

Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

Vol. 6 No. 1 June 30, 2005

Symposium on the Representation and Use of Urban Spaces, April 7 - 8 at UD -- On Citizenship

Border of Words/Border of Images: Tijuana and Los Algodones

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In an article published in 1996, Jorge Castañeda (who later would become Mexico's minister of foreign relations under president Fox) proposed that in Tijuana lies Mexico's future, (1) an idea that has been floating around for many years. Tijuana has become the paradigm of the border city; a region perceived neither as Mexico nor as the United States, but as some sort of amalgam that has been labeled--among other things--a laboratory of post modernity, a hybrid city, a transborder city, Mexamerica, or more recently, the third nation, *la tercera nación*. Few would deny that in Tijuana some very interesting social, economic and cultural processes are taking place. These are manifested in its highly publicized and stigmatized night life, the Nortec musical movement and being named by Newsweek (2) among "The World's Most Creative Cities". In a September 2002 article "The World's New Culture Meccas", the magazine describes Tijuana as one of the best places to create art. Although it must be said that this label comes more from external perceptions of the city than from the local artists themselves. Only a small minority of the members of this art Mecca can make a living at being artists, as many of them have expressed: Tijuana is a very good place to create art, but an awful place to sell it.(3)

Today I would like to go beyond these paradigmatic images of Tijuana. While artistic images as well as some inescapable Tijuana icons will appear in this presentation, I also want to talk about a lesser known part of Tijuana, what is being called the new Tijuana, *la nueva Tijuana*. In the second part of this presentation about border cities, we will look at another much less studied border town, the small community of Los Algodones, Baja California where I believe one can find very interesting clues as to the future of the border.

Tijuana



Picture 1 - Photo by Omar Pimienta.



Picture 2 - Photo by Omar Pimienta

There are two diametrically opposed images associated with Tijuana: On the one hand the idea of a deterrent wall, the definite end of something and the beginning of a different reality, the so called *third vis a vis* the first world, poverty versus wealth, despair versus hope, etc. On the other hand, there is the trendy idea that the region is a porous one, Tijuana as a fusion city, a transborder city, a city that extends and or melds with San Diego, as Teddy Cruz puts it: "Rarely do we find two such radically different cultures and economies juxtaposed so intensely as San Diego and Tijuana. They are intimately connected, but at the same time sharply divided by a ten-foot steel wall that ruptures the continuity of the shared landscape."(4) It is indeed common to hear the joke that the best part of Tijuana is San Diego.

There are some arenas where the region is perceived as one entity. Certainly, some of the same businesses are on both sides of the border (Picture 1). But after all, there are American fast food franchisees, car dealerships, Costcos, Office depots and other many transnational corporations in all of Mexico. Tijuana, however, also reproduce their own versions of American type businesses as we can see in these so called Mini markets, labeled as such in English--

mini market el Aguaje (Picture 2) and mini market Castro (Picture 3), and in the Tijuana version of west coast restaurant and bakery chain Marie Callenders. Tijuana's spoof of this restaurant is María Candelaria, the quintessential indigenous name in Mexican popular culture; a name that derives from a 1940's iconic film by the nationalist director Emilio Indio Fernández.

The Tijuana /San Diego region is perceived as especially porous in the realm of the arts. There are several binational art projects such as Insite that take place on both sides of the border--sometimes literally--and that attest to the border fusion at that level. Precisely from the 1997 Insite biennial comes one of the best known images of border art in recent memory: Marcos Ramírez's *Toy an Horse*, a 30 foot wooden interpretation of the Trojan Horse whose two heads--as Nestor García Canclini has written--emphasize that influences and paranoia travel in both directions, north and south. The horse was strategically placed so that the border went right under it (US check points are 100 feet into its own territory. The actual border is marked by speed bumps like markers on the asphalt.)



Picture 3 - Photo by Omar Pimienta.

In other arenas, the transborderity is just simply not so. The post-border construct is based on a naïve discourse about a theoretical fusion in spite of plentiful evidence showing just the contrary. It cannot be overstated that these concepts were (and are) being constructed simultaneously as more walls were (and are) being erected dividing the Tijuana / San Diego border. The notion that tijuansenses, that is Tijuana's inhabitants, are accustomed to going back and forth across the border is only true for some people under some specific circumstances. To be able to freely and easily go to San Diego, a tijuansense has to fall under one of these three categories: 1) To be a US citizen. There are thousands of tijuansenses born in the United States as well as thousands of naturalized American citizens living in Tijuana. These are not Anglo-Americans living in Tijuana but culturally Mexicans with the two citizenships. 2) To have a green card, to be an alien resident of the US. Although it is technically illegal to have a green card without residing in the US, thousands of tijuansenses cross every morning to work (or to study) in the US with a green card. To the American border officer's question, the answer is "I came to visit my mother, to visit my family, I came to party... Yes, I live in San Diego." Everybody knows of this situation but chooses to ignore it. Both sides benefit. The advantage to the commuter worker is to be able to live cheaply in Tijuana with an American salary. One must keep in mind that the average house in San Diego now costs half a million dollars. The benefits for the American side are the availability of cheap labor for which the city or county does not have to provide services. 3) The third way to easily cross to the United States is either by having a Mexican passport (with an American visa) or the so called local passport. Both are given by the U.S. government to tijuansenses who are able to document long time residency, a secure job and a long established savings account. Those crossing using either a Mexican federal passport or border crossing card are not supposed to seek employment. This is pretty much the Tijuana that most people know, the one that revolves directly around the border, the one born as a result of the prohibition law, the Volstead law of the 1920's, the Tijuana of the Revolution Avenue with its famous or infamous night life and its painted burros.



Picture 4 - Photo by Omar Pimienta

A lesser known Tijuana is the one that is said to grow at the astonishing rate of several blocks weekly. I am referring to *la nueva Tijuana*, the area also known as "Zona Oriente" (Eastern zone) which includes neighborhoods like Mariano Matamoros, Buenos Aires, El Pípila and El Florido. Here is some data about this other non cosmopolitan, non chic Tijuana. In this area live approximately one fourth of Tijuana's estimated 1.2 million inhabitants. It only has one police precinct despite being where most of the crimes take place. It is also where, during winter, most of the respiratory-disease related deaths occur.(5) The "Zona Oriente" is mostly populated by migrants, newly arrived people from several Mexican states such as Colima and Jalisco, but mainly from Sinaloa. This state, Sinaloa, is the home of Mexico's most notorious drug lords, and while it is true that the vast majority of people from Sinaloa are law abiding citizens, it is also true that the notion of *narcocultura* (drug trafficking) is very present among sinaloenses and that it is a transportable one. This area of Tijuana is known to host many safe--and thus clandestine--houses for kidnappers and drug traffickers. Here, *narcocultura* is also openly displayed, even advertised. This is a tortilla factory named Malverde (Picture 4). Jesus Malverde is the patron saint of drug traffickers.

Although Malverde is not recognized by the Catholic Church, there is a chapel dedicated to him in Culiacán, the capital of Sinaloa as well as many other smaller ones in Mexico and possibly in the US. (6)

Being the poorest area of Tijuana, this “Zona Oriente” is characterized by the improvisation of services and business that fill a need in an area with many necessities. If no established business will open soon enough, an improvised one will have to do. No corner store? No problem! No block buster video will open up in the neighborhood? There is Video Vision (Picture 5). No dominos pizza? Homero's pizza will have to suffice (Picture 6). More than its relationship with the visitors from the north, Tijuana's future will be dictated by the city's ability, or lack thereof, to integrate these new tijuanaenses.



Picture 5 - Photo by Omar Pimienta



Picture 6 - Photo by Omar Pimienta

Los Algodones

Now, let us turn to a much smaller town, three hours from Tijuana. Los Algodones is located on the west side of the Colorado River near Yuma, Arizona, and approximately fifty minutes to the east of Mexicali, precisely at the four corners of the states of California, Baja California, Arizona and Sonora. Most of the activity in Los Algodones centers on the winter visitors who cross the border six months out of the year. During those months, an average of 15,000 persons, mainly from the US but also from Canada, go daily to Los Algodones sometimes more than doubling its population. Known as "Snowbirds" because they are seeking out warmer weather during the winter months, these visitors spend an estimated one million dollars daily in Los Algodones. According to local officials, another two million pesos (approximately US \$180,000) is collected in taxes(7). A Mexican customs officer with whom I spoke told me that an average of \$100 dollars is spent per day per tourist.

This small multi border town usually doesn't make either United States or Mexican news. Los Algodones enjoys a relatively low crime rate. In a post 9/11 era when security has become the operative word, Los Algodones seems to represent the goal of a safe border for both countries. On January 26, 2005, the U.S. State Department issued a travel alert cautioning its citizens from traveling to the Mexican border cities. That very same day, Anthony Garza, the American ambassador in Mexico, sent a letter to President Vicente Fox's administration criticizing Mexican law enforcement or, better said, the lack of it. He talked about the incapability of the local Mexican border law enforcement to confront drug delinquents, kidnappings and violence in general. All this--Garza warned--will have a negative effect on binational relations, tourism, and commerce on our borders, "which are vital for the regions prosperity." (8) Both incidents tensed relations between the two countries. The immediate response from the Fox administration was to say that if the violence had increased in some border cities, it was because drug traffickers were being persecuted and felt cornered, that Mexico was giving them the "mother of all wars" (la madre de todas las guerras). (9)

Conscious that perception can carry as much weight as reality, the administration's actual answer came a few days later, the 31st of January, in the form of President Fox's visit to Los Algodones. There he presented the small community as the paradigm of a Mexican border town, one that is a safe provider of services for its American (and Canadian) winter visitors. To the hundreds of winter visitors or snow birds he explained the he had decided to pop in, "came to supervise," he said, "to listen directly from you, how you are being treated and how you enjoy the tranquility that we have in these Mexican border cities." He also talked to the media, both Mexican and American. To an American reporter that asked if American people should be afraid to cross the border president Fox answered "not at all", then he emphasized that his administration will continue the fight against drug trafficking, a war he claimed to be already winning (10). The irony is that it is precisely drugs that many of these visitors are looking to purchase. The drugs we are talking about are not illegal in the United States, they are, however, immensely expensive. These are some of the drugs the thousands of people crossing to Los Algodones are looking for: zocor, sintroid, loproresor (Picture 7).



Picture 7 - Photo by Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta
answer I kept hearing when trying to buy double A batteries.

Contrary to what many people may believe, there is no town on the American side. Yuma, Arizona is nearby, but it is still a ten to fifteen minute drive. All there is in Andrade, California is a small RV park. There's also a parking lot that belongs to the Quechan tribe. For three dollars one can park there and walk to Mexico. Since most of Los Algodones' visitors are older, many of them arrive by the bus load. Contrary to what happens when crossing to the US, the crossing to Mexico exemplifies the definition of porosity.

Los Algodones has been able to adapt itself to the changes. Several years ago there were only a few pharmacies. The businesses then were the traditional Mexican curio shops. One can still find a lot of vendors selling so-called Mexican curios. Different from other border cities, night life is not such an important ingredient in the Los Algodones offerings. Although there are many restaurants where visitors can eat after shopping, contrary to what one would expect from the stereotypical Mexican border town, there are few cantinas in the business area. Sexual advertisement is not altogether absent, many pharmacies advertise Viagra, some even providing visual stimuli (Pictures 9 & 10).

Los Algodones has several impressive statistics. It is probably the place with the most pharmacies per square mile in the world. In an area of two blocks there are over twenty pharmacies, in many cases owned by the same people, located one next to the other and competing against themselves. There are at least three Mary's pharmacies, also in close proximity. One has to keep in mind that the majority of Algodones' commercial area is located on about four square blocks with several plazas to the interior of these blocks. There are six Guadalajara pharmacies in the radius of one block, sometimes literally one next to the other. And some of these pharmacies are by no means small (Picture 8). Los Algodones is a community whose only reason to exist seems to be in relation to its visitors. Their commercial logic only looks to the north. If an item may be of interest to the winter visitors, you will find it, if that is not the case, then you are out of luck. "No, Americans don't buy batteries...sorry" was the



Picture 8 - Photo by J. C. Ramírez Pimienta



Picture 9 - Photo by Juan Carlos Ramírez Pimienta



Picture 10 - Photo by Juan Carlos Ramírez Pimienta

This tourist destination has some logistic limitations for night life entertainment. The visitors have to return to the United States before 10 p.m. because the international port of entry is closed between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. This discourages visitors from staying overnight in Algodones. For the tourists who frequent the area, the majority retirees, this is a very important issue since crossing back into the United States in case of a medical emergency, for example, would be complicated, entailing traveling close to one hour to either Mexicali or San Luis, Sonora whose ports of entry remain open the 24 hours.

It is indeed ironic that it is health related issues that both attract and repel visitors. It is not only in search of pharmaceuticals that visitors go to Los Algodones. The town is also famous for its large number of doctors and dentists. Los Algodones is the proof that one need only look to one side of the border to see what the other is lacking. (11) With prices for health care related services continuously escalating in the U.S., this small border town is the answer for people with a fixed income. As with the pharmacies, the village also holds records for doctors and dentists per square foot. According to the DentistsOfAlgodones.com webpage, in ten years, the number of dentists has grown from single digits to "well over two hundred." (12) Since there is so much competition, health care providers have to depend on "word of mouth" to progress. Even charging one third in relation to their American counterparts, it is evidently a good business, especially if one takes into consideration that several doctors as well as dentists also own pharmacies to where, of course, they direct their patients to fill prescriptions.



Picture 11 - Photo by J. C. Ramírez Pimienta

perhaps all of Mexico in general--is in danger of going through a process of algodonzation. I speak of danger in spite of the picture of progress that I have just shown because of the excessive economic dependency that Los Algodones has on its winter visitors. What I have not mentioned yet in this presentation is that half of the year, the summer with no Snowbirds, Los Algodones is in fact close to a ghost town.

It is no coincidence that the merchants of Los Algodones are emblematic of president Fox's economic neoliberal program that recommended that every Mexican should have a business (*un changarro*). Some professionals and business owners in Los Algodones are in fact becoming corporate groups with interests in liquor stores, pharmacies, opticals and even barber shops.

Of course, not everybody is a business owner; there are many employed as optical, medical and dental assistants, secretaries, vendors, barbers and hair stylists--giving three dollar cuts--and those who provide other ambulant services such as hair braiding and shoe shines. Even the guy who asks for donations to purportedly help rehabilitate drug addicts gets money (Picture 11).

To the notion that proposes Tijuana and its third nation model as the future of the border, I would argue that in fact, Tijuana--and

Notes

1. © 1996 by Jorge G. Castañeda. This article was reprinted in March's 1998 The Mexico File newsletter. " Tijuana, Mexico's Future?" by Jorge G. Castañeda. <http://www.mexicofile.com/tijuanamexicosfuture.htm>
2. September 2, 2002, Newsweek, Atlantic Edition .
3. Personal conversations with Tijuana artists over the last fifteen years.
4. Cruz, Teddy. "Border Postcard: Chronicles from the Edge" http://www.aia.org/cod_lajolla_042404_teddycruz
5. Frontera (Tijuana newspaper), October 18, 2001.
6. For more on Malverde see *True Tales from Another Mexico* by Sam Quiñones and *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas* by Elijah Wald.
7. Source: La Crónica (Mexicali newspaper), January 12, 2004.
8. "Alerta EU por narcoviolenca en la frontera mexicana." El Heraldo de Chiapas on line. http://www.heraldochiapas.com.mx/notas_n.asp?urlnota=270105nac1a.doc
9. "Responde Derbez a Tony Garza " <http://www.esmas.com/noticierostelevisa/mexico/421619.html>, Also, " EE.UU. y

México suavizan diferencias". http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_4220000/4220907.stm

10. "Superado el problema con EU: Fox" C:\Documents and Settings\carlos\Desktop\Superado el problema con EU Fox México esmas.htm Also, "La relación con EU se mantiene normal: Fox" C:\Documents and Settings\carlos\Desktop\Diario de Mexico - La relación con EU se mantiene normal Fox (Vista imprimible).htm

11. Thanks to Pilar Hernández for pointing out this idea to me so eloquently.

12. Source DentistsOfAlgodones.com web page.