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Notes from an Unrepentant Border Crosser

Estoy haciendo fila, haciendo fila, estoy haciendo fila para salir del país. Es algo natural, cosa de todos los días. A mi izquierda, una familia en una vagoneta Nissan; a mi derecha, un gringo de lentes oscuros en un Mitsubishi deportivo. Por el retrovisor veo a una muchacha en un Volkswagen. Adelante, un Toyota. Vamos a salir del país y es algo natural, cosa de todos los días.

[I'm in line, in line, in line to leave the country. It's natural, an everyday occurrence. To my left, a family in a Nissan station wagon; to my right, a gringo with dark sunglasses in a sporty Mitsubishi. In my rear-view mirror I see a girl in a Volkswagen. In front of me, a Toyota. We're leaving the country, and it's OK. It's natural, an everyday occurrence.]

—Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, “La fila”

Telling Stories, Making Place

The beginning of the story “La fila” (“The line”) by the *tijuanense* writer Luis Humberto Crosthwaite serves as an apt epigraph for this discussion of borders, borderlands, and border crossings.¹ The narrator is waiting to drive his car across the border into the United States. The story is one of wandering and of waiting, for

on the endless journey to the border gate there are innumerable stops and starts. Even when it begins to look as if they might finally move, “la fila no avanza” (the line does not move). Yet the people continue toward the border, for crossing the border, as the narrator states, “es algo natural, cosa de todos los días” (is something natural, an everyday occurrence).² Some do it in cars, some do it by swimming, some by running. But to cross the border, any border, is a natural thing, an everyday occurrence.

At the same time, the narrator is telling himself a story, one about waiting in line at the border. Patricia Price, in her book *Dry Place*, argues that “place . . . is a processual, polyvocal, always-becoming entity.”³ In telling a story, the narrator is making a place in a space that is of movement (and, in the case of the waiting line to cross, nonmovement): the border.

This is a story of borders, borderlands, and border wanderers. This is a story about living in/on/across borderlines. But today, this is just a story: a story of movement, a story of wandering, a story of stories about the U.S.-Mexico border, and a story about rethinking the borderlands.

In These Borderlands There Is Movement

My identity is as rooted in place and space as it is enforced by movement. As a child of Mexican immigrant parents, I was born and raised in northern California, with frequent excursions to visit relatives in the northern Mexican border city of Mexicali. Though the drive took between twelve and fourteen hours, it was nothing for my young parents, who considered gas inexpensive and found the pull of family stronger than the burden of driving twelve hours down the center of the state. In those frequent migrations from north to south and back again, we became a part of what Breyten Breytenbach has called the Middle World: a world between nations and populated by migrants. Its citizens—“uncitizens,” as he calls them—in constant migration.⁴

As a teen I would often walk to the border from my grandmother’s house. Sometimes I would stand at the fence separating Mexicali from Calexico, my fingers reaching through, illegally touching the other side. Though it did not feel any different, I would try to imagine that it somehow was. At times there would be others with me, staring through the chain link at the other side. Once when my family and I were waiting in our car to pass, I saw a couple of teenagers at the top of the fence sitting defiantly in the space between nations. Breytenbach’s Middle World refers to a world between the first and the third, a liminal space where “truths no longer

fit snugly and certainties do not overlap.” He emphasizes that though the Middle World is everywhere, “belonging and not belonging,” it is not “of the Center . . . since it is by definition and vocation peripheral; it is *other*, living in the margins, the live edges.”⁵ The physical border between the United States and Mexico can be read as a material manifestation of this Middle World: the seam—or, to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s famous formulation, the *herida abierta*—that exposes the uneven relations between the two nations.⁶

When I was fourteen, my family was living in Imperial Beach, in San Diego County. Our apartment was on the edge of Border Field State Park, a large, undeveloped wetlands area from where we could look out and see Tijuana built up to the border fence. I remember the nightly flyovers by the border patrol, the searchlights piercing through the windows of our apartments. One night my mother found two brothers trying to hide from the *migra* on our back patio. Without thinking twice she offered them a place to stay inside the apartment. They were trying to make their way to Stockton, in northern California. The older brother had a wife and family waiting there; he was bringing his brother across for the first time. They had chosen to throw themselves into the uncertainty of the Middle World. While the searchlights of the INS helicopters crisscrossed our apartment complex, my mother offered the brothers a place to stay. She also volunteered to drive them north. And she did, with all of us kids in tow. She used the trip as an excuse to visit my *tios* in northern California.

In the mid-1990s I often went to the border to visit a friend who lived in Playas de Tijuana. On one trip we headed down to the beach to the fence, a solid wooden wall that continued into the ocean. On the wall large white pieces of plywood had been erected. On them, in stark black paint, were painted the names, ages, and places of origin of those who had died crossing the border since the institution of Operation Gatekeeper in the early 1990s.

North America, I am your scar, the border might say at times.

Rethinking la(s) Borderlands: The Border Is . . .

While the term *borderlands* has come to be associated—at least in the United States—with the southwestern United States and, in particular, as a Chicano/a space, the geographic borderlands is much larger. Extending from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is a vast geographic region that encompasses not just the southwestern United States

but also northern Mexico. Since the 1980s, the geographic borderlands have often been rendered in cultural studies in metaphorical terms—hybrid space, liminal space, gateway, no-man’s-land—and in many cases some of these metaphors have come to represent the totality of the geographic borderlands. As James Clifford rightly notes, “A specific place of hybridity and struggle, policing and transgression, the U.S.-Mexico frontier, has recently attained ‘theoretical’ status. . . . The border experience is made to produce powerful political visions: the subversion of all binarisms, the projection of a ‘multicultural public sphere (versus hegemonic pluralism).’”⁷

In a review of U.S.-Mexico border studies, it has been noted that there are generally two ways of talking about the border. According to Kathleen Staudt and David Spener, “Version 1 is old-style border studies, grounded in history and the empiricism of the social sciences. Version 2 is new-style literary studies.”⁸ That is, while version 1 gives primacy to the physical border and the geographic borderlands, version 2 constructs a metaphorical borderlands that can reduce the complexity of the geographic region, often through elevation of a few border artists/writers/theorists as “the” border representatives. Pablo Vila, in his work *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders*, writes, “I arrived in El Paso with the ‘mission’ of validating with an ethnographic work the ideas of García Canclini, Anzaldúa, and Rosaldo . . . ideas that were developed within a literary criticism framework, not an ethnographic one. Yet as soon as I launched my fieldwork, I discovered that these ideas were only partially addressing the much more complex process of identity construction in the area.”⁹

Staudt and Spener argue, quite correctly, for mixing these two types of border studies, and more recent works reflect this hybrid type of analysis.¹⁰ While in complete agreement that a strictly metaphorical reading of the border is questionable, I would like, however, to examine some of these metaphors—or, more precisely, narratives—that do conform to a particular type of border experience. Here I examine these stories told about the border and the ways in which these serve to create particular “imaginative geographies” for the region. I will focus primarily on Tijuana.

The diverse landscape of northern Mexico engenders distinct cultural productions that in turn both reflect and constitute their cultural context. In viewing the borderlands as a heterogeneous field crossed by multiple geographies, my focus is on itinerant “identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming—completing the story, domesticating the detour—becomes an impossibility.”¹¹

If we take the position of the borderlands as a complex field made up of a variety of imaginative geographies, we could then read the borderlands as a dynamic region that is constantly under construction. In viewing the borderlands as presenting multiple—alternative—histories, the mapping of this space should be accomplished through the illumination of the diverse cultures in the border region.

The Border Is: Danger

Some friends and I are in a cheesy piano bar of some tourist hotel in Ciudad Juárez. A man is telling us about the dangers of Juárez, about how it is far more dangerous than Tijuana. He asks one friend of mine, a *tijuanense*, how many killings there have been in the past year. My friend does not know, but he ventures a guess. The man snorts and states that since the beginning of the year in Juárez there have been twice that many murders. He talks about having to ride in an armored car, how he has a bodyguard, how he has to be extra careful in a city like Juárez. He never mentions the *femicidios*, the murdered women, in that city. We just listen to this man talk and later end up in a diner trying to make sense of it all.

Norma Klahn has written of a “South of the Borderism” trope in U.S.-Mexico relations, referring to the ways in which the United States culturally constructs its southern neighbor: often the Mexican becomes “everything the Anglo was not.”¹² A similar process has taken place in Mexico, in what Socorro Tabuenca has called a “North of the Borderism.”¹³ In each case, this cultural “othering” becomes self-serving, as it affirms national identities. For the United States, South of the Borderism justifies the myth of manifest destiny and the continued militarization of the border; for Mexico, North of the Borderism vindicates cultural nationalist projects to combat the spread of American culture.¹⁴ These two tropes — stating what “the border is” — also shape the most common negative stereotypes about the border as a zone of danger or vice.¹⁵

To read the border as danger, as is most often the case in the media, is to both reinforce notions of cultural identity and justify the increasing militarization of the border. Tijuana stands out within the imaginary of the United States as a particularly dangerous site. In a column for the Mexico City daily, *Milenio*, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite writes: “Me he dado cuenta de que una buena manera de hacer amigos fuera de Tijuana es diciendo que eres de Tijuana. Esto deposita sobre ti un aire místico, como de gangster, como de

cowboy. Y, claro, para esos momentos, uno siempre trae consigo una buena historia para contarle al primero que se deje.”¹⁶

He goes on to write about the image of Tijuana as a violent city, especially since Arturo, his editor at *Milenio*, only likes to hear these types of stories:

Entonces yo tengo que elaborar cuidadosamente mi testimonio, para no poner en entredicho la imagen que él y muchos otros tienen de esta ciudad fronteriza.

“N’ombre, pos ta reduro. El otro día ya ni se podía cruzar la calle frente a mi casa por la cantidad de cadáveres.”

“N’ombre . . . allá en Tijuana puedes comprar coca hasta en el seminario.”

“N’ombre . . . mi papá me dio mi primer pistola a los cinco años.”

“N’ombre . . . el otro día quise cruzar a San Diego, nos salió la migra y nos metió una corretiza.”

“N’ombre . . . yo perdí mi virginidad a los diez años, y mis compañeros de primaria se burlaron de mí por retrasado.”

Los ojos de Arturo brillan, se llenan de lágrimas, mientras toma notas en una libreta y suspira.¹⁷

Crosthwaite goes on to say that he used to feel insulted that his city was imagined in the worst possible light, “alejada de todo lo que es mexicano y engullida por todo lo que es gringo,”¹⁸ until he said to himself that *tijuanenses* are as Mexican as Kellogg’s Frosted Flakes and all the talk about the violence was pure myth. Once he came to that realization, he decided that he could tell any story he wanted. He chooses to propagate the myth of Tijuana as a den of violence purely for narrative effect. For the rest of the column he proceeds to talk about the most recent act of violence that he had witnessed, an argument at his house that escalates to guns being drawn against the neighbors. The situation is diffused by the arrival of Tere, Crosthwaite’s wife, who had gone over to San Diego to shop at a Kmart pillow sale. She proceeds to beat all those present—neighbors, friends of Crosthwaite, and Crosthwaite himself—with the new pillows. Arturo is impressed with the tale, which Crosthwaite finishes, “Dude, the only thing more dangerous than Tijuana is their wives.”

The story subverts both North/South of the Borderism with Crosthwaite’s characteristic humor. His references to the violent image of the city are undercut by the constant play of references to the binational location of Tijuana and the transnational mixings that take place there. In the process

of parodying the narrative of violence about the border, he is also reveling in the local culture.

The Border Is: Vice

I am eighteen and awkward. Uncomfortable in my own skin. Mexicali. Christmas break. A very large family reunion. Some of my American uncles decide to hit the town with a couple of my Mexican *tíos*. They take me along, though I am battling a cold that adds another surreal layer to the night. We travel through the Mexicali strip clubs, consuming mass quantities of alcohol. In the clubs we see all sorts of women, young, old, stepping out to bad disco music. This is Mexico, one of my uncles states. My *tíos* no longer listen. We are traveling in another zone. The night becomes a blur to me.

Related to the image of the border as danger zone, this rendering configures the *leyenda negra* of the border: a zone of illicit activity, of transgression, of prostitution. The border strip club comes to represent the border cities. The northern Mexican writers Rosina Conde, from Tijuana, and Rosario Sanmiguel, from Ciudad Juárez, have written of these spaces as a means of subverting the South of the Borderism implicit within the *leyenda negra* that surrounds the border cities.

In drawing on the theme of the Tijuana nightclubs in her story “Viñetas revolucionarias,” Conde appears to reinforce the *leyenda negra*.¹⁹ But this is not the case. In focusing on this “masculine” theme—the city as a space of prostitution, or as spectacle—Conde reconfigures this negative stereotype by focusing on the women who work in the clubs and by using a direct language that does not pretend to overdramatize or romanticize her characters. In this way, Conde demystifies one conception of Tijuana by subverting the male gaze in the club. By shifting the focus to the women, she puts the men on display. The women who star in the vignettes demonstrate their power over the male public. But the story is not an idealization of the stripper lifestyle. More generally, in recurring to the figure of the stripper, Conde questions the role of woman in the city. She demonstrates how these women in the city, by living in a second city—the world of the nightclubs—survive and flourish in this space. When the men enter the club, they are not entering a male-dominated space; they are the ones on display, not vice versa.

The club space here is a nonplace, a space of transit. The people who frequent the clubs, like the women who work them, are homeless. There is no

sense of a male colonizing gaze; there is only the opening of this liminal space that opens outward, connecting other places into a larger night city. While shifting the gaze away from the masculine, Conde also does not offer a vision of redemption in these “revolutionary vignettes”: There is no salvation for those who have found themselves in this nonplace. And in this way the tropes of North/South of the Borderism are themselves displaced. These vignettes, in their deliberate forcefulness—in the narrator’s direct, unwavering, feminist gaze—do not moralize or romanticize the space of the strip club. Rather, as Castillo and Tabuenca point out, the vignettes “serve as a performative act by which the theme of the border as brothel takes shape.”²⁰ By acting out this theme, the story destabilizes the forces of North/South of the Borderism—the forces that would attempt to inscribe the border into a particular, static conception.²¹

The Border Is: Global Corridor

Here is an old photo. A pregnant young woman holds a two-year-old child in front of her. They are both seated on a donkey pulling a cart. The donkey is painted as a zebra. This is, after all, the border. The young woman and the child on the burro both wear sombreros; his says “Cisco Kid,” hers, “Tijuana.” The *carreta* is painted with bright colors (I imagine, given that the photo is in black and white). In the center is an image of a woman who appears to be doing laundry by the side of a river in a tropical jungle setting. She is looking (smiling?) up at a man dressed in full *charro* regalia and seated on a horse. It is an image that represents *México*, that of Mexico’s golden age of film—its *cine de oro*, as captured by the likes of Gabriel Figueroa—that of the national tourist agency, that of the national myth. “México, rrrrrrrroooooommmmaaaaantiiiiicc México,” as the border *brujo* Guillermo Gómez Peña would sing.

In *Passport Photos*, Amitava Kumar asks why readers of newspapers so readily accept photographs as truthful representations: “Why do we so drastically reduce the immense complexity of reality, its wide heterogeneity and scope of dissent, by what we so quickly accept as the singular truth represented in the shallow frame of an image?”²² In this old photo we only see tourism in Tijuana. Yet the imaginative geography that constructs this Mexican postcard is complex. This is Mexico, romantic Mexico. Smiling tourists, tropical jungles, content women washing by the side of the river, men on horseback looking as if they should be backed by a full complement of

mariachis. The painted image on the donkey cart contrasts with the region where the photo was taken: Baja California, northern Mexico, a region that is largely arid. In Tijuana, the only tropical forests are the ones painted on the donkey carts.

I was almost two when the photo was taken, my mom and me, at the end of spring, spending time with my grandparents on the border. Beneath the bucolic image painted on the donkey cart was painted the words, “Tijuana 1968 México.”

Tijuana, viewed as a mirror of Mexico, is an outpost in the Middle World that is created in its practice, in the itineraries of the people who use it. In Mexico, the naming of streets after important Mexican historical events, heroes, and places serves to unite a national narrative literally at street level. This naming functions within a project of national unification; all urban areas partake in the nation of Mexico, but these meanings often become lost as new significations are ascribed to the streets by those who walk them.²³ In Tijuana, Avenida Revolución is the main touristic drag and, as such, serves for many as an introduction to “Mexico.”

Avenida Revolución, “la Revu,” is a site of contact, of meeting, where, in a sense, all roads lead. Its urban architecture is a mishmash of styles. Juan Villoro notes that its landscape “cambia como si respondiera al *zapping* de la televisión.”²⁴ Anchored—if it can be called that—on one end by the Frontón Jai Alai, a large structure with a vague Moorish air, it ends—if it can be called that—at a small triangular plaza where the mariachis meet, across from the *zona norte*, Tijuana’s red-light district. In between these two zones are megadiscos; open markets—with the air of a bazaar—that sell a dizzying number of items (sign over one: “Cheap Liquor. Public Bathroom. Welcome to Mexico. Want to buy a blanket?”); liquor stores; restaurants (Cesar’s, a large, vaguely Art Deco palace and the birthplace of the Caesar salad); donkey carts. There is a sense of placelessness, as there seems to be no architectural unity. While there are markers that evoke Mexico—a plaza where mariachis meet, the signs that welcome you to Mexico, the images on the donkey carts—at the same time the visitor is placed in a zone that evokes Mexico and a lot of other places. As Lawrence Herzog states, “Revolution is carnival—buildings decorated like zebras or Moorish castles, flags and colorful blimps floating overhead.”²⁵ Reminding us, too, that in Tijuana, Revolution is an avenue.

The many donkeys-painted-as-zebras—what Heriberto Yépez has termed the “zonkey”—posed for photographs on Avenida Revolución lead carts that

are usually adorned with the imagery of “traditional” Mexico: images of volcanoes, pre-Columbian cultures, and the national symbol of the serpent and eagle on the cactus—imagery that has very little to do with the reality of Baja California.²⁶

The result is a city covered by the texts of a Mexico that never existed in that region, an atypical Mexico superimposed in a city crossed by itinerants. Covering the city with these hybrid cultural texts effects not only the invention of a history for the tourists but also the inscription of the city, and the Mexican border region, into a national narrative. Tijuana becomes, then, a mirror that reflects the whole country, marking out the differences between this and that side of the border.²⁷ Avenida Revolución, as a fragment of the mirror, creates an idealized Mexico: “a fantasy land that is a caricature of what Americans might think Mexico is (land of bullfights, sombreros, burros, and mission-style churches), insulated from the real Mexico, but with just a touch of a veiled sense of mystery and foreign intrigue.”²⁸

At the same time, if Avenida Revolución constructs a fictional Mexico, it does so through an appropriation of styles from all over the world. In a fragmented text that reads less like an essay and more like a collection of one-liners (or a quick surf through the TV channels), in keeping with the fragmented nature of the border, Yépez writes, “*Space Invaders* could easily define Tijuana. It is a city of ‘anarchitecture,’ a city of self-destruction. . . . Its official architecture is pure simulacrum, pure kitsch. Tijuana existed long before Baudrillard.”²⁹ Despite Gómez Peña’s celebrated phrase about all cities beginning to look like Tijuana on a Saturday night, we could not argue that Tijuana is a global city. At least not as proposed by Saskia Sassen, where she defines these types of cities as “centers for the servicing and financing of international trade, investment, and headquarter operations.”³⁰ Tijuana is a peripheral city, situated by its history on the margins. However, given this peripheral standing, Tijuana, Mexico’s northern frontier in general, is a participant in a global economy and forms a part of a global corridor, bridging the global cities of Los Angeles and Mexico City.

Do Not Attempt to Adjust Your Television

Spending a lot of time on the border has meant being able to watch channels from both sides, even before the advent of satellite cable service. During my summers in Mexicali, we often watched broadcasts from Yuma, Arizona. The television waves traveled across the border and were caught by

the antenna installed by my uncles on the roof of the house. We watched broadcasts from both sides, traveling across language and geography, passing through the Middle World. Sometimes the channels from this and that side came in snowy, the television seemingly under control from the outer limits. The waves were lost somewhere in the desert, I imagined, spiraling around in whirlpools of wind that raced through the mountains. In a sense, too, we were somewhere out there, on the edge of two nation-states that attempted to place controls on their borders.

Watching television in the age of cable means cleaner reception and a wider variety of broadcasts. A couple of years ago the Tijuana border crossing briefly became a fixture on cable. We dubbed it the Border Channel, or BTV. An odd channel, it had no station ID coming up every few minutes, and there were no commercial breaks. It was simply a video camera, more than likely a consumer model, trained on the Mexican side of the border. There was a soundtrack, of sorts—usually classical music, though one night I tuned in and heard *rock en español*.

There is this too: BTV had no production whatsoever. There was no fancy editing, save for the times when the video camera, in demo mode, began to show off its built-in transition effects. BTV felt like pirate television, as if somebody had jacked into the wired network of broadcasting. And this too seemed fitting. The first time I tuned in, I thought it was something shown at the end of a broadcast day. But the next day BTV was still there.

And my friends and I watched. We watched because of the channel's oddity, because we wondered how long it would stay on before a "proper" television station replaced it. We watched because BTV was reality television taken to the outer limits. Mainly, though, we watched because of the sheer mesmerizing sense of viewing a surveillance camera trained on a monstrous thing, a massive border machine. We joked about looking for people we knew in the process of crossing, but the camera was too far away to make anybody out. Those times when we saw a short wait we were filled with a desire to cross the border. Secretly we hoped to see something happen: a rush of people through the borderline, racing out onto the freeway; a drug bust, with trained dogs passing between the cars; a fight between drivers angered over the long wait. By being transfixed by BTV, we too were caught in the border machine. Mostly, though, we saw only what it was: a time of delay, a time when patience is strained. Sometimes the border is this: tedium.

It appears that before the revolution, the border will be televised.

The Border Is: Language

I was born a Mexican in the United States; my parents crossed the border a few months before I was born. Spanish was my first language. I began preschool at an early age and became a part of the English-speaking world. I became, then, a Mexican American, doubled, speaking with a forked tongue: Spanish at home with family, and English at school. In my university years I became politicized and took on the Chicano identity, but I continued to speak with my forked tongue, often mixing the two languages into Spanglish. Leaping, as I tell my classes, *de una lengua a otra* in a single bound, *como* Superman. A few months ago one of my colleagues in linguistics asked me to participate in a language study and the result was that I scored very high as a bilingual: that is, both my languages were *más o menos* on equal footing. What does it mean to speak with a forked tongue? To maintain dual languages on equal footing? What does it mean to be a one that is more than one? A one that is, at times, two or even more?

Until I was around thirteen, there was a special word my siblings and I used for crossing the border. We learned it from our mother, who wasn't allowed to invoke it: She was born in Mexico. She had a card that she flashed. But for us, her children born on the other side, we had a word. *Mercacirce*. As I grew older I continued to work on this term, trying to approximate my mother's pronunciation: *Mercacirize*. *Murica cdc*. I didn't know what it meant. It was a word that we had to say whenever we crossed the border. It made no sense, like the border made no sense. My grandmother and my *tios* lived in Mexicali, and to go shopping we would cross over to Calexico. Sometimes we would walk alongside the chain-link fence dividing the two. I couldn't comprehend why there was a fence. There were cars and streets and shops on this side, and the other side had them too. We spoke Spanish in Mexicali, and we spoke Spanish in Calexico. Back then there were no mega-flags proclaiming sovereignty over the respective sides. To speak nonsense like *mercacirce* made sense. It was almost a magic term, like "Abracadabra," that would allow us (some of us) to cross through the Middle World of the border region and its state controls.

It was finally one of my U.S.-born aunts who cleared the matter up for me. "American citizen."

Then I understood.

We had learned the word from our Mexican mother, who had a different way of saying things. I had never before questioned her accent, as I had

not previously stated a national citizenship. I knew that I was not Mexican, having been born in California, but I did not feel secure in calling myself American, as I had Mexican parents. I was a mix of the two, and a word like *mercacirce* fit this combination. Once I understood what the word meant, the border lost all its mystery. It was simply a long wait in a line of people or in cars.

Mercacirce is also a word best spoken by those with forked tongues, those from Breytenbach's Middle World who "have broken away from the parochial, to have left 'home' for good (or for worse) whilst carrying all of it with you, and to have arrived on foreign shores (at the onset you thought of it as 'destination', but not for long), feeling at ease there without ever being 'at home.'" ³¹ The Middle World posits a counternarrative to the flows of power that would attempt to control, to delimit. Language may be one such marker of a Middle World identity.

Even now, when I am about to cross the border over to this side, I consider pulling up to the border agent and saying, "Mercacirce." Yes, proudly. *Mercacirce*.

The Border Is: Sound

Tijuana, again. Sitting in a darkened bar with a couple of students from the university. We are drinking beer and listening to *norteño* music coming from the jukebox. There is a small dance floor, and a couple goes out onto it. They are the only two dancing a slow waltz under a blue light. Outside is the Plaza de Santa Cecilia, a square where the mariachis converge. It is on the border of the *zona norte*, the red-light district. Avenida Revolución, Tijuana's tourist strip, feeds right into it. We leave the bar and walk up Revolution Avenue, among the underage college students trying to get into the megadiscos and bars, oblivious to the cantinas where the locals go. We are heading to La Estrella, a *norteño* honky-tonk and, I am convinced, one of the incubators for the Nortec sound. La Estrella is a dance club where the musical landscape stretches from Sinaloa, a twenty-hour drive south from Tijuana to the border. No techno. Just *banda*, just *norteños*, just Tex-mex. It figures prominently in the narrative of Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, native *tijuanaense* and one of the most important new narrators coming out of Mexico. La Estrella was also taken up by academics from the university as a site of contact and for its drink special, fifty Coronitas for fifty pesos. The beers come in metal buckets of ice. We go to dance, drink, hang out.

Contemporary rock criticism champions the musical hybridity of performers like Beck. But if one were to turn to rock coming from northern Mexico, this would be found inscribed into the musical DNA. Bands like Plastilina Mosh, El Gran Silencio, and the electronica collective known as Nortec map out musical geographies that unite disparate places. *Aquamosh*, the first record by the Monterrey duo Plastilina Mosh, could serve as the perfect soundtrack for the multimediated generation—what Juan Villoro calls the “Generación Molotov”—nurtured on Nintendo and Sega. The album moves from lounge to hip-hop to hardcore industrial, from Spanish to English to Japanese. The Nortec collective, from Tijuana, unite diverse places in a similar way. By mixing tape loops of northern Mexican *banda* with European techno, the collective constructs a soundtrack for another type of migrant passing through the Middle World: the migrant who follows the global flows of electronic music. El Gran Silencio, also from Monterrey, constructs a hybrid sound through a band setup that recalls more traditional *norteño* groupings; an accordion, acoustic and electric guitars, drums, keyboards. But instead of playing “traditional” northern Mexican music, their sound slips and slides between *cumbia*, *norteño*, Colombian *vallenato*, hip-hop, punk, ska, and reggae. Uniting Latin American rhythms with American rock, they lay bare the connections across borders and align themselves with histories of migration, both northern and southern. What bands such as these do is not just cut up the musical DNA but scramble and reconfigure it to show off the borderlands’ aural landscape. They remind us that the border is sound.

Josh Kun has written of this other way of sensing the border.³² It is in the sounds of the cars waiting to cross; in the crowds; in the mix of sounds from the mega dance clubs and the honky-tonks steps away from each other in the border cities. Cruising Revolution Avenue in Tijuana on a Saturday is a trip across a varied aural landscape. The urban sounds connect distinct places. By disrupting notions of national homogeneity (if such a thing ever existed), the mixed sounds and languages coming from the megadiscos, the nightclubs, and the stereos of passing cars negate the physical material border instituted by nations trying to impose border controls.

If at Times You Can’t Read This It’s Because Estoy en el Otro Lado

During the construction of the borderlands there will be many maps drawn, some more closely tied to the region than others. The geographies traced

here are just some of the possibilities of a complex and heterogeneous region that offers up a diversity of itineraries. Borderlands metaphors aid in the dearticulation of the hegemonic images that the centers of power attempt to impose on the region and offer up a representation of a diverse region: rearticulating a map that is theirs. In telling stories, those who live on the border are making place. In analyzing the borderlands, it is necessary to remember that the border is not just a single unit; rather, it represents a different face for different people. As Vila writes, “I think that on the U.S.-Mexico frontier we have several borders, each of them the possible anchor of a particular process of identity construction.”³³

While living and teaching in Texas, I began to design a course on the U.S.-Mexico border and on the borderlands region as geography and as field of study. The class, called “Borderlands,” was a natural offshoot on my research inquiries into contemporary border culture. A component of the course was to introduce the students to border studies from the Mexican side, a perspective that is so often displaced in contemporary criticism that focuses on the borderlands as a Chicano space. One of the first readings included in the course packet was a text by Guillermo Gómez Peña, “The Border Is.”³⁴ It seemed an apt way to get the students into thinking about the border. What I came to realize was that though most class members are “borderers” themselves—the majority were students from south Texas—their own border experiences were distinct from the border manifesto by Gómez Peña. His position within the border arts movement was distinct and largely filtered through an aestheticized/fetishized/romanticized Tijuana and San Diego dancing to a *banda* beat. My students knew that the border contained some of what the border *brujo* was proclaiming but that it was also more.

As a juncture in the Middle World, the border is where identities can be reinscribed, re-formed, revalued. It asks us to step right up, to partake in its multiple representations, and examine our own histories and identities in relation to the border. As a line that is, as Alfred Arteaga writes, “half-metal, half water,” the border is not *un border puro*.³⁵ At times a wall, it is also a door, a bridge, and a path.

Standing on the beach of Tijuana in the summer of 2005, I crossed out the border. A few days earlier I had watched as workmen dismantled the border in preparation for building a larger wall. The old border fence of wood and tin was rusted and rotting. As a temporary barrier, the workmen set up an orange plastic fence. It lasted only one day before being washed away by the high tide. On that summer morning, I stood on the border, one leg

on each side. I wasn't the only one—others, too, were freely crossing back and forth. There were no guards telling us to stay on the other side. And so we crossed—unrepentant border crossers—crossing out the border in a process that is, as Crosthwaite reminds us, “algo natural, cosa de todos los días.”

Notes

- 1 Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, “La fila,” in *Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 2002), 13–21.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 3 Patricia Price, *Dry Place: Landscapes of Belonging and Exclusion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 1.
- 4 Breyten Breytenbach, “Notes from the Middle World,” *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Attempt* 6 (2001): 13–23.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 13, 14.
- 6 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987).
- 7 James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, et al., 96–116 (New York: Routledge, 1992), 109.
- 8 David Spener and Kathleen Staudt, eds., *The US-Mexico Border: Transcending Divisions, Contesting Identities* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 14.
- 9 Pablo Vila, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders: Social Categories, Metaphors, and Narrative Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Frontier* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 6.
- 10 See Claire F. Fox, *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, *Cultural Studies of the Americas* 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Alejandro Lugo, “Reflections on Border Theory, Culture, and the Nation,” in *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Production*, ed. Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Santiago Vaquera, “Wandering in the Borderlands: Mapping an Imaginative Geography of the Border,” *Latin American Issues* 14 (1998): 107–32; and three works by María Socorro Tabuena: “Colonizaje intelectual en las literaturas de las fronteras,” paper presented at SCMLA Convention, San Antonio, November 1, 1996; “Viewing the Border: Perspectives from ‘the Open Wound,’” *Discourse* 18 (1995–96): 146–68; and “Reflexiones sobre la literatura de la frontera,” *puentelibre* 4 (1995): 8–12.
- 11 Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.
- 12 Norma Klahn, “Writing the Border: The Languages and Limits of Representation,” in *Common Border, Uncommon Paths: Race, Culture, and National Identity in U.S.-Mexican Relations*, ed. O. J. Rodriguez and K. Vincent, 123–41 (Wilmington: SR Books, 1997), 123.
- 13 María Socorro Tabuena Córdoba, “La frontera textual y geográfica en dos narradoras de la frontera norte mexicana: Rosina Conde y Rosario Sanmiguel,” Ph.D. diss., SUNY Stony Brook, 1997.
- 14 North of the Borderism also maintains—if a bit tenuously—the dominance of the capital in the cultural life of the nation, through a curious project of “official” decentralization in the aim to incorporate the Mexican *agringado* north into the bosom of the nation.

- 15 For an extended discussion on these tropes, see works by María Socorro Tabuenca, including “Colonizaje intelectual en las literaturas de las fronteras,” “Viewing the Border,” and “Reflexiones sobre la literatura de la frontera.” See also Jennifer Insley, “Redefining Sodom: A Latter-Day Vision of Tijuana,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 20.1 (Winter 1994): 99–121; and Vaquera, “Wandering in the Borderlands.”
- 16 “I have come to realize that a good way to make friends outside of Tijuana is to say that you are from Tijuana. This places in you a mystical air, something like a gangster, something like a cowboy. And, of course, for these moments one always has to carry with them a good story to tell.” “Entre cowboys y gangsters,” *Milenio Diario* (June 2003).
- 17 “And then I have to elaborate carefully my testimony so that I do not contradict the image that he and many others have of this border city: Dude, it is so difficult. The other day, I could barely cross the street because of the number of bodies strewn about. Dude, over there in Tijuana you can even buy cocaine in the seminary. Dude, my father gave me my first gun at the age of five. Dude, the other day I tried to cross over to San Diego, the border patrol saw us and gave us a mighty chase. Due, I lost my virginity at the age of ten and my elementary school friends teased me for coming late to the party. Arturo’s eyes shine, and fill with tears while he takes notes and breathes deeply.” *Ibid.*
- 18 “Separated from all that is Mexican and bloated with all that is gringo.”
- 19 Rosina Conde, “Viñetas revolucionarias,” in *El agente secreto* (Mexicali: UA Baja California, 1990).
- 20 Debra Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca, *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, 9 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 136.
- 21 Castillo and Tabuenca, in their discussion of another story by Conde, note how the female narrator uses femininity for material gain and “creating an unfamiliar, dislocated space for a feminist intervention in the unlikely staging of a helpless femininity. . . . Awareness of the undercurrents of language and of the shifting ideological frames allow the women . . . to use men’s strategies and expectations against them” (*ibid.*, 142). I would argue that “Viñetas revolucionarias” operates in a similar way.
- 22 Amitava Kumar, *Passport Photos* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 45.
- 23 Michel de Certeau points out that as the original signification of the name of a street is worn away and inscribed with another signification, “they [the streets] become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning” (*The Practice of Everyday Life* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988], 105).
- 24 Juan Villoro, “Nada que declarar. Welcome to Tijuana,” *Letras libres* 17 (2000): 16–20; quote on 16.
- 25 Lawrence Herzog, *From Aztec to High Tech: Architecture and Landscape across the Mexico–United States Border* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 208.
- 26 Heriberto Yépez, *Tijuana: Processes of a Science Fiction City without a Future* (Mexico: CNCA, SRE; Madrid: Comunidad de Madrid, UNAM, 2005).
- 27 But it is a poor likeness since—as Jean Baudrillard states of a simulacrum—“it bears no relation to any reality whatever” (*Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Batton, and Philip

Beitchman [New York: Semiotext(e), 1983], 11). Tijuana subverts, then, both national narrativization and the border. In political discourse, not only from Mexico City but also from Washington, D.C., Tijuana, as also the rest of the border, is a danger zone. On the U.S. side of the fence there exists a type of border machine that attempts to set limits to the border. Border Patrol operations such as Operation Wetback or Gatekeeper not only militarize the border but also function as strategies to maintain the line, protect the nation from its southern Other. On the Mexican side, federal practices to inscribe the north into a national narrative—through the creation of writers' programs, for example—function in a similar way, to maintain the homogeneity of the nation, to keep the Other back, to protect the border.

- 28 Herzog, *From Aztec to High Tech*, 210.
 29 Yépez, *Tijuana*, 46–49.
 30 Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), xxiii.
 31 Breytenbach, “Notes from the Middle World,” 17.
 32 Josh Kun, “The Aural Border,” *Theatre Journal* 52.1 (2000): 1–21.
 33 Vila, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders*, 6.
 34 Guillermo Gómez Peña, “The Border Is,” in *Warrior for Gringostroika: Essays, Performance Texts, and Poetry* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 1993).
 35 Alfred Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).