RACIAL AND ETHNIC COMPONENTS OF TRANSFRONTERIZO IDENTITY
ON THE Tijuana-san diego border

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Abstract

Transfronterizo (cross-border) students cross ethnic and cultural boundaries on a regular basis, functioning in institutions in Mexico and the United States and exposed to conflicting patterns of racial and ethnic identity. This paper investigates the reactions of fifteen transfronterizo students at UCSD to being classified as an ethnic and racialized minority. The interviews indicate they are a protected group with the legal rights of American citizens but have been socialized in Tijuana and speak Spanish fluently. Thus, they claim the right to label themselves ethnically and nationally as Mexicans, without acknowledging the black versus white racial categories of the USA and disassociating from Mexican Americans. Transfronterizo students challenge notions of citizenship on the border in a cultural sense. Their transnational lives allow them to identify more readily with where they were raised than where they were born despite indications of possible changes in the future.

Introduction

In the spring of 2005, Mexico became a site of controversy on race relations when on May 13th President Vicente Fox stated:

“No hay duda que los mexicanos y las mexicanas, llenos de dignidad, de voluntad y de capacidad de trabajo, están haciendo trabajos que ni siquiera los negros quieren hacer allá, en Estados Unidos” (La Jornada: 17 de mayo de 2005).

“There’s no doubt that Mexican men and women full of dignity, willpower and a capacity for work are doing the work that not even blacks want to do in the United States.”

His declarations were interpreted by the global media as racist and led many journalists, academics and social thinkers in both countries to question the role of racism in Mexico. African-American civil rights leaders Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton demanded an official apology from President Fox and attempted to mobilize protests by Mexicans of African descent.
On June 29th adding insult to injury in the minds of many, the Mexican government issued a postage stamp depicting an exaggerated black cartoon character known as Memín Pingüín. The series of five stamps commemorating the beloved cartoon character that began in the 1940’s depict a short bald black boy with shining black skin, exaggeratedly drawn thick lips, wide eyes, a flat nose, and big ears that bare a resemblance to images of blackface in the United States.

American journalists from the Washington Post to the New York Times immediately attacked Mexico for condoning the transmission of outdated and racist images which baffled and angered the people of Mexico where the stamp quickly sold out. These events have highlighted the conflict between the disparate racial discourses in the United States and Mexico. Moreover, the different interpretations that developed within each country over these incidents testify to the concept of race as a social construction.

Two Nations, One Region

The stark inequality in power relations between Mexico and the United States, both in the present as well as historically, are manifested in the political, economic, social and ideological conflicts and hierarchies that emerge on the border that separate these two countries. Although borders separate nation states politically as well as physically,
the people that inhabit these territories are much more fluid. However, the structural conditions that seek to divide two nations affect the everyday life of border people in several ways.

The US-Mexico border is crossed in two directions. Although many immigrants leave Mexico to settle in the US permanently, and others leave the US to live in Mexico, border people such as those living in the Tijuana-San Diego region, often times have the ability to travel back and forth between the two countries on a daily or regular basis.

For these people, the US-Mexico border is not an abstract concept but a tangible reality. Cross-border people on the Tijuana-San Diego border often times have to coalesce and reconcile the contradictions or inconsistencies between the political, economic and ideological structures of the US and Mexico.

*Tranfronterizo Students*

The young people of the Tijuana-San Diego border (who grow up in two countries, but one region) find inconsistencies between two ideologies of race through their constant interaction with two legal systems. Interviewing them allows us to investigate the social construction of race in the US and Mexico through a comparison of their experiences with institutions in each country. I am studying the reaction of *transfronterizo* students on the Tijuana-San Diego border to being classified as an ethnic and racialized minority in the United States. I want to find out how their experiences in institutions in two countries affect their ethnic and racial identification. This is important to understand or highlight the differences between the ethnic and racial discourses in the United States and Mexico.
Transfronterizo students on the Tijuana-San Diego border maintain ties with institutions across countries, namely their schools and their families. An essential part of being a transfronterizo involves the ability to cross the border frequently. Therefore, absent from this discussion are the many young people who live in the border region but are prohibited by immigration law to visit the other side freely. However, transfronterizo students who grow up on both sides of the Tijuana-San Diego border and have the right to cross freely still sense the unequal power differentials between the US and Mexico.

While portrayals in the media indicate that transfronterizo students on the Tijuana-San Diego border are viewed as an economic burden and a political challenge to residency law\(^1\), institutional discourse at the University of California San Diego\(^2\) portrays Tijuana as a city of vice despite the existence of several transfronterizo UCSD students who proudly call Tijuana home. Thus, transfronterizo students on the Tijuana-San Diego border deal personally with the structural inequalities between the two countries in which they live.

Unlike immigrants who must leave behind a distant country, transfronterizos’s transnational practices challenge the traditional assimilation paradigm\(^3\) which posits that in three generations immigrants in the US will lose their language, culture and identity. Education has been a key site for the socialization of new immigrants in the United States. However, having grown up and possibly acquiring a portion of their education in Mexico affects how transfronterizos on the Tijuana-San Diego border identify ethnically.

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2 Brochure given to incoming freshmen by the Office of Student Safety and Sexual Assault, University of California San Diego: “Before You Visit Mexico”.
in the United States. To understand the role of Mexican discourses of race on the ethnic identification of transfronterizos in the US, one must look at what has been written about race in Mexico.

**Racial Discourses in Latin America**

While race is used to designate phenotype, ethnicity is used to designate cultural traits. In Latin America there is a history of Indians, Blacks and Spaniards producing a mixed race not to mention Asian immigrants that were recruited for labor. Nationalism in Latin America often stresses a mixed heritage to the exclusion of unmixed Blacks and Indians. Furthermore, *mestizaje* and whitening have been seen as positive forces counteracting purely Indian or Black populations. In a way, *mestizaje* and whitening can be argued to represent forms of racism in Latin America.

**Race in Mexico**

The history of Mexico reveals important stages in the development of a national identity based on the hybrid ‘mestizo’. Modernization in Mexico has been tied to racial homogeneity. Widespread racism towards *Indígena* groups in Mexico stresses racial and cultural differences which condemn them to inequality, social and cultural exclusion. In Mexico race is discarded officially and avoided in favor of the ethnic label *raza*, which presupposes a homogeneous national *mestizo* identity. In the United States however, a history of extermination, conquest and immigration of labor of non-white groups maintained race as an important concept separate from ethnicity.

**Race in the US**

Racial difference and encounters between different geographic groups has always been permeated by differences in power. Both in European colonization and in
immigration to the United States, there has been an interest in land and labor. Furthermore, racial difference has been used to explain the exploitation and enslavement of different groups. Ethnic diversity in the United States emerged from this history as well as the recognition of human difference between different national and racial groups.

**Ethnicity in the US**

In the United States, ethnic groups are racially classified. Thus, a category based on culture, language and religion is superseded by race. Latinos in the U.S. are racialized and are often lumped together regardless of nationality. Recent immigrants from Latin America do not always accept this lumping and do not readily identify with Latin American immigrants of other nationalities. Cultural citizenship as opposed to legal citizenship, invokes the right to culture, to ethnic identification and to self definition in this context.

**The US-Mexico Border**

The US-Mexico border is an icon in borderlands studies across the world. Mexican borderlanders everyday perform transnational processes with the United States by economic necessity as well as geographic opportunity (Martinez, 1994). The vast inequality in economics and power that exists between the U.S. and Mexico is similarly negotiated in the daily life of *transfronterizos*. The contradictions of two separate systems of nation state are similarly negotiated by the people who function in both systems on a regular basis.

**Racial Projects**

The history of colonialism in Mexico as well as the history of migration to the United States helps us understand not only the circumstances under which different
groups populated each country, but also provide clues to the creation of race as a social project. While each country has different ethnic and racial groups living in their territory as citizens, the Mexican state avoids racial classifications while the US does the opposite. The reasons for this stem not so much from Mexico overcoming race and the US obsessing over it, but from different racial projects. In Mexico a national identity has been historically constructed based on a theory of mestizaje while in the United States people with one drop of black blood are considered black.

In the United States racial classifications have not been erased because instead of blending into a mestizo nation, miscegenation was strongly discouraged. Furthermore, in the United States citizenship was limited to white immigrants. The racialization that prevented non-white immigrants from becoming American citizens similarly prevents non-white minorities from assimilating ethnically based on language and culture with race as one more variable.

These disparate racial projects help to set up the stage for understanding how cross-border students who grow up in two countries adapt to being racialized by institutions in Mexico and the United States. Furthermore, the disparate social meanings of race in the US and Mexico are juxtaposed along the US-Mexico and Tijuana-San Diego border, where the structural differences between two countries are experienced acutely by transnational borderlanders such as transfronterizo students.

Transfronterizos Universitarios

1. “Realmente estoy estudiando como cualquier otro ciudadano americano pero soy internacional en cierta manera también porque pues no he vivido aquí.” (Interview #14: Female, 23)

“I’m really studying like any other American citizen but I’m also international in a way because well, I haven’t lived here.” (Interview #14: Female, 23)
The focus of this study are seven males and seven females who were raised in Mexico but studied in Tijuana and San Diego. All are current UCSD students except for one at Southwestern College. Five attended Southwestern College before transferring to UCSD. Three did not cross because their entire family moved to San Diego when they were in high school. All who crossed the border traveled North to study in San Diego except for one student who crossed South to study in Tijuana. Two started crossing at the elementary school level, two in middle school, three in high school and four in community college.

The research subjects attended private and/or public schools in Tijuana and San Diego. All of the research subjects were either U.S. born or naturalized citizens. I chose these students for my study because they have been socialized by institutions on both sides of the border: their schools and families. Transfronterizos who were educated in Mexico during elementary and middle school have taken classes on the History of Mexico which includes notions of mestizaje and nationalism. All of the schools that they attended before UCSD were in Tijuana and South Bay and were composed of a Mexican-American majority. All of the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Spanish.

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**Transfronterizo Racial Discourses**

My interviews indicated that the discourses about race and ethnicity in the United States and Mexico are very different. In the U.S. race denotes color and is demonstrated by physical markers. My research subjects argued that the U.S. is a country full of immigrants and diversity. The term race when applied to the United States elicited answers about five racial/ethnic classified groups: White, Black, Asian, Latino/Hispanic/Mexican-American/Chicano and Other.

The word *raza* in Spanish sounds like race, but has a different meaning in Mexico. *Raza* does not refer to one’s physical characteristics but instead denotes a national and ethnic identity. Questions about race in Mexico did not elicit answers about phenotype. Instead *raza* was used to invoke nationality and used as a synonym for “people” as in *la raza mexicana*, (the Mexican race). My research subjects argued that in Mexico there is not the diversity of the United States and thus no need to classify people racially. In Mexico, they argued, everyone is just assumed to be Mexican and race is not
an issue. The divisions that they drew between people in Mexico were based on region, state, nationality, class, occupation and urban versus rural populations.

2. “¿Cómo te identificabas racialmente en México?” (Me)
“Nunca había pensado en esa pregunta antes. Simplemente yo era uno más de los que vivían ahí o sea no había distinción racial de hecho. En México todos son mexicanos y turistas. Nunca nadie me había preguntado ¿de qué raza eres? Jajaja. Obviamente soy mexicano.” (Interview #11: Male, 21)

“How did you identify racially in Mexico?” (Me)
“I never thought of that question before. I was simply one more person that lived there, I mean, there weren’t racial distinctions actually. In Mexico we’re all Mexicans and tourists. No one ever asked me ‘What race are you?’ Hahaha. Obviously I’m Mexican.” (Interview #11: Male, 21)

However, given their view that there are no defined races in Mexico like there are in the United States, many transfronterizos argued that racism in Mexico exists against Indians. My research subjects described Mexicans as a generic mestizo mixture of Indian and Spanish with many shades in between (morenito, tostadito, güerito, prieto euphemisms for brown, toasted, blonde, dark). Mention of indígenas were tied to Mexico’s pre-colonial history or to marginalized sectors of society.

3. “¿Cómo te identificabas racialmente en México?” (Me)
“No se puede negar tanto las raíces Españolas como las indígenas porque después de todo somos mestizos.” (Interview #9: Female, 25)

“How did you identify racially in Mexico?” (Me)
“You can’t deny neither the Spanish roots nor the Indígena roots because after all we’re mestizos.” (Interview #9: Female, 25)

Some acknowledged that in Mexico to call somebody an Indian is an insult. However, several respondents described racism as discrimination against people from rural villages, or peasants without ever mentioning race. Thus, transfronterizos racialized regions, states and occupations when referring to indígenas.

4. “Hay diferentes clasificaciones raciales en México?” (Me)
“Están los indios y están las personas más civilizadas. Cuando creces en la ciudad es menos obvio que tal vez cuando creces en un pueblo chiquito y te das cuenta quienes son los que tienen el dinero y usualmente son personas que no son usualmente indios y los que no tienen dinero la mayoría del tiempo son campesinos que son indios. (Interview #2: Female, 21)"

“Are there different racial classifications in Mexico?” (Me)
“There are the Indians and there are the more civilized people. When you grow up in the city it’s less obvious than maybe if you grow up in a little town and you notice who has money and usually it’s people that are not usually Indians and those that have no money most of the time are peasants who are Indians.” (Interview #2: Female, 21).

Clearly, although transfronterizos argued that race in Mexico does not exist and that all who were born and raised in Mexico are Mexicans, their remarks revealed the exclusion of indígenas as members of the nation as well as the strong links between race and class in Mexico.

**National Identity vs. Legal Rights**

5. “Llega uno a cierta edad que se da cuenta no importa en donde nació uno, donde se crió es el chiste.” (Interview #1: Male, 22)

“One gets to a certain age where one realizes it doesn’t matter where one was born, it’s where one was raised that matters.” (Interview #1: Male, 22)

My research subjects identified ethnically as Mexicans even though they are all U.S. citizens. Legally, they identified as Americans or “technically” as Mexican-Americans. However, the transfronterizos I interviewed showed a strong identification with where they were raised. When they called themselves Mexican-Americans it was to indicate that they were born in the United States from Mexican citizen parents or to explain that they were born in Mexico and then acquired American citizenship through naturalization. Thus, the term Mexican American was invoked to express their transformation through immigration or bureaucracy from Mexican citizens into American citizens. Others stated that they fill out “Mexican American” on forms that ask for their racial identification because it is usually the box that most closely approximates their group. However, ethnically if given a choice they identified simply as Mexican.

6. “Cuando llegaste aquí por primera vez y viste las cajitas que tenías que llenar para identificarte qué pensaste o cómo te sentiste o qué?” (Me)

“Nada. Había una que decía chicano y otra México-americano y yo le puse la opción que decía Otro. Puse Mexicano.” (Interview #11: Male, 21)
“When you arrived here for the first time and you saw the little boxes you had to fill to identify yourself, what did you think or how did you feel or what?” (Me)
“Nothing. There was one that said Chicano and another one said Mexican-American and I put the option that said Other. I put Mexican.” (Interview#11: Male, 21)

Transfronterizo students used their Spanish fluency to separate themselves from Mexican-Americans. Also, they claimed to be proud of their heritage but insisted that one’s race does not represent one’s national identity. Thus, they argued that not all Mexicans are brown. In fact they argued that there are blonde Mexicans, as long as they were raised in Mexico and speak Spanish.

7. “¿Has ido a una junta de MEChA?(Me)”
“No, es que la mera verdad la mayoría de los mexicanos no me llevo en común con la mayoría de los mexicanos que están en todo eso. Yo no me considero Chicano o sea a mí me choca que me pongan en ese grupo de Chicanos. Y no soy Chicano. Yo estoy hablando de experiencia y los que he conocido así de Chicano hablan de tanto orgullo cuando la verdad tienen poca cultura. No te saben ni el inglés ni el español bien. Relacionan el chicanismo con la piel oscura y el pelo castaño negro. Eso no es ser mexicano. Es la cultura. Es la vida social y todo eso.” (Interview #1: Male, 22)

“No, because the truth is that the majority of Mexicans, I don’t get along with the majority of Mexicans that are in all of that. I don’t consider myself a Chicano I mean I hate being put in that group of Chicanos. And I am not Chicano. I am talking from experience and the ones I know that are Chicanos talk about a lot of pride when in fact they have little culture. They don’t know English or Spanish well. They relate Chicanismo with dark skin and dark black hair. That is not being Mexican. It’s the culture. It’s the social life and all of that.” (Interview #1: Male, 22)

As is obvious from this quote, transfronterizos expressed negative attitudes towards Mexican Americans and disassociated themselves from that group. They argued that Mexican Americans do not speak Spanish, know nothing about Mexican politics or history, and are finicky eaters of Mexican food.

The Role of Language

Choosing to speak Spanish or speaking a Spanish-accented English caused several students to be discriminated against. A blonde and fair skinned transfronteriza who is often mistaken for Anglo argued that she was discriminated against on the basis of her language and not her appearance when she received poor service at a department store. In
the same way that transfronterizo students were discriminated for not speaking perfect English, Mexican-American students were discriminated for not speaking a perfect Spanish.

8. “¿En qué eres diferente a los mé xico-americanos?” (Me)
“No tengo acento cuando hablo español. Jajaja. Pero…este, no sé si sea diferente.”
(Interview #3: Male 20).

“How are you different from Mexican-Americans?” (Me)
“I don’t have an accent when I speak Spanish. Hahaha. But…um, I don’t know if I am different.”
(Interview #3: Male, 20).

In some instances, Spanish seemed to erase class and racial barriers. The student who complained about Chicanismo later stated that he identified with maintenance and cafeteria workers on campus more than with Mexican-American students because the workers, who are primarily first generation immigrants, speak Spanish and the students, who are primarily second generation Mexican Americans, cannot.

Thus, language in several instances proved to be more important than race in determining membership in a group. While the transfronteriza in the earlier example was a blonde U.S. citizen, she could claim a Mexican national identity more legitimately than dark skinned Mexican American Chicanos because she was raised in Mexico and speaks Spanish fluently.

Conclusion

Transfronterizo students seem to represent a protected group with the legal rights of American citizens and the ethnic rights of Mexican citizens. Renato Rosaldo proposes the concept of “cultural citizenship” to describe the actions of groups in the United States who claim rights to culture as well as rights that citizens enjoy even if they are not legal residents. In contrast, transfronterizo students who are American citizens, invoke the right to claim a Mexican national identity and thus the right to label themselves Mexican.
All of the research subjects I interviewed attended high schools in Tijuana or in South Bay San Diego that were literally across the border or ten minutes from Mexico. In these schools and at Southwestern College which was 58% Hispanic in 2003, Latinos are the dominant group while Anglos are the minority. UCSD, where only 8% of the students are of Mexican background (2004), may be the first place where transfronterizo students encounter being labeled an ethnic and racial minority. Because these transfronterizos are American citizens who define themselves against Mexican Americans, not against Anglo Americans, they seem to be challenging the traditional assimilation paradigm proposed by sociologists in the U.S. which predicts their loss of Spanish and national identity within three generations. They maintain ties with family, friends and institutions across countries.

In sum, transfronterizos express confusion with the term “race” when it is applied to Mexico and instead use raza to describe an ethnic or national identity in Mexico. They admit that there is racism in Mexico, but racial classification has not been institutionalized in their lives in the way that it has been in the United States. To talk about different racial groups in Mexico they refer to regions, states and occupations. Furthermore, there exists an ideal look for Mexicans which is described as mestizo and not indígena or blonde. However, for transfronterizo students, race is not a determinant of ethnic or national identity. Instead, speaking Spanish fluently and growing up in Mexico are invoked as true identifiers of Mexican identity as opposed to having brown skin and Mexican born parents. This definition creates cleavages between transfronterizos and Mexican Americans.
Bibliography


