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The Socially Polysemantic Border: Positionality and the Meaning of the Fence

By

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Short Title: The Socially Polysemantic Border

Abstract: This paper documents the experience of teaching college students how to rethink the border by doing fieldwork in El Paso, Texas. Students were asked to encounter the border fence through, for example, personal visits to a part of the borderline, journaling, photography, writing poetry, or creating multimedia. Classroom discussions before the assignments revealed that many students had not previously taken the time and effort to study their communities from a larger social, theoretical, and historical perspective. This article discusses the initial challenges and the overall pedagogical success of this approach by showcasing some of the student work reflecting on the border fence. The paper includes some of the insights that border residents have about the U.S.-Mexico border between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. These reflections and testimonies show how various individuals create different social meanings about the border region in general and the border fence in particular depending on their own positionality based on age, gender, ethnicity, language, and immigration experience. The border changes form along its distance and different actors interpret their encounters with it in diametrically different ways. The border is not a moving target but it manifests differently in the lives of border residents.
What do people who actually live in the border region have to say about it? Do residents of the border region have a different sense of what “the border” entails from those who live far from it? Data comes from an exploratory project conducted in a sociology class on “Methods of Research” in the spring of 2013, where I asked students who live in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border region to engage with these issues and questions. After recognizing the importance of questioning and investigating international borders, students began to demonstrate this understanding in their discussion and projects. What emerges is a multiplicity of understandings of the same place and social phenomena that I call “social polysemantics,” i.e., different social understandings of the same object of analysis. I use this term to communicate the parable of the blind men and the elephant, where, depending on what part of the elephant the men touched (the leg, trunk, ears, etc.), they would provide different descriptions. Yet pasted together, these different points of view paint a realistic and complex picture of the U.S.-Mexico border around the El Paso del Norte Region. By reading about the manner in which their classmates approach the same object of study, students were able to expand their reflexive and critical thinking skills. Despite the socially polysemantic understandings that resulted from this collective research project, it was important for students to engage with the border empirically rather than relying on the popular discourse on the topic.¹

Popular media often conflate Hispanic immigration, border crossings, and crime. For example, the TV series *The Bridge* and Scott Ridley’s *The Counselor* are placed in El Paso and focus on crime. But, as anthropologist Howard Campbell argues, while it is important to study and discuss narco-culture and crime in Ciudad Juárez, this does not represent “Mexican or border culture as a whole.”

This paper does not focus on border violence or drug trafficking except in the few instances when students mention it. Contrary to what outsiders may imagine, drug trafficking does not have a direct impact on the daily lives of most people in El Paso, Texas, yet many college students bring into the classroom the prejudices and normative judgments prevalent in their social circles and are influenced by dominant social discourses regarding migration and the U.S.-Mexico border region. For example, students may hold negative views about undocumented immigrants and the U.S.-Mexico border itself. This is also the case in classrooms located in the border region; in this case, those of the University of Texas at El Paso.

When I teach, one of my goals is to increase students’ understandings of how the situations in which people find themselves can be influenced by dynamics outside of their control, thus increasing both the students’ capacity for empathy as well as their understanding of the complexity of social stratification. Professors in the social sciences often try to develop this understanding by assigning academic readings that include structural, contextual, and historical approaches. But even if students do well on assignments and exams it may be difficult for them to fully grasp these insights and to connect at a human level with the population under study. I have found that the best way to change preconceptions about stigmatized topics is direct personal interaction with stereotyped “others”

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3 *The Bridge* is a remake of Danish-Swedish crime drama series *Broen/Bron* and follows the plot of the original series.


contextualized within a university course. The ultimate goal is to provide the space and tools for students to be critical of given categories and create new understandings and meanings themselves. I hope to change the stereotypes that people around the world have of the border as a place of high criminality and unregulated immigration, and a good place to start is to give the border a more positive connotation for people who live next to it.

Sociologist Pablo Vila also had as a goal to change the understanding that interviewees in El Paso/Juárez region had of “the other.” He did this by first eliciting common perceptions as responses to photographs from the region and then at a later day re-interviewing respondents while having a dialogue where he would confront respondents’ answers about border residents with data that contradicted their views. He often saw people would change their narratives about “others” cohabiting in the border region, while at other times respondents would rely on common plots and preconceptions to justify their original responses. Vila presented photos to his interviews in order to elicit narratives about identity and the worth and morality of border residents; however, in this paper students took their own photos in order to show what the border meant to them visually or experientially. This is similar to the photovoice methodology where poor, vulnerable, marginal, or stigmatized populations are given disposable cameras to document their everyday life. In this case, most students had access to standalone digital cameras or to cameras in their smart phones, yet the principle is the same as in photovoice: to present photographs of symbolic landscapes or the places they went for this assignment.

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7 For a similar discussion on empowering poor people within the prison system see Doran Larson, “Abolition from Within: Enabling the Citizen Convict,” *Radical Teacher* 91, no. 1 (2011): 4-15.
The subject of study in this paper was not identity, as in the case of Vila, but the meaning that border residents place on the border region and the border fence in particular.

This article draws from a one-semester experience teaching college students at a budding public research university to better understand the communities in which they live, in this particular case, El Paso, Texas. For sociological courses on “Migration” and “Methods of Research,” I require students to practice different methods in order to appreciate by themselves the strengths and weaknesses of each method. The methods used in assignments include non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and surveys among vulnerable populations within the local community. The groups studied so far include Hispanics, undocumented immigrants, homeless people, and public housing residents. The research projects include questions concerning the uniqueness of El Paso as a border city, the realities of and barriers to border transnationalism, the experience of being an immigrant in El Paso, barriers and access for Spanish speakers, and how to measure homelessness. As class discussions before the assignments revealed, many students had not previously taken the time and effort to study their communities from a larger social, theoretical, and historical perspective. These assignments provided avenues for them to learn how to do so and for teaching researchers interested in the local community more about it.

The students enrolled at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) are most often of Hispanic background with family immigration experiences, many of whom are first generation college students, and many of whom work, are older than is usual at private institutions, commute, and have families of their own. The demographics of the class that contributed for this paper was the following: fifty students were enrolled in the class, and of the forty-nine respondents to a classroom demographics survey, 93.9% had been in college for three years or more; 20.3% were married, in a marriage-like relationship or divorced; 72.9% of them were born in El Paso and 8.3% in Ciudad Juárez; 79.6%
reported speaking Spanish; 81.6% self-classified as Hispanic, 8.2% as non-Hispanic White, 10.2% as other and none as black. Although a majority of the students were Hispanic they were very heterogeneous in terms of immigrant generation.

**The Border in the Classroom**

Teaching about borders in the classroom is not an easy endeavor. First of all, one has to overcome the “common sense” belief that international borders are natural and necessary. International borders are the results of war and historical contention, and they are important for the functioning of modern governments and national projects, but they are historically contingent. Culture, ideas, and people have rarely been kept from traveling by political borders drawn in treaties. Understanding national societies as self-contained boxes with clear boundaries is what Charles Tilly called one of the
“pernicious postulates” of social theory, a widespread conceptualization that hinders rather than advances social scientific analysis.\textsuperscript{10} Defining and describing what borders truly are is a difficult task. Historically, the U.S.-Mexico border has been framed in the national imagination as “the West,” “the frontier,” and as a destination for personal wealth and imperial expansion. Contemporarily, the debate surrounding undocumented migrants colors the image of the border. Media coverage in the last decades often reproduced the image of a Mexican-born man jumping over the border fence in a deserted area.\textsuperscript{11} The media campaigns by the Minutemen, right-wing extremists, and similar groups further give credence to the fantasy of an immediate need to “secure the border.”\textsuperscript{12}

The militarization of the border paradoxically coincided with a growing discourse about globalization. As sociologist Harel Shapira writes, for border residents:

Globalization means that you can’t go into Mexico to get your teeth cleaned without a passport. It means that every time you want to go to the grocery store you need to pass a checkpoint. It means having to negotiate your relationships to a security and surveillance apparatus. It means that suddenly your identity, as a citizen, as an American, as a community member, becomes organized around the border… We tend to take the border as a given, timeless and permanent. But it is not. The border has a history; it is an ongoing project, and until the government’s recent interventions you would be hard-pressed to find something that looked like a border in Adobe, either as a physical object or as an idea organizing social relations. For centuries, the border existed as an abstract political and jurisdictional reality; however, until the past two decades it had neither a prominent physical presence nor a profound effect on the everyday lives of local residents. As a longtime resident recalls: “For as far back as I can remember, people from these parts were going back and forth across the border. Hell, wasn’t even a border to really cross. You’d walk into Mexico without knowing it.” Ambiguity, however, has given way to rigidity; openness to closure.\textsuperscript{13}

The border as a fenced and patrolled area is a new reality indeed. Yet a historical remnant remains alive today: the image of the border as an empty inhabited desert. As Josiah Heyman writes,

> While there are broad areas of consensus among border actors, there is not a uniform set of opinions and experiences… [Yet] In US national discourse, the border is generally treated as an uninhabited location of national concerns and policies delineated across abstract geographic space (Nevins 2002). The only relevant persons are transitory crossers who are deemed subject to official examination and enforcement. It is not envisioned as a region with a large, settled population, with interests, opinions, and rights, commensurate with all other people in the United States. Of course, policy makers, public administrators, and specialists recognize the complexity of border flows and the importance of US-Mexico relations, but the dehumanized view of the border captures the essence of how the border is perceived and acted on. Even national actors who should know better are constrained by the political discourse of an “empty border.”

Border residents are often socially invisible in the interior and their voices are rarely heard; therefore, it is particularly important to give voice to border residents so they can participate in national discussions about the border.

**Resident Voices**

Following are some of the student responses that show how students grappled with the assignment to go to a place where the United States and Mexico’s political boundaries touch. In order to uphold their voices, their statements have been edited only slightly. For reasons of space, in this paper I only show the input from 30% of the students. The passages were selected for heterogeneity and to represent the most common sentiments expressed.

I start with the written response from Jaime Harris, a thirty-seven-year-old White woman, who has lived in El Paso for two years,

> I was surprised when the assignment was given, to realize that we hadn’t even considered the fence as another cultural landmark to visit while we were in El Paso.

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After some thought I’ve come to the conclusion that I see the fence in a much different way than almost every other landmark. In my experience, the fence has very negative associations. It’s a place to be avoided, an off-limits area. A place associated with those who break the law. Criminals interact with the fence, not law abiding citizens. So I’ll admit that I was a little nervous about taking my children to the fence since it’s a location that is routinely patrolled by law enforcement. However, I realized when the assignment was given, that I had to take my kids. This was a location with a lot of things to teach us, and an opportunity to really test the lessons that I hope I’ve been teaching my kids all their lives. We drove to a spot on the side of the highway where we could pull over and interact with the fence.

The first thing that I noticed when we arrived was the different reactions from my two children. My youngest [10] seemed curious and a little confused. My oldest [13] was very anxious. In this photo he is looking back down the highway and insisting that we should leave. At thirteen he seems to already have the same impression of the fence that I do and is very uncomfortable being there. He is very concerned that the police are going to come and arrest us if we don’t leave. And truly, with a large fence, barbed wire, flood lights every 20 feet, and what looks like a moat, it’s hard to fault his logic. It is not an inviting atmosphere.


As a member of the military, Jaime’s family has lived and visited over twenty-three countries. She took her family to visit the Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz, Poland, and the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea, yet until this assignment it never occurred to her to set foot next to the border fence between the United States and Mexico. Despite living and studying in El Paso, Jaime acknowledged the negative connotations that she has about the borderline itself. Yet once the
assignment was announced she immediately recognized the pedagogical opportunity it presented for her children. The visit prompted important questions about America’s self-identity as an open society and one welcoming of immigrants. Jaime writes how, despite being White American citizens with military parents, when “a border patrol car drove past us very slowly, it scared them both so we left.” If this presence was scary for them, one must imagine how this may feel for Hispanics and for undocumented people. This narrative exemplifies all the fear and negative emotions that the fence brings for natives and immigrants.

Photo by Daniel Delgado

An El Paso native may have strong feelings about the neighboring city, Ciudad Juárez, in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, but most of the time they forget it exists. It is hard to explain to outsiders how naturalized the international border has become for people in the region who often do not think much about it. As the statements below show for many inhabitants of El Paso, Texas, the border does
not mean their city or their neighborhood, but the actual buffer zone around the river and the international boundary land-posts including the border fence. For others it means “the other side.” As my student Daniel Delgado wrote for the class,

This image is the El Paso I have come to know my whole life. We are a unique city, not only because we are a majority of Latinos, but because we share a border with Juárez, Mexico. I was asked to write about my experience going to the border. This was something I was never really comfortable with since I had only gone there a handful of times as a child and a couple more as a teenager.

Photo by Teresa Anchondo

A different view is introduced by Teresa Anchondo,

I graduated high school in 2002, at this time it was safe to go to Juárez. Of course my parents would try to fill me with stories of girls getting kidnapped and so on, but I never really paid any heed, because I knew this wouldn’t happen to me. I would always attribute a girl getting kidnapped in Juárez with something that she had done wrong on her part. All the same my friends and I would go and I never really felt a need to worry. We would typically walk over from Downtown and walk back later that night.

I moved to San Jose [California] a couple years later, and that was when there was a war brewing in Mexico, at least that was all I ever heard from the media I was being fed. Yet, one could not deny that Juárez was losing its identity with the constant discovery of mass graves, drugs, and dead bodies. I was worried for my parents and told them to start thinking about moving closer to me or my brother. They, of course, had the same attitude I had as a teenager - they knew nothing would happen to them.

I moved back to El Paso to finish college in 2011, and since then I have never felt the need to venture into Juárez. Before this assignment, the only interaction I had
with that side was with the students in the university who still reside there and with the view I see of it from across I-10.

As I was getting closer and closer to the bridge I found myself becoming nervous. I realized that I felt like this because I was in a place I did not understand. I live in a border city, but never have to deal with the border. The people that I saw, as we got closer and closer to the bridge, all seemed to be a bit rushed, I figured this was because they were either trying to catch the bus or were on their way to some job. When we got to the bridge, I realized that it was much different than I remembered. It looked quite nice, much different than the one I used to cross as an adolescent.

Photo by Teresa Anchondo

In this narrative Teresa, a Mexican American, also talks about her apprehension about the fence and the international bridges. She accepts her inability to understand the border and what it means sociologically. After going to this international bridge she was surprised to find the place nicer in reality than in her mind. It is telling that even though her family is from Mexico, and despite the fact that she speaks perfect Spanish and that she used to visit there as a child, as a college student she rarely thinks about crossing into Mexico. While she has a very different background from Jaime, both share an apprehension and avoidance of the border area next to the fence.
Photo by Valeria Mejia
Out of Mind out of Sight – on the Invisibility of the Border for Urban Border Residents

“The border” is very different in urban areas, with its designated crossing sites like ports and bridges, than it is in more rural and unpopulated areas. Lately, national discussions about the border focus on sparsely populated areas in the desert where groups of undocumented immigrants cross. Yet in larger cities like El Paso, many other things occur at the border besides building fences and seeing people cross. As Jessica Duarte wrote for the assignment,

The border and Ciudad Juárez is right next to us in El Paso, Texas and yet the border is not something we think about in our daily lives. Thousands of individuals come and go through the border every day as part of their daily routine, everyone crossing back and forth having different experiences and different purposes. Unfortunately, crossing the border daily has gotten more difficult each year… therefore individuals who cross from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso wait long periods of time in line in order to be able to cross. Inspection takes longer which means crossing the border takes longer. Individuals are affected by this because most of the people who cross do it for work and school purposes. Personally I do not cross the border very often. I try to avoid crossing the border due to the long waiting periods to cross. Security in Juárez has improved throughout the years, but it is still something that frightens me. At the end of the day I only cross to visit my family and that’s about it. I think it is very amazing how the lives of individuals can be so different on each side of the border. I visit Ciudad Juárez and the building structures, the housing, the colonias, the food, the culture, and even the people are very different. It surprises me how a division of one fence can have people be so different. Then I come back to El Paso and I compare and notice the buildings, the people, the food, the government and it simply amazes me how different things can be... On the other hand I am proud of what the Mexican culture has brought into the United States. It has brought culture, religion, and beliefs that till this day Mexican Americans celebrate and cherish.

In her narrative Jessica tries to grapple with the many visible differences on both sides of the border but also with the many similarities in terms of natural environment and the influence of Mexican culture. Jessica understands how individuals are shaped differently by the border. Some people cross everyday despite the long lines and bureaucratic demands, while others cross very rarely and can forget they live
in a border city. In the quote below, Gabriel Fontan, another student, writes about how the border can become invisible,

As I drove aimlessly towards what I hoped was the border, I couldn’t help but become aware of how forced my actions were. This was not something I would have done freely; I had not seen the border in more than ten years. Maybe a little bit of an exaggeration but what I mean is that [given the assignment] I wasn’t just passing by it, I had to take notice. The thought that kept coming back to me was of looking back into your blind spot while driving. Though a narrow metaphor, it highlights the behavior in which we are forced to look in a direction that doesn’t come naturally. The last time I noticed the border was back when I was 19 and was going to the Juárez strip to go partying and get drunk…

Gabriel poetically captures this reality of the border becoming invisible or irrelevant to locals, even for Hispanics. He writes about the invisibility of the border comparing it to a blind spot while driving: the border fence is there, yet it is not socially visible to the American driver unless one makes the effort to see it. The border is taken for granted, and with the increase in violence in Ciudad Juárez, many wish to forget about it. The fence and heavy policing of it has ironically facilitated this covering of “the other side.”

The Border Fence as the Container of Arbitrariness

As student Daniela Lizarraga wrote, students and scholars know the real and symbolic polysemantic nature of the border. The everyday life in a border city is very multicultural, yet the boundary making mechanisms take on a life of their own that is hard to stop or fight against.

The border is a strange, entirely artificial creation: more of a concept than an actuality. When you think about it, it’s almost childish, even; like two children drawing a line down the middle of their room to prevent further bickering. Unless the squabbling children are divided from one another, conflict will inevitably follow… The physical space of the border also seems rather arbitrary: at times, it is marked by chain-link fences and barbed wire, while others it is merely the sad trickle of what we call the Rio Grande. The boundary that divides the countries, though, was not forged in such an arbitrary manner. Wars were fought and an abundance of blood was spilt in pursuit of staking a claim on the expanse of dirt. While some might find the divide peculiar and
random, its history belies the idea with a long, convoluted past of violence and death. Like most, if not all borders, ours is one created by men’s thirst for power and the sacrifice of human lives.

The disparity in the seriousness with which different people cross the border is striking as well: from a childhood friend who was smuggled over in the trunk of her step-father’s car, to the people who can walk confidently over the bridge thanks to a scrap of paper declaring it legal, to the ones who hop, swim, or dash over the border under the shelter of night. It is strange too, how much easier it is to cross over into Juárez than it is to come back. For those who seek a livelihood across the border from Mexico to the United States, the border is a real, palpable thing; an adversary of sorts that must be overcome. For some, it has been a pursuit that cost their life savings or even their own lives when the Coyote that promised them everything betrayed them. For most American citizens, it is an annoying inconvenience, a pit stop along the way to partying in Juárez or vacationing on a beach, or perhaps a hindrance to visiting their relatives who remain in Mexico. Yet, we all take this border for granted, talk about it as if it were a real, physical construct instead of an abstract concept. Of course, there are people who want to make it into a real barrier as well. They perceive the possibility of illegal immigrants as one might a plague, and wish to build a great wall between our countries, or to line the border with armed guards willing to shoot on sight. Others simply accept the border for what it is to their daily lives, and spend hours every day crossing the bridge and back to get to and from work, or to visit family. The idea that a border can legitimately separate you from your family, that it can rightfully do so, is bizarre, but is taken as a matter of fact for many.

Daniela Lizarraga takes an ontological and critical view of the border, while accepting the cruel effect it has on the lived experience of millions of people. The border is a physical reality with real world consequences, especially for people without migration papers, even while from a theoretical and socio-historical perspective the border is a construct, a “line in the sand.”

The View from the Mexican-Side

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Sign in border mural reads in Spanish, “There are also dreams on this side.” Photo by Eric Mateo.

The meaning of the border and the border fence are somewhat different for people socialized or living in Ciudad Juárez. As many students wrote, for people in Ciudad Juárez the border fence is a big “You are not welcome” sign. Yet the people who can, and have to cross back and forth, do, as Eric Mateo describes,

The ports of entry are full of people doing all kinds of stuff. There are people who want to go to school, people who want to want to get work, people who work on the bridge, people who are going to visit their loved ones, or simply people who want to hang out in a different country. The only trait that could be predicted is that most of the people crossing the bridge are Hispanic. Thousands and thousands of people cross everyday yet I wonder how many people who live in El Paso have never crossed the bridge. I cross everyday to attend college. A thought that disturbs me is to comprehend that it only takes me 25 cents to get to El Paso, and to many others the cost to cross is their life.
Eric Mateo artfully writes about how difficult it is to understand how someone like him can cross back and forth and pay twenty-five cents to do so, while others who would gladly pay this toll, cannot do it because they lack the appropriate papers. The consequences could not be larger: Eric can live a transborder life accessing the best in both countries while others have to choose a side and if they cross they may risk their life, their liberty, or the ability to return south at ease. The belief that everyone has a precarious life in Ciudad Juárez and further south, and that everyone would like to cross into the U.S. if they could, is simply false. Many people including those with papers visit and go shopping in the U.S. but prefer to live in Mexico.

The testimony of Itzel Rosales speaks to this frequent crossing back and forth,

I was born in El Paso but I have lived all my life in Juárez. Since I was about 13 years old I have studied in El Paso and although it was a strange experience for me to cross the border bridge every day, I have gotten used to it. When I was younger I did not know anything about citizenship and the difference between U.S. and Mexican citizens. I did not understand why some people were treated differently. Over the years that I have crossed the border on a daily basis, I have seen the difficulties people endure, such as having to wait in the sun, becoming dehydrated, and even fainting. After the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers, the wait time in the lines became ridiculous, but people still had to cross to go to work and school. I don’t blame the customs officials for these difficulties, because they were just doing their jobs. They had to check every car from the front all the way to the back. During this time many people from Juárez moved to El Paso, as this was easier than spending more than two hours waiting in line to cross every day. I think this also had an impact to the economy of El Paso, as many people were tired of waiting and stayed home rather than coming here to shop or visit family. We also have family here in El Paso and my parents used to come every weekend to visit them, but after the 9/11 that changed. Now they only come about once a month because they hate waiting in line so long, and dealing with the racism of the U.S. customs agents. Recently, with many rumors of guns being taken into Juárez, even more security on the bridges has been implemented. This has caused changes in how crossing occur, as now people that travel from El Paso to Juárez have to wait in line too.
Different Words for the Same Object

The opinion and the terms used to describe the physicality of the border as either a fence or a wall depend on the background of the person and the side of the border with which she identifies. For international students who cross often, the border is a door to a new world, as well as a wound in the ground and in the Mexican collective memory. Sometimes these different approaches to the border can only be communicated in Spanish as in the case of Laura López who wrote an interesting analysis of the terms used to define the border divide. Laura writes,
I find it interestingly revealing that the word we use to refer to this barrier changes from country to country. “Border fence” has a softer connotation, lighter and less invasive. The translation of the word fence into Spanish is cerca, however, in Mexico it is more common to say muro (wall) to refer to this physical division between the two countries. The term “wall” contains connotations totally contrary to the term “fence”; a wall is solid, immovable, hard, heavy, made to separate permanently two spaces. While a fence presupposes a transient or temporary action, an object that can be brought down, that is not there to stay. Could it be that the different points of view between Mexican and Americans about this barrier are so contrary that the words we use reveal our rivalries?

In Ciudad Juárez, I always lived in a house that is located about a block from the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande). As a child, I remember going so far on my bicycle that I did not notice that I was no longer in Mexican territory… That huge piece of steel that we call muro or fence, is simply a physical object which in itself has no power to dictate laws. However is the most emblematic and powerful element that exists to symbolize the interaction between the two countries and the way that this division is lived differently depending on the social situation in question.”

In the paragraphs above Laura makes the important point that in English people use the word fence to refer to the built divide between the two neighboring countries while in Spanish the equivalent of wall is used to describe it. The structure is closer to a fence than a wall yet the words used also show how “fence” can be seen as transparent since you can see across while the image of a wall makes references to castles, the Chinese Great Wall, and the Berlin Wall. Laura writes about how as a child playing outdoors in Ciudad Juárez she would sometimes venture into American territory unknowingly. The border was open and both cities were very safe.

Analyzing in Verse

16 “Me parece interesantemente revelador que la palabra que usamos para referirnos a dicha barrera cambia de país a país. Border fence tiene una connotación más suave, ligera y menos invasiva. La traducción de fence al español es cerca, sin embargo, en México es común decir muro para referirmos a esta división física entre los dos países. La palabra muro contiene tonalidades totalmente contrarias a fence/cerca, un muro es sólido, inamovible, duro, pesado, está hecho para separar permanentemente dos espacios. Mientras una fence/cerca supone una acción pasajera o temporal; un objeto que se puede derribar, que no llegó para quedarse. ¿Será que las diferencias en puntos de vista entre mexicanos y estadounidenses acerca de esta barrera son tan contrarios que las palabras que usamos delatan nuestras rivalidades? En Ciudad Juárez, siempre viví en una casa que se ubica a una calle del Río Bravo. De niña, recuerdo haber ido tan lejos en mi bicicleta que no me di cuenta que ya no estaba en territorio mexicano… ese pedazo gigantesco de acero al que llamamos muro o fence, es simplemente un objeto físico que en sí no tiene el poder de dictar leyes. Sin embargo es el elemento más emblemático y poderoso que existe para simbolizar la interacción entre los dos países y la manera en la que esta división se vive diferente dependiendo de la situación social en cuestión,” Laura Gomez
A few students chose to write poems. Other students opted to express themselves with videos and songs. In his video Alexander Balcazar shows views of Mexico that can be seen from the campus of the University of Texas of El Paso, while he sings his own version of a song called “La Frontera” remembering how growing up he would go on the weekend to the Sanborns’ dinner in Mexico for breakfast with his family. “Far away, so close,” Alexander sings, saying he has not crossed in years due to the drug violence that Ciudad Juárez has experienced in the past years.17

[Link and code to embed the video online,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1cDkBGbBk&feature=youtu.be /<iframe width="420" height="315" src="http://www.youtube.com/embed/E1cDkBGbBk" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen>]

Alexander sings in Spanish about this particular border asking for the line fence to come down so that we can have breakfast in the other side, a mundane reality a few decades back. He correctly blames the drug violence for the decrease in common crossings for entertainment purposes.

**The Border as a Pass for Undocumented Immigrants**

It is true that for people living on the outskirts of border cities, everyday life can sometimes be interrupted by people migrating north making unannounced visits. How do some local Hispanics react to this? Manuel Mata offers one such insight,

Growing up I never thought about or even considered the impacts of living so close to another country and city. I have seen the results of what living so close to the city can bring, and this includes seeing and experiencing a number of times immigrants cross through our house and neighborhood moments after illegally crossing the border. One memory that really stands out to me was on Christmas Eve about ten years ago, my family and I heard some noise outside at night. When we went to go see what it was we

were all astonished, it was a family consisting of the mother, father, young son and daughter. We instantly knew who they were and what they were doing hiding in between tall grass. They immediately insisted for us not to call the police or border patrol, then they explained how they were being chased by the border patrol and that they haven’t eaten or drank anything that whole day. We knew we couldn’t do much to help because there are penalties for aiding criminals, but what we did do was give them tamales and something to drink and let them borrow the phone to call the person that was going to pick them up.

This story is very telling in that it exemplifies the ways in which a tranquil life in the borderlands can sometimes be punctuated by the sudden appearances of undocumented immigrants. In this case a family appearing on Christmas asking for shelter and help for the poor and wandering. Manuel writes about how his family was reluctant to help more because they could be punished by the authorities if they were discovered. Still, as good Samaritans they gave the family food and drink and let them use their phone. This is an example where empathy outweighed fear. If one stops to think, the immigrant family had much more to be afraid about than the people who lived there.

Alejandra Maldonado, who moved to the U.S. from Juárez as a child writes,

I had a vague notion of immigration policy as it pertained to the American side, but it was not until I actually saw with my own eyes a piece of the puzzle that made me wonder what was really going on…Driving along the border, I also drove along the fence that is supposed to keep illegal immigrants in their own side of the river. I saw border patrol agents on a daily basis patrolling along, riding their white and green trucks up and down, carefully inspecting the fence. I never actually saw anybody get caught…Then one day… I was driving along the border in the morning, almost near downtown El Paso, when I saw three individuals: a girl of about eight, a man well into his 40’s or 50’s, and a younger man of about 18 years of age. These individuals were running, obviously crossing the border illegally. The three of them hardly seemed dangerous, if anything, they seemed scared. I believe that they were a family by the way they were all holding hands. Then, in their hurry to run away from the fence and deeper into El Paso, the little girl fell down the dirt path where she was running, taking a hard hit and rolling down a couple of feet. The older man, whom I believe to be her dad, hurriedly picked her up by the hand and dragged her along. The little girl, now covered in dirt, limped a little and struggled, but tried to keep up with her companions. The scene broke my heart. I could think of absolutely nothing that would make people feel the need to hurry a hurt child up and run for it. In an ideal world, I thought, they would have been able to stop and check on the girl and tend to her, instead of putting her through that experience of making her run, fall, keep running. I wondered what she felt, if she understood what was going on. I felt bad for her, and felt ashamed of living in a city where people who stop to
help a hurt child would get in trouble for doing so. In that moment, for me the fence along our border, along a territory that used to belong to Mexico, started signifying shame and unfairness – the failure of human beings of being able to understand and help each other. The images that I see on my way to work every day are very complex: human beings hunting down other human beings (border patrol agents) and a fence that is meant to keep people within a city of violence and lack of opportunity.

In her text, Alejandra is quick to empathize with undocumented migrants and feels ashamed for being co-responsible for the manner in which they are criminalized. Alejandra is a former legal permanent resident who naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 2008. As an American now, she sometimes uses linguistic us/them boundaries when talking about documented vs. undocumented migrants and residents of El Paso vs. Ciudad Juárez; therefore talking to her I could see how she is internally conflicted since at different parts of her life she had possessed different passports. The borderline can indeed create split identities, especially when the dominant discourse emphasizes difference and attributes positive attributes to one side of the boundary and negative ones to the other. I am not implying that moving from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso always creates mental illness but it is indeed a source of stress and “identity insecurity”–not being sure where and in what category one belongs. As Alejandra elaborated on a re-interview, 18

I consider myself American most of the time, since it makes life easier for me as far as traveling and education here in the US goes. However, when I find myself among certain people, I definitely claim I am Mexican. When I lived in Australia and traveled in London, I could sense the tension against Americans and “pulled out” my Mexican identity. When I was in Germany, however, I was American all the way, I felt more secure that way. However, as I described in my essay, I do feel some shame sometimes when I identify myself as American. I can't help feeling pride in my country (Mexico) these days, when it is progressing, with the economy growing and all; I do get attacked by some fellow Mexican acquaintances, who call me “gringa” and feel I just go with what suits me at the time, like a hypocrite. This is partly true, but as they said in the “Selena” movie, a Mexican-American has to be more American than the Americans and more Mexican than the Mexicans, I feel I deserve a break like this. I literally feel confused between 2 different identities sometimes, and I feel trapped between 2 different judges: my Mexican family and my American expectations. The border is only

18 Vila, Crossing Borders.
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physical, unfortunately. I wish I could create a border like that in my personality! It would make things less confusing for me, I think.

As this description by Alejandra shows, the physical international border and its increased surveillance and stigmatization is something that is internalized by immigrants and border residents.

Photo by Danny Antunez
Danny Antunez, a Mexican American student writes about what border crossers meant for him as he was growing up on the northern side of the border,

Does this huge fence around the border make the border communities feel safer? To some yes it does make them feel safer than when there was no barrier between the two countries. Others like me never felt in danger or feel any safer than before… When I was sitting in my car as close as I could to the border it brought memories of growing up right near the border community of San Elizario which was a wonderful time for young children as we were… Fields of corn and cotton as far as the eye could see- this was looking out to the backyard. We lived on the last street on our little community, and we were at the time only about 15 minutes walking distance from the Rio Grande. As young boys, my brothers and I would venture off into fields and play games. Hide and seek was the best as there was endless fields that you could hide between. Also growing up by the border meant that we could go to the river. At that point in time there was about neck deep water for us young children and about waist deep water for grown adults. This water was a bit murky but still clear enough that you could spot fish and crawfish while standing by the edge of the water. The barrier that now covers all of the
city of El Paso and the southern towns in the county does not let anyone even come
within 20 feet of the river where most of our childhood fishing activities occurred. Not
only were we able to fish right out of the river itself but also we were able to go to the
Mexican side without any problems with the Border Patrol. I remember the days that we
used to cross over and just hang out as kids on the other side. Now if you hang out by
the wall the immigration patrol will surely come and question you as to what you are
doing and why.

Another memory I have from when the huge wall was not there was that all the
time you would see people that had just came from across the border would be walking
around during all hours of the day and night. They never really caused any major
trouble. They mostly just passed by, we would not talk to them and they would not talk
to us. In our community we would just let them be because most of us knew that those
had been our parents at some point in their lives. Now with the wall there, I have not
seen anyone like that on the streets. It has made a very significant difference… it has
stopped many people from entering this country that used to use that method of entry.
Now many are coming in through the desert in other states or further south in Texas
where there is no barrier up yet…Being a child born in the United States from illegal
immigrant parents makes me feel lucky that we had the chance to make it here with
some ease as compared to now when it is more difficult with the wall along the border
and the heightened security.

In this testimony the student Danny Antunez writes about how people did not feel insecure before the
building of the fence. In 1993, “Operation Hold the Line,” which was one of the first policies to patrol
the borderline itself, this operation was a popular action in El Paso partly because it meant a decrease
of policing and racial profiling inside El Paso.19 The militarization of the border and the construction of
the fence gained legitimacy after 9/11, especially in a city like El Paso adjacent to Fort Bliss, one of the
largest military bases in the world. Even after semi-sealing the border, the human dilemma remained of
how to deal with people who entered without permission and were undocumented, especially for those
in the classroom who crossed the border outside of customs posts themselves or know friends and loved
ones who did it.

Security-speech

Contrasting the humanitarian view of immigrants that many students have, many students including Hispanics and those born in Mexico also reproduced the security-oriented discourses about the need for a fence in order to protect America. As a part of the exercise Border Patrol agents were also humanized since many of the students started conversations with them while visiting the border and asking for information. I do not reproduce these discourses here for space reasons and because they abound in the media and the internet. Yet it is important to note that they were present in the assignments even next to contradictory points of view that asked for open borders in the same paragraph.

**Pedagogical Conclusion, the Effect of Community Fieldwork**

As the students’ contributions show, the misconceptions and stereotypes about the U.S.-Mexico border are not only prevalent away from the border and in Washington D.C. and Mexico City, but they are also present among border residents themselves. While there are no real rivers of people waiting to flow into the U.S., the hysteria of uncontrolled migration haunts residents of border areas. As the vignettes show this assignment forced students to confront their preconceived notions about the border fence and undocumented migrants. The exercise was transformative for everyone involved; it forced students to confront the complexity of the issue and helped them increase their empathy for undocumented people and for people south of the border who cannot cross even to visit or shop.

This simple assignment took some of the stigma out of space surrounding the border fence and thus helped decrease the fear students had. It also helped them de-stigmatize migrants, Hispanics, and border inhabitants, thus helping re-value themselves, their ancestors, their neighbors, their city and region. This type of field visit embodied actions and experiential assignments, engaging students with
the community where they study creating a transformative atmosphere, producing better informed citizens and critical thinkers, the main goal of a liberal arts education in the United States.

In this paper I have shown how a class assignment with a field component can initiate a reconceptualization about what the border is and means. While such an assignment is only possible in a border community, similar assignments can be made in other cities where students may be asked to go to ethnic neighborhoods and stigmatized spaces or to look into primary documents that represent firsthand the area under study. Doing fieldwork in the community challenged my students and I to leave the comfort of the classroom and challenge preconceived notions about stigmatized people and places. Students are much more likely to engage in critical thinking and to remember the lessons learned from this small hands-on research experience than they are to remember a lecture or a particular reading.

**The Polysemantic Border**

As the student assignments show, the border is a different thing for different people. For some people it is a place of insecurity, for others escaping violence or persecution it is a place of safety. Some see it as a place of engrained poverty but for prospective immigrants it is a place of wealth and unlimited possibilities. For some border residents, the border fence is a bleeding wound, for others a blind spot. For some the cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez are the same city with a large highway in the middle, for others they are two different planets. Even the border patrol can mean inconveniences for border crossers, panic for undocumented people, stable employment, and a road to the middle class for veterans and U.S. Hispanics. This paper shows how all these different understandings and social meanings are not based on different ontologies or epistemologies but in different personal trajectories and social positionality. The different narratives, descriptions, and definitions of the border are not the
result of laziness, half-truths or intentional cacophony, but they show what the border is and how it has an impact on the lives of individuals depending on legal status, class, gender and race rather than on a universal effect.

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