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Crossing Stories: Reflections from the U.S.- Mexico Border Bridge

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Jessica Chapin received her doctoral degree in anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin in May 1995. Her dissertation, which is currently being revised for publication, is entitled "Over the Edge: Capital and Cultural Representation on the U.S.-Mexico Border." It is based on research in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez funded by a Fulbright-García Robles grant awarded by the U.S.-Mexico Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange, and a Faculty Sponsored Dissertation Research Grant from the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. The lecture that follows was given while in residence as a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Latin American Studies Center of the University of Maryland, College Park.

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For Anglo-Americans, the Mexican border has historically evoked both fear and desire. Attempts to control the border have long coexisted with the wish to revel in its lawlessness. In the folklore of border crossing, Mexico is associated with referential instability and loss of control on many levels. The threat of the *mordida*, or of being thrown into a Mexican jail for a minor traffic infraction are the cause of much preoccupation. The laws of the commodity in Mexico are likewise perceived as capricious and arbitrary. Exchange rates fluctuate wildly, as do the prices of tourist items. While one may haggle to reduce the price, the “real” value of an item seems to be permanently unfixed. Undoubtedly the most common cause for concern on the part of Anglo-American border crossers is the loss of mastery over the body that results from the ingestion of unseen microbes. The pleasure and benefits of commerce and consumption are held in tension with anxiety over the loss of familiar referents and the threat to the law, semiosis, and the body that it implies.

Since 1965, the *maquiladora* program has allowed U.S. and other multinational corporations to take advantage of low wages in Mexico. A recent advertisement in *Twin Plant News*, the largest of the monthly trade magazines for the industry, pictured a single black line tracing the familiar contours of the U.S.-Mexico border. The line was accompanied by the simple statement: “This isn’t a border, it’s an edge.” In popular slang, to go over the edge means to lose one’s bearings, to be out of place, or beyond the pale. To U.S. business, the Mexican border simultaneously signals the edge of the familiar and intelligible universe and the lower production costs that create a competitive edge. Because of its refusal to submit to familiar epistemologies, the border poses a problem for U.S. companies, and corporate managers must attempt to operate on the other side of the border without going over the edge. To this end, constructions of development as redemption and of the *maquiladora* program as an “economic marriage” between distinct and intelligible cultural/national entities, inform technologies of managerial control and serve as strategies of containment. They work to sustain a cultural and political economy in which commerce does not threaten existing borders, but instead takes place from a

their ground. The agents appear to weigh the truth value of every statement. The assumption of an unproblematic relationship between identity and self representation is suspended. "I am from Austin" no longer carries the assurance that it does in other contexts. Anyone can be put into the position of an illegal person, a liar, their bodily integrity threatened by the ever-present possibility of a rubber glove search. The Customs agents have a tool that looks like a giant speculum: a long pole with a round mirror at the end which they hold under your car in order to search the nooks and crannies of your underside.

During the summer of 1989 I drove an old Ford Escort station wagon, I was twenty-seven, but I looked younger. At that time I was only crossing every week or two. They pulled me over into the inspection area almost every time. Twice they put a dog (K-9) into my car to sniff for drugs. They would go through my wallet. Once the agent took all the cigarettes out of my pack. I must have fit a profile. During 1992-1993 when I returned for a year of research I was driving a late-model Toyota Camry. I looked older, my hair was longer. I crossed once or twice a day for an entire year and was never pulled over for individual inspection, never asked to get out of my car. I must have unknowingly migrated from one conceptual category to another. Read through some semiotic screen, my self representation had been assessed at a higher truth value.

At the border checkpoint even "legal" crossers—working people, corporate executives, tourists, shoppers, ethnographers—must occupy, if only temporarily, the place of the taboo, the queer, the neither here nor there. This place is characterized by a loss of mastery over time and space, a loss of control over "cultural" encounters, and a suspension of the authority of the speaking subject. At the very site of national differentiation, law enforcement mechanisms force a breakdown of that which they are supposed to insure: coevalness is unavoidable, hierarchies are suspended, and the authority of the Western speaking subject to define and articulate the truth of him or her self, is brought under the sway of the hermeneutics of suspicion that is supposed to be reserved for social others.

Natalie, the wife of an American general manager, has learned to make some "Mexican" dishes: tortilla soup, cheese sandwiches, and burritos since moving to El Paso from Michigan four and a half years ago—and she's decorated her house in cool "southwestern" pastels. "Because there are so many other families from the Midwest that have moved here though, you don't really feel the culture shock," she says. "The company people

realities are otherwise experienced as discontinuous and disjunctive, and where people are constantly being sorted out as capital, labor, objects, and ideas move around —where the identity of race, language, and legal status is not secure, no matter how much easier it would be for those in power to manage if it were. And so the crossing is a moment of scrutiny, of differentiation: an anxious place where metacultural constructions of identity and difference run up against the disenchanting complexities of the everyday.

Despite the differences in their descriptions, for both Natalie and Juana the bridge crossing figures as a place where the self temporarily occupies the space of the other. Although for Natalie this is a source of great anxiety, for Juana it is an occasion for camp humor. The stakes seem to be higher for Natalie: a loss of self knowledge, a kind of semiotic unraveling. For Juana it is a question of tactical maneuver, of negotiating within the spatial maps of the powerful.

In the passage from home to field, U.S. corporations use strategies of representation that produce Mexicans as signs of an Other world that sustains the boundaries of their own. They bring with them a narrative of progress that casts the *maquiladora* program as the redeemer of Mexico from filth, vice, and laziness, and a set of social diacritics (such as nation, culture, and gender) with which to position themselves in relation to those they encounter. In the margins of this construction are vast zones of informality, illegality, and invisibility to which are relegated many of the everyday practices of disassembly and resignification through which Mexican working people negotiate identity and value within the same social field. As corporate elites produce and occupy their version of transnational space, they bypass local meanings and ignore the contaminating effects of their own presence on the local landscape. Yet, their monologic descriptions of transnationalism are haunted by the presence of other stories, and by fears of epistemological failure.

Temporal disjuncture is frequently invoked in corporate representations of the U.S.-Mexico border. Mexicans are viewed as “backward” and lagging behind the progress and modernity of the United States. An April 1990 article in *Twin Plant News* states that “if you were temporarily transported back to 1930, you would find yourself in much the

cardboard to wood to cement block, carved into the hillsides just below the municipal dump. The family migrated to Juárez from Zacatecas over a period of several years. By the mid-eighties they had established a residential compound consisting of a house, a second structure with two apartments for the married children, a small but very beautiful garden where Apolonia, the mother of the family, tends roses and other flowers that remind her of life in the country, and an outdoor area with an outhouse, a water faucet, and an open fire where water for washing is constantly being heated. The area is surrounded on three sides by a fence constructed of large industrial barrels that have been cut in half and flattened. The fourth wall is made of cardboard boxes and packing crates.

In the General Electric *maquiladora*, where Apolonia's teenage daughters work, they assemble components that will become part of small appliances, like blenders and toasters. They don't *mind* working there, they say. It is clean and you get health and other benefits, and there are social advantages to working with lots of people your own age. Their photo album is filled with snapshots of birthday parties and company picnics. Girls in matching smocks and "designer" jeans.

Apolonia's husband Guadalupe, her sons that are older than ten or twelve, and a variety of other male and female relatives who live close by, work as scavengers in the dump. Despite the stench and the choking clouds of dust, and occasional cuts from broken glass or syringes, this work offers higher pay and shorter hours than General Electric does. So even the daughters who choose the latter often come up on weekends and holidays to earn extra cash, sorting enormous piles of residential and industrial garbage back into their component parts: plastic, copper, cardboard, everything that can be reused or resold. They take the small appliances (like blenders and toasters) that they find in the dump home where, if they can't be fixed and reused, they end up on Apolonia's bed in the back courtyard, where she usually sits since a tumor left her paralyzed from the waist down.⁷ Everything except for the plastic casing is disassembled, sorted, and sold to local scrap dealers.

Members of the extended family who live in the neighborhood are distributed fairly equally between the "modern" transnational sector, and the piles and piles of refuse that it leaves in its wake. Despite the *maquiladora* promoters celebratory rhetoric of progress, one cannot help

⁷On my most recent visit to Juárez, I found that Apolonia had died from a recurrence of the cancer.

given out free of charge at the plant. Because the injunction to *be* a given gender takes place discursively (“to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a good worker”) and demands that the subject fill a variety of these positions at the same time, it produces “necessary failures.”⁹ The relationship between truth and power is brought into relief through such contradictions. Like the international boundary, the *maquiladora* is an institutional structure that not only controls the bodies it subjects, but forces them to emit signs. As they move back and forth between the *maquila* and the Colonia, people are acutely aware of the need to produce different signs of self in different contexts.

While the reified notions of Culture produced by the disciplinary ancestors of anthropology have become the objects —rather than the tools— of study in many contemporary anthropology departments, they continue to be an integral part of corporate and political rhetoric about the “global economy.” Such rhetoric asserts the enclosure, coherence, and distinctiveness of culture(s) confined within national boundaries while celebrating a commercial landscape without borders. The possibility of a polyvocal, or multicultural world is neatly incorporated into a centripetal narrative of the capitalist global economy in this report on the 1994 Saturn “Homecoming.”

“Muy buenos días, Spring Hill, Tenn., y Saturno! We thank you, and we love you very much!”

Fourteen employees from Packard Electric Division of General Motors’ Conductores y Componentes Eléctricos 1 (CCE-1) plant in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, attracted hundreds to Saturn’s Town Square stage in Spring Hill in June for three performances of Mexican folkloric dances. The dancers opened each performance with the same greeting, adding salsa to the Saturn Homecoming that saw more than 44,000 Saturn owners turn the grassy knolls at the auto manufacturing site near Nashville into a rainbow sea of Saturns.

The Conductores employees and their co-workers assemble power

⁹Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 145.

Mexico and the U.S. may have a biological base. Studies show that the U.S. people, because of their dependence on the logical activities, tend to be more left-lobed. The Hispanic cultures, because of their greater dependence on feeling and emotions, tend to be more right-lobed. In light of this discovery, perhaps we need to make more of an effort to understand the other half of ourselves, thereby understanding the kind of interaction that would be necessary for a total understanding of the other culture.¹²

This prescription for cultural interaction calls the businessman into dialogue with his repressed and feminine Other half, who, embodying ambiguity which is characteristic of narratives of cultural difference, is Mexican in one breath and Hispanic in the next.

Indeed, many corporate attempts to render Cultural differences intelligible and systematic, present contrasts between Mexico and the U.S. that are similar to comparisons between the conversational styles and modes of workplace interaction of women and men. In *Management in Two Cultures: Bridging the Gap Between U.S. and Mexican Managers*, for example, Eva Kras offers a "Comparative Table—Cultural Factors." The Mexican side of the chart includes such stereotypically female features as "family is first priority," "shuns confrontation," "aesthetic side of life is important even at work," and "truth tempered by need for diplomacy." The U.S. side, on the other hand, lists masculine traits such as "family usually second to work," "sensitivity seen as weakness," "no time for 'useless frills,'" and "direct yes/no answers given and expected."¹³

Central to the configuration of power and powerlessness, an idiom of heterosexual desire pervades corporate and popular representations of the *maquiladora* program and the economic relationship between Mexico and the United States more generally. The *maquiladora* program is frequently referred to and celebrated as an "economic marriage," a form of licensed intercourse between the two countries. Mexico is described as "turning the heads" of its powerful northern neighbors, or having a "facelift" in order to attract business. A 1978 *Business Week* article about the *maquiladoras*

¹²Lois Elias, "Intercultural Communication," *Twin Plant News* (July 1986): 39.

¹³Eva S. Kras, *Management in Two Cultures: Bridging the Gap Between U.S. and Mexican Managers* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1989), 71-72.

In official and popular responses to the blockade, much attention was paid to the absence of the transvestite prostitutes, or *vestidas*, from Ciudad Juárez who had previously made their living by crossing the border each night to work. Homophobic and xenophobic sentiments converged in statements that cast the transvestite prostitute as a potent trope of social disorder. During the first several days of the blockade, Silvestre Reyes, the chief of the Border Patrol's El Paso sector, repeatedly cited the absence of transvestite prostitutes as an index of the action's success. The Mayor of El Paso, Larry Francis, announced: "I walked through downtown and all the underworld was gone. Particularly the pickpockets and the transvestites weren't there."¹⁵ In one of many similar letters to the editor of the *El Paso Times*, "taxpayer" Ruth Flynn credited the blockade with reducing crime, welfare "handouts," and drug trafficking and producing a "drop in transvestites and prostitutes that spread disease."¹⁶

In popular perceptions of immigration, there is what Stallybrass and White have called a "transcoding" between the body, the topography, and the social formation.¹⁷ Marginal to both Mexico and the United States, to masculinity and femininity, to the family and the state, the transvestites are somehow imagined to be central, their presence opening an epistemological gap in U.S. national identity that must be closed. The failure of the Border Patrol to control entrances into the body politic gives rise to anxieties that are frequently articulated in terms of the vulnerability to penetration of a symbolically *masculine* body. The defense of the nation, like the defense of hegemonic forms of masculine heterosexuality, is framed as a rigorous policing of boundaries. In relation to Mexico, this perceived vulnerability gives rise to a legion of phobic projections, from the reversal of conquest in the metaphor of "Montezuma's revenge," to the "giant sucking sound" of U.S. jobs going to Mexico that Ross Perot feared would result from the passage of NAFTA.

At the border, the biological threat of the microbe, like the social threat of the drug smuggler, is often the focus of anxious fantasies about the disruptive potential of the unseen, of contaminants that threaten to evade the law and corrupt the body politic from the inside out. The biopolitics of the

¹⁵ "Crime Drops, Reasons Still Unclear," *El Paso Times*. (September 24, 1994): 1A.

¹⁶ "Letters to the Editor: Thanks to Border Patrol," *El Paso Times* (September 27, 1994): 6A.

¹⁷ Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

Illegal Immigration Along the Southern U.S. Border, which can be purchased in the gift shop of the Border Patrol Museum in El Paso, the author, a Senior Agent in the San Diego sector, describes a group of migrants waiting to cross the border from Tijuana. His description evokes a contaminating presence that is quite literally threatening to crawl up out of the sewer:

Clouds of flies and swarms of contaminated mosquitoes rush up in a wild frenzy after the passing odious, raggedly clad groups of undocumented aliens and shortly return, hovering above the stagnant, oozing puddles of sewage water along the Tijuana River.

Meanwhile,

Back on the south levee, groups of undocumented aliens, all dressed in a ragged combination of inexpensive soiled clothing, multicolored and ill-fitting, mingle while filthy food vendors sell tacos and burritos on the dusty, fly-infested graveled roadway, usually surrounded by small puddles of urine.²⁰

In this scenario the boundaries between the upper and lower halves of the body are transgressed. These “undocumented aliens” are eating while surrounded by urine; flies are moving between the sewage water and the tacos. Here transgression of the international boundary is figured as a confusion of the upper and lower parts of the body, a conflation of consumption and waste.

Gilman maintains that “‘Pathology’ is disorder and the loss of control, the giving over of the self to the forces beyond the self.” The tendency to label the different as the pathological is, he argues, “an efficient way of displacing the consciousness that the self, as a biological entity subject to the inexorable rules of aging and decay, ultimately cannot be controlled.”²¹

Images of contagion, contamination, and violation link control over the boundaries of the community to control over the physical body.

²⁰Venson C. Davis, *Blood on the Border: Criminal Behavior and Illegal Immigration Along the Southern U.S. Border* (New York: Vantage Press, 1993), 10, 13.

²¹Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 24.

of representational signification.

Like the “homosexual,” the specter of the “illegal alien” is also the subject of highly politicized and widely varying statistical claims. A population that is uncountable, unknowable, and statistically invisible, comes to stand for fears about the unknowability of the self. Even though the U.S. Bureau of the Census estimates the undocumented population in the United States to be four to five million persons, with an annual increase of 200,000 to 250,000,²⁵ groups such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform cite figures such as two to three million illegal entries per year. Because they cannot be counted or effectively distinguished from the population of citizens and legal residents, “illegal aliens” becomes a highly malleable signifier. This unseen population can be blamed for everything from unemployment, crime and urban violence, to traffic jams.

The hermeneutics of suspicion that such unknowability engenders casts a wide net, one that (although it vigorously asserts its ability to discriminate) indiscriminately catches a large number of U.S. citizens and resident aliens of Mexican descent. The possibility that—despite policies of “ethnic cleansing” directed against Native Americans, and efforts to spatially marginalize minority populations—“alien significations” are always already internal to the national self, in the form of large numbers of non-Anglo-American citizens and permanent residents (not just immigrants, but the descendants of those who lived in the area before the imposition of the national boundary) deflates an Anglo fantasy of origin and identity. It leaves in its place a national space that is, as Bhabha asserts “internally marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations.”²⁶ It suggests that perhaps it is the self, and not the other, who is the bad copy. It undermines the fantasy of a hermetically sealed, morphologically homogeneous social body that undergirds racist and xenophobic constructions of the nation at home, and the deployment of unitary constructions of self and other in the field.

As figures against this landscape, the transvestite prostitutes carry a heavy symbolic load. Presumed to be both “illegal aliens” and

²⁵“Advocates ‘Quick Reference’ Guide to Immigration Research,” Claudia Jansin, ed. (Washington DC: Policy Analysis Center Office of Research, Advocacy, and Legislation, National Council of La Raza), 8.

²⁶Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” *Nation and Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 299.

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