables. Lo que sí extrañamos es que en cada esquina había algo que comer, elotes y tacos y we built a relationship in the area that we were and that was nice. La vida era más ligera aunque Tijuana ¿no?

[I got married, we put in the paperwork. They gave me an appointment to go get my visa because when you marry an American citizen its faster. And the appointment was in Ciudad Juárez and they had to give me a physical and wait in line and all that uproar. I went to talk to the consulate and he told me your husband can’t ask for you
because he doesn’t make enough money because if you are an American citizen you need to make a certain amount of money to assure that you will take care of them and that they won’t ask for the government for any type of social service so we left sad because of that. We asked my brother to speak on my behalf you know? Because well he’s older, you know, in his 30s, he was already making more than us, so he sent documents saying that he earned enough money to be able to support me. We went to the consulate and he said ‘you became illegal, so for that reason your husband needs to write a letter asking forgiveness to the consulate, so you need to stay in Mexico’ about six or seven months they’ll respond and then they will give you an appointment. If they approve your pardon I don’t know, maybe they won’t approve it. And if they don’t approve it, it all ends there. We returned to Tijuana. We said, what are we going to do? At the time my brother happened to have a house in Tijuana. And it just so happened that at that time his house was empty because he rented it out, we stayed in my brother’s house. Then 9-11 happened. We were in Tijuana for a year and a half when they called me for my appointment. I had to return to Ciudad Juarez, my husband was already working here. So he crossed everyday from Tijuana to work here, daily. Then they gave me the visa. And it was like uhhhh, it was a relief, it was March 15th of 2002. And then we returned to the United States. And I told Billy let’s go to Tijuana, we left our stuff there and he told me no honey I won’t return there, leave the stuff there. We slowly brought our stuff. (laughs) You know, he had never lived outside of the United States and it was such a big experience. When we arrived at my brother’s house, it didn’t have a boiler. There was a stove but we didn’t have a gas tank. In order to bathe I heated the water in a small pot, heated the water and threw it in a bucket and then heated more water and then put it in
the bucket until you could bathe, bathing was a process of a half hour, one hour to prepare. San Diego and Tijuana, its like night and day. When we were in Tijuana all the neighbors knew each other well we try to do the same here. But that is the difference that I noticed that people are poorer but very friendly. What we do miss is that in every corner there was something to eat, corn and tacos and we built a relationship in the area that we were and that was nice. Life was more calm even though it was Tijuana.]

Rosa:

I spoke with Rosa while she had downtime in her job caring for an elderly woman in San Diego. Rosa stayed caring for her during the week and went home to Tijuana on the weekends. We spoke over the course of many months. Rosa\textsuperscript{11} is from Tijuana, Baja California. She lives in Colonia Libertad, one of the communities closest to the San Ysidro border crossing. Rosa did not begin commuting until after she was married and had three children. Rosa stayed home to care for her children and made extra money by tailoring clothing and making clothes for important events such as quinceañeras, weddings and graduations. Sadly her husband became very ill and died about 10 years ago when her children were adolescents. After her husband’s death commuting seemed to be the only option for Rosa to make enough money to care for her family as selling and tailoring clothes was not enough. This time was very hard on her family and one of her children in particular went through a period of depression, which caused him to take a year off from high school.

Rosa has been commuting for over ten years and has been crossing on her

\textsuperscript{11} I spoke with Rosa over a series of months but Rosa’s interviews were not audiotaped.
“pasaporte local.” Two of her children live in Tijuana and are already married with children of their own. Another of Rosa’s children is attending a university in Mexico. She continues to sew to make extra money and related that it helps her relax and de-stress from caring for the elderly woman who needs constant care and supervision. Other than for work Rosa crosses to San Diego to shop, visit friends and sometimes sell at local swap meets for extra money.

The narratives of the people I spoke with caused me to think about what it means to be a border crosser. Through the narratives I began to see that the border is performed in their lives in diverse ways on a daily basis. It also became clear that they in turn participate in border performativity in their attempts to navigate the border and the daily planning and strategies that they use in order to live their daily lives and go to work or school. The narratives also brought up the notion that “superación” plays a large role in being a border crosser. Superación includes the many motivations that people have that propel them to cross the border. Additionally almost every person I spoke with referenced aspects of their culture and identification as what makes them unique and different from the rest of Mexico and the United States. Their conceptualization of culture critiqued the idea of one type of Mexican culture. It became clear through the narratives that their culture was central to their lives and to the meaning of being a border crosser.

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12 Border crossing card or laser visa
Chapter 3:  
Enforcing and Crossing the Border as Performance

Through the narratives and experiences of the interviewees I spoke with it became evident that the border is performed on a regular basis. Border performativity occurs when physically crossing the border, at the solicitation of services and documents and through varied actions performed in order to cross the border. Border performativity as a framework for theorizing borders is advanced by Wonders in her study on migration and tourism and the semi-permeability of borders. As stated earlier (see Chapter 1) according to Wonders border performativity constitutes a dance between the border crosser and the border agent or border enforcer. The border is enforced every time an agent makes the decision to allow or refuse border crossing. The image of who constitutes an “illegal” immigrant or who is worthy of entrance is highly influenced by race, class and gender. The need to convince border agents of their reasons for entrance happens frequently for transborder commuters. Documents are extremely important in crossing the border and commuters who do not have the legal documents to study or work in the U.S. have an extra burden to prove their reasons for crossing, as the threat exists that these documents can be taken away. Attempts to convince border agents are part of the dance on the part of the commuters. Another component of the dance are the daily actions and stresses that commuters have to go through in their attempts to cross the border. Commuters must endure the long waits at the border, plan around the crossing, find the easiest and most time efficient way to cross. As a result of the stress of crossing, various businesses have emerged to ease the process. Transborder commuters routinely partake in this performance. Wonders argues that state policies begin to take meaning once they are
performed by state agents but at the same time the large, imposing steel wall/border serves as a constant reminder of separation, being unwanted and reinforces exclusive state policies. Part of Wonders’ theory of border performativity is that the border is not only performed at state borders. The border is performed away from the border in other spaces such as when seeking assistance, workplace raids, transportation raids and in the approval and denial of passports, visas, naturalization applications. This chapter explores some of the ways that the border is performed on a daily basis by transborder commuters’ daily attempts and strategies to cross the border and border agents who patrol and make the decision of who is allowed entry.

**Enforcing the Border**

Brenda went through many attempts to cross the border. Over and over Brenda was met with barriers to mobility. Her narrative underscores that crossing the border is a process of constant inspection and scrutiny. Growing up in the U.S. she was undocumented and felt the weight of the performance of the border every time she left the United States to visit her grandfather in Mexico.

Each time she reentered the U.S. she had to convince the border agents that she was a U.S. citizen and belonged in the United States. When she was a teenager she crossed back in the U.S. through the Tijuana-San Ysidro pedestrian crossing and walked in between a group of people. Brenda told the Border Patrol in English that she was a U.S. citizen. “Mis papás me dijeron ‘be brave’ y fue lo que hice, nomás le dije you know que era de Estados Unidos.” [My parents told me ‘be brave’ and that’s what I did, I just told them, you know, that I was from the United States.] Even though she grew up in the United States she still had to participate in the performance of convincing the border
patrol to allow her to enter.

The process of applying for residency is another manifestation of the performance of the border. In this case the acceptance or denial of her residency applications dictated if she could be in the United States with the required documents. The necessity of these documents for fulfilling basic functions in her day-to-day life also manifest border performativity. Without documents, Brenda would not be able to get a driver’s license, open a bank account, receive educational aid even though she spent the majority of her life in the United States.

Brenda applied for residency under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) as a child when she was growing up in Washington. She got married her first year in college and applied for residency again through her husband. The first time she applied Brenda was unable to receive residency because she left the country. This provision limited her ability to visit her sick grandfather in Mexico because it affected the status of her application and when her family at one point decided to move back to Mexico her application became void. When Brenda reapplied for the last time under her husband it was not guaranteed that her application would be accepted. In addition to the year and a half wait to find out if the application was accepted Brenda related that the process in itself was humiliating. The physical she went through in the Ciudad Juarez consulate office was especially humiliating and felt like she as though she were treated like a common animal. In waiting for the decision to her application Brenda could not re enter the U.S. and had to stay in Mexico until the process ended. Again state policies and the border limited her movement.

A portion of the Tijuana population is made up of people who have been deported
from the U.S. or have moved to Tijuana like Brenda, awaiting decisions on their immigration status. Commuting also becomes a by-product of mixed-status families. During the wait for the decision on her residency application Brenda’s husband began commuting from Tijuana to school and work in San Diego everyday. Without proximity to the border or legal access to mobility, a transborder lifestyle and access to the resources of the border would not be available. This was very true for Brenda, who spent her middle school years and on in San Ysidro without documents. The performance of the border went beyond the border crossing and, she felt isolated. Brenda also could not do all the things her friends and peers did, including visit her family in Tijuana, get a job, a drivers license, open a bank account or easily apply to college. Brenda emphasizes the importance of having a form of identification and the effects it had on her everyday life and the limits she regularly faced. Due to her undocumented status Brenda was not eligible for financial aid. In order to afford college she applied to dozens of scholarships and fortunately received approximately four thousand dollars in scholarships, which led to unforeseen problems. Yet she felt the performance of the border and the impact of not having documentation greatly as she was unable to deposit and cash her checks in a bank without documentation. Relief was not found until Brenda received her SDSU identification. In the system and structure of the United States having an identification was crucial to her everyday life.

Otro barrier que me encontré, me dieron los cheques de las becas, 500, 2000, etcetera, entonces yo tenía cheques pero fuimos al banco para tratar de depositarlos. En el banco de mi papá no me dejaron porque necesitaba un ID y yo no podía sacar un ID al menos que tuviera mis papeles. Oh my gosh, entonces este necesitaba yo sacar mi ID de la Universidad… Ahorita cualquier persona que agarraba su ID yo siento lo tomaba en vano. Ah San Diego State ID. Pero para mi fue mi boleto para poder abrir mi
cuenta de banco en la Credit Union. Con esa ID me dejaron abrir mi cuenta de banco, pude depositar mis cheques y cuidar mis cheques para poder pagar la escuela. Esa ID me abrió las puertas para mi, you know?

Another barrier that I found. They gave me the scholarship checks, 500, 200, etc. and so I had checks but we went to my dad’s bank to try to deposit them. They didn’t allow me to deposit them in my dad’s bank because I needed and ID and I couldn’t get an ID because I didn’t have papers. Oh my gosh so I needed to get my ID from the university… Now I feel like anyone who gets their ID takes it for granted. Ah San Diego State ID. But for me it was my ticket to be able to open my bank account at the credit union. With that ID they let me open my bank account, I could deposit my checks and take care of my money to pay for school. That ID opened doors for me, you know?

Rosa is the only person I spoke with who commutes using a “pasaporte local” (border crossing card) and her narrative expressed the inspection process of border performativity every time she crosses the border. During the times that I spoke with Rosa something that constantly emerged was her concern about losing her pasaporte local, which would not only mean losing the ability to move back and forth between Tijuana and San Diego but would result in the loss of her job. Losing her pasaporte local was a concern that she continuously voiced. A pasaporte local is not a work or student visa and does not allow you to work so she had to come up with strategies to deflect suspicion of the reasons for her frequent crossings to San Diego.

At the beginning of this interview Rosa was crossing every week at the San Ysidro border in her car. A few weeks later she began to worry that a picture was taken of her car while driving up to the booth where agents check documents. Due to her worries that ICE may have tagged her car and were checking the frequency of her crossings she was forced to stop driving across the border. She decided to have her son drop her off at the border, cross on foot and meet her son again in San Ysidro so he could
drive her to work. This situation lasted for a couple of months but she felt trapped in San Diego without her car. Rosa then decided to chance it and return to driving but she would cross more frequently through the Otay border even though it is much farther from her home. While she has the legal ability to cross the border her lack of proper work documents and the enforcement of the border caused her to change her crossing habits and caused emotional stress.

The last time I spoke with Rosa she told me that ICE agents recently began patrolling the foot crossing from San Ysidro to Tijuana and randomly checking people for documents. This worried her as she recounted stories of friends who had been stopped and interrogated by ICE agents when returning to Tijuana. When I asked which people ICE agents were stopping she said anyone who looks Mexican. Her tone of voice indicated that this should be obvious to me, then she laughed and joked that everyone crossing into Tijuana is Mexican anyway. Her statement and the implication that it is obvious that ICE agents racially profile certain groups speaks to the racialization of the performance of the border. The changing strategies for crossing the border and threat of losing her border crossing card underline the unequal power relations present at border crossings and how the performance of the border affects people’s everyday lives.

Working in the US without the correct documents is penalized and can result in the loss of her border crossing card. The irony of the criminalization of her actions is that her work in the US and residence in Tijuana provides her with a middle class lifestyle in Tijuana and increases her economic ability to be a tourist and consumer in the United
States. The border constitutes a “state of exception” for Rosa where in crossing the border she has to prove that she is entering the US for certain reasons and is constantly under the threat that her ability to enter can be taken away.

Salter paraphrases Agamben's theory on the state of exception arguing that "The state of exception is a ‘zone of indistinction, between inside and outside’ where there is no difference between law and force, wherein individuals are subject to the law but not subjects in the law" (Salter 2008: 367). In the San Diego-Tijuana border region a Tijuanense, non-U.S. citizen with a border crossing card, pasaporte local or tourist visa can "legally" cross into the United States but is not supposed to work or attend school there. Consumption is encouraged but activities that most likely lead to increased consumption are, on the surface, discouraged and made illegal such as working or going to school with a border crossing card. Documentation and inspection are important factors in the everyday lives of transborder commuters. Here being "subject to the law but not subjects in the law" becomes extremely important. The precarious nature of visas is heightened during crossings. There exists a constant threat that the visa can be taken away by any perceived transgressions or provocations. Additionally crossing the border without the proper documentation is considered a crime that is always connected to the person and one can never get rid off.

The border is performed through inspections and as Lugo (2000) argues these inspections are tied to race, class, gender and skin color. Lugo argues that color plays an

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13 It is estimated that Baja California residents spend 3 billion dollars annually in San Diego. According to the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce approximately 85% of the retail customers come from Mexico, *San Diego Union Tribune* March 11, 2008. After 9-11 the city of San Diego declared an economic state of emergency due to loss of revenue and drop in Mexican shoppers (Andreas 2003).
important role in the inspections and decisions made by border patrol when crossing the border yet he states that it is not a topic explored enough on research on immigration or borders. The border is performed not only at the border but also in the decisions regarding who is approved for documents such as a border-crossing card. Maria did not have to apply for a border-crossing card but mentioned that manner of dress and skin color influence the decisions made and the treatment received in the process of applying for a border-crossing card. In Mexico skin color is perceived to be a marker of class and socioeconomic status. Maria explains her perceptions regarding the role appearance has in the treatment people receive when applying for a border-crossing card:

A mi personas que han ido a sacar pasaporte me ha dicho como que si te ven así, incluso suena mamón, si te ven como güerito y bien vestido te lo dan bien rápido, es lo que han dicho y he escuchado por otras partes. Como que si te ven acá más no sé a lo mejor no tan arreglado o así como que un poco más Mexicanito que se portan mucho más mamones.

People who have gone to apply for their passport have told me that if they see you it even sounds mean, if they see you a little lighter and well dressed they give it to you very fast, that’s what they’ve said and what I’ve heard from other areas. Like if they see you more I don’t know maybe not as well dressed or like a little more “Mexicanito” that they act a lot ruder, like jerks.

**Strategies and Networks for Crossing**

The everyday efforts of attempting to cross the border on the way to school or work for commuters forms part of the performance of the border. The diverse strategies people use and the social networks people rely on are methods of easing the crossing. Alejandro spoke a lot using “we” and “paisanos” and referred to a network of people who helped one another find jobs, carpool to work and navigate the border region. Initially he carpooled to work with a group of “paisanos” and everyone would pitch in money for
gas. By carpooling Alejandro was able to save money to eventually buy his own car and go to work on his own. An obstacle to mobility in both San Diego and Tijuana is that both cities were created for cars and do not have fast and efficient public transportation. The network and mutual help within the group facilitated getting to work and transborder commuting for Alejandro.

Some of the outgrowths of transborder commuting are small businesses that emerge to ease the crossing. When Gabriela was a child her father worked in San Diego but began work very early in the morning, which meant he was not able to drive Gabriela to school. Gabriela’s parents paid a lady who created a business shuttling children in a van back and forth across the border to Gabriela’s school in San Ysidro and later back home, this is similar to some businesses that popped up making pedestrian crossing easier such as paying 5 dollars to ride in air conditioned vans with bathrooms14. Since the age of six years old Gabriela had a routine of waking up very early in the morning to be ready and waiting for the van. According to Gabriela even when riding in the van things were not always easy and smooth. On her way to school they had to deal with border agents who could make the crossing easier or harder depending on their mood or how they felt that day:

Un camioncito que básicamente era una Señora con una panel, que transportaba y recogía niños de varias partes de Tijuana y nos llevaba a la escuela… Entonces sí era pesado porque igual mucha gente trabajando, mucha gente cruzando a la escuela, a trabajar. Y luego aparte tampoco era fácil porque al llegar a la línea unos inmigrantes eran un poquito más concientes y unos no nos querían revisar y pum nos mandaban a revisión secundaria. Entonces eso ya nos atrasaba, nada más porque no querían

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tomar el tiempo en revisar… Era problemático porque si un inmigrante no le gustaba o cuestionaba o veía que unos de los documentos eran pasaportes Mexicanos les preguntaba a qué escuela iba. Entonces o sea fácil no era, era difícil, no es así de fácil.

A little bus that was basically a “panel” (van), that transported and pick up children from varios parts of Tijuana and took us to school. So it was tiring because there were a lot of people working, a lot of people crossing to school, work. And then it also wasn’t easy because in arriving at the line some border patrol were a little more conscientious and some wouldn’t want to look them over and pum they’d send us to secondary inspection. So that would make things take longer, just because they did not want to take the time to review… It was problematic because if a border patrol did not like it or questioned or saw that some of the documents were Mexican passports they’d ask what school do you go to. So I mean it wasn’t easy, it was hard, it’s not that easy.

During Gabriela’s high school years her social networks helped her cross the border. She would carpool with friends or get dropped off by family at the trolley station or bus stop in Chula Vista and make her way to school. Gabriela learned how to navigate the public transportation in Chula Vista through her sister-in-law who showed her which buses to take and how to transfer through the fastest routes. Gabriela emphasized over and over how hard it was to commute across the border throughout our talk. While expressing the hardships she also seems to take it as part of her everyday life and expressed that crossing the border and commuting was normal for her. Gabriela is currently living in San Diego but is planning on returning to Tijuana and return to commuting again. She spoke with me about this and talked about her husband’s concerns that she would have to commute again, Gabriela downplayed this and joked “¿cuando no he cruzado?” (when have I not crossed?).

Both Brenda and her husband participated in border performativity in their strategies and planning such as having to plan their days around her husband’s commute.
They both shared a car and many times she would drop him off early in the morning at the border crossing or he would drop her off at work. Brenda and her husband lived in her brother’s home far from the border crossing in Mariano Matamoros when they first moved to Tijuana and later moved to Otay, a five-minute drive to the border, to be closer to the crossing. Brenda related that her husband had many strategies to cross the border; sometimes he would bike across the border and jump on the trolley then bike to her parents’ home in San Ysidro where her parents had a car that he could use to get around San Diego. In the evening when it was time return home he would leave the car at her parents’ house and return on his bike to Tijuana where Brenda would pick him up at the same border crossing. Brenda explains that he began using the bike after 9-11 because the lines became so long and he saw others doing the same thing. Switching from bike to car and car to bike was his method of navigating the border and the extremely long lines.

The Physical and Emotional Toll of Crossing

The health risks and exposure to pollutants by transborder commuters is currently being researched by San Diego State University and the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, in Tijuana. In a presentation Dr. Quintana of SDSU reported that the preliminary results suggest that the border wait is a contributor to daily exposure to pollutants that are linked health risks, such as cancer and lung problems. Luis is in his fifties and has been commuting for over eight years to work in the northern part of San

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15 The presentation by Dr. Quintana was presented at a American Public Health Association Conference and can be found at http://apha.confex.com/apha/136am/webprogram/Session25006.html. San Diego newspaper “La Prensa” reported on the health effects of crossing the border. “Health Effects of the Border Commute” Sáinz 9-26-2008 http://laprensa-sandiego.org/archieve/2008/september26-08/border.commute.092608.htm
Diego. Luis spoke about the fatigue and wasted time that arises from the long border waits. Over the years the time spent waiting in line at the border had increased significantly for him. The difference between waiting at the border and long commutes in traffic is at the border one cannot get out of the line, if one is able to get out of line the process of waiting in line starts all over again. Stopping to rest, go to the bathroom, etc are not options if you are driving alone. Luis points to how tiring it can be to be in the car for such a long amount of time. He finds things that he can do to make that time go faster but comes to the conclusion that in the end it is lost time.

Pues hace ocho años estaba muy cómodo. Y parecía que no pero ocho años es una gran diferencia y últimamente se ha acentuado las esperas. Las largas colas para cruzar la frontera y pues es cansado. Es cansado y se resiente al final del día. Porque cruza uno en la mañana y en la mañana pues está uno descansado, fresco y pues más o menos lo soporta o empieza uno a utilizar el tiempo hablando por teléfono, haciendo cosas manuales, escribiendo, leyendo, escuchando este la radio o aprendiendo un idioma en fin. Hay muchas cosas que puedo hacer pero no deja de ser muy difícil el estar allí sentado una hora y media que es una hora y media improductiva.

Well eight years ago it was very comfortable. And believe it or not, but eight years is a big difference and lately the waits have gotten longer. The long lines to cross the border and well it’s tiring. It’s tiring and you feel it at the end of the day. Because one crosses in the morning; and in the morning, well, one is rested, fresh and well more or less you can withstand it or one begins to use the time talking on the phone, doing things with you hands like writing, reading, listening to the radio, learning a language, anyway. There is a lot of things you can do but it doesn’t stop being very hard sitting there for an hour and a half, that is an unproductive hour and a half.

The introduction of the SIAVE (Sistema Integral de Aforo Vehicular) has drastically increased the wait times to cross into Tijuana during rush hour and can last around an hour on weekdays and even more on Fridays. The SENTRI program was initiated to help make the lines and wait time faster, but Luis stated that he will not apply
for the SENTRI until his wife becomes a citizen. According to Luis the application asks for the immigration status of your household and he wants to avoid difficult questions and possible problems that may arise. He decided he would put off applying for the SENTRI until later when he could answer those questions. Even though Luis does not know if his wife’s immigration status will affect his application and ability to receive the SENTRI, this uncertainty affects his decision making process.

The creation of the SENTRI is a form of border performativity and is a point where inclusion and exclusion decisions are made based upon who is seen as desirable or a threat to entrance. Denial of the SENTRI does not signify denial of entrance into the country but it does mean that the applicant is not considered a “low threat” border crosser. The inverse implication is that a person who is not approved for the SENTRI is considered somewhat of a threat to the United States.

As a U.S. citizen Maria stated that she rarely has problems crossing the border. She went on to say that since she crosses so frequently some of the border patrol agents recognize her and often make small talk. The hardest thing for Maria is that crossing the border entails separating the needed time to cross, which ultimately means planning your entire day around the performance of crossing. In the end the toll of crossing and planning your day around crossing is so great that Maria would rather not cross so frequently if she did not have to.

Nunca he tenido en realidad problema. Bueno o sea fuera de que es un problema hacer la línea, ¿verdad? Y incluso en la SENTRI porque no siempre es muy rápida. El hecho de cruzar es tedioso pero fuera de eso no. Pero sí es más que estar esperando en la línea es como que todo tu día tiene que girar alrededor de tengo que cruzar entonces tienes que planear y a veces irte mucho antes para hacer la línea porque no sabes si va a estar bien o mal entonces tienes que planear tu día en base que vas a cruzar…
Si no tuviera que cruzar no, no cruzaría tanto.

In reality I have never had a problem. Well other than that it’s a problem waiting in line right? And even with the SENTRI because it’s not always that fast. The act of crossing is tedious but other than that no. But it is more than waiting in the line, your whole day has to revolve around ‘I have to cross’ so you have to plan and sometimes go much earlier in order to get in line because you never know if its going to be good or bad so you have to plan your day around having to cross… If I didn’t have to cross no I wouldn’t cross so much.

Maria added that the longer waits to return to Tijuana have caused her to stay longer in San Diego than she used to in order to avoid the traffic returning home. The loss of time, stress of sitting and waiting for hours and daily planning around crossing affects both her daily pattern and quality of life.

Elizabeth commuted for about 5 years and began taking her soon to school in San Diego when he was five years old. She eventually decided to move to Chula Vista because she did not want to continue crossing the border everyday and put her son through the ordeal. Her decision to move to San Diego and stop crossing was also related to the toll of crossing that she viewed as negatively affecting her quality of life.

Elizabeth compared herself to her coworkers who cross everyday and feels that commuting in the end is not worth it.

Allí solamente aburrirte y aguantarte si tienes que ir al baño. Pero no y por ejemplo mi mamá cruzó la línea 40 años, había línea pero no se puede comparar con ahora, ¿Verdad mamá? (mom: “no ni la mitad”). Tengo compañeros de trabajo, bastantes como unos 10 por decirte que viven en Tijuana. Y yo sí los compadezco porque obviamente lo hacen para ahorrarse el costo de la casa y que pueden construir una casa allá mucho mejor. Pero la depreciación de los carros, el gasto de la gasolina. Lo que dicen es que se levantan a las 2 de la mañana, se van a la línea a las 3 o 4 y se estacionan allí cuando la abren a las 6, ellos son los primeros, se cruzan, se duermen. Y luego ya cruzan pero yo sí siento que es mucho sacrificio. Es que tienes un ritmo de vida muy diferente. Rompes tu rutina, rompes de todo. Quizás a ellos sí les vale el sacrificio (Mom interjects: “pero la
mujer no creo”) Pero yo sí estoy muy convencida que pues hay que tratar de vivir lo mejor posible.

You’re there only being bored and waiting, holding it in if you have to go to the bathroom. But no and for example my mom crossed the border for 40 years, there was a line but you can’t compare it to now, ‘right mom?’ (mom: ‘no, not even half’). I have coworkers, a good amount about ten that live in Tijuana. And I feel for them because obviously they do it to save the cost of a house because they can build a much better house there. But the depreciation of the car, the cost of gasoline. They say that they wake up at two in the morning, they go to the line at three or four and they park there when it opens at six, they’re the first, they cross, they sleep. And then they cross but I feel like it’s too much of a sacrifice. You have a different way of life. I mean you break your routine, you break everything. Maybe for them the sacrifice is worth it (mom interjects: ‘for women I don’t think so’). But I am convinced that you need to try to live the best you can.

For Elizabeth part of quality of life is not having to go through the daily performance, even if it means she has a smaller home and does not have nearly as much in the United States as she did in Tijuana. Elizabeth stated earlier that commuting for 40 years was very hard for her mother, Teresa. Doña Teresa did not want Elizabeth and her sister to go through the same hardships she encountered. “Mi mamá siempre dijo mis hijas no van a ir a cruzar la línea todos los días. Quizás obviamente para ella era mucho sacrificio levantarse a las 4 de la mañana cada día, cruzar la línea, regresar hasta en la tarde. Y ella aspiraba para nosotros otro tipo de vida.” (“My mom always said my daughters are not going to cross the border everyday. Maybe it was a lot of sacrifice for her to wake up at 4 in the morning each day, cross the border, return until late. And she wanted another type of life for us”).

16 In hindsight I should have asked Elizabeth’s mom what she meant as I believe that gender is important. It is out of the scope of this project to thoroughly explore this but an important research topic would be gender and transmigration.
Transborder commuters have to deal with border enforcement and the performance of the border in different stages of the commuting process. Border performativity is not only the enactment of the border by federal agents in the solicitation of services and documentation, but also everything that comes with attempting to cross the border and ease the crossing such as the long waits, the diverse strategies and the planning of one’s day. In addition to border performativity all the narratives pointed to a desire for “superación,” bettering one’s life, and the freedom of movement to be able to accomplish this.
Chapter 4:  
Superación in Transmigration

Es la necesidad más que otra cosa… si tu te vas para otro lugar es con la finalidad de superarte ya sea económicamente, ya sea por tu estudio, ya sea por X razones pero si sales de un lugar a otro es por una mejor situación. Y allá aunque en México o de donde somos originarios, la razón porque salimos de allí, porque la situación no nos permite superarte…. Te quedas allí pues ni casa tienes y no puedes comprarte lo que tu necesitas o lo que tus hijos necesitan. -Alejandro

It’s necessity more than anything else… if you leave for another place it’s with the objective of improving oneself (bettering oneself) be it economically, be it for your studies, be it for X reasons but if you leave from one place to another its for a better situation. And even though in Mexico o wherever we’re from, the reason that we leave is because the situation does not allow you to better yourself… You stay there well you don’t even have a house and you can’t buy what you or your children need.

The notion of “superación” was a theme that emerged with everybody I spoke with. It entails more than economic subsistence and survival. It can best be described as attempting to live a better life. The interviewees not only spoke of the necessity and economic need of transborder commuting but also spoke of their desire for a better quality of life with dignity and hope for the future. For some people superación may mean the ability to live in Tijuana with friends and family and being in a space where they feel at ease and comfortable, while for others superación can mean providing their family with opportunities for education, fulfillment in jobs or the ability to move freely without restrictions.

Motivations for Mobility

Alejandro repeated the concept of “superación” throughout the interview. When Alejandro spoke about his reasons for leaving Oaxaca, he spoke a great deal about poverty, what people face in rural areas and made a distinction between subsisting and
“superación.” Superación is bettering oneself, improving or striving for something better; while subsisting is barely having enough to survive. This distinction is vital as it underlines the fact that subsisting is not nearly enough for many. All people deserve more than just the ability to survive and this gets lost in the debates and literature surrounding immigration.

Legal restrictions to mobility and power differentials between Mexico and the U.S. meant that Alejandro was initially forced to cross the border without documents. His undocumented status coupled with the inability to speak English as well as his indigenous ethnicity made him extra vulnerable to exploitation and being paid extremely low wages. When he first came to San Diego he worked and lived in the “campo” (the canyons) as a farm worker, in North County, San Diego. Indigenous farm workers are generally paid the lowest wages, have the hardest jobs and face extra prejudice in the United States as immigrants and indigenous Mexicans. As indigenous Mexicans they also face racism from other Mexicans (López and Runsten 2004).

Por un lado de que pues tu bien sabes cuando uno es de otros estados, nos es difícil el ingles. Recién aquel entonces pues no sabíamos nada lo que era el ingles, cero, o sea todo lo que era el campo lo podíamos hacer porque no se practicaba el ingles. Se nos hizo un poco difícil encontrar y para conseguir otro trabajo, pues, diferente a lo que nosotros pudiéramos hacer, diferente… porque antes era puro campo cuando recién, recién llegamos aquí sin documentos, éramos trabajadores del campo, trabajamos acá nos quedamos en el campo todo y sin papeles todo eso.

On the one hand, that you know well, when one is from other states, English is hard for us. When I just arrived well we didn’t know any English, zero, everything that was the fields well we could do because you didn’t need English. It was a little hard for us to find and get another well different job… because before it was only the fields when we first, first arrived here without documents, we were farmworkers, we worked here and stayed in the fields and without papers, everything.
Alejandro expressed a lot of frustration and anger with the corruption in Mexico and spoke at length of the huge socioeconomic gap and the lack of government support for poor and rural areas. He strongly declared that there should be more government support for education and health services in low income and rural areas. His frustration with the government and his view that he did not have the ability to better himself in his home country is the reason immigration was a means of superación. Unlike the others I interviewed Alejandro is from a rural area in Mexico that has been historically cut off from many basic government services. Oaxaca is also one of the most marginalized states in Mexico, along with Chiapas and Guerrero. He grew up in a village, which at the time had no electricity and in order to attend school he had to leave his village and study in Mexico City. Alejandro wanted to study civic engineering in Mexico but was unable to because of his economic situation and the lack of universities close to his home. Immigration became a strategy for him and the younger generations in his town to advance themselves. He and others from his village are doing what he believes should be the role of the government. For Alejandro superación is not just individual but includes his children and their future.

Te estancas desgraciadamente en México por la política de nuestro gobierno… México es muy rico pero ¿de qué nos sirve? si la riqueza lo reparten ellos entre ellos (los ricos). Nuestro pueblo aunque se mueran de hambre a ellos no les importa. Y es lo que somos allá, pues son zonas rurales, no hay porvenir. Aunque vives bien, no hay futuro para ti, para tus hijos. Te vas a quedar en la miseria, te vas a morir igual así como estás y no hay futuro. Y esa es la razón de que le busca uno como ser uno poquito mejor porque tus hijos que no pasen lo mismo que te pasó a ti. Aunque como te digo pues allá el aire es puro, toda la comida es deliciosa, pero el problema es que no puedes estar allá… No hay apoyos económicos para superarte, para superar tu familia… Y allá no hay ingresos. Lo poco que tu puedes ganar sembrando maíz o sembrando frijoles, lo poco que
puedes ganar es apenas para subsistir.

Unfortunately you get stuck in Mexico because of the politics of our government... Mexico is very rich but what good does it do? If the wealth is distributed among them (the rich). They don’t care even if our people die of hunger. And that is what we are over there, the rural zones, there is no future. Even if you live well there is no future for you, for your children. You will stay in poverty, you will die the way you are, there is no future. And that is the reason one looks for a way to be a little better so that your children don’t go through what you went through. Even though like I say over there the air is pure, all the food is delicious, but the problem is that you can’t be there… There is no economic help to better yourself, to better your family. And over there, there is no income. The little you can make planting corn or beans. The little you can make is barely enough to subsist.

Brenda reflected a similar view of the rural village her father is from in Jalisco.

Brenda’s childhood of growing up and attending school between Jalisco, Washington and California shaped and influenced her views and sense of belonging in both the United States and Mexico. She was critical of the traditional lifestyle and wanted more in life than just marriage and having children. Brenda felt that if she had stayed in rural Mexico that this would be her future and only options.

En Mexico no me sentía que yo pertenecía allí. Yo no quería vivir la tradicional vida que era allí. Las muchachas se casaban, tenían hijos and that’s it... Things happen for a reason. Mi abuelito no quiso aceptar a mi papá even though he brought his whole family and because of that I lost my papers, the chance to emigrate. Le dijo ¿sabes qué? Estás perdiendo tu tiempo aquí conmigo. That was the best thing that could have happened. Porque fue cuando decidió regresarse pa los Estados Unidos y para mi fue like finally. Ya miré la luz. Porque me sentía que estaba en un pozo, sentía que no iba hacer nada de mi vida. No sentía que había futuro para mi, no sentía que había esperanzas allá.

In Mexico I didn’t feel like I belonged there. I didn’t want to live the traditional life that was lived there. The women would get married, have children and that’s it. Things happen for a reason. My grandfather did not want to accept my dad even though he brought his whole family and because of that I lost my papers, the chance to emigrate. He told him ‘you know what? You’re wasting your time with me.’ That was the best thing
that could have happened. Because that was when he decided to return to the United States and for me it was like finally. I saw the light. Because I felt like I was in a pit, I felt like I wasn’t going to do anything with my life. I didn’t feel like there was a future for me, I didn’t feel that there was hope there.

Brenda’s perception of superación is obtaining a higher education and professional career. She was unsure if she would be accepted to a university in San Diego because of her undocumented status and also looked into attending a university in Tijuana as a back up plan.

Part of superación for Maria is also tied to education and having a professional career that provides job satisfaction. Maria is very conscious of the limits in mobility and the need for specific documents for many Mexicans. She feels privileged that she has the opportunity to move about freely. She mentioned many times throughout the interview that she is lucky. Maria has a U.S. bank account, U.S. cell phone number and driver’s license. Living in the border area of Mexico she can use a California driver’s license, pay in dollars and have California license plates. She does not have or see the need to have a Baja California driver’s license because to her it is more important to have her U.S. paperwork in order even though she does not plan on moving to the U.S. anytime soon.

These power differentials and presence of the U.S. in the border region manifest themselves in her everyday life.

Porque no sé en realidad porque creo que sí podía tener la de aquí también. No sé. No sé pero fui y la saqué allá. Como que sabía que tenía que tener como mis papeles, me preocupaba más por tener como todo en orden lo de allá que lo de acá. Sabía que era como que no importaba tanto.

Because I don’t know in reality because I think that I could have the one from here (Baja California) too. I don’t know. I don’t know but I went and got it over there (California). Like I knew that I had to have like my
papers, I was more worried about having everything in order from there and from here. I knew that like it didn’t matter as much.

Maria worked as a waitress in San Diego while she was attending the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC). She continued working at the same weekend job and simultaneously as a vice principal in a private high school in Tijuana. After a couple of years Maria left her job at the high school and decided to continue commuting to work full time across the line to work in the restaurant. Her decision to stop working in Tijuana was based on the huge wage differentials between the U.S. and Mexico. María’s professional job in Tijuana paid significantly less than a job in the service sector in San Diego. She also was not fulfilled by her job in Tijuana and wanted to pursue a career. She recently applied to a master’s program in San Diego and was accepted. Job satisfaction as well as economics played a major role in her decision to commute full time. She was indifferent about her job as a waitress but expressed that she did not like her job as a vice principal. Maria echoes some of Alejandro’s same sentiments about “superación”.

Work here in Tijuana is not very well paid. I worked as a vice-principal in this high school and comparing for example my friend’s salaries who are also professionals with mine I was the one who earned the most. But
comparing what I earned as a waitress on the other side it wasn’t worth it. And more than anything because in reality that job never convinced me. Maybe I could have put up with it and it wouldn’t have mattered earning a little less... But I didn’t love that job. I felt that I was there just stagnant. And as a waitress working a little more than half the hours I earn more. As a vice principal I worked 40 hours a week. As a waitress I work 20, from 20 to 25 hours a week and I earn more… I could even be working in something a little more professional but it would still be very poorly paid.

**Education, Cultural Capital and Superación:**

Maria attended school from kindergarten through university in Tijuana, but her family now plans to send her youngest sister to high school in San Diego. She now regrets not going to school in the United States because of the cultural capital she would have gained from being fluent in English and having a U.S. education. Maria believes that this would have given her more opportunities in both the U.S. and Mexican job market.

Yo meto mucho presión a mi mamá de la tienes que poner a estudiar allá. Por ejemplo yo que estudié acá creo que ahora como lo veo fue un error haber estudiado en Tijuana. Siento que me hubiera ahorrado a lo mejor unos pasos si me hubiera ido a estudiar desde el colegio allá. Por ejemplo no soy así como bilingüe, bilingüe. Se me dificulta mucho leer en inglés, cosas así. Pero también las posibilidades de mis papás no eran las mismas a las que tienen ahora por ejemplo. Y por otro lado en ese momento a los 18 no me hubiera ido a estudiar allá porque me sentía con mucho miedo por el inglés. En cambio mi hermana ya entiende bastante y cuando empieza a practicar sí va ser muy fluida… Una cosa lleva a la otra. O sea el saber inglés, estudiar allá, sacar una carrera allá y poder trabajar en algo un poco mejor allá.

I put a lot of pressure on my mom that you have to make her study there. For example I studied here and now think that it was a mistake that I studied in Tijuana. I feel that I would have saved some steps if I would have gone to study since high school over there. For example I’m not like bilingual, bilingual. Its hard for me to read in English, stuff like that. But also my parents did not have the same possibilities as they do now. And on the other hand, at that time, at 18 I wouldn’t have gone to study there because I was really scared because of my English. But my sister already understands a lot and once she begins to use it she’ll be very fluent… One
thing leads to another. Knowing English, studying there, having a career over there and being able to work in something a little better over there.

Her desire for a different and more fulfilling career led Maria to apply to graduate school in San Diego. She will begin graduate school this year (2010). According to Maria there are limited options for graduate school in Tijuana so commuting to San Diego for school is her best educational option.

In contrast to Maria, Gabriela attended school in San Diego and began commuting in the first grade. Gabriela grew up in Tijuana and her father was a transborder commuter since she can remember. Her mother ran a small convenience store from their garage that sold candies, canned food, drinks and other food products. Gabriela’s parents decided to send her and her younger brother to school in San Diego because they wanted them to have access to a U.S. education, learn English and have more opportunities. Schooling in the United States is one way to gain English language fluency, as well as social and cultural capital. This provides an advantage for working in both the U.S. and Mexico. Gabriela’s family’s decision to send her and her brother to school in the U.S and Maria’s family’s decision to send her younger sister to high school in San Diego is a method their families chose to help them increase their cultural capital in the border context.

The wage gap between the U.S. and Mexico creates incentives to commute to the U.S. Schooling in the U.S. increases English language ability, bicultural competence, knowledge of how the educational and labor systems in the U.S. function, access to higher education, networks among peers and the ability to compete for higher paying and
more professionalized jobs in both the U.S. and Mexico. English proficiency is also an asset for jobs in Mexico, especially in border cities and in jobs that deal with international business or tourism. Gabriela is also conscious of the economic discrepancies in Tijuana and the difficulty of gaining a “good education” without having a lot of money, which also influenced her parents’ decision to send her to school in San Diego.

Ellos querían que yo tuviera una educación que ellos no pudieron tener… Si no tienes el dinero básicamente es muy difícil poder tener una buena educación... Ellos querían que yo estudiara en Estados Unidos para tener una mejor educación y mejores oportunidades y poder terminar una carrera, no nada más terminar la prepa o high school pero tener una carrera... Igual como yo nací aquí y sabían que mi vida iba a estar muy ligada aquí querían que yo estudiara y dominara el ingles. Querían que hablara bien el ingles, pues siendo frontera y sabiendo también que iba haber más oportunidades de trabajo en Estados Unidos que en México. Y si iba querer tener un buen trabajo iba tener que hablar bien ingles.

They wanted me to have an education that they couldn’t have… If you don’t have money basically its very hard to have a good education… They wanted me to study in the United States to have a better education and better opportunities and be able finish a profession, not only finish high school but have a profession... Since I was born here and they knew that my life was going to be tied to here they wanted me to study and have a good command of English... They wanted me to speak English well, being a border and knowing too that I was going to have more work opportunities in the United States than in Mexico. And if I was going to have a good job I would need to speak English well.

Alejandro revealed similar sentiments about his decision to move back to San Diego after commuting for six years from Tijuana. As a Mixtec from Oaxaca Alejandro did not learn Spanish until he attended school. In the United States his inability to speak

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Gerardo Mauricio Chávez Montaño presented a paper titled “Transfronterizo Capital: Motivations and potential of transfronterizo students in the Tijuana-San Diego region,” which discusses in depth the accumulated capital and potential of transborder commuter students in the Tijuana San Diego border area at the International Borders Conference at University of Texas El Paso. The paper can be accessed on the conference website: http://research.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=24748
English affected the types of jobs he got and also made it difficult for him to express himself and communicate. His only option in the U.S. was farm labor because he did not know English. He attended English classes with a group of friends in order to communicate and express themselves better with the goal of moving onto better jobs. Alejandro explains that he suffered a lot and did not want his children to experience the same obstacles and suffering he went through. Alejandro doubly felt the linguistic barriers and lack of cultural capital in the larger nation of Mexico and then again when he came to the United States.

And that is the reason that I could easily be living in Tijuana and come (to San Diego) but that’s what I want for my children. Even if they don’t complete a professional degree I want them to at least more or less advance a little and be able to express themselves as long as they don’t work like one, not knowing the language. That they know how to express themselves and know how to express what they want to do. That’s my mentality, my way of seeing, the reason that we are here more than any other thing.

Superación encompasses a variety of aspects and is defined differently for different people. For some people superación is education and language that opens up more opportunities and provides an increase in cultural capital in the border region. It also encompass having a comfortable space in Tijuana while earning more money in San Diego or deciding to move to San Diego in order to not deal with the border crossing. Superación is more than subsistence and having enough food to eat or shelter to live in.
Affection, friendship, family, fun, comfort and identification with others are all important aspects of life. Culture and how one situates themselves emerged through the narratives as a main theme in defining what it means to be a border crosser.
Chapter 5: 
Border Cultures

Todos los países tienen sus pedazos. O sea un país no está hecho de una sola mirada y un solo concepto, sino es una unión de diferentes formas de pensar y culturas... En México hay muchos México como en todos los países hay muchas partes, muchos pedazos, muchas secciones. – Luis

All countries have their pieces. I mean one country is not made of only one view, one concept, instead it’s a union of different ways of thinking and cultures... In Mexico there are many Mexicos like in all countries there are many parts, many pieces, many sections.

Culture is not clear-cut or static but is influenced by one’s history, experiences, positionality, interactions at any given moment and can be inclusive, exclusive, resistant and overlapping at the same time. Notions of culture are central to how people situate themselves. Culture is also an important aspect of one’s dignity and worth. Cultura fronteriza, or border culture, was a topic that came up in nearly every interview and was fundamental in defining what it means for people to be a border crosser and live on the border. Cultures are constantly changing, negotiated and are not territorially delineated. According to Gupta and Ferguson it is important to denaturalize the notion of culture (1992). People’s views of their culture depends on place, space and the socio-historical moment as well as aspects such as age, and gender. The narratives and perceptions of the people I interviewed questioned stereotypical notions of Mexican culture, and what it means to be Mexican. In defining their views of border culture(s) each person defined border culture differently. They did not have a single, essentialized view of culturafronteriza, Mexican border culture but rather referenced their own experiences, positionality and interactions. In addition to reflecting on similarities the interviewees mentioned differences within Tijuana and differences with other parts of Mexico and San
Diego. Although the narratives referenced diverse notions of border culture the
performance of the border and the back and forth nature of commuting was central to
many of the definitions of border definitions of border culture.

Border scholar Josiah Heyman advocates to analyze border culture in a new way.

Heyman states:

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 mazeways that
come and go, open and close, joining disparate people at every level of
aggregation… This is, perhaps, the most important lesson the border
teaches anthropology and other new fields of cultural study: the relational
caracter of culture is as prone to polarization as hybridization” (Heyman
2001: 58).

The narratives echo Heyman’s notions of the relational character of culture. The
interviewees interactions with people in Tijuana, San Diego, Mexico City and their own
personal experiences crossing the border are major factors they used to define their own
culture. This included similarity and identification as well as rejection and resistance.

Luis questions the notion that there is only one way to be Mexican or that there is
only a single representation of Mexican culture. Luis is in his early fifties and considers
himself a “transfronterizo.” He remembers spending summers with his family in Los
Angeles. For him the border was very fluid and he was able to travel back and forth on a
regular basis. Luis’ family has been in the border region, specifically Alta and Baja
California for many generations. His mother’s family moved between both sides of the
border with some family settling in Alta California (i.e. the U.S. state), and others in Baja
California. Luis jokes about the differences within his own family in California and his
own family in Mexico. He acknowledges mixing both cultures and his own transborder
experiences but at the same time draws distinctions within his family in Mexico and his family in the U.S. He jokes that some of his family in California look brown but are really “white,” distinguishing what he sees as cultural difference within the family.

Entonces hay una cultura este Fronteriza Mexicana, Fronteriza Californiana, y luego además Transfronteriza porque yo lo veo con mi familia. Yo en mi familia, son de origen parte español, parte mexicano y unos de ellos son totalmente con mentalidad americana. O sea por decirlo como dicen aquí eres blanco. Y que lo dicen los resentidos tu no, tu eres blanco, estás moreno pero eres blanco, en forma ofensiva. Hasta hablas como gringo ja ja ja. Así entre la familia así se dicen, ja ja ja ja. Entonces y allí desde ese extremo Mexicano, Mexicano que vivimos en Baja California. O sea de la misma familia, entonces allí, yo veo allí como hay una diferencia de cultura extrema. Pero a pesar de todo eso somos una mescolanza.

There is a Mexican border culture, California border culture and then also transborder because I see it with my family. In my family, they are partly of Spanish origin, partly Mexican and some of them are totally with an American mentality. I mean in other words like they say here, ‘you’re white.’ And the resentful say ‘no, you’re white, you’re dark but you’re white,’ in an offensive way. ‘You even talk like a gringo ha ha ha.’ Like that within the family, they tell each other that ha ha ha. So and from there to the extreme Mexican, Mexican who live in Baja California. From the same family, so there I see how there is an extreme cultural difference. But in spite of all of that we are all a mix.

Luis’s use of the phrases “que dicen los resentidos” (what the resentful say) and “de forma ofensiva” (in an offensive manner) indicate that he knows that the jokes seem harsh. The term “resentidos” (resentful) also indicates that the jokes may function as a form of resistance. Many Chicanos or Mexican Americans are viewed by Mexicans as having more privilege and power than Mexicans from Mexico. Humor in this case is a method of maintaining dignity and pride. Luis not only denotes a difference between his family living in Mexico and his family in the U.S. but also differentiates himself from his family in Mexico City. The tension between the two cities highlights this contrast.
Yo tengo familiares en la Ciudad de México, nosotros les decimos los Chilangos, y ellos nos dicen los Tijuaneros, ‘tu no eres Mexicano, tu eres Tijuanero.’ ‘Sí estás en México pero tu eres Chilango.’ El que vive en la ciudad de México es una pequeña nación que tienen unas características muy especiales. Que tienen el síndrome de la gran ciudad universal, ellos creen que se comen el mundo.

I have family in Mexico City, we call them Chilangos and they call us Tijuaneros, ‘you’re not Mexican, you’re Tijuanero.’ ‘Hey you’re Chilango, you’re not Mexican.’ Those who live in Mexico City are a small country that has very special characteristics. That have the big city syndrome, they think they own the world.

Luis and Elizabeth are of the same generation growing up in Tijuana and experiencing the border much differently than the generation of Gabriela and Maria. They recall the border waits were much shorter and crossing into the U.S. did not require the same level of documentation and scrutiny. Both lament the changes that have transpired in Tijuana.

Elizabeth also constructs much of her view of “cultura fronteriza” in relation to and in contrast to both the U.S. and Mexico City. Due to Elizabeth’s job in the hotel industry she traveled to Mexico City frequently and there she sensed hostility and felt that the people did not consider her Mexican because she was from Tijuana.

Sufrimos el hecho de que en el centro de la republica, creen que no somos Mexicanos, nos marginan. Y obviamente pues no somos estadounidenses porque nacimos en México. Entonces es como una cultura fronteriza, se crea un propio lenguaje y se hace como algo diferente a lo que es de la parte de México para el sur a lo que es el norte... Tenía que viajar mucho a la capital y yo pasaba unos corajes porque a mi me querían ver como bicho raro porque era de Tijuana. Porque no eres Mexicana... Entonces conforme fui creciendo, dije yo no me tengo que enojar. Tengo que al contrario valorar que somos una cultura diferente, netamente fronteriza. Que tenemos tambien la ventaja de cruzar de un pais al otro todos los dias hasta varias veces al dia. Y que no en todas las ciudades del mundo puede suceder eso

We suffer because in the center of the country they think that we aren’t
Mexican, they marginalize us. And obviously we aren’t Americans because we were born in Mexico. So it's like a border culture, it has its own language and things are different in the southern parts of Mexico to what is the north… I had to travel a lot to the capital and I would get so angry because they wanted to see me like a weird creature because I was from Tijuana. Because you’re not Mexican.

Elizabeth commented that the use of English and certain words differentiate people from Tijuana from the rest of Mexico. According to Elizabeth the use of English and terms influenced by English in Tijuana is a sign of border culture and not “pochismo”. Pochismo is considered the inability to speak fluent Spanish and being overly influenced by American culture. She draws on her own childhood experiences and relates the use of English to her generation and the fact that Tijuana was separated, especially by television, from the rest of Mexico, whose government has historically been centralized. Until 1982 the television stations available in Tijuana were U.S. network stations (i.e. ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC) whose signals crossed the border (Alonso-Meneses 2008). As Elizabeth explains in its inception the local station in Tijuana was limited to the afternoon. Currently the inverse is also true and the television signals of Televisa and TV Azteca reach the U.S. border cities.

Border scholar Jorge Bustamante (1996) argues that much of the use of English and specifically certain sayings in Tijuana pertain more to the middle class than mere proximity to the U.S. Bustamante argues that English, U.S. television, music, films and other form of popular culture have been globalized and adopted by the middle class all over the world and are present in cities in Asia and Latin America as well as in Tijuana. Bustamante also argues that the use of English in Tijuana becomes an appropriation and play with English terms (1996).
El idioma era diferente porque nosotros de toda la vida hablamos de “parquéate” y hablamos de la “marqueta” y hablábamos de cosas así que no están bien dichas pero que para nosotros era parte de nuestro idioma, no lo veíamos mal. Yo pienso que el cien por ciento de la gente de mi generación aprendíamos inglés en la casa, en tu televisión, porque el único canal Mexicano empezaba a las 4 de la tarde. No había retransmisoras como Televisa, TV Azteca no existía. Nosotros los canales que veíamos eran el 6, el 8, el 10, los que todos de la frontera. A las 4 de la tarde empezaba el canal 12 pero antes no era de Televisa. Entonces era algo muy natural. Tu de niño veías la televisión en ingles y pues aprendías. Pero eso ayudaba mucho para que después obtuvieses otros trabajos con las compañías extranjeras. O sea esas eran las diferencias de que éramos Mexicanos pero más bien éramos fronterizos, era una cultura fronteriza.

Our language was different because all our life we said “parqueate” and “la marqueta” and we said stuff like that which aren’t correct but that were part of our language, we didn’t see it as bad. I think that 100 percent of the people of my generation learned English at home, on your tv because the only Mexican channel began at 4 in the afternoon. There were no transmitters like Televisa, like TV Azteca didn’t exist. The channels we watched were 6, 8, 10, the ones everyone on the border would watch. Channel 12 started at four in the afternoon but before it wasn’t part of Televisa. So it was something very natural. You would watch television in English as a child and well you would learn. But that helped us a lot so that later we could get other jobs with foreign companies. I mean those are the differences that we were Mexicans but rather we were fronterizos, we were a border culture.

Gabriela, in her twenties, shares Elizabeth’s view that Tijuana has a unique language and manner of speaking and agrees that the use of English is not related to being “pocho” or not being able to speak Spanish properly. Being pocho is viewed as negative to both Elizabeth and Gabriela. This terminology is also a way of delineating what is Mexican and what is not. In her view, being Mexican includes the use of certain words and English and at the same time fluency in Spanish is necessary.

Claro que vivir en Tijuana tiene su propia cultura, maneras de decir las cosas, dichos, o sea la mezcla de ciertas palabras. No te estoy hablando de ser pocha porque eso no es cultura de Tijuana. Somos una cultura fronteriza, ¿cómo te la pongo? Cualquier persona que esté educada o como cualquier persona que tenga cierto nivel de escolaridad que haya
vivido en México, de Tijuana lo de ser pocha no es nada de cultura. Y se
ve negativo pues. Pero las palabras el ‘bye,’ la ‘soda’, y yo también lo
decía mucho y lo sigo diciendo ‘hay que buscar parking.’ ‘Aquí te vas a
parkear,’ sabes que esa palabra es de parking, soda es de ‘soda’ pero tu vas
al interior y no es eso. Es el refresco, y la gaseosa. No dices ‘bye’ dices
adios, hasta luego. Bye es muy de Americano.

Of course living in Tijuana has its own culture, ways of saying things,
sayings, I mean the mix of certain words. I am not talking about being
pocha because that is not Tijuana culture. We are a border culture, how
can I put it? Any person that is educated or any person that has a certain
level of schooling that has lived in Mexico, from Tijuana, being pocha is
not culture. And it is seen as negative. But words like bye, soda and I
used to say it a lot and I still say it we need to find ‘parking’. You’re
going to ‘parkear’ here, you know its from the word parking, soda is from
soda but you go to the interior and its not. Its ‘refresco’ and ‘gaseosa’.
You don’t say bye you say ‘adios’, ‘hasta luego.’ Bye is very American.

Elizabeth also emphasized that the use of English and dollars was normal to her.

Because of commuting and tourism the dollar is still in use in Tijuana, even after
nationalization of the prices in Tijuana.

Y tu ibas al hipódromo y todo era en ingles pero para nosotros era una
cosa normal. Como estaban anunciando, o sea no estaban anunciando las
careras en español, se anunciaban en ingles. Era muy chistoso pero para
nosotros era el como un denominador, un pan de todos días. No era que
dijésemos ah están anunciando todo en ingles. O no era que nosotros
dijéramos ah estamos en México y utilizamos la moneda del dólar, no era
así. Obviamente nacionalizaron a la ciudad y todos los precios son en
pesos, en moneda nacional. Pero obviamente el dólar circula por toda la
gente que va para allá.

And you would go to the racetrack and everything was in English but for
us it was normal. They way they were announcing, I mean they weren’t
announcing the races in Spanish, they were announced in English. It was
very funny but for us it was like a common denominator, commonplace.
It wasn’t that we would say oh we’re in Mexico and we’re using the
dollar, it wasn’t like that. Clearly they nationalized the city and all the
prices are in pesos, in national money. But obviously the dollar circulates
because of all the people that go over there.

Elizabeth notes the common use of dollars in Tijuana by the transborder
population and tourists. This illustrates the impact of transborder workers and the power differentials between both countries. The peso was not used as a currency in the U.S. border regions due to economic and power differentials between the two countries. Transborder commuters contribute greatly to the Tijuana and San Diego economies. In 1998 eight percent of Tijuana’s working population commuted to the U.S. for work, and earned 20 percent of the total salary of Tijuana (Alegría 2000b). However the increasing border waits and fortification of the border has negatively impacted transborder habits. In 2005 delays at the border were expected to have a significant economic impact. The economic output loss due to border waits was estimated to exceed 2.259 billion dollars in the San Diego-Baja California region (SANDAG 2006).

Crossing back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico to work, go to school, visit family, have fun and shop were components of border culture that the people I interviewed spoke about. Shopping and access to the U.S. market is an important component of border culture. All of the people I interviewed who are currently commuting and commuters who recently moved to San Diego have U.S. cell phone numbers and bank accounts. Many large purchases are made in the U.S., such as cars and electronics. Gabriela’s father purchased their home in San Diego and had it transported to Tijuana. All of the people I interviewed purchase most of their clothing in the United States. While its difficult to estimate the exact amount that Baja California residents spend in San Diego County a 1994 study reported that border crossers spent 2.8 billion that year in San Diego County (San Diego Dialogue 1994). Another study in 2002 study Baja California reported that Baja California residents spent 1.8 billion a year in the U.S. (Sierra López and Serrano Contreras 2002).
Alejandro mentioned that many people buy merchandise in San Diego or Los Angeles to resell it for a couple dollars more in Mexico. Gabriela’s aunt has a small business where she buys jewelry in the jewelry district in Los Angeles and resells it in Tijuana. It is not surprising that the large outlet center in San Ysidro, “Las Americas,” is adjacent to the Tijuana-San Diego border wall. According to Gloria most people from Tijuana who have access to crossing buy their clothing in the United States. “La ropa es mucho más barata en San Diego. Una persona que vive en Tijuana y que trabaja en San Diego va comprar su ropa en San Diego. Una persona que aunque trabaje en Tijuana, va comprar su ropa en San Diego o sea si puede cruzar, claro porque es más barato.”

[“Clothes in San Diego is much cheaper. A person who lives in Tijuana and works in San Diego is going to buy their clothes in San Diego, I mean if they can cross, obviously because its cheaper.”] According to the executive director of the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce 85 percent of the retail customer base is from Mexico (Berestein 2008). Yet, the Tijuana population that is excluded from crossing the border cannot take advantage of the resources of the border and cheaper clothing prices in San Diego, which ultimately impacts the San Diego economy. A special advertising section “La Bolsa Azul” advertises specials in San Diego and is distributed around the middle class Tijuana neighborhoods to encourage Tijuana residents to shop in San Diego.

Gabriela also defines border culture as a moving back and forth between both countries. She attended school in San Diego as most of her immediate family and friends shared similar experiences. Gabriela has been interacting with both systems since she her childhood. She went on to state that she is bicultural and feels comfortable in both San Diego and Tijuana. The “va y ven,” back and forth, has also been a constant in
Gabriela’s life. Throughout our interview, she spoke about the differences between San Diego and Tijuana, and of the commonalities and things that she identified with.

Gabriela stated that a mixing and fusion exists that overlaps both sides of the border, she also acknowledges that her views are related to the fact that she has spent time on both sides. Gabriela is the only person I interviewed from Tijuana who attended school in San Diego since first grade. Her interactions with Mexican Americans and the U.S. educational system are much more profound than the other people I interviewed, as they started commuting regularly at a later age. When Gabriela moved to San Diego she did not feel like it was a huge change because she would return almost every weekend to visit family in Tijuana and had spent a significant amount of time in the U.S. Rather her interactions and experiences with San Diego and her biculturality made the move easier.

Nuestra vida era ibas a la escuela en San Diego o trabajabas en San Diego… Cuando yo me mudé a San Diego no fue como que hijole no manches estoy ahora en Alemania o ahora hijole no manches estoy en Veracruz porque yo creo que si yo me fuera a vivir a Veracruz aunque soy mexicana… cuesta un poquito más de trabajo. Sabemos que no hay esa frontera, que hay muchas costumbres que a la mejor yo estoy familiarizada y acostumbrada que allí no las hay aunque hablo el idioma… No fue como un balde de agua fría. Sí podía ver las diferencias, las cosas malas pero no fue así de difícil porque muchas cosas seguían estando constantes… También hay cosas de que al menos para mí me siguen gustando de vivir en Tijuana, que aquí no lo hay de esa misma manera.

Our life was you go to school in San Diego or you work in San Diego… When I moved to San Diego it wasn’t like damn I’m now in Germany or damn I’m in Veracruz because I think if I would have gone to live in Veracruz even though I’m Mexican… it takes a little more. We know that the border isn’t there, that there are many customs that I’m familiar and accustomed to that do not exist there even though I speak the language… It wasn’t like a bucket of cold water. I could see the differences, the bad things but it wasn’t that difficult because many things stayed constant… There are other things that I still like about living in Tijuana, that don’t exist here in the same way.
Maria, like Gabriela is in her twenties, and views that San Diego and Tijuana are connected. She is influenced by her access to crossing and participates in a transborder lifestyle. Maria underlines that there is a differential between people who have access to crossing the border and those who are excluded from participating in a transborder lifestyle. Class and exposure to the other side play a large role in her analysis. The differential involves not having access to the resources of the border, such as the ability to buy products from the U.S., that are often less expensive, and the ability to experience activities on both sides. She explains the division within Tijuana, and the divide between the U.S. and Mexican side, which is dependent on the positionality and experiences of each person.

Es como muy parte de una cosa de la otra, como San Diego de Tijuana, y no concibes una sin la otra. Pero para la gente que no tiene pasaporte obviamente los condiciona de alguna manera porque saben que hay algo más allá pero no pueden ir supongo. En la prepa donde trabajaba, había muchos alumnos que nunca habían cruzado. Y te puedes dar cuenta, suena gacho pero es una clase más baja la que no tiene acceso y pues se nota. Lo puedes notar hasta en la manera de vestir. Y en las actividades que hacen. Sociocultural y económicamente. Más bien dicho las tres cosas revueltas, va de la mano lo económico con lo sociocultural. No lo puedes separar. Una cosa te lleva a la otra, como que las limitaciones económicas a veces te llevan a limitaciones culturales a lo mejor y al mismo tiempo te ponen en cierto estrato social.

Its like one thing goes hand in hand with the other, like San Diego of Tijuana, like Tijuana of San Diego and you don’t conceive one without the other. But for people who don’t have a passport obviously they’re conditioned in a way because they know that there is something more but they can’t go I suppose. In the high school where I worked, there were many students that have never crossed. And you can tell, it sounds bad but it’s a lower class who doesn’t have access and its noticeable. You can notice it in the way of dressing. And in their activities. Social-cultural and economically. Actually the three things combined, the economic and socio-cultural go hand in hand. You cannot separate them. One thing leads to the other, like economic limitations sometimes lead to cultural
limitations and at the same time it puts you in a certain social stratus.

Maria stated that many of her co-workers in San Diego have never been to Tijuana. In contrast, a difference exists between her co-workers and the students in the high school she worked at. Her co-workers have access to cross but may not have the desire or the opportunity to go to Tijuana but the students she described do not have the option to cross the border. The students at the school she worked at are socialized much differently by proximity to the border than her co-workers. The experiences of the students with the border is one of exclusion. Her view of Mexican cultures also does not reflect the stereotypical image of Mexico. During the interview with Maria ‘Ranchera’ music when began playing in the background Maria laughed and said “do they really think we listen to this?”

Alejandro has a slightly different view of border culture. In contrast to Luis, Elizabeth, Gabriela and Maria he did not grow up in Tijuana. Alejandro was born in a small village in the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca, a state in southern Mexico. Tijuana and San Diego both have large indigenous Oaxacan communities, usually from Mixtec areas (Lopez and Runsten 2004). He does not define border culture through the interactions and experiences, but rather through traditions and celebrations. Tijuana is a place that is made up of migrants from many states and Alejandro does not see that Tijuana has developed a culture. In contrast to the others I interviewed who were raised in the border area and believe they have their own distinct culture. Alejandro lamented that in Tijuana the city government does not give people from different states a place to have cultural celebrations from their state of origin. His view of culture is strongly related to traditions and celebrations. He mentioned that in Tijuana only national
holidays and “Dia de los Muertos,” Day of the Dead, are celebrated. Alejandro argued that these holidays are celebrated all over Mexico and are not specific to the border region.

The interviewees experiences and views on border culture point to the need to de-essentialize notions of culture. Culture is a component of border performativity for transborder commuters. All interviewees, in one way or another, constructed their view of their culture in relation to crossing and interacting with people from both sides of the border. At the same time their view of their culture was also constructed in resistance to people from the U.S. side of the border or other regions of Mexico. They reflect Heyman’s view that the “relational character of culture is as prone to polarization as hybridization” (2001: 58).
Transborder commuters provide a central narrative to the Tijuana-San Diego region. The narratives provided a unique, special and in-depth view of the experiences of seven transborder commuters. Border policies made at the national level affect people locally at the border yet the policies do not sufficiently take into account the everyday lives of people and businesses on the border. This thesis provided a face and stories to lives that are usually defined in numbers. The need to humanize border crossers is especially significant in light of current anti-immigrant sentiment. The stereotype of border crossers in the U.S. is that people cross borders to take advantage yet these narratives refute this notion. This thesis illustrated that border performativity, “superación” (bettering oneself) and border cultures all form part of what it means to be a border crosser. This thesis illustrates how border crossers contribute culturally, socially and economically to both sides of the border. If borders were open or crossing was made easier, contrary to stereotypes there would not be a large influx of people.

An expansion of this thesis might include the economic impact of transborder commuters on both sides of the border. Very little research has been done on the population of U.S. citizens that have moved to Tijuana and become transborder commuters to work in the United States. More research needs to be done on transborder commuters who reside in the U.S. and commute to Tijuana to work. An increasing number of Mexican commuters have moved to San Diego County who have businesses in Tijuana. There is also a lack of research on the businesses such as restaurants that have moved from Tijuana to San Diego County.
While what is occurring on the U.S.-Mexico border is unique because of the relationship between the countries and power differentials similar things are occurring in borders throughout the world. The narratives and stories of border crossers teach us that we need see border crossers as people and treat them with dignity. We also learn of the struggles and contributions that they make to both countries and how border policies can separate people and make everyday life more difficult. The voices and stories of borderlanders throughout the world need to be heard, including those with more militarized borders and those with more peaceful borders. As Pablo Casals has stated “The love of ones country is a splendid thing. But why should the love stop at the border?”
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