

United States–Mexico Borderlands/La Frontera

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Dedication

We dedicate the Borderlands program to Don Américo Paredes whose lifelong intellectual, artistic, and social engagement with the border has led the way in understanding borders as distinctive cultural regions. Borders, and in particular the area he has called the Lower Rio Grande Border and from which he came, create complex and turbulent environments. These generate what Don Américo has rightly understood as a culture of conflict, struggle, and resistance. For Don Américo, it is precisely the generative power of the struggle that makes border folklore distinctive.

La frontera marca el sitio donde dos países soberanos colindan, creando un ámbito de acercamiento pero también de separación entre culturas y jurisdicciones nacionales. La frontera trazada de acuerdo al tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo de 1848 entre México y los Estados Unidos invadió tierras indígenas, dividió comunidades mexicanas, y creó una dinámica de oportunidad, explotación, y conflicto que ha engendrado una cultura propia fronteriza.

Basado en la investigación, este programa nos ofrece una muestra de esta cultura fronteriza — sus historias, sus diversas comunidades, identidades locales y regionales, y de su música, su arte, su artesanía, sus costumbres, su comida y su narrativa. El programa se ha realizado gracias a la colaboración de El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Texas Folklife Resources, Western Folklife Center de la Biblioteca de la Universidad de Arizona, el Centro de Estudios Regionales de la Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, la Universidad Autónoma de Baja California y de investigadores individuales y miembros de varias comunidades de ambos lados. Este artículo es una introducción a los ensayos de investigadores partici-

pantes que aportan diferentes perspectivas y tocan diversos temas.

Finalmente este artículo es una introducción a los participantes del programa en el festival, a esas voces individuales que viven y crean la cultura de la frontera. A través de sus historias y la presentación de sus habilidades artísticas y creadoras, esperamos apreciar la vitalidad y riqueza propia de la cultura fronteriza, y entrar en un diálogo con los fronterizos mismos para mejor entender los problemas y los procesos culturales y sociales que se dan en este ámbito transnacional.

Introduction

Borderlands have often been the locale of major folk cultural achievements, from the outlaw ballads of the Scots-English border to the heroic *corridos* of south Texas. Energized by the lives of heroes and others, borderlands continue to spark themes of frontier lawlessness, national pride, rebellion against injustice, and a community hero's stand against all odds. What is it about a border that triggers these cultural forms and others, such as souvenirs, duty-free liquors,

"United States-Mexico Borderlands" has been made possible with the support and collaboration of the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes - El Programa Cultural de las Fronteras, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Texas Commission on the Arts, Cerveza Tecate - Imported Beer, Texas Folklife Resources, University of Arizona Library's Western Folklore Center, Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León - Centro de Información de Historia Regional, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Gobierno del Estado de Nuevo León, Mexican Cultural Institute, and the recording industries Music Performance Trust Funds.



retaining walls made of automobile tires, and *maquiladora* assembly plants? Is the border a particular kind of region or social environment? If so, does the border tend to produce a particular kind of culture? And what is the relationship between this environment and its culture? In this essay and in this Festival program we explore answers to these questions.

A line drawn in various ways, a border marks the place where adjacent jurisdictions meet. This combined conjunction-and-separation of national laws and customs creates a zone in which movements of people and goods are greatly regulated, examined, discussed, and hidden. Commerce attains a higher importance in border society as does dialogue about the identities of its peoples. Smuggling, the myriad signs in border towns, legal and illegal immigration, and the use of unneighborly names between neighbors are parts of this picture of accentuated concern with the trade in goods and the flow of people.

The border is an environment of opportunity. Individuals find work enforcing or avoiding the laws that regulate movement. Companies use national differences in labor and environmental regulations to pursue their advantage. Border society thrives on difference, and people and institutions come there to exploit niches in its environment.

Borders are artifacts of history and are subject to change over time. When borders shift, lands and peoples are subjected to different sets of rules; this creates opportunities for exploitation, conditions of hardship, and motivations for revolt.

An approach to describing a society constructed by difference is necessarily many voiced. Rather than a central, authoritative perspective, we strive for a de-centered point of view, one with many authoritative speakers. Of course, this is more easily achieved in the Festival, where citizens of the border region speak and perform for themselves and their communities. But even in this printed medium, through translation and transcription, a variety of authorities are represented.

Border society is an abstract concept compounded of ideas about the sovereignty of nation-states, the intensification of commerce and social discourse, and strategies of cultural representation. The U.S.-Mexico border can be understood in these terms; and in this it is similar to borders like those between the U.S. and Canada, East and West Germany, or Kenya and Tanzania. But a particular history of the U.S.-Mexico border is expressed in the images, sounds, discourse genres, and social formations discussed below. This particular historical development has made the border the planet's longest between a country characterized by economic practices and achievements sometimes known as 'first world' and a country whose economy is

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sometimes characterized as 'third world'. The growth of a capitalist world economy provided the context for the development not only of U.S.-Mexico border culture, but also of other types of cultural processes that incorporate difference — acculturation, creolization, and the growth of various cultural diasporas.

Cultural processes which may be opaque and elusive elsewhere become clear at the border. This is the case, as Dr. Valenzuela points out, in the formation of cultural identity. The border offers a stark context of cultural difference, social inequality, and ever present reminders of governmental power to limit individual opportunity by ascribing national identity. The dominant discourse that assigns low social value to particular sectors of the population is answered by a creative flood of expressions of identity in music, graphic arts, poetry, and styles of clothing and self presentation.

People speak passionately and often artistically about themselves and others; they regulate exchange and avoid regulation; they struggle to survive in an environment often shaped by the practices of nation-states and a global economy. These human acts are not unique to borders, but they occur there with a clarity and an urgency that commands our concern.

People at the Border

The region between the Gulf of Mexico and Baja California has been inhabited by many Native American societies, which first settled and used the land. Spaniards took ownership of these lands in grants made by the Spanish crown according to a perceived divine right. Mestizos, whose practices, like their ancestry, combined Indian and Hispanic heritage, inhabited the region. And English-speaking citizens of the U.S., whose land acquiring and owning practices were informed by principles of commercial capital and manifest destiny also settled here. The border region is usually thought of as composed of these principal groups of landowners, former landowners, and workers, but its environment of opportunity has attracted many others, whose successive arrivals continue to transform the sociocultural life of the region.

On the Gulf coast, Jewish families from central Mexico sought refuge from religious persecution in the 18th century and established businesses in Matamoros and along the valley. In the latter part of the 19th century, a Mexican government concerned by U.S. expansionism encouraged settlement and in some cases granted land



When her paralysis was cured, Josefina Ollervidez built a shrine in her yard in San Antonio, Texas, to Nuestra Señora de los Lagos, a patron saint she brought with her from Jalisco in central Mexico. *Photo by Kathy Vargas*

in the western region of the border to groups as diverse as Chinese, Mennonites, Molokan Russians, Black Seminoles, and Kickapoo Indians. Black Seminoles and Kickapoo were welcomed with the stipulation that they defend the territory against the Apache and Comanche raids.

As Maricela González describes in her article, Chinese managers and laborers established residence in the towns of Mexicali and Calexico at the beginning of the 20th century. The damming of the Colorado River converted this area in the Imperial Valley along the Colorado River into fertile agricultural land. Anglo landowners leased this land to Chinese entrepreneurs from California, who smuggled agricultural laborers into Mexico from China.

The Bracero Program of 1942-1964, first negotiated by the U.S. and Mexico as an emergency measure during World War II, encouraged large migrations of Mexican workers to the U.S. Under its terms, American agricultural enterprises could legally bring Mexican contract laborers

for seasonal work. In the off-season many did not return home but settled on the border, often selecting a place where people from their home state were already established.

The Mixtecos are one of 16 indigenous groups from Oaxaca who, for at least 30 years, have been migrating to urban and agricultural areas in Mexico and in the U.S. As Francisco Moreno's article points out, they are not a monolithic group but have regional linguistic and cultural differences. For them, as for other indigenous migrants in Mexico, the sale of traditional and tourist crafts has been an economic mainstay. Today, some of the most popular tourist items sold throughout Mexico are the rag dolls dressed in archetypal peasant garb with no strong regional identity. Mixteco women vendors sell them in Tijuana. They formerly made the dolls but now buy them, along with other traditional crafts, from other migrants in Tijuana, who come from the western Mexican states of Jalisco and Guanajuato, and from Guatemala. The traditional and tourist crafts displayed on a Mixteco vendor's cart represent the labor of many cultural groups on the border and the entrepreneurial skill of Mixtecos who make a living in this market created by short-distance tourism.

Mexican immigrants continue to seek economic opportunities. Workers have been attracted to the border area by the 1961-1965 Mexican National Border Economic Development Program followed in 1965 by the Industrialization Program of the Border, which introduced the maquiladora assembly plants to the region. In her article, María Eugenia de la O records testimonies of several maquila workers in Ciudad Juárez.

From the 1980s onward, economic and political refugees from Central America have swelled populations at the border and migrations across it. Individuals, groups, and corporate bodies continue to be attracted to the border to exploit niches in an environment created by difference and marginality. What they have constructed, appropriated, abandoned, and re-constructed fill the social landscape of the border region.

Regions of the Border

While border cultures share an environment created by adjacent jurisdictions and socioeconomic marginality and difference, cultural expressions do vary from one border town or region to another. Older, established communities populate the string of small towns on both

sides of the river along the Rio Grande/Río Bravo valley to Laredo/Nuevo Laredo. Eagle Pass/Piedras Negras and Del Río/Ciudad Acuña began as coalmining towns in the 1800s. In Del Río, the San Felipe spring feeds a network of canals, creating a lushness not otherwise seen in south Texas and inviting the establishment of Italian vineyards. Here regional cultural traditions are shaped by agriculture, cattle ranching, and mining as much as by the early conflicts between the Mexican land-grant settlements and the northern land-grabbers. Labor unions of Mexican farmers, service employees, and oil workers now organize maquila workers at the assembly plants that are replacing those older industries on the Mexican side.

The border follows the river through the rough terrain of the Big Bend and through the once busy trading posts of Presidio/Ojinaga and on to the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez twins established as the "Passage to the North" between the mountain ranges, "the border's fulcrum, where the river gives way to the fence and where North and South have been horsetrading for centuries" (Weisman 1986:85). El Paso/Ciudad Juárez is a crucible of cultural identities, in which shared border personas are created, exported, re-imported, and transformed. Here the *pachuco*, a Mexican American, neighborhood identity of the 1940s and '50s was reformed as the *cholo* Mexican and Mexican American youth of today.

West of the river a series of straight lines, not the topography, define the boundary. Here the Sonoran Desert border is home to Yaqui and O'odham Indians. As noted by Dr. Griffith, there is in this region a unique cultural interdependence between Native Americans and Mexicans, exemplified by the shared celebration of the patron saint, Francisco Xavier, and of the missionary Francisco de Kino (often merged into a composite St. Francis along with St. Francis of Assisi). Members of these groups share each other's crafts and food at the feast in Magdalena, 20 miles south of Ambos Nogales (the Two Nogales). In this area, the socioeconomic struggle of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo region is not as dominant a feature of life. Whereas lower border corridos praise the valor of men who fight for their rights, corridos in this area celebrate famed horses that win epic races.

The westernmost border area between the Californias is very different. The original Native American populations are surrounded and forgotten by the growing urbanization of the early 20th century. Many have migrated to San Diego



Most Mixtecos in Tijuana live in the neighborhood known as the Colonia Obrera, where retaining walls made of tires are used to keep homes from sliding down steep hills. *Photo by Laura Velasco Ortiz*



On the Río Bravo/Rio Grande, a *pollero* (whose work is to assist undocumented travelers cross the border) floats children from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso on an inner tube raft. *Photo by Pete Reiniger*

and Los Angeles, establishing large communities.

A striking architectural feature in the Tijuana working class neighborhoods that spread on the sloping canyons of the city is the use of tires in landscaping. Tires create stairs that lead up to hillside houses, and they are built into retaining walls that keep homes from sliding downhill. Architects have integrated the distinctive tire embankment motif into the cement retaining walls they design for affluent neighborhoods. In Nogales, street vendors reserve their space on a downtown street with bright yellow half tires lined up like croquet wickets to mark their territory and attract customers. In Laredo and throughout the valley, sculpted and painted tire flowerpots decorate the front yards and yard shrines. And as almost everywhere, border children swing on tires hung from trees in house yards or from metal scaffolds in public playgrounds.

The Border in History

The Mexican and the United States governments settled the location of the border with the signing of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty in 1848 and the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. But long before there was a border, Indian communities had settlements in the areas between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific. In the 17th century, Spanish settlers established the same area as the northern frontier of New Spain and then of Mexico after its War of Independence in 1810. In the Spanish colonial period, this area was a frontier that attracted the most adventuresome explorers and dedicated missionaries.

The eastern region of the border along the Río Bravo (later called Rio Grande in the U.S.) was more hospitable and became a focus of regional life as towns grew up along its banks. As Dr. Ceballos points out, residents of these towns like Laredo felt a strong allegiance to a Mexican identity. El Paso del Norte, now known as El Paso, was the first and largest town built on the river in the early 1600s in the mountain corridor that was called *El Paso del Norte*, the "Passage to the North." Many small towns established before the creation of the border still dot the Texas valley.

The Rio Grande/Río Bravo, a "symbol of separation" in Texas, constitutes over half of the length of the border. In the decades following the Mexican-American War (1850s), U.S. cattle barons and agricultural opportunists from the East and the Midwest with substantial capital and



Much border crossing is done extra-legally because of convenience. Here a grandmother crosses via a well-traveled route for a day's shopping in the U.S. Photo by David Burckhalter

extensive mercantile connections came to dominate the U.S.-Mexico trade across this Texas river border. Shortly after their rise, these merchants began to acquire extensive tracts of land in Texas and to assert dominion over the earlier Spanish and Mexican settlers. This created an environment of cultural and economic conflict that characterizes the border to this day.

During the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910, the border population increased significantly as many moved across the border seeking refuge. Migration patterns were established between particular states in Mexico and particular regions or towns on the border. For example, refugees from central Mexico who settled in the Texas valley were likely to be joined later by immigrants from their hometowns. Migrants from the northwestern states of Zacatecas, Durango, and Sinaloa regularly traveled to Ciudad Juárez/El Paso.

When economic recessions hit the U.S., efforts mounted to push immigrants back to Mexico. In 1914-1915, the U.S. side of the Rio Grande Valley experienced a winter of violence



A mural decorates the wall of a workers' neighborhood in Ciudad Juárez. Photo by Lyle Rosbotham

when hundreds of Mexicans, or *mejicanos* in border usage, were persecuted and killed by the Texas border patrols. The Great Depression of the 1930s brought a new wave of deportations in which immigrants who had lived undisturbed in the U.S. for decades were repatriated.

As people from different cultural regions of Mexico have settled on the border, they have evolved a complexly layered cultural and social environment that has been created by competition and adaptation for survival. In this struggle, border peoples have developed distinctive styles, social organizations, and local economies. An interesting example of this is the way Mixteco vendors in Tijuana appropriate the traditional and tourist handicrafts made by other Mexican migrants to create a market that helps to support not only their own cultural identity but also that of the other groups.

Local economies that develop on the Mexican side capitalize not only on available skills but also on available, usually discarded, materials. Small businesses trade in secondhand clothes purchased by the pound and cardboard from the U.S. Some items, like the used tires found everywhere along the border, are made into distinctive items that support local economies and define a border style.

The extensive use of tires is evidence of economic difference and marginality and of the cultural inventiveness and resilience that exploits the border environment. But the visible presence of discarded materials is also a reminder of the pollution that is unfortunately also prevalent on the border. The poorly regulated industrialization including that of agriculture on both sides of the border increasingly contaminates the air, water, and land. While border residents can creatively reuse discarded tires, the unchecked and growing regional pollution, which seriously affects their health as well as the environment, is at present beyond their control.

The Program

Based on research in the rich and dynamic living culture of the border, the Borderlands Festival program is designed to provide a glimpse of the border — its histories, its diverse communities, local and regional identities, and its music, arts, crafts, healing practices, foodways, and narrative. This program has been assembled by the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies in collaboration with El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (a center for studies of the northern Mexican border), Texas Folklife Resources, the University of Arizona Library's Western Folklife



Carolina Samaniego de Leyva shapes rounds of asadero cheese in her home in El Divisadero, a few miles from Ojinaga, Chihuahua. This major cattle region of Mexico's northern border is noted for this pliable white cheese made from milk curdled with *trompillo*, a seed from a local deadly nightshade plant. Photo by Emily Socolov

Center, the Centro de Estudios Regionales of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, and with individual scholars and community members from both sides of the border.

The program is about community-based culture. It presents cultural practices found on the border and cultural expressions about the border, and it explores cultural patterns that seem to be created by the border. It also addresses the cultural heritage, adaptability, and creativity of Native Americans and of the Mexican, Hispanic American, Anglo and other immigrant communities that have played a part in creating the life that surrounds the Mexico-U.S. border — those that maintain it, those that cross it, those that are left behind, and those that dwell in the border region. The program explores the processes through which the groups create, adapt, and preserve culture to meet the challenges of life on the border. It seeks to present and understand community codes of behavior that evolved on

the border including confrontation, evasion, violence, and romance, especially as these have been transformed into narrative and other forms of artistic expression.

Music performances include emergent forms such as the *conjunto*, which grows out of the interaction between different cultural communities; older forms, such as the *corrido*, which has been used to preserve a historical vision in the defense of disputed territory; and adapted forms such as the string band music now incorporated into the traditional repertoire of the Tohono O'odham Native American communities.

Also featured in the program are five muralists, whose work reflects the traditions of Mexican *cholo* and United States Chicano muralism. These traditions draw upon the rich history of muralism in the Americas — from wall paintings in pre-Columbian temples and colonial churches, to popularized images in bars and on commercial facades, to the socially-engaged masterpieces of the Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and Tamayo, to the graphic protest in U.S. cities that has now been re-contextualized on the border. Murals continue to be touchstones of common historical experiences, archaeologies of sociocultural movements, and powerful statements of identity, ethical principles, and community aspirations.

The unique fusion of border aesthetics and handcrafted technology is embodied in lowriders — distinctively customized automobiles — described below by Michael Stone. These lowslung, hopping cars complement the iconography of murals as statements of cultural identity. Vaqueros of south Texas demonstrate their skills, crafts, and foodways associated with their cowboy tradition, which dates back to the Spanish colonial era. A fisherman from the port of Brownsville demonstrates shrimping techniques. A Laredo blacksmith forges stirrups, belt buckles, and other implements of vaquero life, along with a number of traditional and contemporary decorative objects. A ropemaker demonstrates the use of the local fiber called lechugilla (an agave of the amaryllis family). While fine craft traditions like guitar- and furniture-making are not specific to the border, craftspeople have incorporated motifs and instruments native to the region, like the *bajo sexto* guitar. Other occupational groups characteristic of the border environment include federal Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents who regulate movement across the border; *coyotes* and *polleros*, who help migrants evade immigration regula-

tions; and workers in *maquiladora* assembly line industries. Narrative sessions focus on the culture of craft and occupation in the context of the border.

Artisans demonstrate crafts used in the home and for special celebrations, including quilt-making, flower- and piñata-making, candle-making, and reverse-painted glass. Participants prepare regional specialties, traditional foods served for *fiestas*, and offer a sampling of typical vaquero outdoor cooking. Finally, the Festival presents members of the Mixteco Indian community in Tijuana, a recent migrant group, which preserves its cultural identity and contributes to the economy at the border by maintaining ties with other Mixteco communities in Oaxaca and California.

The United States-Mexico border has had a profound effect on the lives of millions of people. The pending free trade agreement is only the latest in a long line of international socioeconomic arrangements that have wide ranging local impacts. Critical attention in Mexico and the U.S. has been increasingly focused on the historical consciousness created in this borderland and on its expression in traditional and other forms of art. Recognition of the vitality and value of borderland culture is growing at the margins, among borderland populations, as well as in the centers of power and opinion in both countries. Scholars and political leaders increasingly realize that the cultural encounters, syntheses, and resistances characteristic of border life signal similar cultural developments in the larger societies. This intensifying concern and scrutiny centers on the margin, but can it reduce the marginality in human rights, social dignity, and economic opportunity at the border? Listening to community voices of the border from the Mexican and United States sides can better inform our thinking and decision-making.

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