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Symbols and Voices Along the Tijuana-San Diego Border

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Literature and Writing Studies

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 1
Chapter 1 ................................................................................................................................................ 10
Chapter 2 ................................................................................................................................................ 26
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 42
Bibliography ......................................................................................................................................... 53
INTRODUCTION

My grandparents have a large backyard. They lived in a nice home in Playas de Tijuana. Playas is located on the physical border between Tijuana and San Diego. Playas is where the Tijuana beach touches the San Diego beach, where dirty Mexican water intermingles with clear American waters. It is a place where tourists can walk down and touch the physical border between countries. My grandparents’ backyard is physically connected to this border. This is the house where my father, uncles, and aunts lived for most of their lives. This space housed Mustangs made in ‘64½, ’65, and ’69, and one ’54 bright red Ford Truck. It has accommodated unexpected pregnancies. The house raised malevolent and destructive young men and women. Its inconspicuous corners lend themselves as hideouts for teenagers experimenting with beer, cocaine, and marijuana. Its billiard table is where most of my grandfather’s grandchildren learned how to cheat and gamble.

The house’s gardens are uprooted from elsewhere. My grandmother would tend to them until she was physically unable. The plants were taken care of by gardeners after she had died. They weren’t taken care of with as much meticulous attention as she had once given. Now, the only plants that remain are the natural plants in the backyard, away from the front yard, and divided by a long white wall.

The place is divided between three spaces: a large house, my grandparents’ home; my uncle’s home, a much smaller home behind my grandparent’s house; and a backyard. My grandfather built a small chapel by his home. For Christmas, we would congregate into the chapel and pray. We would be thankful for everything my grandfather had. The house was well guarded. My grandfather installed a large gate and bought several dogs to keep away any intruders. There was always a fear of intruders, even though my grandparents did not live in a
particularly dangerous area. But my grandfather was protective of his family, of his car, and of his property.

As kids my cousins and I played inside the house. We played in the backyard. Our fathers had built a pseudo-playground with a tree house, obstacle courses, and a one-sided basketball court. Our entertainment consisted of basketball games—dominated usually by the older cousins—and soccer games—proudly dominated by me. We would throw rocks when these games did not suffice. Our boredom turned to exploration. The backyard lent itself for this specific activity. We would find new things to play with, new ideas for later days. The backyard seemed like its own universe. I remember the light sand, hard dirt, crackling grey concrete, native plants that were only watered with the seasons, inflated soccer balls, footballs, basketballs, an unsafe tree house built by proud, uninteresting men, and a large rusty border that extended sideways across my grandparent’s home.

Now, as I’m sitting and writing in my dead grandparent’s old bedroom, everything looks different—smaller and closer. The tree house is still there. The men who built it don’t speak to each other, and some of them have passed away. The once inflated soccer balls, footballs, and basketballs were dilapidated by time and lack of usage. The concrete were we ran on as kids sits idly without noticeable change. The rusty border is still there. It’s been there. Even before my grandfather thought about building a home next to it.

The border is a part of my grandparents’ house. There was a few times where the border played a critical role in my life. The first was as a child playing in that backyard. We were playing a game of soccer. Kicking the ball and lifting dust from the concrete, we played without compassion for each other’s shins and bodily parts. We would sweat, and shove, and kick, and curse. Despite these moments of competitive violence, there were always moments when everyone remained still. There were always moments when the ball would stop rolling. We
would take deep breaths during these times. We would relax our tense muscles only to continue. In one of these moments, I stood with the ball looking onto my cousins. I looked out to our field. Behind this field, stood the tall rusty border. A man jumped from the other side to our side. I stood there looking at him, wondering if I should be scared. Another man jumped over, and another, and another few followed. They wore dark colored pants, rolled up shirts, hats, and held bags. I stood there looking at them, wondering what to do. Should I run? Should I walk? Should I keep playing? I chose to stare impolitely. The group of men crouched down and pressed their bodies to the border. One of the men smiled at me. I smiled back. They crouched motionless for a few minutes. None of the other men paid any attention to us. I was scared regardless. Any of their sudden movements startled me. I had never seen men jump from one side to the other with such ease and comfort. I looked for direction from my eldest cousin. He said, “No te procupes,” meaning not to worry. Shortly after, the men climbed back up the border and started their own journey in hopes of a new life in the United States. I never saw them again.

Another time the border played a critical role in my life was on American soil. Although I was born in the United States, I’ve lived in Tijuana and attended American schools for most of my life. Like many kids that lived in Tijuana, my home remained a secret to my American teachers and school administrators, especially my peers. It was an implied secret that never gathered much explanation. It was something nobody talked about but was eminent in children’s daily musings, on their parent’s Mexican license plates, their words, their grammar, their ease with the Spanish language, their preference of soccer over football. These small cultural differences stood as flags of guilt, a guilt that meant expulsion from a district where regional lines were set. I would cross the border every day. I would eat vendor food on the Mexican side or fast food on the American side daily. Commutes were not long until September 11th.
After September 11, I would leave my house at 4:00 am to get to school. I would get back home at 6:00 pm. My father and I would ride our bikes to the border. We would pack our lunch bags, books, and any tools we might need on our ride. The ride started from my house and ended in San Ysidro. We would cross the border and mount our bikes onto a brown 1994 Chevrolet. He would go off to work. I would take the trolley, a bus, and a short walk to get to school. Other times, we would drive and would sit idly for several hours waiting to cross. Other times, my mother would drop me off, so I can walk across the border. The way back was similar. One of my fondest memories of commuting back home was the day I walked from the border to my house. My walk started from San Ysidro, CA. I never walked home before, so I walked without direction, exploring avenues and routes I’d never seen through a car or a bike. I was able to interact with the city in a different way. Walking slowly and taking breaks, I ventured into different parts of Tijuana. For example, I walked through La Revolución, a place that has always been for tourists, not for locals. This walking tour allowed me to interact with fundamental elements that created Tijuana as a city of moral and cultural bankruptcy.

Strolling through the streets of Tijuana felt illuminated and insightful. Tijuana is a city where I lived, hated, and loved simultaneously. Tijuana was a city that restricted me. I kept its secrets from my American friends. It was a secret on its own. I loved it because it felt homely—its dirty sidewalks, loud taxis, louder buses, lines, bad street food, and tourist attractions. Its long exhaustive lines to cross into the United States were a practice of everyday life. The mashing of cultures at the borderlands is a staple of Tijuana’s identity. A recent *New York Times* article describes Tijuana as, “a city whose most widely known symbol is a painted donkey is used to being the butt of jokes. But Tijuana, often derided as a lowbrow center of debauchery and more recently as a hub of drug-related violence, is transforming itself through something that has quietly always been a strong suit: culture” *(NY
The New York Times describes Tijuana as a place of quiet culture, as being the “butt of jokes,” as an open space with endless “debauchery” and “drug-related violence.” From its high rise building in New York City, the New York Times assumes Tijuana’s cultural production is suitably describable as only one word, “quietly.” As I see it, Tijuana’s cultures are not necessarily unifying entities like cultural production in cities like New York City, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Madrid, and London. These metropolises have what the Times would consider a loud culture. What differentiates loud culture and silent culture? Does loud culture come easily to an outsider? Does silent culture, as the Times describe it, a matter of subjectivity? (If I don’t see it, it’s not there). It seems so. And as the Times attempts to define Tijuana as a “chaotic, messy, visceral place, the resurgence has been from the ground up,” it still remains an inhabited place by many natives (NY Times, Sep 21). This liberty allows the American newspaper to occupy a place that it does not inhabit. By inhabit, I mean to live in, to understand and see the rotary wheels of cultural production. The distinction between the word “inhabit” and “occupy” differentiates in terms of space and being. Inhabit defines a place of habitat, a place of lived space. While occupy defines the practice of temporarily being. The problem with this, and what I will argue for the rest of my thesis, is that the academic/outsider cannot simply occupy, he/she must inhabit to better understand its subject.

In *Personal Stories of Latin Americanism*, Arturo Arias suggests that we must transcend the “confinement of both the institutionalism and the cryptic discursively found in academia.” We must create “mechanisms to establish contact with the public space” (Arias 52). In a way, Arias is suggesting that theorists are far removed because of theory, and fail to see the actual and practical use of academic work. He is writing to the disconnection between academia and the “public space” it serves.
He directs his audience to the theorization of Rigoberta Menchú. Menchú caused controversy in academic circles with her testimonial book *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. He is interested in the professional benefits some theorists gain through this kind of subaltern discourse. He claims that scholars leave the realities of Menchú miles away from the ivory tower while advancing their professional development. Arias addresses his audience with three fundamental questions: 1) what are the problems in Latin American Studies? Specifically, what are the changes in the field of Latin American Studies as a result of the Cold War and September 11th, 2001? 2) What are the problems in the area of knowledge between the two periods? 3) What kind of knowledge can we produce today, and how is it relevant? Before addressing these problems, Arias raises the question of distance between academia and the public space. He cites Néstor García Canclini’s idea about personal stories in Latin America as an important tool to uncover epistemological and political issues. He states, “We all try not to be thought of as purely domesticated academics whose political practices have been reduced to speaking in a conceptually abstract manner, or else within the strict boundaries of academic forums” (Arias 52). Arias’ point is to question his field. These questions are important to my study because they pertain to literature departments, and they are critical because they interrogate the field, and how the field often views itself. While Arias is concerned with Central American literature, I am concerned with border issues and border narratives. My interest lays within what Jose David Saldivar calls “Tijuana’s consumer market of the symbolic,” a field constructed both by the local citizen and the tourist. A field constructed by the cultural and economic. A number of symbols and voices operate within this field—for the purpose of this thesis I will concentrate on the Tijuana zebra and the Tijuana sex worker.

Prostitution has been essential in Tijuana’s tourism industry. It has been elemental in the economical and cultural development of both Tijuana and San Diego. I have interviewed four
Tijuana sex workers as a part of this section. The purpose of the interviews is to hear and record oral narratives otherwise not found in an academic setting. These oral narratives will act as tools to allow us to listen to different border narratives while looking for meaning, and asking questions of marginality and multicultural literary forms. The oral border narrative allows readers and listeners a direct and relative form when looking at subjects like globalization, hybridity, and borderization. What I hope to accomplish in this section is to reach what Edward Said calls the “unhoused.” By leaving the “housed” environment, I hope to better understand questions of border conflict and identity. The section forces me to enter the unhoused environment that Said talks about. Entering this environment as part of an academic institution poses several problems of representation and marginality, which I will address in its respective section.

Before I begin looking at the zebra and the sex worker, I want to give a brief overview on the historical context—the city of Tijuana. This complex framework developed through a series of illegal business practices, farmers, filibusters, and gangs. According to the 1900 census, Tijuana was a small city populated by 450 citizens. Those citizens, mostly dedicated to agriculture, farming, and small businesses, were the foundational forces behind the early history of the city. At this early stage, Tijuana’s tourism surrounded itself on curio shopping and ranch visits. It wasn’t until the American John Russell introduced greyhound racing that Tijuana’s image and industries changed drastically. The greyhound-racing track the Jockey Club opened a track, hotel, and casino. In quick succession, another entrepreneur, José Alvarez, built another track, followed by J. Lopereno who built a bullring.

By 1907 these businesses flourished as tourist attractions and major economical stimulants to an open-ended city. It was at this point that San Diegans began looking to Tijuana as a major tourist destination. The commute was inexpensive and simple. T.D. Proffitt’s book
Tijuana: The History of the Mexican Metropolis describes it, “One could go by stage coach to Tijuana and cross the river, or later cross by auto on a rail bridge, or one could go by sea and land, launch and rail via Imperial Beach for $1.50” (Proffitt 186).

San Diegans competed with Tijuana’s newly erected fun houses. For example, when the San Diego Panama Exposition at Balboa Park launched between 1915 and 1916, Tijuana organized the Tijuana Fair, or Feria Típica of Antonio Elosúa. The Tijuana Fair offered San Diegans activities otherwise outlawed in the United States, sports including boxing, cockfights, and gambling. Because of the competition, U.S promoters were eager to acquire Tijuana’s racetrack from the Mexican government. By 1915, Tijuana’s population grew to 1,000, and at the end of the year gambling promoters James W. Coffroth and Baron H. Long, alongside the Spreckles Companies, took ownership of the Jockey Club. The inauguration of the club welcomed thousands of U.S. visitors. The San Diego and South Eastern Railroad transported tourists from San Diego to Tijuana and into the racetrack. The American railroad companies and other entrepreneurs began what was to become a city built on gambling, sport, and sex, and marked the first “tourist rush” to Tijuana. Alongside the Tijuana Fair, the bullfights, and the newly opened track, Tijuana’s tourism industry was growing in population and economic development.

While Tijuana’s tourism industry was booming, American criticism did as well; most of it directed towards racetrack gambling, an illegal activity on the American side of the border. Some newspapers, like the Los Angeles Morning Tribune, believed that the crowds heading to Tijuana were ignoring the economic opportunity in San Diego, for example, the San Diego-Panama Exposition. The Los Angeles Morning Tribune published, "racetrack gambling hell at Tijuana," about the city (Berumen 20). Soon after, The Los Angeles Morning Tribune published a series of articles condemning patrons on attending any events in Tijuana, as it deterred tourism
from San Diego and the United States. The series included a supposedly special investigative report. The report looked at immoral behavior within the city, or more specifically, the behavior that the environment spawned in its visitors. One of Tijuana’s biggest opponents was the mayor of Los Angeles, along with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, who publicly announced his efforts to shut the border with Mexico. After the bad press, the city of Tijuana, as well as a few San Diegan entrepreneurs, committed to cleaning the city. Amongst the men that tried to clean up the city were Esteban Cantú and Antonio Elosúa. By this clean up, they gathered an assortment of street criminals and deported them from the country (Berumen 43). After this, city officials claimed the town as “free from vice as any in the United States” (Berumen 43). Cantú was influential in the early history of tourism in Tijuana. He was involved with a variety of business endeavors in the area, some legal other illegal. His business included: license fee for gambling halls (Tecolote Club Canina and brothels in Mexicali) smuggling of opium, opiates, and cocaine to the U.S. Even though it was regular practice at time, and not looked down upon as it is today, cases of addiction increased among World War I veterans, due to Cantú’s smuggled opium. However, addiction wasn’t the only reason for consumption; women also took opium to treat bodily discomforts and it was even an alternative to alcohol. Coincidentally, none of these incomes were reported to the federal treasury in Mexico City (Berumen 78). But Cantu wasn’t the only entrepreneur making a profit; plenty of government employees were making their rounds with the soon-to-be popular border city.

The vice industry was booming. With the help of the Mexican government, the environment remained borderline lawless. American entrepreneurs were favored over the locals, citizens and businessmen alike. This is particularly important because I will touch on these issues later on in the form of symbolism along the border.
 CHAPTER ONE

I took a trip to Mexico City. I’m familiar with its taxicabs, roads, pollution, streets, and alleyways. I’ve eaten at many of its restaurants, tried many of its different street foods. I’ve talked to many of its people. I’ve stayed there as a tourist and within the locals. I’ve stayed in tall hotels overlooking the city and in one-story homes. I’ve had the pleasure of being lost, of being part of the city, of being eaten by pollution’s dark glow. I’ve never felt so estranged from my home in Tijuana—so far from the border city. The metropolitan’s language seems more fluid, more put together. It seemed like they had been dealing with language since it started. They’ve worked through problems of language, and solidified it into a single entity. It had a certain kick to it. It seems strange to me; the ups and down of their tonality; the rise and fall of pitches; their elongated tones at every end of sentence. It had a certain class to it—European more than anything. It was far from home nonetheless.

I find myself at a protest in Mexico City. It was presidential season and Mexico’s third political party—first and second being PRI and PAN—did not win the election, unsurprisingly. Like any election, in any country, injustice blossoms in the losing party’s sentiments. Thousands of people protested in anger in the Zócalo—Mexico City’s bustling center. There are white skinned people, dark skinned, people in suits, men with Che Guevara t-shirts, women in dresses, teenagers, children, singing, kissing, yelling, chanting, crying, selling food, selling clothes, drinks, churros, beads, and crosses. There’s a collective mashing of people from different places without any agenda. They seemed to float with the crowd. Moved by an unseen force, parading, singing along to songs that seemed to come from nowhere. It was a festival of nothing—a party to commemorate something vague. People began to run. I never knew why. They start running towards me—away from the center. So, I run. We’re running towards something. Earlier in the day, I heard that the Zapatistas Army of National Liberation would be making an appearance.
The small army’s appearance would symbolize its analogousness with the losing side—with the protesters. It was symbolizing that they were on the losing side of history as well—just like PRD. The army, whose roots trace back to 1994 uprising in Chiapas, as well as the Mexican symbol of Emiliano Zapata, had made an appearance for solidarity to the common people. They rode in with horses and guns. They wore their iconic military uniforms and ski masks. Their appearance caused a happy uproar, a fanaticism of political revolution. I feel it is time to move on. I leave Mexico City to go further south.

I find myself in Xalapa, Veracruz. Famous for its port, Xalapa is my grandfather’s hometown and Mexico’s southern tip. I stayed with family. My uncle, an ex-politician, showed me around the city. We ate fish by the sea. He took me to the most historic parts of Veracruz. He introduced me to all his friends as his nephew from San Diego. He would tell everyone that I live in San Diego. His friends were impressed. They asked questions about schools, cars, weather, and politics. They all seem interested in the United States, not in what I do, but me as a symbol for the United States. At this time, I lived in Tijuana, not in the United States.

Like the New York Times article mentioned, Tijuana is the butt of all jokes. It’s too American to be Mexican and too Mexican to be American. My uncle’s introduction is interesting because of the status an American holds outside of the United States. Although I was unaware of this at such a young age, the idea was nothing new to me, unknowingly. I’ve always been embarrassed of living in Tijuana. I thought about my situation as schools, where I would hide where I was from. I didn’t want people to know where I was from or that I spoke Spanish at home. I was embarrassed even at school. This dichotomy between Tijuana as a geographical location versus a philosophical location proved problematic in my research. How does one treat the city of Tijuana in such a study? It’s in Mexico, geographically, but philosophically? Philosophically, things get messy. It’s a reject from the south and north. Nobody wanted it, but it
was constantly busy with drug cartels and trade tourism. Every time my uncle had to come across, he would have to come through Tijuana. It was a gateway for him and many people. It was a stepping-stone to San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Coincidentally, Tijuana, being the butt of jokes, is a highly inhabited tourist city. Tourists pour their American dollars onto its streets. They visit its restaurants, streets, and tourist attractions. They also visit their brothels, sex shows, and nightclubs.

Known for its donkey shows, Tijuana is a hot bed for sexual tourism—any kind of sexual tourism: straight, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and child prostitution. Frequent by San Diegans and military, these brothels range from high-end to street corners to strip clubs. As I wrote earlier, Tijuana is built on these ideas—on prostitution, drug cartels, and gambling. And not much has changed; Tijuana is still centered as a place of myth, as a place where anything is possible—financially, historically, and sexually.

Because of the complicated structure of Tijuana, I feel border cities are fragmented forms of hybridity that should be analyzed through their respective and specialized lens. It is not enough to view Tijuana in the same light as any other text. Through the perspective of a local, I will explore tourist exposure to symbols of simulacrum and cultural hybridity in the downtown streets of Tijuana. My focus for this section is the relationship between tourist and spatial formations. I will be giving specific attention to the “Tijuana zebra,” as symbol of otherness, transculturation, and a physical willingness to succumb to outside cultures, while negotiating its own.

Early in the 20th century, Tijuana was known as a place for reckless drinking, drug consumption, and organized crime. The city gained a reputation of tourist-centric, a place where the visitor created boundaries, a place of desolate existence separated by invisible borders. Not quite Mexico, but not quite the United States, Tijuana’s tourist attractions revolved around
gambling, drug trade, and prostitution. The city’s tourist attractions weren’t something democratically elected, nor was it an internal development. As I stated earlier, American entrepreneurs and Mexican government officials did the city planning.

Tijuana’s infrastructure was built on bars and gambling facilities. And it is through these initial businesses that Tijuana gained its notoriety as a city of addictions. Later, prostitution made its way in, and created a bigger tourist attraction for the visitor. Humberto Felix Berumen calls this phenomenon the tourism of addiction, or turismo de adicción. Fittingly so, Tijuana continues to be a center for adult/child prostitution, powerful cartel organizations, and, what sometimes seem like, mindless violence. Now, alongside those old hotels, casinos, and American sweatshops, rests upscale, yuppie restaurants, modern hotels, and cultural centers. This strange fusion of the modern and, what seems like, the archaic, are the contradictory foundations of what Tijuana has become. The point of this section is to better understand that contradiction, and to explore Tijuana as its own ambiguous identity, and how that identity reflects on citizens and tourists.

The Tijuana zebra has been a long time tourist attraction in Tijuana’s downtown district. Tijuana zebras are donkeys painted with heavy coats of white paint. The donkeys are painted with a design that resembles a zebra, usually zigzags or other seemingly appropriate designs. Located on street corners on the Avenida Revolución, a popular tourist destination, and Tijuana’s official Red Zone, vendors set themselves up in kiosk-like platforms. Tourists pay a minimal amount of money to mount the donkey and get their picture taken. Behind the zebras is a backdrop of Mexican historical scenery. The customer gets in return a picture with the zebra. Dealers will have the donkeys dressed with traditional zarapes, sombreros, and plastic shotguns to accompany the picture. These undercover donkeys can be found in street corners. Each owner decorates his own zebra with bright colors, and exotic backgrounds, like faux-historical moments
in Mexican history. An example of this is the bleeding Aztec man holding an unidentified woman. This archetypal figure is casually found holding his dying female counterpart. Another popular background is the Mayan calendar. Shining brightly against the backdrop of the Aztec pyramids, the Mayan calendar is casually placed in between scenes. My interests lay between the relationships in the simulacrum, the vendor, and the tourist; specifically how these symbols interact with each other. In more literary terms, I’m interested in the relationship between subjectivity and textuality. I believe this relationship lends itself for a more accessible way of doing border studies because of the accessibility and public.

**Zebra as Literary Text**

Before I continue, I’d like to explore the Tijuana zebra as a novelistic discourse according to Bakhtin’s five types of compositional-stylistic unities into which a novel usually falls under:

1) “Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants)”

I interpret Bakhtin’s 1st unity as the first placeholder of authorial intent. Be it traditional literary space or cultural space, the authority is intended to manage the relationship between symbol (literary-artistic artifact) and imagination (subjective interpretation). These two mechanisms are, what I feel, the basis of the relationship of intention. Within this relationship of intent, the vendor’s purpose is that of capturing the imagination, of being noticed, of being read, of being paid money for a service. Through this, he/she establishes, what is necessarily, and practically, called the simulacrum of the real—more on this problem later. Also, the vendor’s authority establishes otherness through tourist subjective reality. The tourist relies on the authority of the natives for direction (“He’s from here. He must know”).
2) “Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (skaz)”

The 2nd unity is represented through the vendor’s oral invitation. This invitation, often yelled out to passing tourists, comes in Spanish, broken English, or a combination of both. This amalgamation of language represents skaz in the structured artistic system that is the Tijuana zebra. Furthermore, the oral tradition is not a simple binary, but a hybrid area between Spanish and English. The materialization of skaz in the structure is essential. For Bakhtin’s and some Russian formalists, literature has to be grounded in some type of oral tradition. In this case, the oral tradition wallows in constant ambiguity and Bhaba’s “third space.” This type of language can be heard in the phenomenon known as Spanglish. For example, the hybridization of language in words such as cora—the marriage between quarter (English) and peseta (Spanish).

3) “Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.)”

I connect Bakhtin’s 3rd characteristic to signage. By signage, I am referring to words written on borrowed hats—or zarapes. Words like “Tequila,” “Rancho,” and “Drunk” dress these round, wide hats. Here, most notably, is the presence, and process of, social heteroglossia. This is through the interchangeability of words from English to Spanish and Spanish to English. Also, it’s noticeable through the conversation between English speakers, Spanish speakers, and bilinguals. The narrative is addressing several crowds at once, and language is bouncing through the system.

4) “Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth)”
This 4th characteristic is similar to the 3rd. The structures of speech are authorial because its affirmation through locality. In other words, the native sets unwilling authority on the tourist. Yet, in this borderland, locals are not necessarily authorial, but tourist themselves. The most problematic aspect in this section, for me at least, is the “extra-artistic authorial speech.” I say this with great indebtedness to vendors who go extra lengths to decorate their stands. For this, I call the “extra-artistic authorial speech.” These vendors allow me to differentiate between a common vendor and an extra artistic. I’ve looked at the dichotomy between those two models. Although I cannot safely assume there are reasons for this distinction, I understand their differences and place them artistically higher than those with less “artistic speech.”

5) “The stylistically individualized speech of characters”

Individual stylistics is obvious within the system. Every vendor chooses his/her own prop, hats, words, backgrounds. Therefore, the stylistics of each vendor is autonomous to neighboring authors, but not completely. Each vendor takes stylistic efforts to present his piece, yet conforming to a uniform code. This variety in style allows the system of the Tijuana zebra to be closely analyzed as having internal stratifications during a historical existence—a topic that can be widely researched, but will not be as part of this essay.

The Tijuana zebra acts as a disruption of traditional and nationalist paradigms. In Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English, Paul Jay claims that “If globalization is characterized by the growing deterritorialization of culture, by the fluidity of its movements across a nation state boundaries, and by its tendency to survive and mutate in diasporic pockets thriving within the border of multiple countries,” a disruption of traditional connecting between, “territory, culture nation, and literary expression will increase” (Jay, 38). The Tijuana zebra is an attempt to succumb to its detached national identity, and to its next-door American neighbor. It
does so by attempting to capture the identity of its past, by commodifying itself in a way that attracts customers from the other side of the border, and offering an experience that seems both real and exotic. And it is from this simulacrum of the real and the exotic that constructs Tijuana’s identity. But how does that identity fit into its economy and culture?

To better understand the symbol within the artistic system, and inevitably explore border through this symbol, I’ve divided it into three sections: dealer/author, representation/text, tourist/reader. For the purpose of literary clarity, I will refer to the different sections as author, text, and reader:

**THE AUTHOR**

In a literary exchange, the writer guides the reader through a story. He/she carefully chooses specific words and sentence structures that lead readers to an ultimate conclusion. In other instances, the writer purposely leads a reader to no conclusion—that being the conclusion. Both formulas (modern/postmodern) are an amalgamation of cultural memory—a series of oral histories, experience, spatial formations, smells, and sounds. The writer transcribes that memory onto a system of written word, engaging with his sociological positioning as well as with him/her self lived experiences. It is within this step of the process where meaning is created. At this point, things can be a little blurry and less artistic, and more or less financial—an area I will not write in-depth about. The written record is published. The writer or a publishing company publishes the text. It is then distributed to the reader. It is worth noting; the relationship between reader, text, and writer will always include complicated financial boundaries. For the purpose of this model, I will not be giving attention to that. Regardless, the reader who picks up the text reads. The act of reading, a solitary one, is similar to the writing of the text. The reader approaches the text with their own series of oral histories, experience, spatial formation, smells,
and sounds. In other words, the reader takes the text and gives meaning through his/her own experiences. To problematize things even further, the reader comes to the text with expectations of words, sentence structures, and form. The reader expects a specific experience. As some writers do, they write to an audience, to a reader who will want to read this kind of story. The writer is then in the position of not only writing general fiction, but writing fiction to a specific person with specific expectation of words, forms, and style. I attribute this style mostly to popular fiction—bestsellers and that lot. The relationship between author, text, and reader in the Tijuana zebra is similar.

The author, who creates his business through the symbol, and acts as a middleman/woman between reader and text, relies on fiction to create reality. A vendor in Canclini’s *Culturas Híbridas* states, “Since we don’t have much here, like they do in the south, where there are pyramids, we don’t have any of that stuff here…so, we have to invent something for the tourist” (240). The author recognizes his distance from the pyramids as a problem. The problem is placing the tourist in a historical perspective; therefore, his intentions create an exotic gateway into a lost and forbidden land; one of pyramids, blazing suns, wailing Aztecs, and, of course, zarapes. In a sense, the writer takes the idea of his spatial living situation and creates a new history. This creation of a subjective history defines for the tourist what is not clear. The tourist, in this case, interacts in the intermediacy phase, a phase attributed to the hybridization of cultures and economic interest.

As I stated earlier, Tijuana is, more or less, a tourist construct, mutating and shifting itself according to demands of its reader. The Tijuana zebra morphs accordingly. This is a materialization of that idea. The author meets the demands of the reader. This theme seems to transform itself in other aspects of Tijuana tourism, like adult and child prostitution and drug
dependency from the U.S, where drugs are dependent on the demand from U.S consumer. The demand is inherently natural in the Tijuana zebra. The dealer must meet a market standard, which is connected to the otherness tourist hope to find in a foreign country. The relationship is both a false consciousness of the real, and a contradiction to the lack of southern Mexican culture in the symbol. Because of this, Tijuana sets itself apart from the rest of Mexico as a city where the Spanish and Indian influences collide with American expectations. It is not an end state, but a process of change, an open state of American expectations and Mexican willingness. This process leaves Tijuana at the edge of an already hybridized country with American culture looming over it.

THE TEXT

The reader dictates the text. Not suggesting that the reader has more power in the relationship between text and writer, but because it is from the expectation of the reader that the writer often operates. This idea is native in popular fiction—not taking into consideration form inventiveness by authors. In this relationship, I am only concerned with the popular text itself—the middleman between writer and reader. In this formula, the popular text has appeal because of the commodification of style, words, themes, ideas, and experience. These formative elements are expected in popular forms of literature. For example, to pick up a book from a best sellers list is to expect a conformed and formal piece of literature. This isn’t saying that there is less of an aesthetic quality to best sellers, but saying that there is a difference between Twilight, 50 Shades of Grey and Moby Dick, Ulysses, and Gravity’s Rainbow. Although one is sure to find these works of art on a bestsellers list, they are not necessarily connected to modern popular literature and known for having lucrative sales numbers. In this case, economics does play a simple role. Popular novels, written to appeal to a certain audience, sell considerably well over less popular novels, per say. In another example, the Harry Potter series has sold more copies than the single
copy of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *White Noise*, or *The Road*, although McCarthy inclusion into Oprah book club might delineate my argument—but just by a little. My intention is not to lower the aesthetic value of popular culture, but to look at the formation and intent of popular anything. Ultimately, it comes down to intention. Does the writer write the text to appeal to an audience to sell copies and make money? Although this distinction isn’t cemented anywhere, even though it should be, for the purpose of this essay and my argument, I treat popular literature as having intent to operate in a capitalist market, which is fine, but just needs to be taken into consideration with my next point.

In the case of Tijuana zebra, the text has intent to sell. It sells though the entangled archaic and contradictory discourse directed at an audience. It sells through the tourist, who expects a simulacrum of historical discourse as stimulation; therefore it is safe to assume that the zebra is invented to make money. Because of this, the zebra must be analyzed in a chronological order, and in respects to the needs of the consumer. In the simplest of terms, the donkey is a zebra; and as for the notorious, illuminating backdrops, there are no official records of an Aztec holding a dying woman next to the pyramids, especially of the Mayan calendar creeping up on the aching couple. It is interesting to see that most images found in these locations mash up historical inaccuracies by treating national symbols and combining the non-historical. What appears to be the grand narrative is in fact a well disguised, or not so well disguised, mimicry of a nation’s history. This mimicry, in turn, acts as a representation of exotic otherness, a place the tourist can visit safely without the need to visit the bigger metropolitan that is Mexico City.

Language flows through the simulacrum. Many dealers supply their customers with illustrated backgrounds and popular saying of words written across it. Some vendors combine English and Spanish to appeal to American tourist. Through this familiarization of language,
words like “Tequila,” “Drunk,” or “Rancho” adorn the same background of the zebras, words associated to the myth of Tijuana. As I stated earlier, since the beginning of this city, it has been a place where one can act in any immoral manner, a place where one can fulfill his/her own fantasies, be they sexual, or non-sexual, be they alcoholic, or borderline inhumane. But the duality of languages implies the dichotomy of two nationalities, the Mexican and the American—bridging the gap between spaces.

Vendors often add props to accompany the picture. In some instances, vendors have replicas of shotguns for the customer to pose with. In the case of the shotgun, a symbol for violence, rebellion, and heroism, works alongside the idea of the exotic act of rebellion. The rifle works on a variety of levels to revive an old mythical/real character of Pancho Villa, or Emiliano Zapata, both famous revolutionaries. Having historical importance, the presence of both men aid the mythological aura of the situation. The two collide with the exotic expectation. By replicating these men, whom have always been shown as being armed and dangerous, the consumer feels even closer to the experience of being in a foreign country.

Octavio Paz reinforces this idea by connecting humanist and rebellion. He states, “All radicalism is humanist. Man is the root of reason and society. So, revolution pretends to create a world in which man is finally free from old regimes, is able to express truth and fulfill the human condition” (157). Although Paz is speaking directly for political reasons, his statement fits into the artistic system at stake. Why a shotgun and why is it important? The shotgun is a symbol for violence. This particular violence is connected to an act of rebellion, a rebellion performed by the symbols associated to the shotgun. I can’t help but think about war reenactments. What is the appeal of reenacting war? It could be said, as well as many other things, that reenacting war brings one at close proximity to violence, a violence once performed in a far and distance past. If we take a closer look at war reenactments we might find traces of suppression. If one suppressed
feeling of violence, of being a part of something so formative, as say the civil war, there is exclusiveness to the act of the civil war itself—exclusivity to history. This exclusivity, then, as a reenactment of war, allows participants to be as close as possible without the repercussion of death.

If treated as so, the shotgun works as a similar symbol—a throwback to violence, a throwback to war. To readdress the first question about the shotgun, the answer seems much more tangible, but still needs to be addressed in a longer format. Again, I’m brought back to the idea of intention. And since the intention of participating in an exotic gateway is safely assumed by being a tourist, the intention here is to leave reality, to leave and/or destroy “old regimes” to fulfill a human need—freedom. Of course, I say this in the broadest sense, but if the act of rebellion is inherently a false one, and one can never, be entirely “free” from economic or political systems. This suggests that the basic human need for individuality is suppressed when one is not a tourist. Therefore, the performance of violence expresses, for a short glimpse, complete disassociation of “old regimes” and complete freedom.

THE READER

As I mentioned earlier in this essay/thesis, the reader is as much part of the text as the writer. The creation of meaning in a popular text is shared, and in some cases, is more driven by reader’s interpretation. In order for this relationship to be, the readers must interpret, struggle, and give meaning to the text, a text which otherwise would be meaningless and without market purpose. It is safe to assume that the reader wishes to be read. Because he/she has made the effort to publish is that the assumption is safe. It is only when the author has died, and not published a work, that this model will not work. But luckily for us, the authors and texts are alive and well. Besides, as I mentioned earlier, the goal purpose in this artistic system is to make money.
To be a tourist is to have privilege. Perhaps not high privilege, but some—culturally and financially—the tourist is in the fortunate position to break away from a routine and visit a space. In this case, the space is Tijuana, and those tourists are usually American or European, and, in rare cases, Mexican. The tourist implies foreignness to him/her. I return, again, to the idea of suppression and expression. The movement from place to place is an escape from his/her original spatial locations. In this model, something is always lost. It is from the subjectivity of the author that suppression. One can say, we visit, get out, and escape out routine to retire old habits. It is within these habits that we, as tourist, can inhabit a place while maintaining our subjectivity. I’m asking the question, why do we escape? Why do we become tourists? What is so bothersome about our homes?

We escape for several reasons. Firstly, because we are able (privilege exercised). Secondly, for simple escape (suppression only because of privilege or performing expression). The example of the American teenager in Tijuana comes to mind. Tijuana nightclubs offer an 18+ policy. Because of this, it is common to see American teenagers frequent these clubs. Here, one is able to find traces of performing in American nightclubs—drinking, dancing, making out, and sexual possibilities. The reason why the American teenager attends these clubs is because of the suppressed emotions he/she experiences in the United States, because of wanting to participate in escapes like dancing and drink—leisurely acts performed away from every day routine. Of course, being under +21 grants you buying cigarettes, the suppression of what is inherently bad or looked down upon is expressed as a tourist in Tijuana night clubs.

The financial transaction is the final experience in the relationship. A paying customer is rewarded with the experience. The ability to travel across the border symbolizes the passageway into the new unexplored and dangerous land. By mounting the donkey, like they did in Mexican movies or American westerns, the customer mounts off into a hyperreality created by the
producer—an experience real and exotic, as well as historical and fictional. As part of the New World symposium, Guillermo Gomez-Peña delivered a rant too informal to call a speech, stating: I’m constantly asking myself, should I go further north, but the north is at war. South? Should I go back to Mexico for good? But Mexico’s nation state is collapsing, so Spanish Mexico no longer exists. Everyday Mexico and the US look like one another, and less, and less like you and me. We are no longer foreigners to one another. We have no government to defend. No flag to wave.

Gomez-Peña comments on a personal dilemma, yet one familiar to most people living in-between borders and cultures. Gomez-Peña, a visual artist, writer, and activist, is speaking on the anxiety of being in between. Optioning to move to MIT with “the technological elite, or to Yale with the academics,” or simply giving himself away to science, Guillermo’s point is of finding meaning in hybridity. He, as many people do, finds himself lost in both cultures, not only physically, but philosophically as well. The benefit of Gomez-Peña’s argument is essential when studying borders. Border cultures are constantly changing, and this is base of any border study. Like the zebra, academic analysis should be based on immediate example, as they exist in the public space. For me, the Tijuana zebra is immediate—it’s happening now, both in the cultural and philosophical.

Gomez-Peña’s comment reminds me of the zebra’s condition of being in both cultures at once. The Tijuana zebra is on the crossroads between these problems. It unconsciously comments on the evolving Mexico-U.S relations, where nothing is steady, yet nothing will change them drastically. As I attempt to answer questions posed by my environment, trying to make sense of the world around me, Tijuana is evolving. Tijuana will continue to be open-ended. It will continue being a place filled with discrepancies, and historical inaccuracies. The city both archaic and postmodern, a place where the tourist is the local, and the local is the tourist.
Accommodating to the tourist, it is a place willing to fulfill exotic fantasies, both of strange cultures, and strange sexual needs. There seems as if there are no solutions to this problem, as it is indebted into Tijuana’s identity, as a place of uncertainty.
CHAPTER TWO

I’m writing this second chapter from the top of a hotel in Tijuana. I can see landmarks. I can see the border. People are still out in the city. Night hasn’t completely taken over. Even if it did, it wouldn’t stop anything from moving. Things are constantly moving. People are constantly changing, evolving, moving from one place to another. The room has air conditioning and a heater—I can’t seem to find a comfortable temperature. It’s either too hot or too cold. I have food and a shower. I’m comfortable. It’s somewhat elegant. I want to be able to see the city from above. The city is an ambiguous text filled with symbols and voices, jumping in and out of literary tradition, procuring cultural security and reverie. The text weaves itself in oral histories along the border. Symbols guide walkers through their routes, on their way home, work, school, or wherever. To be above the city is to be like Icarus. To be Icarus is to be above the everyday life. To be Icarus is to be an all seeing eye above the cities structural limits. The distance becomes an obstruction for Icarus. He’s away from the base of the city—its people, its voices.

My argument originates from a long personal history of walking. I’ve walked through many places. I’ve walked out of necessity, out of a romantic need to connect with my surroundings, and sometimes, out of boredom. Regardless, walking has allowed me to interact with people and places I otherwise would not have been able to if I were in a car or a bus. The longest I’ve walked home was 2 hours; this wasn’t out of necessity, but curiosity about how long it would take me to walk from the border to my house. This two-hour walk took me from San Ysidro into La Revolución into Avenida Tabuada, and eventually to my house. Walking through La Revolución, an infamous tourist attraction, exposed me to the realities of adult and child prostitution, not through a book or a car window, but there, staring at me, asking me questions, and telling me what I could get for ten American dollars. The problem was real, not one debated
by politicians in heated debates or academics in a classroom, but one being lived by children and women.

In this section, I argue for the benefits of testimonial literature and for leaving the academic setting to learn about border narratives. Throughout the section, I give particular attention to the difference between poetic and ordinary language, and how those differences are often similarities in literary analysis. My research argues for the need to leave the safe place of academia to find border narratives. I do this by recording testimonial accounts of two sex workers in the Tijuana-San Diego border. My research consists of walking from the San Ysidro border through downtown Tijuana into a brothel. I will be presenting my research chronologically: the meaning and purpose of testimonio, my experience in the brothel, and the interviews. In association, I compare Anzaldúa’s Borderlands to the oral histories of the sex workers to better understand border narratives and what differentiates one from another.

Testimonio’s purpose is to represent children, women, criminal, and the proletarian. It attempts to capture the realities of voices outside of popular literature. The genre can be traced back to colonial “cronicas” made famous by Costumbrista essays of Spain and the Americas. In these essays, writers would chronicle everyday life as a form of record keeping. Seemingly, these records hold no literary or academic language, but do deal with a narrator in his/her own stories. Although testimonio literature is often lumped in with resistance literature, for the purpose of this project, I am not concerned with the political implication with the genre. I am interested in how these voices help better understand voices along the San Diego-Tijuana border.

My walk begins at the San Ysidro border. The same border I’ve always crossed. The border I would cross as a child, teenager, student, and an adult. I’m awfully good at avoiding beggars. I’ve mastered the art of avoiding everyone. I’ve been doing this for a long time. I would
recognize everyone who crossed with me—workers, single mothers, girls, and the guys I’d recognize from my school. Living in Tijuana and attending American schools had its own politics. No one from Tijuana told anyone they were from Tijuana. This was out of fear of being labeled as poor or ousted for living outside of the country. The American border patrol stands on the American side. The Mexican border patrol lounges on the Mexican side. I walk through the clanking, loud revolving doors. The doors are one way. They have always been a yellow, greyish taint. I would never touch them. I would wait for someone to go through, and I would kick the bar doors. I would grab the straps in my backpack. The cross is brief. The walk is long, and it could take me either to downtown, or to the nicer parts of Tijuana.

I spoke about my research to a few people. I told them I was interested in the oral history, specifically of the marginalized voices in literature. Somehow, a person I know knew somebody who knows somebody else. This person had complete access to a brothel. She owned it, and would let me do any kind of interview I needed. My plan was to walk to this place. I would walk, again, from the San Diego border with a backpack, a tape recorder, and a notepad, and a few questions written down in Spanish. I was hoping to ask the workingwoman a few questions about their life. I wanted to understand, and come in contact with the theorization in literary studies. I wanted to leave the library. I wanted to leave the safe place. I wanted to explore the realities of globalization, of cultural studies. Up to this point, like I’ve mentioned earlier in this essay, everything was out of touch with its subjects, with borders, with hybridity, with the dislocation of centers.

The brothel is located in a tourist area. The building’s walls are mustard colored and outlined with blue corners. Sprinkle of red rock form the patio’s floor up to the top of the squared building. Its structure is held by adobe-like material, a strange amalgamation of native
façade and contemporary design. The brothel’s community is a maze. Entangled in a series of restaurants, shops, dance clubs, the brothel is not hidden. In fact, the storefront is facing a main street, easy to spot by any American tourist, the brothel’s main clientele. Clients, as I observed, and was told by the workers, arrive by foot or taxi. Those clients who arrive by taxi are paid a small percentage. The reason for this is because tourists arrive to Tijuana without direction, and usually ask to be taken to either strip clubs or sex houses, as they are often referred to. In a way, these taxi drivers are gatekeepers to Tijuana’s grimy, and in some cases, fancy underground sexual tourism.

Adjacent to the brothel is a popular Tijuana hotel. For the sake of anonymity, and that I’ve promised to keep with the brothel and my connection at the brothel, I will try to be as discrete and descriptive as possible. The hotel, which houses many American and Mexican politicians, as the Madame told me, has a verbal contract with the brothel. Many of the girls here walk over to whatever room, whatever floor, whatever man, is staying the night. This service is common here and in many other Tijuana hotels. The brothel doesn’t just service the common tourist, but the average American or Mexican politician. This claim goes as far as this essay, as the Madame of the brothel mentioned, but didn’t give any concrete evidence to this actually happening. For now, I took her on her word, as she has no reason to lie. This report, as I mentioned to her and her workers, will not include personal names or business names.

The brothel owns two sides of the building; the storefront, the building next to it, which I’d become awfully familiar with, and a back building, locked by deadbolt and huge door that reminded me of a bank safe. A woman in a yellow dress mops the sidewalk. She dips a crusted, wooden mop into a soapy bucket, drags it out, spreads it over the concrete, and repeats. I watched her do this several times as I was walking up, always at the brink of tipping over the bucket. She wore tall yellow heels to compliment her dress. Her dark skinned contrasted with her
colors. She could barely carry the wet mop from the bucket to the floor. It was only when the mop was dry from cleaning the concrete that she was able to carry it. As I was walking towards her, and away from San Diego, it seemed always useless to wash a sidewalk. Grey concrete will not shine. Grey concrete will not change. It’s grey. It’s ugly. You can clean it once a day and people will still walk over it. People come out of clubs and piss all over the floor. And here she is, cleaning the concrete, the sidewalk. No matter how politicians or business owners form their comments on Tijuana, as a reformed urban city, as a place that no longer has donkey shows, prostitution, high crime rate, drugs cartels. Tijuana has dealt with one way or another with these problems. It is the reason it is a city. It is the reason is has thrived as a community, unfortunately. Although this is a very pessimistic perspective, it is a real one. As I mentioned earlier, the beginning of Tijuana is crime, American interest, and always being labeled the other. Tijuana is the concrete that will always get pissed on, stepped on, but it will always be there for you to walk on.

I asked the girl if I could speak to Leti, the Madame (her name has been changed to protect her identity). She asked who I am, and if I know what kind of place she’s running. She was hesitant to let me in or give me any information. I was asked to stay put. She went in. A tall large dark woman stepped out from the back—Leti. She quickly walked towards the door, drying her right hand, preparing to lend it out and shake mine. We shook hands. She was cordial. I let her know who I am, what I’m doing, and what I needed. She had no clue. She stepped closer to me, asking for more information, and if I know “what kind of place this is.” I answered her question, but she’s still unsure of what to do about me. Leti asks me to wait at the door. She grabs a nearby phone, dials numbers, and begins a call. I hear hissing and complaining, questioning who I am and what I’m doing there. Finally, Leti returns. She tells me she “doesn’t know anything about me” and that “nobody told” her I “was coming.” I try to explain again.
She’s a bit hesitant. At one point our conversation couldn’t go anywhere. I had explained everything. I couldn’t make any calls. I didn’t have a phone number for my contact or my contact’s contact. Leti just stood there, waiting for me to either leave or say something—but I had nothing else to say or do. I didn’t want to go back. Leti almost left me no choice. I felt I had explained everything, told her everything, and been cordial and respectful. She seemed threatened by my presence, and at one point put her hand on the wall next to her, as if saying, “You’re not coming in. You have to leave,” but she didn’t. Instead she said, in Spanish, “Look, I don’t know who you are, but I’m trusting you that you’re telling me the truth. I’ll give you 20 minutes with two girls. They have a job to do. If they’re not back in 20, I’ll go back there and get them myself.” I agreed. Her only request is for me to do the interviews in the backroom of the brothel. I’m fine with her request. She tells me to wait—again. A girl comes out of the storefront. She’s holding a large key chain with what seems like a thousand and one keys. She’s quiet, patient, shy, and probably curious at such a strange request—“I just want to talk.” She started walking without saying anything, assuming I would follow. I did. I’m walking behind her. She’s wearing a dress similar to the yellow one earlier. Her dress is blue. She’s holding a sweater with round beige buttons. I’m still clutching to my backpack and wondering where she’s taking me.

As promised by Leti, we are in front of a large deadbolt lock—the backroom. When I think of the backroom of a brothel, I think about whips, chains, dirty floors, and equally filthy beds. I picture laying men, tired from paid intercourse. I hear the swift shuffling of embarrassed men and calm, confident women. And most importantly, for my safety, the backroom of a brothel is not where I would want to be—but here I am. The girl quickly fingers through the thousand and one keys. She finds the key, plugs it in, and twists. The heavy door opens wide into a dark space with hollowed out rooms. She asks me to walk in first. I walk into the dark corridor. From the bit of outside light, I can make out some rooms, doors, white floors, and a longer
passageway into, what seems at this point, more and more darkness. She closes the door. And it’s
dark. There’s nothing. I’m standing without perception of material references. I don’t know
where the wall is located. I don’t know where the door is located. I don’t know where the keys
are, or who has them. I’m unsure of who else might be in this room, this hallway, this
passageway, and this backroom. So, I stand still waiting for something that might happen. I think
back to Leti, who didn’t know me, whose trust I gained through a few strange words about a
research project, a university, and just wanting to “talk” to a few of her girls. Leti led me here
without trusting me. I think of what Leti might have thought, “Does think guy think he can just
come in here and ask to speak to my livelihood?” That’s what I was doing. I might have been a
threat. I might have been a person with ulterior intentions, to cause harm or even sexual harm;
I’m not. I just wanted to talk. Leti saw me and didn’t know me. Nobody, especially in her
position, who answers to someone else, would let any stranger into her place of work, especially
this kind of work, especially if they felt any type of danger. At this point, and this is the only
point in my research, that I thought it might not have been such a great idea. I could go back and
read Anzaldúa, Cisneros, Acosta Torres, or the Saldivar brothers, or the Saldivar sister, Sonia,
who I had just found out was related to Ramon and Jose David. Maybe I should go back to the
theoretical drawing board. I should go back to the corner room in a quiet library. The room that
has light and friendly students who are all packing lunches: sandwiches, apples, berries, organic
juice. I could go back to the house of books on Derrida, Foucault, Hall, Jameson, and Zizek.
They’re all great philosophers, writers, and thinkers of my time, their time, and someone else’s
time. There is sound. Her footsteps clank on and off—left and right. I follow the sound for what
seems like split seconds until it was too far to have as a reference for human contact. The sound
stopped.
The point of all of this is to understand the place where stories originate. Border narratives begin in a space. Whether that space is war, depression, an exotic location, or the backroom of a brothel, stories from our understanding of spatial formation and cultures. Our interactions and cultures weave together. They untangle and go their separate ways. These newly formed entities transcend from space to space and create meaning. They’re not always binary systems of cultures (Mexican and American), but self-contained kiddie pool of water and bubbles, making splashes, big and small, crashing onto one another, wreaking havoc within systems of order. Theory is not stable even with the careful lenses of academia. A cultural force moved by people, unwilling movements of language, expression, and symbolism.

I’m back in the backroom of the brothel. The light flashes. The light flashes again. The lights stay on. I can see the girl standing under a light. She says, “Come this way.” I did. Finally, I could see the room once the lights are on. The once incarcerating darkness turned into an open space with several rooms. I looked into the rooms as I walked towards her. The rooms are adorned with lotions, beds that resembled something you would find at any doctor’s office, white towels, stools, ladders, whips, chains, oils—there were a lot of oils. The rooms are well kept. I walk into the room. Like the other rooms, this room is filled with lotions, a single bed, and towels—a lot of towels. There are two chairs. They’re placed like a late night television talk show, side by side, but slowly tilted so the person sitting can see the other person’s face. There’s a table in the middle. It’s a small table. My hands unhitch from the backpack. I set it down my backpack, and take out my notebook and voice recorder.

The speech act is telling of space and time. Speech, with its discrepancies, word choices, pauses, long or brief, are telling of someone’s history. History, in a broad definition of it, is created through these voices. Of what we know as intellectuals or academics comes through these voices. These voices are naturally contradictory, naturally unable to fully express itself in
one clear, grammatical sentence, or sometimes in words alone. Because of this, I feel there is no
great difference between a poetic language and an ordinary language because the poetic is the
ordinary and the ordinary is poetic. These two seeming binary systems of language are
interconnected as one chooses to view what is poetic and what is not. What is poetic, can be the
words of Anzaldúa’s Borderlands. And while her words are deemed as poetic, they are born in an
ordinary language, from a feeling or an emotional place and space where the poet makes
meaning. This meaning, in turn, is translated into poetic language—something aesthetically
pleasing to a particular reader. The ordinary language, in Anzaldúa’s case, comes from lived
experience—from living on the border, from racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. They come
from experiences without proper terminology for expression, yet they are not yet at the end of
the binary system. They are poetic and ordinary at once.

From this in-between space of ordinary and poetic language, the citizen creates meaning
in everyday practices. In this case, the worker creates his/her meaning from spatial formations
and social interactions. The workers voice is poetic and ordinary, and something in-between,
because of its relationship with the market in which he/she operates. In the first chapter of
Practice of Everyday Life, de Certeau writes about the differences between “Everyman” and
“Nobody.” He states:

He [Everyman] plays out on the stage the very definition of literature as a world and of
the world as literature. Rather than being merely represented in it, the ordinary man acts out the
text itself, in and by the text, and in addition he makes plausible the universal character of the
particular place in which the mad discourse of knowing wisdom is pronounced. (3)
De Certeau is alluding to the idea of space as text. In this equation, the space acts as a text in
which the speaker operates. The speaker, as much as the space, creates the text in the same way
as ordinary creates poetic. This relationship, as I see it, is complicated because analyzing these
spaces breed new variables. De Certeau believes the world as literature, that the world is both ordinary and poetic. And from this place, I come to the conclusion that the stories I’m about to hear are ordinary and poetic, and construct border narratives, as much as Borderlands.

Again, I tell her what I’m interested in. She’s confused, asking, “Do you know what we do here?” and “Why me?” She agrees with skepticism, but is willing to help me. Our conversation begins. She’s shy and reserved. She tells me about herself and her relation to the border. She says, “My first memory of the border is when I came to Tijuana to visit my mother and cousins. That was the first time.” She looked down, shuffled her feet for a bit. Comparing Tijuana to New York, Paris, and London is an accurate connection. The symbolisms these cities carry are particular for those exact places—glamour, hope, money, wealth, and food. In the case for the border city, for her, as well as for Anzaldúa, spaces filled with conflicting identities, of in-betweeness. She continues “I had a very (pause), a very happy childhood (pause), but when I got here I started working at a sweatshop, and selling English language video lessons.” The pauses in her speech are limited to the insight, or perspective she wants to give me. She’s open, but hesitant—just like when we arrived. She was comfortable at this point. I didn’t want to push anything or ask too much of from her. I still wanted this to be as free as possible. The pauses, like in Borderlands, force the listener or reader to make a physical stop. Like in poetry, pauses work for dramatic effect, and even though she, I can assure my readers, wasn’t attempting a dramatic effect. The action further proves the connection between ordinary language and poetic languages. I did not prompt her for anything besides speech. Naturally, her pauses, short or long, stand for something beyond our general discourse—perhaps her own discourse, which she might not be comfortable speaking about at this point. What concerns me about her pauses is even in “common” speech, as some might label it, literary effects are natural—literature is natural. But
needless to say, this pause is not entirely enough evidence for suggesting the world is literature as de Certeau gently puts it.

“When I got here, I sold Ingles Sin Barreras, worked at a grocery store, worked at a sweatshop, I did a lot of things just to stay alive.” These lessons are called Ingles Sin Barreras—coincidentally, this translates exactly to “English Without Borders.” Being awfully familiar with the series—my parents bought it in the 90s to help with their English—I couldn’t help but think about the symbolism behind it. The video lessons, usually sold from door to door salesmen, are bundled with booklets and videos that help Spanish speakers master the English language. They come in encyclopedic form. There are about 30 volumes or lessons in the series. In fact, Ingles Sin Barreras is still strong today. Expanding on their newer series, which still targets the Spanish speaking public living in the U.S, but also acknowledging technological advances incomplete. Some of their newer products include Computación Sin Barreras and Profesiones Sin Barreras—which translate to “Computers Without Borders” and “Professions Without Borders.” It is obvious, from the title of these lessons, that the idea of borders is prominent through their products. The trademarked “Sin Barreras,” to be without borders, is to anyone, somewhat of an idealistic space—especially for someone living in between cultures, in between borders. Ingles Sin Barreras is a fairly popular product in the United States, especially with newly arrived immigrants/migrants. To speak about English without border is to speak about transcendence of cultures. It speaks to the difficulty of adapting to an English-speaking world without the restriction, which is the English-speaking world itself.

Anzaldúa’s Borderlands began as a feeling or a thought, a notion of something greater than her. Anzaldúa’s narrative comes from experience of being both Mexican and American, of being a homosexual in two unaccepting cultures, and of being a human operating in spaces. Her work has been edited countless times, sent to the publisher, polished, edited again, revised, and
rewritten. It’s been given great artwork for better sales, for easier identification and relation. It’s been written about. It’s been reviewed by academics to further their career, or establish new ones. It’s been placed in the Chicano/Chicana section, in Latin American Studies, American Studies, and Border Studies in libraries and bookstores. It’s been assigned reading in undergraduates and graduate courses alike. It’s been given the whole academic publishing treatment. It’s canonical in the Chicano/Chicana canon, in the border canon. Although these are all great things, what we read when we read Borderlands is a polished version of a border narrative. It speaks nothing against the grandiose of the book, but it does speak to academic interpretation of border narratives, and what it’s like right now. Like I mentioned earlier, border studies is an attempt to understand relations between two cultures, two—or more—countries and a third space. If we, as scholars, want to understand this space, we must venture into these spaces to capture the realities, less polished, non-academically accepted works of literature. The voices I capture in my voice recorder are literature, and as De Certeau claims, “literature is the world and the world is literature” (37). But in order to fully engage with that world, we must seek different ways to understand it—not just the ones that make us comfortable, not the ones that keep us safe in a quiet library room, but with the forms that makes us feel uneasy and uncomfortable.

“I don’t know the U.S. I’m not interested. I’ve heard horror stories. There’s no such thing as the American Dream. Because I’ve never been there, I can’t tell you what I think about it. I’ve heard so many stories about it; the American dream doesn’t exist.” The overall theme of the interviews was literary devices used in ordinary language, and again, this is another. As a type of frame narrative, observing her story from a story she heard, construct her understanding of what the U.S may or may not mean. In traditional storytelling, for example, traditional frame narrative like Canterbury Tales, stories within stories inform us of cultural norms, economy, practices, and so on. I feel it is important to see this opportunity to acknowledge what stories do for us, and in
this case, what stories do for her. Through my research, I’ve been trying to understand how symbols and voices construct the border. In her case, her obvious disdain for the United States, expressed through intonation, hand and body movements express the stories that form her narrative. Up to this point, I was interested how stories practiced. The stories that form her understanding are from past experience, of spatial formation wherever those characters lived, whatever circumstances they lived through, they must have been bad. Yet, spatial relations form those stories with the storyteller. Stop using form so much.

“To be happy, always happy. I always have to be happy at the job (pause) even if I’m not.” In her story, happiness functions as a binary system. There are two things she could be—happy or sad. There is no in-between. The trajectory that comes with emotions in this line of work is heavy on the producer; constant happiness, in some case, can be physically and emotionally draining. The act of being is a forcefully endeavor when what is natural doesn’t express, for the lack of better words, naturally. The act of being is something that is being performed. In her case, this performance of happiness is constant. The only time she can be away from the performance is when she’s not working, when she’s freed from emotional responsibility. Performance requires physical commitment. If she says, “I always have to be happy,” the performance is constant and required. When she states, “even if I’m not,” she’s alluding to the fact that it is not a simple performance, and I cannot think of anything in between force and unforced. Speaking of hybridity is speaking about a third space, in-betweenness. But what’s problematic in this specific scene is that there is not in-between between forces and unforced. There is nothing to analyze in between these two actions. Either one is forced or one is not forced. Forced, is to be pushed by a higher power—be it political, economical, and cultural. Unforced is quite the opposite—being autonomous in your everyday life. I cannot think of a completely unforced situation where the individual is completely unforced by anything. And in
this equation, there is nothing in between, nothing in the middle—you’re either forced or unforced.

This forced performance of happiness fits into border narrative in several ways. In Anzaldúa’s Borderlands, happiness is unstable state of being. The idea of happiness in Anzaldúa is more or less an idea, not a state of being. In her section entitled, *A Tolerance for Ambiguity*, she addresses the natural hybridity in her Mestiza heritage, “These numerous possibilities leave la Mestiza floundering in uncharted seas. In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders” (105). She is alluding to her hybrid Mestiza heritage, and the contradictory messages that come from living in between borders. Anzaldúa’s only escape, or coping mechanism, is to accept ambiguity. Her answer to hybridity is to use to understand and cope with both cultures—a culture interested in the individual and a culture interested in the communal whole. She states, “The Mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move towards a single goal (a Western Mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa 101). The “Western Mode” that Anzaldúa is speaking about is the focus on the individual. She is comparing it to a non-western mode, which is the border mode. Within this border mode, she, as well as other border thinkers, do not lean towards a side, or particularly way of thinking. The border thinker, as I believe Anzaldúa is concerned with, functions in between culture. He/she juggles social responsibilities of this in betweenness with an acceptance of ambiguity, an ambiguity that derives from political and social formations.

Anzaldúa’s concerns are within social formations. By this, I mean that this problem that Anzaldúa is addressing is the answer itself. Through Borderlands, Anzaldúa is at odds with her
sexuality and culture. She’s unsure of her place in either culture, or of being accepted for her
Americanness or her Mexicanness. What she concludes is the evolving hybridity state as an end
state, as a form of fixed identity. What appealed to me about Anzaldúa’s work are her
truthfulness, her diary-like narrative, and her honest approach to heavily theorized work. For
example, in the section, “A Tolerance for Ambiguity,” she states, “She,” the Mestiza, “can be
jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or
resolve the ambivalence. I’m not sure exactly how” (101). In this section, Anzaldúa takes theory
and makes it her own, and answer by saying “I don’t know how.” One of the many powerful
moments in her work, Anzaldúa answers with an honesty rarely found in academia. This honesty
attracted me to pursue my own public space, my own interaction with theory.

Furthermore, Anzaldúa addresses the future of her Mestisaje, “the future will belong to
the Mestiza. Because the future depends on the breaking down or paradigms” (102). Anzaldúa is
alluding to a much bigger framework than border thinking. She’s directly addressing
globalization, and the role the Mestiza/Mestizo will play. His/she’s role will be much more
important as the limits of culture expand and cultural distinction will be less distinct. This
distinction, or cultural globalization, creates a new reality, one that blurs cultural lines. Although
Anzaldúa might be theorizing deep into a possible future, she understands the issues of
globalization in border thinking and the future of the border subject. She attempts to portray the
distinction between a duality and a blurred, erased border culture. Her focus on ambiguity is
centered on the idea that ambiguity is an identity, that duality, or juggling, of both cultures is not
harmful, but advantages as cultural lines expand through globalization.

She states, “A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective
consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us
to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (102). A bit too idealistic for my taste, and not taking into consideration that culture is not the only factor of “rape, of violence, of war,” she’s hopeful for a world-wide culture, a humanitarian culture that brings males and females together, a culture that blurs the lines between gay and straight, between being with culture and without culture and in between cultures. Her futuristic work, I feel, is too idealistic to take seriously, but her idea of ambiguity as a solid state is important to me for several reasons.

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, ambiguity is what attracted me to Anzaldúa’s essay. I see Borderlands as a process of discovery, a thesis without an end, and a self-placement in literary theory and tradition. In her work, she exemplifies theoretical frameworks within her life and creates meaning to living people. Although I can’t say I fully relate to her work, Anzaldúa inspired me to concentrate on the everyday experiences. Because of this, I took up to the idea of the everyday practices and voices. My plan was to interview a prostitute working in Tijuana. I wanted their testimonio. I wanted to talk to someone who lives the everyday of border issues, prostitution being one of them, especially in Tijuana. My attention then turned to John Beverly's work on testimonio. His nominal work entitled *The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio* challenges the conceptions of genre and literature, of marginality, and canonical western traditions. Although informative and insightful, his work seemed problematic with what I wanted to achieve.
CONCLUSION

Border symbols and voices mingle with each other. They’re interchangeable; the voices speak for the symbol and symbols speak for the voices. They can change as quickly or as slowly as anyone chooses. They touch and descend away from their own rooms, brothels, street corners, hotels, and respective homes. These homes are built with plywood, cardboard, and, sometimes, expensive material. The type of homes varies from location in some parts of the city next to some homes, stand buildings—some bigger than other, some older than others. Buildings act as markers for city maps. Buildings are easily distinguishable from afar, from an outsider’s perspective. Buildings keep tabs on the city’s limits—philosophical and physical. They’re centers of commerce. People hold buildings together with administrators, accountants, engineers, secretaries, interns, and CEOs—people who, after a long day at work, retire to their homes. They walk and drive through the city’s roads. These roads, like border symbols and voices, mingle with each other. They lead to dead ends, large homes, homes built on solid cardboard, other businesses, restaurants (old and new), dangerous alleys, hip new bars and run down bars, sporting events, to the new soccer stadium, to the universities, churches (old and new), to small, forgotten areas of the city, to downtown, where the painted zebras roam, and to the brothel’s where sex workers work, and, eventually, to the American border.

All roads don’t lead to the border. Some, like I said, are dead ends, or lead you away from the border, away and into Mexico, the real Mexico. Stephen Chambers, writer for the New York Times, reported on June 6th 1920:

South from San Diego, Cal. There runs a road. It is not a straight road, nor is it narrow. Broad and crooked, it winds a more or less serpentine way to Tia Juana, across the international in the Old Mexico…Against the paving of that road, against smoothing out
the ruts in the way of the transgressor, the clergy of Sunshine City [San Diego’s nickname] have thundered protest, and to that road to Tia Juana the pulpit has given a name which, to the joy of the irreverent, has stuck—“The Road to Hell” (Vanderwood 108).

Aside from the old name of Tia Juana, Chamber’s article takes us back to consider history of Tijuana. It takes his reader to an unknown, exotic location south of San Diego, a colorful beach city, and into the strangeness of in-between. Chamber does not take history into consideration. Chamber’s continues with his narrative of Tijuana, his experience in the space as a type of “American Wild West.” He wrote about the possibilities of free and easy drug use, of “escorts” hanging on to prospective clients, of the strangeness in people’s faces. Chambers, interestingly, wrote about the lack of locals—a conglomerate of races and faces.

Vanderwood points out in his book Satan’s Playground: Mobster and Movie stars at America’s Greatest Gaming Resort, “Chambers may have understood human nature, but he knew nothing of Mexico, past or present” (Vanderwood 109). Vanderwood is correct about the lack of historical consideration by the New York Times reporter. Although Vanderwood, a historian of the area, eloquently and accurately points to Chamber’s faults as a journalist, the New York Times writer isn’t imposing in a racist or colonial sense. I say this because his narrative is of reality, of his reality. This situation is particular to Tijuana. And, I’m not saying there is no history of Tijuana, but the history of Tijuana now as gradually dispersed away from fact and into the realm of comfortable fiction. From what I pointed out in the zebra section, history is molded into a necessary commodity. The tourist, especially now, in 2012, is put into whatever he/she wants. Again, in the example of the zebra, some vendors made up history to accommodate to the
perception of the tourist. The tourist arrives to Tijuana with a specific perception of history, and it is offered, it is given just for a few pesos—there’s nothing wrong with this.

I come to three conclusions in my study. First, the Tijuana zebra must be analyzed as a text, and then through “users who are not its makers”—the tourist. Second, the sex worker’s voice is a miniscule voice of production (television, newspaper, literature, commerce). Third, U.S-Mexico Border studies, as a theoretical model—observing these voices and symbol as they relate to a border—call for an active participation from the researcher.

Through Bakhtin’s theory of discourse, I’ve made the Tijuana zebra a readable cultural artifact. This enabled me to analyze the spectacle as a text, a text weaving in and out of history and fiction. The structure allows the spectator to read the text, to inhabit the text. The zebra took a form of transformation as a mere object of tourism into a readable text.

This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment that they furnished with their acts and memories. As do speakers in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own “turns of phrase,” their own history. The zebra acts as an “ephemeral dance” between the native and the tourist. It plays a critical role in the understanding of a space, yet its historic fallacies create realms of distorted realities that, eventually, become solidified. The “ephemeral dance” is constantly beginning and ending. These dances, between the writer and the reader, change from street corner to street corner. They’re mere representations of a city creating cultural production on-demand.
The analysis of the Tijuana zebra is elemental in U.S-Mexico Border studies. The zebra, although in a constant state of on and off, allows readers of the city easier access to its cultural production and dynamic and as a constantly evolving city. I say evolving in comparison to bigger cities, like New York, Paris, or Mexico City, whose cultural markers have been staples for centuries. In places like these, the subject visits the city not the other way around. In the case of Tijuana, the city visits you, accommodates to you, and makes up history and people for you.

Returning to Vanderwood argument about Chamber’s visit to Tijuana, Chambers creates the space, especially in a time like the 1920s. His report sees Tijuana as a wasteland, and a wasteland it will be. Chambers morphs Tijuana into his own image. And this is still the case with the tourist in the system of the zebra. The tourist makes his own reality—from what he wants and how he acts.

The Tijuana zebra is a moving, living system that is happening as I write. This is the most important thing to me in terms of research that’s being produced. Returning to Aria’s question about “what kind of knowledge is being produced,” I respond with an immediate portrayal of a real-life, “the world as literature and literature as the world.” I recorded these women’s histories because I wanted a comparative analysis between Borderlands, a piece of work that’s received acclaim and the publishing treatment, to a more realistic voice, to something that wasn’t rehearsed, edited, made to move in a market of multicultural literature. I wanted the emotional involvement in the speech act. It was real, unconventional, and unrehearsed. The miniscule voices that help make up the border. Anzaldúa’s Borderlands is a great narrative. It intentionally performs the border realities through looking at biculturalism, race, gender, and language. In a sense, I feel that Borderlands offers a watered down experience of the border. It did touch on Anzaldúa’s feeling of resentment and exploitation, yet it made me feel that there was more to the
border, and of border narratives themselves. Because of this, I set out to find my own border narratives.

The difference between borderlands and the interviews is that Anzaldúa concern is with the Mestizo process. These interviews were concerned with the other side of the border—the Mexican side. It gives another perspective of the border. Although issues are dealt in different ways, they share commonalities in narrative structure. The idea of “The American Dream” is an example. She’s seeing from the other side to Anzaldúa, who sees the American Dream similar to the girls at the brothel. Both sides react to the idea of “The American Dream.” Anzaldúa fights against it. The girls don’t. To say that Anzaldúa and the girls at the brother—border narratives—experience the border the same way is an understatement. They do in a way, but they don’t in a very drastic way. For Anzaldúa, a scholar, writer, activist, 17th generation Mexican-American, the border’s immediacy, while still there, it’s very removed from the realities of these young women (similar struggle different perspective). The woman made no mention of activism. They focused on their work and their life, and how this job pays bills, pays well, horrible hours, but it bearable.

Most importantly, I did this to compare border narratives. I wanted a different way to “do” Border Studies/Cultural Studies. As I mentioned earlier, the verb “do,” requires action. To “do” Vegas is to spend money in its casinos, its strips clubs, gambling. To “do” New York is to ride its subways, eat its hot dogs, Time Square, Central Park. To “do” Tijuana is different because the reaction is dependent on the action. The action defines the reaction. To “do” border studies is to be active on its borders to adapt to its’ changing environment with its drug cartels, immigration policy, and ever changing atmosphere.
Ethnographical investigation comes with repercussions. Much of my time in Tijuana, whether it is through this project or just my regular life, depends on waiting, of standing still, not going or doing anything. Chamber’s article hit close to home in this paragraph:

But along about five in the evening there is usually a rush for the line before dark, as that crazy bridge must be negotiated, and one by one the cars are halted at United States Customs for search. As frequently from 500 to 1,000—oh sometimes more—automobiles from the United States are parked like a mass of black beetles at Tia Juana, your changes of getting back to San Diego are slim.

Regardless of Vanderwood’s arguments, this passage reminds me of one of the most important parts about living in Tijuana. It reminds of always having to wait to cross to the U.S. It’s interesting to see the case hasn’t change since the 1920s. Coincidentally, I’m waiting in line to cross to the United States. I’ve done this wait many times in my life. I’ve negotiated with this route, these people, vendors, stores, shops, customs agents, and Mexican police. I’m standing in a line of 1,000+ people waiting to cross. I was at the brothel earlier in the day. I was talking to sex workers about their border narratives. Though shy at first, they were open about their history, open about what they do and how they do it. The second interview, as I stated earlier, went much smooth. She asked me, “is there anything else you need?” I said “No. That’ll do it.” She smiled. She asked about my project. I told her I’m interested in border stories, how different people have different ideas about stories, and how we could use to better under different problems. She said it was “interesting.” She grabbed the circle of keys and asked if I was ready. I said “yes.” I packed my stuff and walked back through the corridor.

The corridor is well lit. I can see into the room and down its halls. It’s bigger than I imagined. The backroom seems like a maze, a maze with passageways, alleyways, and rooms.
Each turn, it seems, has a handful of more rooms. I feel that each room has millions of stories to hear, to record, to write about. I went into the corner room today. I heard two stories in that pool of experience. I heard two important stories that would be as important as any of these rooms. They were stories about the border and experience. They were stories about defeat, success and comfort.

I take a look back at all the rooms as the girl opens the room. I think about the possibilities for further investigation, to be out of the scholarly circles again, and reach into this space of storytelling, of border narratives. I imagine everything I could learn, everything I could take back with me, analyze, talk about with my peers, play theory with, and how it could all mean everything to me. I think back to when I started my research with books and ending up here, at the backroom of a brothel, waiting to be let out. It’s interesting to think about a few minutes ago, maybe a few hours at this point. I’ve lost track of time when I was standing in a dark room without any markers of walls, doors, safety, or people. I think back to that, and realize where I am, and how this will end up. I think about page lengths. I think about 10 pages, 20 pages, perhaps, 30 pages, if I’m lucky. I think about what I’ll do with this. Lastly, I think about how this is just going to the library, the small library at my small university. Read by a few, ignored by many.

The girl opens the door—sunshine. The heavy door moves right and opens to us. I stand behind her as she closes the door. I say, “Thank you. I really appreciate this.” She nods in agreement and says nothing. We walk back to the front door, back to where everything almost fell apart, back to Leti, the Madame. I’m standing outside of the front door, my notepad and pen in my hand—just in case. A dirty yellow taxicab pulls up in front of me. The driver gets out, walks around the hood of his car to his passenger seat, and opens the door. He’s excited. He’s
wearing dark glasses, and a silk shirt, the kind you’ll find men wearing on a Saturday night in downtown Tijuana. His sweaty dark skin glows. He’s hopping around, smiling looking past me. He opens his passenger door for his passenger. A tall white man with blue jeans, blue shirt, dark sunglasses, yellow hair, wrinkles around the top of his eyebrows. The taxicab driver walks in front of him. They both begin walking towards me; they’re ignoring me. The taxicab driver walks right into the place, talks to a few people. The white man is standing in front of me.

He’s standing. He’s ignoring me. I contemplate asking him if he would talk to me. I’d get both sides of the experience. I’d ask him why he comes here, what he expects, if he goes to other places, what his story is, and what’s his relation to the border. If we were to talk, I wonder where we would talk. I wonder if it would be appropriate. I wonder if I’d be overdoing my stay, my privilege. I decide against it. Right when I decide against it, the sweaty taxi driver comes back. He grabs the white man and tells him to come in. They both move along in front of me into the brothel. There are many people like him, taxi drivers who have contracts with brothels to bring in customers. The taxi drivers get a share of the money, that’s why they do it. Tourist will come in and ask to be taken somewhere for sex. This cab driver took him here.

I’m back at in line at the border, reading my newspaper, and talking to the guy behind me. It’s been a few hours since I left the brothel. I’m back outside under the sun, sweating a bit. The line at the border curls. Normally, it’s a straight line from the U.S border customs back into Mexican territory. Since there are so many people, the line curls across business, around poles, cops close it off, and it goes in various ways. The people structure the line’s order. As I’m standing there, I see the same white man walking down, the same one from the brothel. The same man that was standing in front of me is now walking in front of me. The same man I thought about talking to. I snatch a picture of him—the coincidence is overwhelming. I watch him as he
looks for the back of the line. He looks around, walks right beside me, cusses at the line being so long, a line tangled in ambiguous order. He finds the end. I can see him from where I’m standing. As he walks towards the end, other people reach it first. The slower he walks, the more people pile on the line. I can see a woman with three children walking to the end. I can see a short stocky bald man walking behind her. And behind him, there is a couple, walking, slowly talking about something. And, finally, behind them, is the white man. He gets to the end and stands. He is the end of the line. The line moves ahead of me. I try to walk and keep my eyes on him, to see what he does, to see whom he talks to, if anyone for that matter. He doesn’t. In a span of seconds, he no longer is the end of the line, but part of the line itself.

My original idea for this project revolved around being outside of school, outside of the institution, outside of the library. I wanted to do theory as an action, not jargon. I walked the streets of downtown Tijuana, and interacted with its attractions. I walked into a brothel in Tijuana, and heard oral histories from sex workers. I lived on the border for the greater part of my life. I think back to Leti. I think back to the last few words she told me. As I was standing there, waiting for her to come out, to thank her. I take out my wallet. I take out forty American dollars. I’m not sure what would be appropriate at this point, but I want to thank her for her trust. She comes out. I start moving my hand—cash ready—towards her. She says in the most polite way, “How was everything? Do you need to talk to another girl? Do you need anything else?” Surprised, I say, “No. Thank you, but here’s some money for their time.” She says, “No. No. No. Please, if you ever need to come back, just let us know. We’ll be happy to have you.” I put my money back. I thank her more times than I can remember. As I walk away, her big, soft body leans out of the brothel, onto the same wet pavement that a girl was cleaning earlier. She raises her hand to wave, smiles, and yells, “Stay in school!”
In *Tentative Exchanges: Tijuana Prostitutes and Their Clients* by Debra Castillo, Maria Gudelia, Rangel Gomez, and Armando Rosas a team of scholars collaborate to study prostitution’s role in Tijuana’s economy and reputation. Their study pulls from a variety of disciplines and sources to better understand cultural dynamics. Their project consisted of thirty in-depth interviews with Tijuanan prostitutes on the subject of AIDS/HIV and to test for blood samples for seropositivity. The study unveiled a high awareness of disease. Besides the health aspect, researchers found an intricate prostitution scene and an underground Internet prostitution community. The community is composed of men who connect and chat through the use of Internet listservs. Members of the listserv would recommend specific clubs, areas, restaurants, and, in particularly, women. The authors of the article give the example of Rosie from Chicago Club and a client whose screen name is “Señor Pendejo.” Mr. Pendejo comments on Rosie’s ease with the English language and general knowledge, “I’ve discussed everything from Gangsta Rap to Beavis and Butthead with Rosie” (Castillo 588). User “Oliver” states, “the idea that this was ‘the’ Rosie made me even more excited. On the way to the hotel, I told her I’d heard about her, ‘From the waiter?’ she asked. ‘No…uh…have you heard of the internet?’ She had of course’. After describing his sexual encounters with Rosie, he states, “Rosie asked me if I’d write about her on the Internet; I said of course, so here you have it. She wondered if any of her Internet fans were asking about her hair” (590). This discussion opened a realm for the researchers. It allowed them to analyze the situation in Tijuana as a type of metadiscourse.

Similarly, a type of metadiscourse is happening here too. The symbols and voices of the streets of Tijuana speak through this medium, the academic thesis. I think deeply about Leti’s final words—“Stay in school.” And I return to school with an experience. My research consisted of being out, of being with the abject I read about in Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*. Kristeva
states, “The border has become an object. How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you—it is now here, jetted, abjected, into “my” world” (4). The sex worker’s voice is still abjected, though the experience can’t be replicated. It can’t be reduced to simple binaries. It goes beyond the academic discourse into the public space. Jungles of symbolism and speech share spaces in Tijuana. Some symbols are locally constructed while others are tourist constructs. Some voices are paid to listen while other are paid to speak. The city is filled with intricacies on every corner, business, brothel, vendor, and person. The sexual tourist listserv works as a place to chat with other men. Other men take recommendations into consideration. Some women’s names are held in high regard while others are a glimmer on a screen. Men share stories, experiences, and admit unethical doings. Other men ask for advice. One user asks a very specific question about Tijuana. A veteran of the site answered, “The best way to do that is to go there” (288).
BIBLIOGRAPHY

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