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HACIENDO FILA: CROSSING BORDERS AND NEGOTIATING ENTRANCE IN THE U.S. – MEXICO BORDERLANDS

BY ERIKA RENDÓN-RAMOS¹

The borderlands provide opportunities to legally cross the border on a regular basis, opening the door to a greater range of job, living, and educational possibilities. *Fronterizos* (borderlanders) are fluid migrants—they cross between Mexico and the United States on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. In Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas there is a constant flux of workers and students who are taking advantage of their unique position to be transnational citizens. *Fronterizos* seemingly always have one foot in each country; their lives are shaped by the existence of this international boundary. *Fronterizos* often spend hours daily “*haciendo fila*,” waiting in line, to cross the bridge. This article explores the troubles and processes of negotiating entrance in the borderlands and illustrates the complexity of border crossing.

My research is influenced by the works of, Pablo Vila, Josiah Heyman, and Oscar Martínez, among others. In “Narrative Identities: The Employment of the Mexican on the U.S.—Mexican Border,” Vila argues that the U.S.—Mexico has several borders “each of them the possible anchor of a particular process of identity construction.”² This is in response to scholars, like Gloria Anzaldúa, who tend to homogenize the border “as if it were only one border identity, border culture, or process of hybridization.”³ Vila states that he can easily identify at least four different border environments—one of which is the Lower Valley—Tamaulipas border. This is the border that I analyze in this article. Vila is correct to stress that one should not conflate a 2,000-mile borderland region as a homogenous environment because by doing so, one

overlooks the nuances in culture, crossing patterns, demography, and political identities, among others.

American anthropologist Josiah Heymen has written about capitalism and US policy at the border. One of the arguments he makes is that the “border is a key site for the total performance of differential mobility with two simultaneous agendas: broad class inequality reaching across borders and nation-to-nation inequality contained within borders.”⁴ As one will see, this is evident in the interviews I conducted as well. Interviewees noted feeling discriminated against at the border for various reasons but the most frequently cited were perceived class status and legal status. Heyman goes on to state, “Human mobility from Mexico into the United States must be viewed in the context of capitalism, but within that frame, it is multidimensional, unequal, diverse, and undergoing dramatic changes.”⁵ In a separate article, Heyman notes that inequality and discrimination on the border is impacted by local Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents and their individual worldviews.⁶ This is also observed by interviewees of this study who claimed that policy enforcement while crossing the border was arbitrary and dependent on luck and the agent’s mood.

Historian Oscar Martínez published the first collective experience of borderlanders entitled, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.—Mexico Borderlands*. He argues that borderlanders “live in a unique human environment shaped by physical distance from central areas and constant exposure to transnational processes” (1994, xvii). This is at the heart of my study; geography dictates ones immigration experience and is the root of why persons who are in a continual state of movement in the borderlands are able to remain tied to both countries.

The Brownsville—Matamoros twin-cities epitomize the borderlander, or *fronterizo*, experience with perpetual interaction; they function as “unified entities despite the division imposed by the international boundary.”⁷ Economic dependency has created “many opportunities for borderlanders to establish social relationships across the boundary as well, allowing significant cultural transfer to take place.”⁸ Martínez calls for a visualization of the border as a “zone of overlapping territoriality” because despite the political boundaries, border people rarely confine themselves to a particular side.⁹ Demographically, economically, linguistically, and culturally the United States—Mexico borderlands are an extension of one another. The twin-cities of Brownsville-Matamoros are

truly bi-cultural and made up of hundreds of thousands transnational citizens. In Brownsville, 94% of citizens are Hispanic and it is estimated that 29.9% are foreign-born—predominately from Mexico.¹⁰ Borderland identity is an amalgam of the various cultural groups that intermingle in this region.

In *Continental Crossroads* Samuel Truett and Elliot Young touch upon the pluralistic identities that exist in the borderlands, stating, “[w]hen we look at identity in the borderlands, what we find is not a simple story of Mexicans on one side and North Americans on the other, or even a simply story of South—North or East—West relationships. Instead, we discover a multiplicity of overlapping and competing histories.”¹¹ This understanding of borderlands is used widely in current scholarship that seeks to blur the lines that previously confined borderlands historiography. The pull towards a transnational analysis is facilitating a wider examination of how borderlands have been intertwined. The interwoven cultural and identity described by Truett and Young’s is the bi-culturalism that thrives in Brownsville-Matamoros. The testimonies of borderlanders in this article demonstrate the extent to which their lives and identities are a fusion of United States, Mexican, and borderlands culture. Oral history is a key component of this study—capturing the lived experiences and testimonies of border crossers. As oral historian Donald A. Ritchie states, “By adding an ever-wider range of voices to the story, oral history does not simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex—and more interesting.”¹²

Border Crossing and Political/Economic Events

The U.S.—Mexican border is the world’s longest between a highly industrialized country and a developing one—nearly 2,000 miles, which covers four U.S. and six Mexican states. The two countries feature distinct differences in economic development, language, political and legal systems, culture, and race.¹³ One would assume that these differences would clash at the border, but it is far more complex than that assumption allows. Border cities are, in general, peripheral and far from the core region of the country and its main cities. Thus I believe they serve as a type of “grey area.” Border crossing facilitates a constant exchange and interaction of language and culture between the two countries, which blurs the sharp contrasts that one would imagine.

The cultures bleed into one another in a way that makes *fronterizos* feel comfortable in either country. Jan Buursink states, “[s]een superficially, a pair of border cities consists of two separate but almost adjacent cities on either side of a national border. The cities create the impression that they, in some way or another, form one contiguous urban area—one city.”¹⁴ While Brownsville—Matamoros do not physically *look* like one city, people move fluidly between the two, as if they are one.

This fluidity is interrupted every so often by the occurrence of local, national, and international events. Events that are out of *fronterizos* control, and often events that are far-removed from the border, can dictate their desire to cross the border and the manner in which they do so. This is evident through the evolution of border crossing strategies that are constantly being adapted to reflect changes by both the United States and Mexican government. For example, Oscar Garcia, 60, an electrical engineer, was raised in Matamoros. Until Mexico’s economic downturn in the 1980s, border-crossing daily for work did not appeal to him. The debt crisis of 1982 was, in part, the “fallout of the large and rising fiscal deficit that accompanied the oil bonanza between 1978 and 1981.”¹⁵ The poor and the middle class were hit the hardest by the crisis as average wages and income continued to fall. The crisis pushed Oscar’s parents to become naturalized U.S. citizens during Reagan’s amnesty and while he had the option to be naturalized as well, he was satisfied with his border-crossing card. At the time he was an educator at the local university in Matamoros and also had contract positions with various high schools. He stated that he was making three or four times as much money working in Matamoros than he could have made in the United States, therefore border crossing for a job was unnecessary. Oscar imagines that he would have remained working in Matamoros were it not for Mexico’s severe economic downturn. When the devaluations started hitting the economy, it no longer benefitted him to work in Matamoros and he began his search for work in the United States. He was offered a job and immediately began paperwork to become a U.S. resident since his border-crossing card did not grant him permission to work in the United States. His wife was an American citizen so it was not difficult to receive his residency card. In Oscar’s case, Mexico’s financial crisis pressured him to find an alternative in the United States that would provide stability for himself and his family. Living on the border provided him opportunities that extended beyond the confines of the nation-state.

Fronterizos often have their schedule for crossing the border down to a perfect science based on anticipated wait times on the bridge. However, every so often a national or international crisis wreaks havoc on this ‘perfect science.’ One example is the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. The 9/11 attack ignited a wave of fear on the border which manifested itself through unprecedented revision protocols at the bridge. In the aftermath of 9/11 the federal government linked the protection of national security to immigration screening and enforcement.¹⁶ This emphasis on national security quickly seeped into U.S. immigration laws, policies, and agencies. Deepa Iyer and Jayesh M. Rathod state that a defining feature of post- 9/11 immigration policy has been the “heightened scrutiny of those who seek to enter the United States”—essentially controlling entry into the country.¹⁷ Not long after 9/11, “the federal government tightened the process of issuing temporary visas to tourists, business issuing overseas posts *and* at ports of entry in the United States.”¹⁸ Thus, border crossers were immediately impacted by these changes as most were seeking entry into the United States on a daily basis.

Olga Olmos, born and raised on the border, shared her memories of crossing the border immediately after 9/11 saying,

Yes, you would take an hour to cross, at a standstill in line because it became more difficult with the revisions. What did they revise? Well, everything up to what you didn’t have and you’d try to cross with as little as possible so that you’d lose less time being revised . . . after 9/11 the lines became longer, more time consuming. I remember that, especially with 9/11, that everything caused fear. Because they were suspicious of everyone and everything. And on some level, you understood the fear, right?¹⁹

Although fear was an issue all over the United States post-9/11, *fronterizos* experienced it in a unique way; *fronterizos* were reminded on a daily basis that the space they were living in was unsafe. They were not terrorists but they were scrutinized and treated with suspicion as the federal government attempted to secure the borders. While on the whole, the government crackdown profiled Arabs, Muslims, and Sikhs—in the borderlands, everyone was scrutinized (Hing 2006, 195). An attack that happened thousands of miles away impacted the ease of fluid border

crossing and altered the schedules of *fronterizo* commuters. Crossing the border on weekday mornings had always been a time consuming task in the memories of the people I interviewed but it became more taxing post-9/11. It made people think twice about crossing with unnecessary items because it would lead to a delayed initial revision and possibly a secondary extensive revision.

Another woman, Jimena Cantu, also born and raised on the border, discussed how even though she was not connected to anyone who suffered through the attacks in New York City or Washington, D.C., she felt the effects of the attacks in Brownsville-Matamoros. Like Olga, she commented on the thorough inspections at the border and the additional delays. It was not convenient to cross for entertainment, shopping, or leisure in the months that followed 9/11. In time, the situation normalized and inspections returned to their less invasive standard but nevertheless, the effects of this event left an impression in the minds of *fronterizos*. Additionally, while there were immediate noticeable impacts of 9/11 on the border, there were also permanent changes with new federal legislation in response to the terrorist attacks.

In 2007 the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) law came into effect on the border, requiring all travelers to show proof of citizenship with a passport or birth certificate.²⁰ This initiative was created through the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Prior to the WHTI persons crossing into the United States from Mexico or Canada simply needed to verbally confirm their U.S. citizenship without showing any identification. If the border patrol agents had reason to doubt one's citizenship they could ask to see a driver's license for verification. These changes were implemented in January 2009 for foot passengers and private automobiles. Even though several years' notice was given to *fronterizos* about the new requirements, there was an adjustment period where both border crossers and border agents had to become accustomed to the protocols, causing further backlogs with traffic. It made the lines at the bridge longer and unpredictable as people tested the enforcement of the law and attempted to continue crossing without proper documentation. Eventually these backlogs subsided but in the interim, *fronterizos* suffered the timely consequences. This law serves as an example of the federal government's reach in the borderlands.

While federal policies often dictate *fronterizo* movement, local events can be equally troublesome. Sergio lived in Matamoros his entire life and never had any interest in moving to Brownsville. He lived in Matamoros from 1978 to 2009 and even after he married an American citizen, they chose to live in Matamoros. Both Sergio and his wife worked in Brownsville but the cost of living was overwhelmingly more affordable in Mexico. Sergio described their decision to move to Brownsville in 2009 as one of necessity due to the increasing drug-cartel related violence. He knew too many people who died in the crossfire of gunfire because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. He also knew people who were targeted by drug lords because of their economic and social status and feared raising his family in such an unpredictable and unsafe environment. The more he and his wife discussed the situation, the more it made sense to move to Brownsville. His daughters attended school in Brownsville and had to cross the bridge every day, just like he and his wife did for work. Their entire lives were in the United States and the lower cost of living in Matamoros was no longer a good enough incentive. Thus, his family moved from Matamoros to Brownsville primarily for safety and the added convenience.

The Life of a Daily Border-Crosser

The borderland environment has an added layer of uniqueness and complexity that cannot be replicated in places far removed from an international boundary. The perpetual mixing along the border is exemplified by daily border-crossers—those who cross for work, school, and/or socializing. Interviewees frequently discussed the necessity of having a routine when crossing the border for work or school—a ten-minute delay at home could lead to an additional 30 minute delay on the bridge. Time management is essential for *fronterizos* who drive from Matamoros to Brownsville, or vice versa, on a daily or weekly basis. A young man I spoke to, Chris Escalada, 28, described his experience crossing into Brownsville for school as a teenager and now having his four daughters live the same experience. “Now they’re suffering what I suffered,” says Chris.²¹ He wakes his daughters up at 5AM and they sleep in the car while he waits in line for approximately an hour and forty minutes to take them to school before he goes in for work. Once they cross the bridge Chris buys breakfast for his daughters before dropping

them off at school at 7:30 a.m. Afterwards, with about an hour to waste, he sleeps in his car in the company parking lot until his shift begins at 8:30a.m. His daughters get out of school before he gets out of work and since his wife does not have the proper documentation to cross into the United States, they struggled to find a viable solution for after school care.

He and his wife went through several Brownsville babysitters before stumbling across a transport service that would cost them \$70 a week, only \$20 more than the babysitter, for direct service from their daughters elementary school to their home in Matamoros. It is unsurprising that local residents have created a business out of the need for this type of childcare assistance. The liability for crossing children who are not one's own back and forth is undoubtedly a risky endeavor but such demand exists for parents who are unable to transport their children or prefer the convenience. Chris's testimony touches upon both the cycle and evolution of border crossing for *fronterizos*.

Certain aspects of crossing the border, such as time management, have remained constant for several decades. Chris says waking up nearly 4 hours before he has to be at work is easily the most inconvenient aspect of border crossing. It made him bitter at first but he shared that, with time, his body grew accustomed to the early days and now he does not give it a second thought. The time spent in line or "*haciendo fila*", as locals say, can be frustrating. Chris recalls his sentiments on crossing the border when he lived in Brownsville in the early 2000s, "I hate doing that line . . . it's the only thing that gets to me. 'Alright I'm going to visit my brother for 20 minutes and do three hours of line?' Never-mind, I'll just call him, 'Hey, how you doing?' Nobody wants to do that line. Nobody. It's long, it's too long."²² Traffic is slightly more predictable during the week with the steady flow of people crossing for work or school but on the weekends, when there is an influx of people crossing for entertainment, shopping, and socializing, the wait times are heightened and erratic.

Some people live the best of both worlds and constantly have one foot in Mexico and one in the United States. The interviews I conducted revealed that *fronterizos* most often choose to live either in Brownsville or in Matamoros. However, a small percentage maintains residences in both countries despite their careers being in the United States. Ricardo Jaramillo, 47, moved to the border in 1988 at 18 years old after

completing a technical degree in hopes of finding a job in a Matamoros or Brownsville *maquiladora*.²³ Ricardo got his paperwork organized in 1990 for a border crossing card and a passport but worked in Matamoros until 1996. He then found a job in Brownsville and while he crossed with a passport and a permit, Ricardo did not have the proper permit to work in the United States but did so anyway. He worked illegally in Brownsville until he was able to file for U.S. residency status through his wife. In 2002, Ricardo was finally able to work in the United States legally but continued to live in Matamoros. Unfortunately, between his salary and his wife's salary they still could not afford to pay rent in the United States; it was more economical to live in Matamoros and pay the toll to cross the bridge every day than it was to rent or buy a home in Brownsville. Sociologist Sergio Chavez points out, “[b]order commuters engage in this form of work-life as a strategy to minimize the economic costs associated with the reproduction of daily family life. Migrant workers minimize costs of living and crossing the border to earn wages that are higher than those of where they reside.”²⁴ Accordingly, Ricardo and his wife were trying to navigate these economic factors alongside his legal status.

Ricardo discussed his routine crossing the border every morning at 5AM to avoid long lines at the bridge—wait time was typically 20 to 30 minutes versus an hour to an hour and a half. After crossing the bridge, he had a couple of hours to spare before his shift so sometimes he would stop for a quick breakfast and then drive to work and sleep in his car and other times he opted to skip breakfast and take advantage of more sleep. Whenever possible Ricardo found friends to stay with during the week to ease the time and financial obligations of his border commute. He continued this routine for three years before he and his wife were able to purchase a home in Brownsville. Once they purchased their home, the necessity to cross the border decreased significantly. Now they returned to Matamoros a couple of times of month for socializing and family commitments. I was surprised to find out that even after purchasing a home in Brownsville, the Jaramillo's kept their home in Matamoros. When probed about why they would choose to maintain two homes—especially in a country that they did not visit as frequently anymore—he replied simply that 1) the upkeep was so inexpensive it would be impractical to lose the convenience it provides and 2) Mexico would always feel like home.

His motivation for keeping this home was in large part due to sentimentality. I asked him if he and his wife had any intention of returning to Matamoros permanently and he responded that, no, their life was in the United States now. For Ricardo, it was important to remain tied to Mexico because being Mexican was (and is) a central component of his identity. In our conversation he expressed his desire to have physical ties to his native country despite having lived nearly half of his life in the United States. His story is one of many that demonstrates the unique ability of borderlanders to live as true transnational citizens. *Fronterizos* might preference one country over the other but they do not have to choose between Mexico and the United States because they can live in both worlds.

Discrimination for border-crossers

The ability to live in both worlds, however, does not guarantee a seamless routine as one has seen. One's experience crossing the border is often shaped by legal status: is one Mexican, a U.S. resident, or a U.S. citizen? Unfortunately, the category can dictate the treatment by border patrol agents. Discrimination occurs on the bridge and, according to the interviewees, it is a result of social hierarchies where the border patrol agents and U.S. citizens, in general, are at the top of the pyramid.

A study on South Tucson by Pat Rubio Goldsmith and Mary Romero analyzes the "anti-immigration sentiment from the standpoint of the racialized population being policed on a daily basis in the neighborhoods in the U.S.—Mexico border region."²⁵ They point out that everyday discriminatory practices against racialized "others" typically occur outside the public view. As such, glimpses into the interaction between local and state law enforcement are only visible when they result in scandals or protests but this, too, is problematic. Goldsmith and Romero contend, "[e]ven in these cases, documented accounts are almost overwhelmingly framed from the perspective of law enforcement with the goal of exonerating agents or soldiers involved (Romero 2001)."²⁶ The narratives of the interviewees of this section provide a welcomed, and much needed, perspective from Mexican and Mexican Americans themselves rather than that of the justice system.

It was fascinating to discuss this systemic racism with people who had transitioned between all three legal statuses and, as a result, could

comment on the shift they experienced at each stage. Sergio, the aforementioned border crosser who moved to the United States with his family after heightened drug violence, described how drastically his experience and attitude changed as he moved through each status. When he crossed as a Mexican he said,

I worshipped all of them [border patrol agents]. To all of them, when you cross as a Mexican, and even as a resident, if they tell you something, they've asked me for my license when they shouldn't care if I have a license or don't have a license—I didn't have it—and I would tell my wife, or my girlfriend at the time, 'Calm down,' because she would want to be bad-tempered. And I did whatever they wanted because at the end of the day, they are letting you enter their country and any day they can say, 'You know what? You're going back [to Mexico] for X, Y, or Z.' You're going to lose as a Mexican. So yes, sometimes, not all the officials, right? But there are some that are kind of—and then you see them with the surname Pérez, too, and it infuriates you, but oh well.²⁷

Sergio illuminates several different issues here, one being the question of power. Crossing as a Mexican citizen—and in Sergio's perspective, even as a U.S. resident—leaves one with no power or leverage. They are at the mercy of whichever agent they encounter; of course, not all border agents will abuse their position of power but one never knows what their luck will be when they are waiting in line. Goldsmith and Romero suggest that Border Patrol agents, as opposed to INS officials, local police, or U.S. Customs Service, "would most likely be responsible for mistreatment because their behavior is less scrutinized than that of local law enforcement agents."²⁸ Mistreatment can range from being rude, insulting, threatening and coercing to detaining without cause, physical or sexual abuse—with the former being the most common types of mistreatment.

In our conversation, Sergio mentioned how, prior to becoming a U.S. citizen, he would get nervous every day when he crossed the bridge for work. He knew he had nothing to hide but rubbing a border patrol agent the wrong way was always a possibility and could lead to further delays and consequences. He was aware that border agents held the power to determine his fate on a daily basis. His testimony supports Goldsmith and Romero's argument that mistreatment is typically "carried out by

the portions of law enforcement with the greatest unchecked discretion,” such as the Border Patrol, which in their study accounts for two-thirds of mistreatment episodes.²⁹ Because of this commonality, Sergio made a conscious effort to be extra respectful because his admittance into the United States was never a guarantee. He shared how it felt awful knowing that he was perceived as beneath the agents simply because he was not a U.S. citizen—essentially, he was discriminated against based on his appearance as “not belonging.”³⁰ This leads to another issue that Sergio raised: race/ethnicity.

Sergio commented on how frustrating it was when he would be scrutinized and treated poorly by someone who was also of Mexican/Hispanic descent. They belong to the same cultural group yet a piece of paper indicating one’s citizenship is what makes one superior to the other? Both he and the agent could be Mexican but the social and racial hierarchy determined that the agent should have more power not only because of his job but also because of his legal status. Everything changed when Sergio became a U.S. citizen. He stated,

Now that I am American, whatever they tell me, it doesn’t matter to me, in other words it goes in one ear and out the other. Or for example, if Sunday we cross and we don’t have our little one’s birth certificate, we don’t care. Because I think, ‘well, if you want to send me to be revised and you want to investigate, I’m going to give you all the answers and you’re not going to send me back [to Mexico] because I do not live there and I’m not Mexican.’ I mean I *am* Mexican, but I can do things with more certainty because I know that they are not—unless they have a reason—I don’t have a reason to fear them, that is a type of fear that is not right.³¹

He went on to say that even though he no longer fears border patrol agents, he continues to respect them because he knows it is their job to ensure the security of the border. The main difference as an American citizen is the confidence that the government is there to protect you and you no longer have anything to lose. When he crossed as a Mexican citizen or a resident, his privileges of coming into the United States could be taken away from him but that is not an issue now that he has citizenship. He can cross the border with a weight lifted off of his shoulders knowing that he has the right to be in the United States and that his rights are protected under U.S. law. Additionally, he believes he

is viewed as an equal in the eyes of the agents because he is a citizen. He acknowledges they still have the power to control the extent to which he gets inspected at the border, but they cannot keep him out of the country. However, it is important to note that this perception is connected to local realities of this particular border region. For instance, Arizona's SB 1070, passed in 2010, is a restrictive anti-illegal immigration measure that gives law enforcement the power to verify a person's legal status during a lawful stop, detention, or arrest. It essentially strongly encouraged racial profiling of Hispanic persons. Thus, even U.S. citizens were not "safe" from scrutiny.

Lazaro Acosta also discussed how crossing the border as a Mexican citizen and as a U.S. resident was equally nerve-wracking. The reason being, when you are crossing with a residency card or green card, you cannot get in trouble with the law. Lazaro said, "You had rights but you didn't have any rights."³² You had to constantly be on guard when communicating with the agents at the border. He described how even if you encountered an agent who was bullying you or someone you were travelling with, you had to be quiet and take it or choose your words deliberately. The power they have to invalidate one's crossing privileges left one in a vulnerable state. This supports critical race theorists who contend, "[t]he victim's perspective of discriminatory practices in immigration law enforcement is not officially documented and remains invisible."³³ It also supports Heyman's argument that INS agents are influenced by their personal worldviews and that may or may not be in the border crossers favor. Everyday mistreatments on the border are rarely reported for fear of further discrimination and loss of privileges. They are also often small acts of mistreatment that go unnoticed by the public but not by those having to endure this behavior on a daily basis.

Lazaro's border crossing experience transformed drastically after he was granted American citizenship. The border patrol agents lose some power when they are dealing with a U.S. citizen because as Acosta said, "Once you get the U.S. citizenship, you can easily threaten them, you have rights."³⁴ This is not to say that there are not consequences for having an attitude to border officials as a citizen—one can be searched and detained for any behavior deemed inappropriate or aggressive—but when juxtaposed with the risks involved as a non-citizen, one has much less to lose. Acosta expressed that he does not blame the border patrol agents for their attitude and knowledge, or lack-there-of, because the

fundamental problem is with their training. If they had better training and understanding of evolving legislation, perhaps there would be less misconceptions and inconsistencies in the implementation of policies. This would not eliminate the fear that exists among border crossers but it could provide an additional level of understanding and respect between each party.

This attitude is rather idealistic and perhaps misguided. It is the United States' racialized immigration history that facilitates and perpetuates the mistreatment and power dynamics that *fronterizos* experience at the border. Goldsmith and Romero argue,

Racialized immigration laws and citizenship distinctions allowed physical appearance to be used as a proxy and functioned to control specific racial and ethnic groups. In the United States, race has been a significant criterion in determining immigration laws; cases and trials and immigration law enforcement have had serious implications for racialized minority citizens.³⁵

The racialized immigration legislation can be traced back to Chinese exclusion laws, the Gentlemen's Agreement between the United States and Japan, *United States v. Thind*, the 1924 national origins quota system, and the Immigration Act of 1965.³⁶ In 1975, Mexican Americans took a particularly hard fall. Kevin R. Johnson points out that in *United States v. Brignoni-Ponce*, the Supreme Court proclaimed, "Mexican appearance' constitutes a legitimate consideration under the Fourth Amendment for making an immigration stop."³⁷ As a result, Latinos are "stigmatized as 'aliens,' and surveillance and citizenship inspection rely on racial profiling of their 'Mexicanness' rather than specific behavior."³⁸ Moreover, Johnson argues that race-based enforcement "disproportionately burdens persons of Latin American ancestry in the United States, the vast majority of whom are U.S. citizens or lawful immigrants."³⁹ This is particularly noticeable along the U.S.-Mexico border where there are large populations of Mexican Americans. *United States v. Brignoni-Ponce* and the preceding legislation serve as evidence of how race has been used by the United States to construct immigration status.

The issue of race and discrimination is far from invisible for *fronterizos* and border crossers. Lazaro discussed race and discrimination as an inconceivable factor when crossing the border. He stated,

You are racist, just because you are racist? No. You are taught to be that. You'll ask because most of them have a, I always say they have a [expletive] cactus on their forehead. They still discriminate Mexicans. I am like, "Dude, you look more Mexican than I [sic]." I'm not that white with blue eyes, I mean I'm normal but "Dude, you look worse than me." Then that trickles down even in Mexico. They're very racist. There is racism, but not because of race. It's basically a discrimination because of social-economical aspect [sic] and looks."⁴⁰

This brings us back to the issue that Sergio Errisuriz said was incredibly frustrating—discrimination among Mexicans. On the border, socio-economic status is another factor that shapes discrimination. Race is intricately linked with socio-economic status, given that in Mexico one's status has often been associated with one's skin-tone. The lighter one is, the higher he or she is expected to be on the social hierarchy and vice versa for those of darker skin-tones. This type of discrimination is a modern iteration of colonial Mexico's legal racial caste system.

Colonial Mexico's caste system was comprised of three primary groups, Spaniards and Europeans, indigenous peoples, and Africans. Within the three primary groups there were an additional 16 subcategories that specified one's position based on the lineage of their parents. For example, the term *mestizo* identified a person who was born of Spanish and Indian parents. Mestizos were often associated with illegitimacy because during the Spanish conquest Spaniards procreated with local women and birthed children out of wedlock. The caste system became increasingly complex after generations of intermixing but Spaniards were always at the top of the hierarchy. Despite the various labels, essentially the lighter your skin the higher you were on the social strata. This system has been outlawed for nearly two centuries since Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821 but traces of it remain evident in the mentality of its modern society.

One can detect such traces in comments such as the one made by Acosta. He declared his frustration that someone who looked "more Mexican" and "worse" than he was hassling him on the border simply because he was not an American citizen. The mentality being that were it not for the piece of paper that made the border patrol agent an American citizen and Lazaro a Mexican citizen, Lazaro would hold

more power. This is by no means a criticism of Lazaro but an indication of how engrained the caste mentality is in the minds of Mexicans. Regardless of skin-color, border patrol agents automatically hold more power because they serve as U.S. immigration enforcement and have high levels of unchecked discretion. It is evident that within Mexican society and on the bridge, the caste mentality and racial discrimination run deep.

In some senses their experience of discrimination is timeless—it could have taken place during any given year in the course of this study. However, the reality is that the experiences of these men have been shaped by political discourse whether they realize it or not. They are both roughly the same age and have therefore grown up in the same political climate. Being American already had its privileges but when immigration became synonymous with national security—and post 9/11, with terrorism—it also encouraged a superiority complex tied to citizenship. It allowed agents on the border to place themselves above anyone who was not a United States citizen. This, in conjunction with historical, structural racism, is shaping their daily experiences crossing the border. Sergio and Lazaro's narratives provide a glimpse into borderland discrimination that is typically minimized or ignored and illustrate the frustrations and struggles facing *fronterizos* who choose to live their lives between borders.

Fronterizos & U.S. Citizenship

The importance of legal status during border crossing is one of the primary incentives indicated by the interviewees for petitioning for U.S. citizenship in Brownsville-Matamoros. Obtaining American citizenship is a dream for thousands of immigrants living in the United States. The idea exists that once American citizenship is attained, life will be infinitely better. There is also a desire for immigrants to find belonging in their new country and citizenship validates their place in society—at least theoretically. The reasons for citizenship in the borderlands, however, are much less romanticized. Some people were not interested in obtaining citizenship because it was considered a hassle and with border crossing cards, it did not seem a necessity. Those who did opt for citizenship usually did so for one of three reasons: 1) they would have a more

positive experience crossing the border as needed; 2) they got married and wanted to share citizenship with their spouse and 3) it was more convenient with work, school, taxes, etc., to be a United States citizen.

Lazaro, now a dual-citizen, used to cross the border with a TN visa, a work-permit visa through the North American Free Trade Agreement. Under this visa, Lazaro had the right to work in the United States, but he was not eligible to apply for U.S. residency or citizenship. His situation changed when he married a U.S. citizen and he was prodded by a border patrol agent to apply for residency. Lazaro described this particular situation that took place one day when he was crossing the bridge with his wife. It happened prior to the passport law when U.S. citizens only had to verbally affirm their citizenship, thus, his wife stated she was a U.S. citizen and Lazaro handed over his visa. The agent then asked what they were to each other because he saw their wedding bands and they told the agent that they married. The agent got upset that they were married and he was still crossing on a working visa instead of establishing his residency in the United States. When the agent asked why he had not filed for residency Lazaro responded simply that it was because he did not need residency since his visa was still valid. The agent responded that if he caught him crossing the border again and still without having filed his residency paperwork, he would take Lazaro's TN visa away—again reinforcing the ambiguous nature and unchecked discretion of immigration enforcement on the border.

I asked Lazaro if he knew if there was any legal validity to what the border patrol agent threatened. Was it illegal to be married to a U.S. citizen and still be crossing with a TN visa? Lazaro responded, "You know what? Everyone makes the Immigration Law what they want."⁴¹ This is one of the biggest fears for people crossing the border with visas or border crossing cards—agents, whether lawfully or unlawfully, warranted or not, tend to interpret the law however they please. There is misinformation about the laws and people do not know whom to believe. In Acosta's case, the agent told him that once he married a U.S. citizen, he needed to become a U.S. citizen. Lazaro knew that this was not true, but he felt bullied enough by the agent that he filed the paperwork to become a resident. He did not want to have to cross the border with additional anxiety wondering if he would come across the same agent who threatened him and lose his crossing privileges all together.

Initially Lazaro believed that things would be easier once he became a U.S. resident, but he continued to experience problems crossing the border. The questions now revolved around why he lived in Matamoros instead of Brownsville if he was working in Brownsville and had a residency card. He felt it was never ending and his life would be simplified if he finally applied for citizenship. Becoming an American citizen was not a dream or a goal, it was a matter of convenience. Aside from the run-in Lazaro had with the border patrol agent, he said his experience obtaining citizenship was smooth sailing. He applied for his residency and because he was married to a U.S. citizen and had passed thorough background checks for his TN visa, he was approved quickly. It took longer for him to become a U.S. citizen because someone told him that he was required to be married for 5 years before he would be eligible. It was not until his fifth year of marriage when he went to file for citizenship that he realized he could have applied sooner. Regardless, the process was quick and easy and he became a citizen without having to overcome any major obstacles.

Oscar shared his experience first applying for residency and decades later, citizenship. Becoming a resident was a necessity for him after the economic downturn in the early 1980s but he also welcomed the change in status because he and his wife were frequently badgered when crossing the border. The agents would accost them because he crossed with a border-crossing card and his wife was an American citizen. They would question his wife, asking where each of them lived and when she would respond, "Matamoros", they doubted her honesty knowing that many people abused their border-crossing cards to live illegally in the United States. By the time he petitioned for residency, he and his wife had been married for three years. During his interview for residency Oscar was asked,

"Why didn't you request residency right away?" Because I had my work over there [Matamoros]. "And where did you live?" Well I lived in Matamoros. "You never lived here [Brownsville]?" I never lived here [Brownsville]. "Why not?" Because it was not legal to live here." And in reality I never lived here [Brownsville], I have never lived here. I mean, I have an address here and if they ask me, "Where do you live?" I say, "In Brownsville". But I have never physically lived here.⁴²

He said he is familiar with the laws as a resident, and now citizen, and he has never been out of the country for more than two or three weeks. He crosses the border daily for work and any time his family has taken vacations, they have been in the United States. He became a resident in the 1980s but did not petition for U.S. citizenship until 2016. His wife and children were citizens but he had a laid back attitude and no rush to file paperwork since he was comfortable enough as a resident. The only reason he initiated the process in 2016 was because a co-worker was about to start the process and encouraged him to do it so that neither would have to go through the process alone. It turned out that the woman giving the citizenship class was also a fellow co-worker and the convenience of having that support system was too good to pass up. He said it felt like it was time to take the plunge, study, and formalize his citizenship. Becoming a citizen had been weighing on his mind the closer he got to retirement since there are different benefits and restrictions for citizens versus residents.

Oscar shared that even though he had never had any trouble with the law, he knew his privileges in the United States were more vulnerable as a resident and he did not want to put himself at risk with retirement around the corner. Thus, for about 4 months they went to class together every Wednesday for two hours and on August 31, 2016 he became a naturalized American citizen. Oscar expressed his belief that one of the reasons his petition for citizenship went smoothly was because he never requested federal aid from the government for himself or for his family. During his interview they asked him numerous questions about receiving federal aid and he acknowledged that he knew that it was available but he was always able to provide for his family and thought government aid should go to people with a greater economic need. They ran his name, his wife's name, and his children's names through their database and verified that he was being truthful. Oscar said, "All of that counts for something—that I am not a person coming to the United States to live off of the government."⁴³ The agent who interviewed him never specified if this influenced his candidacy in any way but it was clear to me that Oscar was very proud of his ability to maintain his family independently.

Of the 32 people interviewed in Brownsville-Matamoros, no one described a negative experience in the naturalization process. The negative

experiences, when noted, typically took place during their time crossing with a border-crossing card as a Mexican citizen or as a U.S. resident. The ease of their transition to citizenship is likely related to the fact that their residency was well established prior to their applications and their years contributing to the American workforce. Their reasons for becoming citizens varied but the most frequent responses revolved around convenience (including avoiding being hassled during border-crossing commutes) marriage and family security.

Conclusion

In Brownsville-Matamoros, people are continually commuting from one side of the border to the other as it suits their needs. The narratives in this article illustrate how unpredictable and difficult crossing the border can be for *fronterizos*. Nevertheless, the border provides a wealth of opportunities to people who are willing to use it to their advantage. Their lives revolve around the existence of a short bridge dividing the United States and Mexico. The border is a unique space with norms that are contingent upon the flexibility of movement. These norms do not exist in the great majority of the United States or Mexico simply because it is not permitted by geography. The border appears to be a community of transnational citizens who live in a bubble isolating them from the realities of each respective country. However, this article has demonstrated that the borderlands are not free from the grasp of the federal governments. I argue that the people in the borderlands are more affected by political policies and national events than in other urban centers because the protocols on the border are heavily influenced by the national governments state of affairs—impacting all border-crossers. In addition, *fronterizos* experience systemic racism on the bridge on a regular basis as a result of the United States' racially defined immigration policies. Lastly, *fronterizos* do not often live with illusions of an American Dream. *Fronterizos* are not driven by ambitions of U.S. citizenship but happen upon citizenship for convenience, family or in an effort to avoid discrimination. Their days revolve around *haciendo fila* and negotiating entry as smoothly as possible into the United States.

Notes

1. ERIKA RENDÓN-RAMOS is an Assistant Professor in the Mexican American Studies Academic Program. Erika received her PhD from Rice University in History. Her scholarship addresses Mexican immigration, bi-culturalism, and transnationalism through the lived-experiences of Mexican migrants, making oral history an integral component in her methodology. Erika has presented her scholarship both nationally and internationally.

2. Pablo Vila, "Narrative Identities: The Employment of the Mexican on the U.S.—Mexican Border," *The Sociological Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 148.

3. Vila, "Narrative Identities," 148.

4. Josiah Heyman, "Capitalism and US Policy at the Mexican Border," *Dialectical Anthropology* 36, no. 3/4 (December 2012): 266.

5. Heyman, "Capitalism," 266.

6. Josiah Heyman, "Putting Power in the Anthropology of Bureaucracy: The Immigration and naturalization Service at the Mexico-United States Border," *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 2 (April 1995): 261–287.

7. Oscar Martinez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.—Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 12.

8. Martinez, *Border People*, 9.

9. Oscar Martinez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006): 151.

10. United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Brownsville, Texas," accessed June 25, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/brownsvillecitytexas/RHI725217#viewtop>.

11. Samuel Trueet and Elliot Young, *Continental Crossroads: remapping U.S.—Mexico Borderlands History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

12. Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), xiv.

13. Hercules E. Haralambide. and Maria P. Londoño-Kent, "Supply Chain Bottlenecks: Border Crossing Inefficiencies Between Mexico and the United States," *International Journal of Transport Economics/Rivista internazionale di economia dei trasporti* 31, no. 2 (June 2004), 185.

14. Jan Buursink, "The binational reality of border-crossing cities," *GeoJournal* 54, no.1 (2001), 8.

15. Nora Lustig, "The 1982 Debt Crisis, Chiapas, NAFTA, and Mexico's Poor," *Challenge* 38, no. 2 (1995), 46. It should be noted that, although the United States assisted in Mexico's bailout, they were also partially responsible for Mexico's financial crisis. Three factors in particular affected Mexico greatly: first, the implementation of new and stricter monetary policies in 1979, second, the rise in interest rates on debt and third, the deceleration of international trade. For more on U.S. policy impacts on the financial crisis in Mexico, see: Sgard, 2012 and Aguayo, 1998.

16. Deepa Iver and Jayesh M. Rathod, "9/11 And Immigration Law and Policy," *GPSolo* 29, no. 1 (2012), 62.

17. Iver and Rathod, "9/11 and Immigration Law and Policy," 62.

18. Iver and Rathod, "9/11 and Immigration Law and Policy," 62.
19. Olga Olmos interviewed by author in Brownsville, Texas on September 12, 2017. Quote translated by author.
20. The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative became effective in January 2007 for all persons traveling by air or sea. In January 2009 the law also became effective for all persons traveling by land, such as borderlanders crossing from Mexico to the United States by foot or in a private vehicle.
21. Chris Escalada interviewed by author in Brownsville, Texas on September 12, 2017.
22. Chris Escalada interviewed by author in Brownsville, Texas on September 12, 2017.
23. A *maquiladora* is a Mexican assembly plant, contracted factory or textile factory.
24. Sergio Chavez, *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 62. See, for example: Martinez, 1994; Acuña Gonzalez, 1988; Valenzuela, 1993; Herzog, 1990; Young, 1994.
25. Pat Rubio Goldsmith and Mary Romero, "'Aliens,' 'Illegals,' and Other Types of 'Mexicanness': Examination of Racial Profiling in Border Policing," *Globalization and America: Race, Human Rights and Inequality*, edited by Angela J. Hattery et al. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 128.
26. Goldsmith and Romero, "'Aliens,' 'Illegals,' and Other Types of 'Mexicanness,'" 128.
27. Sergio Errisuriz interviewed by author in Brownsville, Texas on August 22, 2017. Quote translated by author.
28. Goldsmith and Romero, "'Aliens,' 'Illegals,' and Other Types of 'Mexicanness,'" 134. See also: Johnson, 2004.
29. Goldsmith and Romero, "'Aliens,' 'Illegals,' and Other Types of 'Mexicanness,'" 138.
30. Goldsmith and Romero, "'Aliens,' 'Illegals,' and Other Types of 'Mexicanness,'" 131. See also: Marx, 2001.
31. Sergio Errisuriz interviewed by author in Brownsville, Texas on August 22, 2017. Quote translated by author.
32. Lazaro Acosta interviewed by author in Matamoros, Tamaulipas on August 24, 2017.
33. Goldsmith and Romero, "'Aliens,' 'Illegals,' and Other Types of 'Mexicanness,'" 128. See: Johnson, 2004; Romero, 2006; Romero and Serag, 2005; Vargas, 2001.
34. Lazaro Acosta interviewed by author in Matamoros, Tamaulipas on August 24, 2017.
35. Goldsmith and Romero, "'Aliens,' 'Illegals,' and Other Types of 'Mexicanness,'" 129. See also: Chang 1999; Hing 1997; Johnson 2004; Moran 1997.
36. The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 and halted Chinese immigration for 10 years (which was later extended) and made Chinese ineligible for naturalized. This was the first significant U.S. legislation that restricted immigration to

the United States. The Gentleman's Agreement (1907) was an arrangement between the U.S. and Japanese governments in which the U.S. agreed to withhold passing legislation singling out and restricting Japanese immigration and Japan agreed not to issue passports to emigrants seeking to move to the United States. The Supreme Court case, *United States v. Thind* (1923) ruled that immigrants from India were ineligible for naturalization because Indians were not classified as white. The Immigration Act of 1924 imposed a national origins quota system based on the 1890 census. Foreign countries were allowed a certain number or annual entries to the United States based on a percentage of their presence in the U.S. in 1890. The 1890 census was chosen specifically because it favored nationalities such as English, Irish, and Germans and severely restricted arrivals from Eastern and Southern Europe. The Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated the 1924 quota system and instead preferred family reunification and attracting skilled labor but it also placed caps on per-country entries and total immigration. This was the first legislation placing restrictions on immigration from the Western Hemisphere since the 1924 act had no limits set for the Western Hemisphere.

37. Kevin Johnson, "The Case Against Racial Profiling in Immigration Enforcement," *Washington University Law Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (2000), 676.

38. Goldsmith and Romero, "Aliens, 'Illegals,' and Other Types of 'Mexicanness,'" 130. See also: Benitez 1994; Johnson 1996–1997, 2000; Lugo 2000; Rodriguez 1997; Romero 2006; Rosenbaum 1994.

39. Johnson, "Racial Profiling," 677–78.

40. Lazaro Acosta interviewed by author in Matamoros, Tamaulipas on August 24, 2017. By "normal" he was indicating that he has fair skin, dark hair and dark eyes and not the darker skin tone that is typically associated with indigenous Mexicans.

41. Lazaro Acosta interviewed by author in Matamoros, Tamaulipas on August 24, 2017.

42. Oscar Garcia interviewed by author in Brownsville, Texas on September 13, 2017. Quote translated by author.

43. Oscar Garcia interviewed by author in Brownsville, Texas on September 13, 2017. Quote translated by author.