

HUMAN INTERACTION IN THE TEXAS–MEXICO BORDERLANDS

Essay by

Oscar J. Martínez, Ph.D.

University of Arizona

Unquestionably, the U.S.-Mexico border has an image problem. Many people associate the region with gaudy tourist districts, unsavory bars and nightclubs, tasteless curio shops, cheap liquor stores, "hustlers" of many shades, uncontrolled illegal migration, large-scale smuggling of drugs, ethnic tensions, and general disorder. There is some truth to these uncomplimentary characterizations, of course, but *fronterizos* (borderlanders) live in an environment that is infinitely more complex than superficial caricatures suggest.

Both the U.S. side and the Mexican side replicate the political, economic, social, and cultural systems of their respective nation-states. At the same time, borderlanders have blended the structures, institutions, and life expressions of the two societies to create something novel and entirely theirs—the *ambiente fronterizo*, or borderlands milieu. Today the area stands as a prime example of binational interdependence, providing striking evidence of the trend toward closer ties among the world's nations and societies.

Transborder interdependence is rooted in the economic interaction that has existed between the United States and Mexico for several generations. In a functional sense, two systems have combined to produce one order that is quite distinct from those of the two parent societies, and a population whose lifestyles differ considerably from what is found in heartland zones.

Out of economic necessity, as well as personal desire to venture into "other worlds," border Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Anglo Americans intermingle at close range, borrowing from and contributing to each other's way of life. That three-way association, ranging from superficial contact to intimate relations, has produced unique patterns which comprise key components of what is commonly referred to as "border

culture."

Fundamentally, border culture, or the border "way of life," is rooted in the influences that the boundary exerts on *fronterizos*. First, borderlanders are surrounded by internationality; they go from one nation to the other frequently on shopping trips, on business, or for leisure. Transnational interaction is normal and routine. Second, they are accustomed to dealing with conflicts spawned by the border itself or by larger international controversies. *Fronterizos* know the border is a flash point and they are used to putting out fires. Third, border people are adept at ethnic interaction; over several generations they have learned how to transcend group differences. These experiences then are central elements in the values, thinking, and behavior of border people.

But other factors play a significant role, as well. Regionalism, an important variable in the configuration of the borderlands, is evidenced in the expression of U.S. Southwestern and Mexican *norteño* cultural styles. We can identify distinct subregions, each with its own characteristics shaped by local environmental factors and contact with the outside world. Above all, the singularity of the border population rests on the many traits that derive from its sub-groups, including cross-borrowing of such things as language, religion, customs, traditions, holidays, foods, clothing, and architecture. In short, U.S.-Mexico border culture may be said to be the sum product of forces and influences generated by the boundary itself, by regional phenomena, and by the transculturation shared by Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Anglo Americans.

Border culture is most vibrant in the core zone of the borderlands, or the strip of territory where the border cities are situated. Beyond this area, there is a secondary domain where border culture is strongly felt; important cities in the Texas-Mexico region include San Antonio, Houston, Monterrey, and Saltillo. Each of these centers feels the import of the other side of the border through constant migration flows. The impact of the border diminishes in the interior of each nation, but selected spheres of influence are readily apparent. For example, in the United States, places like Denver and Chicago have large Mexican American populations who maintain steady contact with the borderlands. An important part of that contact is carried on by migrants who constantly travel between Mexico

and the interior United States. Within Mexico, cities with cultural connections to the border include Guadalajara and Mexico City, to name two large cities, and hundreds of towns and villages that send emigrants to the borderlands or the greater United States.

It is only to be expected that the vastness of the borderlands assures significant sub-regional variation in the manifestation of border culture. Hence, while fundamental commonalities characterize the lifestyles of borderlanders regardless of their location, local peculiarities shape the cultures of different places in distinct ways. For example, the New Mexico/West Texas-Chihuahua borderlands exhibit cultural patterns characteristic of an isolated high desert zone and a population heavily dependent on the major rivers in the region, i.e., the Rio Grande, Pecos River, and Rio Conchos. Cultural strains from Chihuahua and New Mexico are strong here, but mainstream Mexican and U.S. influences have made their presence felt in recent years with the arrival of many immigrants, and several generations of newcomers have modified traditional folkways of the region. Migration is of particular importance because this zone has served as a major corridor between central Mexico and the U.S. Southwest for centuries.

East along the Rio Grande, the South Texas-Northeastern Mexico borderlands manifest influences arising from a sub-tropical climate, a large agricultural and ranching society, and a strong mix of Texas Anglo culture with Mexican *norteño* culture, i.e., "Tex-Mex" culture. The mix of these strains is illustrated in "Tex-Mex" music which combines instruments and sounds from both nations. As in other border locales, deep and widespread poverty constitutes an important variable in the shaping of the culture of this zone.

Few who reside on the Mexican side of the border are able to escape the overwhelming influence of the United States, and consequently, most Mexican borderlanders have direct or indirect ties to Americans. Such links have resulted in heavy consumption of U.S. products and popular culture, but that does not necessarily imply a corresponding loss of national identity; Mexicanness, as a rule, remains strongly embedded among all Mexican *fronterizos*, regardless of their external orientations.

On the U.S. side, vast numbers of Mexican Americans maintain substantial bonds with Mexico, and they live bicultural and transnational lifestyles to a far greater degree than any other sector of the borderlands population. Out of economic necessity and by the sheer force of the U.S. "melting pot" phenomenon, most Mexican American borderlanders, including many first-generation immigrants, have learned the English language and have absorbed large doses of American culture. At the same time, the proximity to Mexico has assured strong adherence to the Spanish language and Mexican culture. Generally speaking then, with some exceptions, Mexican American borderlanders are transnational in outlook and behavior.

By contrast, relatively few Anglo American borderlanders manifest transnational characteristics, although some do interact in a substantive way with Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The low incidence of transboundary interaction and biculturalism among Anglos is principally explained by the lack of a compelling economic need to cross the border, learn Spanish, or become familiar with Mexican culture. Those who do have such a need are generally the ones who speak Spanish and function comfortably in Mexican American and Mexican circles. But there are Anglos who have become bilingual and bicultural, and who participate in transnational activities for personal reasons rather than economic self-interest.

Based on the level of transboundary contact, the border population may be divided into two general types: (1) national borderlanders and (2) transnational borderlanders. National borderlanders are people who, while subject to foreign economic and cultural influences, have minimal or superficial contact with the opposite side of the border owing to their indifference to their next-door neighbors or their unwillingness or inability to function in any substantive way in another society. Transnational borderlanders, on the other hand, are individuals who maintain significant ties with the neighboring nation; they seek to overcome obstacles that impede such contact and take advantage of every opportunity to visit, shop, work, study, or even live on the "other side." Thus, their lifestyles strongly reflect foreign influences. For some transnational borderlanders, such influences are modest, but for those who are seriously immersed in transborder interaction, foreign links govern central parts of their lives.

Ambivalence over national identity and loyalty certainly exists among some individuals heavily immersed in transnational interaction, but for most, that appears not to be a major problem. The fact that Mexico and the United States maintain a relatively friendly relationship tends to mitigate self-doubt or guilt stemming from intimate contact with the "other side."

Varying factors determine whether borderlanders are "national" or "transnational," including length of residence in the borderlands, ties with interior areas, occupation, sources of income, level of education, family networks, and social relationships. It must also be kept in mind that the border population includes both permanent and semi-permanent residents, plus large numbers of transients who spend little time in the border communities. Population fluidity and turnover are especially strong on the Mexican side. The longer a person lives at the border, the higher the chances that she/he will be caught up in transnational processes. Consequently, long-term border residents are more likely to reflect transnational characteristics than newcomers.

At one end of the border population spectrum are people who, by circumstance or choice, are largely unaffected by the border milieu, and at the other are individuals whose lives revolve around it. Many who adhere to a strictly national and unicultural perspective have surrounded themselves with walls to keep out the hybridizing influences of the border. By contrast, those with a transnational orientation have built bridges that enhance and promote binational and bicultural symbiosis. That is the essence of core borderlanders, those transnationals who most exemplify the fusion of the two societies.

Core borderlanders have successfully adjusted to the innate instability generated by a boundary born of extreme territorial and cultural animosity and sustained, in more recent times, by great economic disparity between the two nations. They have found ways of making the border permeable and different cultural worlds accessible. They have developed attitudes, values, and behavioral strategies that allow them to move swiftly between two nations and from one cultural group to another.

In day to day relations, core borderlanders have collaborated to keep the channels of international communication open and to

hold border-related disagreements to manageable levels. Those with a high degree of cultural versatility have provided leadership in the networks that bind the area's major groups to one another. Constant movement in and out of different cultural milieus has allowed core borderlanders to develop expertise about the ways of others and sensitivity to their concerns. Aware of the perspectives of people from both sides of the border, many core borderlanders have been prompted to look beyond their own national interest, to examine problems in broad context, and to take into consideration the implications of parochial policies and actions.

In pursuing transnational interaction and multiculturalism, they have overcome long-standing rivalries between the two countries and the sting of racial and cultural biases. Living in an environment of uncertainty and unpredictability, they have developed a high tolerance for ambiguity and mechanisms for coping with it. In short, core borderlanders have discarded fears, inhibitions, and prejudices that afflict people with a national or ethnic-specific orientation.

The patterns of behavior among borderlanders, both positive and negative, are a product of powerful forces that have long been reshaping two societies and molding a social structure in which people of different cultural strands have learned to cope and to thrive. The institutional underpinnings of the system are so deep and so strong that attempts to diminish transnational or transcultural interaction are exercises in futility. The convergence of groups at the border is in concert with the "natural order" of human relationships and, viewed from an internationalist perspective, actually represents a significant advance in the way people from different countries and cultures interact with one another.

What is transpiring on the border at the present time yields insights into what is in store in the future on a grander scale. As free trade forges a closer relationship between the two nations, the intensity of binational people-to-people contact is expected to rise dramatically. Borderlanders will feel the effect of that increased interaction most acutely, but fewer and fewer people who reside in central areas in both nations will be left untouched as the force of transnationalism radiates beyond the frontier.

The border experience has great significance for instructing us on how international cooperation and cross-cultural accommodation can be accomplished, and how individuals can draw strength from within themselves to successfully overcome problems that arise from living on the periphery, in an environment that is neither mainstream U.S.A. or mainstream Mexico, but a variation of each. At a time when national disintegration and extreme ethnic polarization trouble other parts of the world, our borderlands stand out as a place that has succeeded in transforming a once predominantly conflictual human environment into a predominantly peaceful and cooperative one. Such good news, amidst all the bad news we constantly get about the border, needs to be recognized and celebrated.

Oscar J. Martínez is Professor of History at the University of Arizona. A detailed discussion and analysis of the uniqueness of the border experience is found in his new book, Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994).

SELECT BOOKS ABOUT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

Oscar J. Martínez

Professor of History, University of Arizona

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

Conover, Ted. *Coyotes: A Journey Through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.

D'Antonio, William, and William H. Form. *Influentials in Two Border Cities: A Study in Community Decision-Making*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965.

Fernández, Raul A. *The Mexican-American Border Region: Issues and Trends*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.

_____. *The United States-Mexico Border: A Politico-Economic Profile*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dane Press, 1977.

Fernández-Kelly, Maria Patricia. *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier*. Albany: State University of New York, 1983.

Fowler, Gene, and Bill Crawford. *Border Radio: Quacks, Yodelers,*

Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves. Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1987.

Gamio, Manuel. *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life Story.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931.

García, Mario T. *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso 1880–1920.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Hall, Linda B., and Don M. Coerver. *Revolution on the Border: The United States and Mexico. 1910–1920.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988.

Hansen, Niles. *The Border Economy: Regional Development in the Southwest.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Herzog, Lawrence A. *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space and Politics on the U.S.–Mexico Border.* Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1990.

Horgan, Paul. *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History.* 2 vols. New York: Rinehart, 1954.

Maciel, David R. *El Norte: The U.S.–Mexican Border in Contemporary Cinema.* San Diego: Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias, San Diego State University, 1990.

McWilliams, Carey. *North from Mexico: The Spanish–Speaking People of the United States.* Updated by Matt S. Meier. New York: Praeger, 1990.

Maril, Robert Lee. *Living on the Edge of America: At Home on the Texas–Mexico Border.* College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1992.

Martínez, Oscar J. *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juarez Since 1848.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978.

_____. *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994.

_____. *Troublesome Border.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988.

Meinig, D.W. *Southwest: Three Peoples in Geographical Change 1600–1970.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Miller, Tom. *On the Border: Portraits of America's Southwestern Frontier.* New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

Nathan, Debbie. *Women and Other Aliens: Essays from the U.S.–Mexico Border.* El Paso: Cinco Puntos, 1991.

Paredes, Américo. *George Washington Gomez.* Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991.

_____. *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958.

Poppa, Terrence E. *Druglord: The Life and Death of a Mexican Kingpin*. New York: Pharos Books, 1990.

Price, John A. *Tijuana: Urbanization in a Border Culture*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973.

Rippy, J. Fred. *The United States and Mexico*. New York: Knopf, 1926.

Ross, Stanley, R., ed. *Views Across the Border: The United States and Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978.

Ruíz, Vicki L., and Susan Tiano, eds. *Women on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Responses to Change*. Boston: Allen Unwin, 1987.

Sklair, Leslie. *Assembling for Development: The Maquila Industry in Mexico and the United States*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

Stoddard, Ellwyn R. *Maquila: Assembly Plants in Northern Mexico*. El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1987.

Timmons, W. H. *El Paso: A Borderlands History*. El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1990.

Urrea, Luis Alberto. *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*. New York: Anchor Books, 1993.

Vanderwood, Paul J., and Frank N. Saporano. *Border Fury: A Picture Postcard Record of Mexico's Revolution and U.S. War Preparedness*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988.

Weber, David J. *The Mexican Frontier. 1821-1846*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982.

_____. *The Spanish Frontier in North America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Weisman, Alan. *La Frontera: The United States Border with Mexico*. Photographs by Jay Dusard. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991.

BORDER STUDIES

A humanities exhibit organized by

Texas Humanities Resource Center

Austin

*Supported by Texas Commission on the Arts, Trull Foundation, Texas
Humanities Alliance*

*Matching support by Texas Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the
National Endowment for the Humanities*