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DEFINING THE US-MEXICO BORDER AS HYPERREALITY

A B C T R A C T

The us-Mexico border has been defined as a periphery, as a transborder social system, and more currently, as a station in transnational circuits. The two first definitions presuppose the strongly criticized concepts of region and cultural area. The third definition shares, along with the other two definitions, the positivist epistemological supposition that the border is a specific entity that can be known and experienced as such by any observer, no matter their social site. This paper is to support the definition of the border as a hyperreality constituted by speeches, practices, and experiences of the different social actors. From this posture, the image of the border as a formal geopolitical division is interpreted as a sustained image and reproduced by government agencies. Likewise, this writing is to support the documentation and promotion of alternative images constructed and reproduced by social actors from different power sites.

R E S U M E N

La frontera México-Estados Unidos ha sido definida como periferia, como sistema social transfronterizo, y más recientemente como una estación en circuitos transnacionales. Las dos primeras definiciones presuponen los fuertemente criticados conceptos de región y área cultural. La tercera definición comparte con las anteriores la suposición epistemológica positivista de que la frontera es una entidad dada que puede ser conocida y experimentada tal cual es por cualquier observador, independientemente de su locación social. En este artículo se argumenta a favor de la definición de la frontera como una hiperrealidad constituida por discursos, prácticas y experiencias de diversos actores sociales. Desde esta postura, la imagen de la frontera como una división geopolítica formal es interpretada como una imagen sustentada y reproducida por agencias de gobierno. Se argumenta en cambio, a favor de la documentación y promoción de las imágenes alternativas construidas y reproducidas por actores sociales desde diferentes locaciones de poder.

INTRODUCTION

Gupta and Ferguson define the traditional anthropological notion of field as the “taken-for-granted space in which an ‘other’ culture or society lies waiting to be observed and written”(1997a:2).

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What is that “field” that supports the “fieldwork” of the US-Mexican border? That field is now conceived of not only as a space, but also as a metaphor. The nature of the space is contested both in the borderlands and in the literature, and the metaphor includes cultural, social, political and identity processes of boundary crossing not necessarily grounded on the geopolitical space. The “other” in the borderlands is increasingly becoming a self. Border cultures and societies are no longer homogeneous or territorially contained; furthermore, they are not passively awaiting description, but rather are actively being constructed. Finally, anthropology’s authoritative accounts are being challenged by the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and by native’s own accounts. In what sense, then, can we speak of an “anthropological field” in the US-Mexican borderlands?

The goal of this paper is to propose a redefinition of the US-Mexican border as subject matter of anthropology that will better account for the complex phenomena related to it. I argue that previous theoretical understandings are based on fallacious epistemic and metaphysical assumptions that render insufficient representations of the socially and culturally constructed border. It is my contention that contemporary inequalities found along the US-Mexican border have their origins in the legitimized late capitalism phase in which images are transformed into commodities and used to construct an unequal, and sometimes even life threatening, social reality. I argue that the representation of the border as a hyperreality is not only more theoretically sound, but also necessary if we are to contribute in the deconstruction of the contemporary social order, and in the construction of a new one in which basic human rights will be observed.

Space in The US-Mexican Border has been conceptualized as a region, as a culture area and, more recently, as a hyperspace. A region is a historically constructed political and economic area that represents the culmination of a centralizing process of power (Fábregas, 1992). A culture area is a territory inhabited by people that share a culture (Stoddard, 1983). Whereas regions have borders, culture areas have frontiers. The former being a geopolitical boundary, the latter a social-cultural one. In this sense there may be several frontiers within and even across a border. A hyperspace is the locus in which de-territorialized

communities create and recreate their social identities, and includes several geographically distant locales that transcend borders and redefine frontiers (Kearney, 1996).

Ever since Bolton (1921) created the label “Spanish Borderlands”, scholars have attempted definitions based on different criteria. These include geographic (León-Portilla, 1972), demographic (Galarza, 1972), economic (Fernández, 1980), cultural (Paredes, 1978; León-Portilla, 1990; Martínez, 1994), and political variables (Kearney, 1991, 1995, 1998; Bustamante, 1992). Most recently scholars have attempted holistic definitions based on a combination of several of these variables (Whiteford, 1979; Alvarez, 1984; Rouse, 1991; Chambers, 1994; Alvarez, 1998; Hackenberg and Hackenberg, 1999). However, regardless of their diverse emphasis, these definitions assume all the existence of a distinct region and/or culture area. Furthermore they all respond to three central problems. These central problems are, in turn, preferentially analyzed by what constitute the three main contemporary research programs or paradigms in the borderlands: 1) the problem of the relationships between the regions and the national centers is emphasized by what I have termed “the borderlands as periphery” paradigm; 2) the problem of the relationships between both sides of the border is mostly emphasized by what I have called “the border as a single system” paradigm; and finally; 3) the problem of the role of the region in transnational processes is focused on by what I have termed “the border as a transnational locale” paradigm. Each of these problems are important because they represent the major processes that take place in the borderlands. The following section is a description of the US-Mexico Borderlands as conceived by each of these paradigms.

THE BORDERLANDS AS PERIPHERY

Dependency (Frank, 1966) and world systems (Wallerstein, 1976) theories led scholars to conceptualize the Mexican northern and the US southern border regions as peripheries of both their respective nation states, and of the imperialist global system (Rouse, 1991; García, 1989; Kearney, 1996). This model proposes a global order that is reproduced at all levels, from the local community to the entire world (Rouse, 1991).

It assumes that power, wealth, culture, identity and even loyalties spread gradually from the centers—in which they are concentrated to the peripheries—in which they are highly diminished or even corrupted (Nostrand, 1983; Monsiváis, 1978). It also assumes that peripheries are not connected among themselves but only to a core, although the core to which they are subordinated may change through time depending on the global distribution of power (Kutshe, 1983). National borders represent, in this scheme, both a barrier where “the foreign” stops, and a permeable membrane (Stoddard, 1991) through which the goods, services and even selected cultural traits (Díaz, 1978) that may benefit “the nation”, are filtered.

Peripheral notions of the border have been both optimistic and pessimistic. The former sees innovation, freedom and creativity (Nostrand, 1983; Kutshe, 1983), the latter sees disorder and moral and cultural corruption (Monsiváis, 1978). Kutshe (1983) optimistically describes the Mexican side as a space favorable to the growth of democratic life, and Monsiváis (1978) represents Norteños as the national political vanguard and as leaders in the resistance to political and economic imperialism. Pessimistic descriptions of the border have emphasized Border Towns as vice centers (Martínez, 1988), and as transient settlements without roots (Alvarez, 1984). Border people have been seen either as pre-cultural in the sense that they do not possess an authentic culture, or as people with invisible culture that are not what they once were but neither what they will be (Rosaldo, 1991). This a-cultural reality leads them to adopt official Mexican and American mass cultures (Monsiváis, 1978). Finally, Mexican ethnicity has been seen as the cause of borderlanders oppression, on the one hand, because it is imposed by the Mexican government, and on the other hand, because it is a source of discrimination by Americans (Monsiváis, 1978).

The American side of the border has been described as a demographic region in which the Spanish-Mexican legacy in the US is richest. This cultural legacy is manifested in food, architecture, language, population (Nostrand, 1983), and even in psychological traits, such as the notion of respect in Texas (Díaz, 1978). It is also a zone where poverty is concentrated, and through which drug and illegal aliens enter to corrupt American health, culture and race (Reisler, 1996;

Delgado, 1997). And besides, is the region of the “confused and angered” Chicanos that do not and cannot identify with mainstream American culture because they lack the racial, social and economic resources to do so (Herrera, 1996). It is also where Mexican ethnicity and culture, even when inauthentic, are used for resistance (Monsiváis 1978).

THE BORDERLANDS AS A SYSTEM

The second competing research agenda conceptualizes the US-Mexican borderland as a unified ecological, demographic, linguistic, cultural and economic local system, that transcends the political divide (Martínez, 1994). This approach conceptualizes the borderlands as a distinct region (Bustamante, 1996), as an extended community (Whiteford, 1979), as a social system characterized by extended kinship (Alvarez, 1987), and as a distinct culture area (Stoddard, 1991; Martínez, 1994; Paredes, 1978). It is not a corrupted periphery but rather a center in its own right (Alvarez, 1984). It is a system characterized by two borders: “one official, rigid, and object of bilateral policies, and another one, informal, flexible and of constant cultural creativity” (Delgado, 1997). This political boundary is the actual agent that, in providing for a shared border experience, unifies the region (Martínez, 1994, Bustamante, 1996). At the same time, it constitutes an obstacle for the “normal” movement of people, goods and services which promotes conflictive situations (Martínez, 1994).

A shared history of relative functional independence from the national core areas also unifies both sides of the border (Alvarez, 1987). The Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty was seen by Paredes (1978) as the mechanism settling conflict in the region, but not as a marker of the border between the US and Mexico, since that border “had always been much more to the south”. The actual demarcation of the border meant the involuntary incorporation of both Mexicans and some Native American groups into the US (Martínez, 1988). Martínez (1994) argues that there has been a dynamic process in which the borderlands has moved from being alienated, that is, with a functionally closed border filled with tension, through a coexistent borderlands, with limited

binational interaction, into an interdependent borderland with economic and social complementarity, and towards an Integrated borderlands in which “the economies of the two countries are functionally merged”.

This unified system suffers the hardships of a forced allegiance of two national states (Delgado, 1997). Mexico and the US have the power to impose citizenship and to restrict the free “natural” movement across the border of capital, goods, services, and most gravely, of identities and even kin. The identity of the migrant is often times transformed to one of exile (Delgado, 1997), forced to feel like a commodity (Vélez, 1996), like intruders, like illegals, read: criminals (Chávez, 1998). Families are cruelly separated (Delgado, 1997). Nevertheless, the national states, although uncontrollable for the locals, lack the power to contain the cultural system (Vélez, 1996), and human creativity overcomes this alien, unnatural boundary that capriciously divides cities, institutions and families (Stoddard, 1983).

Although the border region is almost boundless and heterogeneous, the actual geopolitical marker is the factor that provides the border its specific definition and produces the border experience. The extension of the borderlands is determined by the intensity and outward orientation of the interactions with the “other” (Bustamante, 1996). Participation in transnational processes is delineated by the actual border, but also by several social worlds: national culture, border environment, one’s own ethnic group, and foreign culture; these create the border experience which all borderlanders share (Martínez, 1994). This constant interaction formed attitudes, lifestyles and cultural orientations that made Chicanos and Norteños marginal people in their own countries (Martínez, 1988). Some borderlanders have a more intense border experience than others. Opposed to peripheral borderlanders, core borderlanders are bicultural, bilingual, and have a high degree of transnational and intercultural relationships (Martínez, 1994). Some experience the borderlands as an exile (Delgado, 1997), others as a liminal place between two cultures, in permanent crisis (Paredes, 1978; Anzaldúa, 1987), most manipulate otherness to their own benefit (Martínez, 1994; Herrera-Sobek, 1996). Cultural, economic, and even intense physical conflict are inherent to the border experience

(Paredes 1978). This is particularly the case for *maquiladora* workers that experience sexual harassment (Delgado, 1997; Fernández Kelly, 1983; Iglesias, 1997; Peña, 1997). Martínez (1994) emphasizes cross-border migration, interdependence, labor, border management, ethnic confrontation, cultural fusion, and social activism as major themes in the border experience.

The systemic qualities of the US-Mexican borderlands include a binational zone with shared cultural forms (Stoddard, 1983); these include transborder ideas of identity, patriarchy, ways of raising children, *confianza* and reciprocity (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996). It is also a bilingual zone in which both languages diminish as they cross the border but that, nonetheless, never disappear. Both languages are actually reproduced even without official programs (Delgado, 1997). The border is a region where, irrespective of territorial location, national holidays of both nations are celebrated (Taylor, 1997; Heyman, 1993), and where southern Mexican and Afro-Mexican cultures are reproduced and even appropriated by Chicanos (Malagamba, 1997).

Paredes (1978) illustrates the border as social system through his depiction of border culture as a “cattle culture”. Here, the most striking feature is the cowboy, inter-culturally adopted and transmitted as symbol of both American and “Mexicanness”. Hollywood and the Estudios Churubusco in Mexico, were responsible for the wide proliferation of the symbol. This borderlands culture is locally produced and even exported to the interior of both countries; both *corridos* and derogatory words have a border origin (Paredes, 1978). For Martínez (1994), US-Mexican border culture is “the product of forces and influences generated by the boundary itself, by regional phenomena from each nation, and by the transculturation shared by Mexicans and Americans” (1994:53), and is most vibrant in the core zone of the borderlands. Both the public and the private sectors have created health organizations, churches, cultural, sports, and youth groups (Martínez, 1988) among other politic, economic, and social organizations that transcend the boundary (Vélez, 1996).

The US-Mexican borderlands are a social system (Alvarez, 1984) transected by a 3 000 kilometer dividing line. It has at its core 18 twin cities—“unified metropolitan areas sharing single airsheds” (Martínez,

1988:145)—, 3 000 *maquiladoras*, one million workers, 400 million crossings a year in the Tijuana-San Diego border (Delgado, 1997; Valenzuela, 1997), 25 indigenous groups of which three participate in transnational interactions (Martínez, 1988). It is characterized by extended family networks that constitute transnational families (Alvarez, 1987; Ojeda, 1994). Transmigration, or everyday circular movement across the border (Ojeda, 1994), is experienced by commuters, students, and people that cross the border to receive medical, religious, and recreational services, to shop, and to visit family and friends. Trans-border families experience binational fertility, marriage, and labor. This border symbiosis allows for multinational investment (Martínez, 1988). Economic interaction is intense: “On the US side, commerce, banks, real estate and stock brokerage firms, and labor intensive industries thrive on the importation of capital, products and workers from Mexico, while the Mexican side derives substantial benefits from externally financed *maquiladoras*, US tourists and shoppers, and US jobs for many local workers” (Martínez, 1994:49).

This social system is highly hierarchical and filled with inequalities based on a tremendous power asymmetry (Bustamante, 1996). The border, especially in the US, is used by several social agents that benefit from the distinction between the Mexican and the American. The border exists not only to separate, but also to define the other as the “enemy” (Bustamante, 1996). In this context, otherness is used to reaffirm ethnic identities, it is the place that leads the groups to acquire a self ethnic consciousness (Bustamante, 1996). Intellectual Latin-American traditions are used to reject assimilation and to identify the Mexican with the Chicano (Chabram, 1997). There is a constant challenge to the Spanish language (Delgado, 1997). And even within religious organisms, Mexican-Americans and indigenous people are subordinated (Taylor, 1997). Ethnic interaction is not symmetric; Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and indigenous people experience discrimination by Anglos (Paredes, 1978). Mistreatment by immigration authorities is probably the most visible infraction. Although the economic contribution that Mexicans make is much higher than what they consume through welfare and other social services, they are constantly harassed and denied even the most basic services (Chávez, 1998; Nagengast *et al.*,

1992; Weaver, 1988) At the same time, there is a high correlation between overpopulation and surplus labor and poverty, low wages, substandard working conditions, and low levels of unionization (Martínez, 1994). All this is taken as an advantage by US employers who benefit from weak unions, while negatively affecting Mexican employers that lose qualified workers (Martínez, 1994). But although Mexicans and Mexican-Americans suffer terrible conditions, the 25 indigenous groups of the border have to cope with widespread isolation, economic deprivation, political powerlessness, poor educational achievement, inadequate health care, and unfair application of justice (Martínez, 1988).

Another crucial asymmetry is that of the relationships between federal governments and local people. Millions of dollars are spent each year in contradictory policies both to keep “illegal aliens” outside, and to deregulate tourism and commerce (Stoddard, 1991). Local people on both sides of the border see their unified social system threatened by federal agencies, whose task is to incorporate the region to the national economy, culture and society.

BORDER LOCALES IN TRANSNATIONAL PROCESSES

Emerging models of the border focus on transnational processes that include economic, cultural, and social links produced by contemporary globalization. For these models the border loses its value as unit of analysis and becomes a set of localized spots in the geography of what previous paradigms conceptualized as a region. The links that are emphasized are not localized within the region but span national territories. The borderlands are not contained solely along an east-west demarcation. Neither border phenomena nor the spaces linked by migrants, capital, information, commodities, services and ideas are found exclusively in the region. Of importance here is the transition from transfrontier to transnational processes. These models acquire different characteristics depending on the variables emphasized.

One of the richest contemporary conceptions of the border stems from migration studies that challenge not only our traditional concepts of community, culture and identity as bounded (Alvarez, 1998), but

also and most importantly our notions of self and rootedness (Chambers, 1994). For these theories the borderlands can no longer be just a geographical space, but also need to be a metaphor to represent migrant's experience of dwelling in more than one cultural world and dealing with more than one political system (Bade, 1994) and borderlander's experiences of multiple intersecting identities (Rosaldo, 1991).

The borderlands as space become a set of fragmented locations linked to several dispersed stations in migrant circuits across countries. The locus of community is the hyperspace created by that circuit, by social networks (Rouse, 1991). Identity becomes a resource and simulacra is played out in negotiations with the state that "performs" border enforcement, and indigenous groups that "perform" ethnicity and folklore (García, 1989). The rural-urban, traditional-modern, and local-non-local distinctions lose their explanatory value: the traditional fuses with the modern, the local is infused with the international, and the urban spaces become as crucial as the rural area in the reproduction of groups (Bade, 1994; García, 1989). Not only are revenues sent from US cities and agricultural fields, but the costs of social reproduction, retirement, and job training are covered by the community at both the rural areas and urban centers in Mexico (Mines & Anzaldúa, 1982; Escobar *et al.*, 1986; Caballero & Rios Morales, 1994; Bade, 1994). Health practices include the constant "migration" —literally and metaphorically— from folk to western medicine, from the borderlands to the countries interior and vice versa (Bade, 1994). Social responsibility travels from the rural community in Mexico to locales in the US. People engage in cyclical migration to attend rituals in several distant locales. But most astonishing is the fact that community representatives are elected or supported in one local to perform their duties in another (Varese, 1994). Furthermore, children's education is targeted towards social and cultural competence in the different sites of the circuit (Rouse 1991). Some communities, however, lose their links with their place of origin, and community becomes imagined and deterritorialized. In this context, remembered places become the imagined locus of community (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

In this scenario, the boundaries of community membership become mobile and self-conscious as they incorporate the changing culture of

its migrant members (Pérez Ruiz, 1993; Caballero & Ríoz Morales, 1994; Appadurai, 1991). This redefinition of the boundaries of identity actually strengthens it and produces an ethnicity that challenges the power of the states to impose a national identity and control space and movement (Kearney, 1991). This is particularly true for Native Americans who are marginal in both political systems, they even join other indigenous group and develop new pan-Indian identities for the defense of their rights (Varese, 1994; Nagengast *et al.*, 1992; Kearney, 1991, 1998).

However, not all transnational communities are post-national in the sense of defining their identities in the margins of national ideology. For certain groups it is the reterritorialization of a national identity that takes place; in that sense, they are not post-nationals (Bach *et al.*, 1994). In any case, hybridity, diaspora, simulacra, displacement, hyperreality, deterritorialization, reterritorialization and fragmentation, are all phenomena that transect the borderlands and create the stage for a postmodern experience (García, 1989; Bach *et al.*, 1994; Fox, 1991). In doing so they heighten the postmodern condition of migrancy and rootedness, therefore becoming a metaphor of the human experience in the globalized world (Chambers, 1994).

These migration processes are not conceptualized as the result of individual strategies, but rather as social phenomena produced by the pervasive globalization of capital. Saskia Sassen (1988, 1996, 1998) shows how migration, to specific countries, is fostered not by poverty, but rather by the penetration of capital that disrupts local economies and creates links between countries. Whereas international treaties are implemented to facilitate capital flow (Hackenberg & Hackenberg, 1999), the migrant is constructed as the public's enemy par excellence (Tabuenca, 1997; Bustamante, 1996; Kearney, 1991). This allows the constant replacement of an ethnic work force that is in no conditions to demand minimum benefits (Mines & Anzaldúa, 1982; Zabin, 1992).

Cities become de-nationalized with the effect of an internationalization of both wealthy investors and poor laborers (Sassen, 1998). This globalization of the city demands a constant crossing of frontiers in the every day interaction with the ethnic other (Rosaldo, 1991), besides that it becomes the source of hybrid subjects and cultures, and

the space in which citizens become consumers and audiences (García, 1989). The city becomes an organizational commodity, and it is there where the needed infrastructure is found, and where control is achieved through telecommunication and finance (Sassen, 1998). Manufacturing spaces loose their importance to the financial centers. This globalization of capital leads to the annihilation of commercial barriers, of space and time (Hackenberg & Hackenberg, 1999). In this sense, the borderlands become a place for migrant capital, a place for multinationals that extend themselves through a hyperspace composed of financial cities such as New York, Mexico City, and Tokyo, and industrial centers such as the US-Mexico borderlands.

Although the flow of commodities across borders is one of the most pervasive and important transnational links, it has been neglected by most anthropologists. James H. McDonald (1994), however, provides a general framework through which he analyses NAFTA and the projected impact on a collapsing Mexican agriculture that would foster Mexico's dependence on US imports of basic food crops, specifically dairy products. Also pioneer research has been done by Robert R. Alvarez (1990, 1994, 1998). He shows that the flow of ethnic commodities —such as *chiles* and *mangos*— is part of the so-called “implosion of the third world”, and that it also follows a social network logic managed by specific cultural systems of *confianza* and *compadrazgo*. His analyses show the dependence of capital on Mexican entrepreneur culture and knowledge of the markets, as well as their penetration to the US market, which question traditional models that assumed a one way dominance of the developed over the underdeveloped countries.

Finally, Heyman (1994) provides a fine ethnography of Agua Prieta, Sonora, in which he shows the impact of the consumption of US commodities by Mexican households. The consumption of US appliances led the household from a flow-conserving economy in which it obtained cash-income at one or a few points in the year to a flow-through economy in which the household received and expended income on a steady or nearly steady periodic basis. This process is what Heyman calls consumer proletarianization in which the consumer is deprived of the means of consumption such as the loss of natural resources and local craft production skills.

In synthesis, flow production, distribution and consumption also force us to conceptualize the borderlands as a just one site in a multidirectional transnational consumption network.

REDEFINING THE US-MEXICO BORDER AS ANTHROPOLOGY'S SUBJECT MATTER

Johnson and Michaelsen (1997) criticize the landmark works of Rosaldo (1991) and Anzaldúa (1987) for describing the borderlands as “a privileged site for progressive political work”, and for taking it for granted as an analytical tool and as an object of study. This criticism echoes major debates in the literature, that include the epistemological and political criteria to define the borderlands, the possibility of defining the borderlands as a region, its extension and the southern and northern limits, its nature, meanings and uniqueness, and its relevance for social theory and for democratic or otherwise agendas. It is necessary, then, to problematize what the borderlands are.

The problematic nature of the definition of the US-Mexican border and borderlands implies unclear boundaries of the field of US-Mexico border studies. The changing nature and meanings, the unprecise definition of its object of study, and contemporary theoretical revolutions, make of this field of study a contested terrain. The reconceptualization of key concepts of anthropology such as “culture” (Rosaldo, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 1991; Appadurai, 1991; García, 1990), “field” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997a), “region and culture area” (Fábregas 1992), “traditional-modern, rural-urban” (García, 1989; Kearney, 1996); “Nation and State” (Anderson, 1991; Kearney, 1991), “power” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997b), and the “Self-Other” dichotomy (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997a; Alvarez, 1995; Kearney, 1991), question the way in which we have conceptualized the border and the borderlands.

On the other hand, contemporary inter and trans-disciplinary ideas question the scope and limits, the appropriateness and the uniqueness of our methodologies (Lugo, 1997; García, 1989; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997a). The political commitments of the authors (Tabuenca, 1997), the structures of power that influence what, where and how one is published and taken into consideration as being part of the field

(Donnan & Wilson, 1994; Johnson & Michaelsen, 1997; Tabuenca, 1997; Lutz, 1995), also determine the unboundedness of borderlands studies. Finally, contemporary globalization processes, transnational movements, and reterritorialization and deterritorialization processes (Fox, 1991; Appadurai, 1991; Abu-lughod, 1991; Alvarez, 1995; Rouse, 1991; García, 1989) challenge our analytical tools and our methodologies.

The two first paradigms that I described at length in the previous section fall into several of the contemporary criticisms. Both the model of the borderlands as separate peripheries of their own national cores and the model of the borderlands as a regional system, confound the concepts of region and culture area, and attribute them to the borderlands. The mere search for the boundaries and / or frontiers of the region implies a reified notion of the borderlands: a geographic space that intrinsically shelters people who share an identity and a rooted culture. If it was once true that the area developed into a region as a result of the centralizing actions of the nation states, then it is incorrect to postulate an homogeneous culture for the huge diversity of people that inhabit the area and that are differentially influenced by the diverse processes that transect the area.

The third paradigm discussed —the border as a transnational locale—, avoids this problem. However, it shares with the others the epistemological assumption that the border is a region that extends through time and either a geographic or hyperreal space passively awaiting description. All of these models assume that the border is a given entity that may be known and experienced as it is by any observer regardless of its social location.

Opposed to the positivistic assumption of a given object to be known universally, I argue that the borderlands are experienced differentially by specific social actors depending on their social location. I follow James P. Spradley's (1972) analysis of tramp culture in which he concludes that although tramps share the same infrastructure and urban spaces with other groups, each group assigns a different meaning to each space, constituting a different cultural world for each group. In that sense, it is possible to make a distinction between what I would call the border(lands)-in-itself and the border(lands)-for-themselves.

The first concept would refer either to a given entity before it is experienced by someone (the positivistic entity independent of a subject), or to the experience of an omniscient and omnipotent social actor that could simultaneously be in all possible social locations (based on the post-positivistic notion of intersubjectivity). I argue that the border(lands)-in-itself does not exist, except as an iterative goal, that is, as an ideal description to which we aspire.

The question “What is the border?” and its intuitive answer “An imaginary but formal geo-political divide that regulates the flow of people and products, and that is recognized and enforced by both the Mexican and US states”, are incomplete and fallacious. The intuitive answer uncritically assumes the perspective and experience of the national states and, by doing so, helps legitimize and naturalize them, implicitly negating contesting experiences and perspectives. In assuming just one among many perspectives and experiences of what the border is as the real description of the border, the researcher commits the fallacy of taking the part to be the whole. The appropriate and complete question should be, instead, “What is the border for them?”, where the pronoun “them” means a specific type of social actors.

The border(lands)-for-themselves refers to the social spaces and institutions in which particular subjects (collective or individual) develop their border experiences. For example, three main actors in the border drama experience the Border Patrol—one of the institutions that constitute the border—. The undocumented migrant faces the Border Patrol with fear and terrible economic, familial and emotional consequences. The entrepreneur sometimes uses it as a tool to get rid of unwanted workers, and sometimes is negatively affected by the high turnover detentions produce. Finally, congressmen in Washington experience it as another category in the national budget, or as a crucial element in their strategies to power. All of these actors, depending on their social location, differentially experience the Border Patrol. The same may be said of other institutions and processes that are construed as being part of the borderlands by specific social actors.

The US-Mexican border is not a stable entity with just one meaning, but rather is a variety of entities in constant change and with multiple meanings. Both its stability and change depend on the contested

discourses and practices of differentially located actors. If the US-Mexican border is more or less stable as an entity, is because it is being maintained by specific actors through their practices and discourses. The same can be said about its multiple meanings which may vary with the actor's location on the social fields of power, but that may also be homogeneous due to enforced discourses.

Attempts to give an ultimate description of the US-Mexican border are flawed. First, because its complexity makes it impossible to describe all its characteristics; second, because it changes through time; and third, because it has different meanings to and is differentially experienced by diverse social actors, including scholars.

If definitions of the border are always actor and context-specific, we need to recognize our affiliations and provide a definition that suits our needs as a specific type of scholar: anthropologists. As scholars we fundamentally experience the borderlands as an object of study. Our relationship to those social spaces and institutions is above all epistemological. It would be possible to talk about the border(lands)-for-anthropologists, in which our border experiences are determined by our political and epistemological goals. I argue that the borderlands-for-anthropologists should be defined as a hyperreality of contested discourses and practices. I understand the difference between defining an object and characterizing one to be that whereas a characterization is simply a description as accurate as possible of the object, a definition is a more or less arbitrary delimitation of the characteristics to be taken into account for a specific purpose. In this sense, a definition of an object of study is a creation of a theoretical object that, although it has its roots in reality, is nevertheless independent of it.

To define the borderlands as a hyperreality does not mean, then, that the border is not real, it only means that in order to better understand the social and cultural dimensions of the border, as well as its political implications for every social actor, we need to transcend essentialist and static views that take the border for granted. The border is very real, but it is socially constructed and maintained, and differentially affects people. I suggest that we study not only its characteristics as a real entity, but also its hyperreal dimensions. The only way to do this is to define the border, as an object of study, as a

hyperreality, which necessarily includes the relationships between the hyperreal and the real.

The concept of hyperreality is problematic. Umberto Eco (1983, 1987) identifies it with culturally specific situations in which a copy or a double is offered as substitute of reality that would satisfy the consumer more than reality itself. Such is the case of museums in which theatrical reproductions of a culture are more pleasing and accessible than the actual social group, or instances in which indigenous groups enact their traditional culture for anthropological or tourist audiences. On the other hand J. Baudrillard (1983) identifies hyperreality with a postmodern condition in which both originals and copies are replaced by simulacra. That is a completely imaginary world that bears no relationship to reality which is seen as less attractive. Such is the case of Disneyland, in which characters are all imaginary. Frederic Jameson (1984) limits his analysis of hyperreality as simulacrum to art. Two basic shortcomings of these analyses are that they limit the scope of hyperreality to a single phenomenon either a double or a simulacrum, but most importantly that they are not related to the broader political and economic global context. Nick Perry (1998) suggests that hyperreality is context specific, and it can either be a double or a simulacrum or both. In any case, hyperreality is not limited to the artistic or to the entertainment industry, but can be present in everyday interactions. Penelope Harvey (1996) has shown how political representations of the nation state are negotiated through hyperreality.

For me, hyperreality includes the four different relationships of the image to reality that Baudrillard (1983) has suggested, but in a political economy framework. He argues that an image can be: 1) a reflection of a basic reality; 2) a mask and perversion of a basic reality; 3) a mask for an absence of a basic reality; and 4) its own simulacrum. In the US-Mexican border the image as a reflection of a basic reality can be seen in border enforcement of agricultural regulations for imported produce. The image as a mask and perversion of a basic reality can be seen in representations of the border as a boundary that separates two distinct social systems. Third, the image as a mask for the absence of a basic reality can be seen in the rhetoric of an homogenous and pristine American culture to be defended through the border. Finally, the image

of the border as its own pure simulacrum, can be seen in the performance of boundary enforcement through the border patrol, which does not fulfill its expressed purpose.

Methodologically, this definition implies the description of the ways in which border representations are used and consumed by different social groups to construct the “basic reality” in which they live and how it affects the “basic reality” of other groups. For example, the migrant that illegally crosses the boundary in search for a better paid job is implicitly assuming a representation of the border as a resource open to, at least, his ethnicity, nationality and gender. This representation immediately challenges the State’s representation of a closed border to migration. Neither of these representations are fully imposed, although it is clear that the State’s representation is the most powerful; however, neither of these representations fully determines the reality of these spaces. How does the interaction of these representations build an oppressive situation? How can we help to build and impose a representation that will respect basic human rights?.

I argue that by exposing the representations of the border as social constructions supported by specific social actors that benefit from them, and by exposing the alternative representations of the oppressed, we can call on oblique powers to transform the situation. The relationships of the different levels of representation to the basic reality should be exposed in terms of who bears them and benefits from them in order to de-naturalize them. We need workers, voters and consumers to know that this is not a normal or natural situation, but most importantly, that they, as social and political agents, can help impose a new representation of the border.

In general, I am suggesting that we study the commodification of the images of the border; how they get produced and consumed and what are their relationships to reality; who gets benefited by the consumption of which images, and most importantly, what is the political economy of the whole process. Although the study of the commodification of the image of the border would entail the analysis of its use in the marketing of products—as is the case in the selling of otherness to tourists—I am more concerned with explicitly political processes as is the case of voters’ consumption of certain derogatory

images of the immigrant who would vote for initiatives such as California's 187 or guest worker programs that do not accept reproduction costs as seem to be contemporary initiatives, in particular that of Arizona's governor Jane Hull.

CONCLUSION

Previous paradigms accounted for some of the processes that anthropologists consider to be part of the borderlands, but because these were essentialist models, the processes provided exclusionary definitions of the border. Either the border is a periphery, a center or a stage in a circuit. But if we transcend the essentialist notion, we may realize that all of these processes occur simultaneously but affecting social groups differentially. If we focus on social actors and their constructions of reality, we will be able to transcend these static notions of the border and account for the complementary processes that previous models had emphasized.

One advantage of this model to study and intervene in the borderlands is that it does not eliminate any of the previous mutually exclusive models, but rather incorporates them all as subject matter. The difference is that they are no longer seen as merely descriptive or explanatory theories, but rather as located representations of the border used by specific social actors. This conception of the border follows the idea that the border is not a natural boundary, but rather an artifact; it also follows the idea that it is a tool that allows for an efficient, even if exploitative, international division of labor. The difference is that this model recognizes the presence of a variety of social actors, with differential power to impose their own representations. Nevertheless, the actual outcome, in this case the border, is the ever changing variety of oblique powers. Hence, "the border" never completely corresponds to the desired representation of any social actor, although it is clearly the US State's view the most influential. This definition allows us to trace the creation of discourses, their manipulation, and their impact in the construction of social reality. It also places the anthropologist in the social fields of power as just another social actor with a specific view of reality.

And precisely this definition provides an answer to our guiding question: What is the “field” that supports the “fieldwork” of the US-Mexican border? It is a hyperreal space constituted by the socially and culturally constructed border and borderlands that extends in a multidimensional hyperworld of border-practices, border-discourses and border-experiences of different social actors. In other words, it is constituted by each and every one of the processes and institutions that constitute the border-for-every-social-actor that conceptualizes them as part of the border and /or the borderlands. This definition of the borderlands shifts from an assumed objective entity to the totality of the representations of different social actors that develop border experiences, that is, a grouping of the social and cultural border that is experienced by different social actors. Put in traditional anthropological terms, it could be said that this definition is a grouping of the diverse emic definitions of the border. The actual border, a constructed but nevertheless basic reality, is part and parcel of every one of those borders-for-someone, however, it is seen as multidimensional in so far it is experienced and conceptualized differentially. The US-Mexican border field does not disappear with the rebuttal of the concepts of region and culture area, but rather extends itself to include the different social actor’s perspective and its impact in the construction of a basic reality.

Finally, I suggest that we continue to deconstruct hegemonic representations of the border and to make visible the alternative images held by migrants, *maquiladora* workers, and even scholars. By doing so we will be contributing to the creation of a new social order in which basic human rights will be enforced.

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