Rebecca Meyers

Creating Categories and Emotions: Security and Migration on the U.S.-Mexico Border

The U.S.-Mexico border has long been a sight of academic interest, for demographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists, among others. However, Heyman, (1994: 1) urges academics and politicians to move beyond the study of the border as an image, metaphor, or line, to the study of the localized expressions of "state and capital actions and limitations" that border inhabitants experience in their daily relationships with the state, capital, and other transnational forces. Kearney (1991, 1995) additionally problematizes the delineation of a U.S.-Mexico border, by highlighting its historical contestation and construction, as well as the transnational cultures that develop along and beyond the borders. Assuming the border to be a natural division between two sovereign states, two distinct cultures, or the First and Third Worlds obscures the politics and power dynamics involved in creating and enforcing borders. Creating and enforcing international borders is therefore a political project, often enforced by discourses of security, nationalism, and fear, that often seeks to divide territories and peoples by emphasizing or fostering cultural or moral barriers and differences (Donnan and Wilson 2003).

Security is one particular discourse, outfitted with the resources of the Border Patrol and Homeland Security and politicized through a language of fear that is employed by the U.S. government and its enforcement agents to enforce border management and control. While much of the literature gives necessary attention to the role of economic policies of integration, exclusion, and marginalization in fueling and fostering U.S.-bound Mexican migration (Massey 1987, 1997; Cornelius 1989), less attention has been paid to the linked perceptions of threat and security to migration. Post 9/11, security and borders re-emerged as key analytical tools to understanding inter and intrastate interactions with citizens and foreigners (Andreas 2003). For instance, the U.S. has justified unilateral actions of intervention and border restrictions in the name of national security, creating a resurgence of the state in a supposedly increasingly porous,

borderless, transnational post-state era (Andreas 2003; Biersteker 2003). Heyman (1995) provides a cogent ethnographic examination of the bureaucracy and contradictory practices of border control enforcement, and others show the effect that fear of "invasion" has on U.S. anti-immigration legislation (Kearney 1991); however, few analyses examine the role that security policies, the discourses enforcing them, and the definitions of legitimate versus illegitimate they create, have on migrants' conceptions of themselves as agents in the migration process. This paper seeks to reveal the cultural and political construction not only of borders, but of security and its categories relating to illegality, criminality, and thus, those who are threats and subject to discipline by the U.S. state (Hurrell 1998).

Understanding such categories and definitions of security are instrumental for those seeking to understand the migration process and its effects on people and local communities. In particular I look at the political nature of the construction of categories such as legality, family, community, criminal, and migrant. Who gets put into such categories by whom and how will those categorized as such be treated? I show how the U.S. definition of security is often interpreted as a source of insecurity for those seeking to cross the border, while also unpacking such emotions of insecurity to understand its differential effects by social differentiators such as class, race, and gender. While preliminary and ongoing, I hope to elucidate some new spaces for the questioning of the categories that have come to be defined as givens or variables in much of demography. According to Escobar, "Labels and institutional practices are issues of power; they are invented by institutions as part of an apparently rational process that is fundamentally political in nature" (Wood 1985 in Escobar 667). While critical views to categorization have been pursued in understanding census data (Nobles 2004; Kertzer and Arel 2002) and reproduction and fertility regimes (see Bledsoe 1994; 1998, among others, Greenhalgh (2003), little of this analysis has extended to migration, already viewed as a highly charged emotional and political issues between the U.S. and Mexico. I hope such questioning can result in a more critical understanding of the complex process of migration and the lives it affects.

The following case studies open up some of the emotional and political salience of the categories often applied when referring to security threats, nationalities, borders, migrants, and criminals. The cases here represent excerpts from my MA research, gathered during the summer of 2004, while living with a family in a squatter settlement of Tijuana. Living in the community, traveling, and regularly visiting with migrant centers and various support groups in downtown Tijuana for migrants and the city's poor gave me access to a broad, however brief, range of experiences in Tijuana. The cases do not, in their limited form, pretend to overthrow the usage of such categories, often necessary for legal, commercial, and demographic procedures, but just open them up to critical analysis of how some of these categories are locally experienced.

Making Migrants, Criminals, and Aliens:

The sign at the border before crossing from Tijuana to San Ysidro California warns that any "aliens who attempt to cross illegally into the U.S. will be detained and prosecuted" and possibly imprisoned. These terms are used to justify certain types of action toward and against these "aliens" including family separation, deportation, physical abuse, discrimination, and jail sentences. The cases below ethnographically highlight the power of U.S. border policies to patrol identities. While there are numerous cases of local peoples contesting and transcending such given identities (Kearney 1991), these categories still hold weight for how people at the border are treated by policies and often how they see others and themselves.

We are Now Migrants:

La Roca was more crowded that day than previous Wednesdays. At the suggestion of a missionary working in Tijuana, I attended *La Roca's* weekly Wednesday bible sessions and lunches. *La Roca* sat on the corner of *Calle Primero*, well-known for its prostitution. Up a steep flight of stairs in an attic room, the back wall was painted blue with a cross. It served as a migrant shelter for men at night who had nowhere to sleep, but on Wednesday afternoons it became the site of a lunch and bible session for about 10 to 15 women, some of whom were regulars.

That Wednesday Elisa,[1] the thirteen-year-old daughter of one of the regular attendees, whisked me away when I arrived to buy more sweet bread for lunch. About thirty people had shown up at *La Roca* that Wednesday, including a family with six kids I had not seen there in previous weeks. The family sat by themselves, taking up a whole table during the lunch. The session-leader asked me if I could help them buy milk for their 3 month-old baby. The mother, Marisa, thanked me and asked if I could help them get back to the U.S.

As I gave this mother the name of some lawyers I knew, I listened to her and her husband's story:

> We never thought this could happen to and we would be in this position. All of a sudden we are now migrants. We live in California. My husband and all of my kids, except my baby, are all U.S. citizens.

Marisa and her husband didn't think of themselves as migrants. They seemed a bit overwhelmed in relation to their new status when I suggested that they could wait at the migrant shelter while lawyers helped them with their case to return to the U.S. The family has lived in California for twelve years, although Marisa's papers have not yet gotten through immigration processing. They had changed lawyers and the papers were supposed to be in the mail, "They could even be at my house right now, I don't know." Marisa's mother had fallen ill in Guadalajara a few months ago and so the family took their van down to help. They sold her mother's house, helped her into nursing facilities, and stayed a few months to ease her into better health. There, Marisa gave birth to their sixth child, a blonde, blue-eyed little boy.

Yet, their money and their luck ran out as they tried to return. They hadn't realized how much they would need to spend on her mother. The last of their money was spent on gas as their car ran dry in Tijuana. Their van then became their home. Their rent in their California home had expired, and the father debated selling their van for bus passage to California. If he got back to California he could work a bit to put a down payment on an apartment before bringing his children back. He had friends with whom he could stay in the meantime, but no room for 6 kids. "Could you cross the baby?" they asked. "He is blonde, he could pass as yours."

Pondering the ethical and legal implications of crossing with their child, I connected them with the migrant shelter for the mother and children to stay at temporarily while their father looked for a job, and lawyers or relatives figured out a way for Marisa to get home. Marisa and her two freckled daughters hopped in the cab with me as we went to check out the migrant house, while the father stayed with the tow-headed boys in the park they had been living in next to their van.

The migrant shelter accepted Marisa and her children. A family had been converted into migrants. This label will now affect their strategies for crossing back into the U.S. Instead of simply driving home, they will need to find a way to sneak Marisa over the border, perhaps with an illegal smuggler, illustrating how easily border restrictions render the conversion of migrants into criminals. It will also affect how they are treated in Tijuana, as transitional migrants, a marginalized role in itself. They will be looked upon with suspicion by strangers and will be forced to navigate a new city for work to pay for their passage back home. The U.S. will not allow Marisa to call California home, yet Tijuana is hardly her home.

"**They Handcuffed me in my Boxers":**

> "We were just sitting there at home. All of us together watching my wedding video. They rang the bell so we let them in. They handcuffed me and took me out to their van. They wouldn't even let me grab clothes. I was pulled out with my boxers on and no shoes."

22-year old Manuel described the scene in a mix of Spanish and English. The *migra* (border patrol) came to his family home two weeks earlier to deport him, his siblings, and his parents. His sister, Laura, added, "My son (eleven years old) was crying and asking his dad, 'Where is mommy going, why are they taking her away? What did mommy do wrong?'"

I first met the Benitez-Ordaz family at the office of a Tijuana anthropologist, Enrique, who also works with human rights on the border. Manuel's father, Felix, was on Enrique's couch when I arrived and Enrique was on the phone with lawyers. Enrique motioned for me to sit. I told him I was interested in issues of migration, the border, and security, and he responded, "Then go

talk to him. He will have a lot to tell you," Enrique pointed to Felix. Felix agreed to let me interview his family as Enrique helped straighten out his case.

We walked across the street to an apartment building in Zona Rio, Tijuana's failed effort towards a modern, cosmopolitan business center. Felix had his own dry-cleaning company in Southern California and had lived there with his family for almost eighteen years. "We thought we were doing everything right. We had been applying for papers and I paid all of my taxes. I had my own business, my kids were in school, and two were recently married to US citizens. My daughter's school is probably wondering why she didn't show up for class and my employees…how are they running the store?" Felix said as we walked to the apartment. When the *migra* came to Felix's house to deport them, they took them briefly to immigration in San Diego. Then they were "dropped off" on the Tijuana side of the border.

"We had nowhere to go. We don't know anything about Tijuana and had only been here when we first crossed the border. We're from Mexico City and were only there as kids. We have no idea what the *peso* is even worth," Laura told me at the apartment. "It was a good thing my husband's mother has an apartment here in Tijuana and let us in, otherwise, who knows, we might be on the street." Her younger sister added, "I stay in here and watch TV all day. I'm scared to go out and don't know anything here." The family had gathered in the small apartment living room, which was also serving as their bedroom while they talked about their experience.

Enrique was going to help at least Manuel and his younger sister get back to the U.S., maybe through Juarez, which he thought might be an easier crossing point. The two had kidney problems, one recently recovering from a transplant and the other in need of regular medication and dialysis. They said they knew some people who had been deported, but never thought it could happen to them. They struggled to show the *migra* the documents they had and Felix tried to argue, "we are good citizens, we work hard, our kids go to school, we vote and pay taxes. I employ Americans in my business and my wife volunteers at a jail. Some of my kids are married to U.S. citizens. We were trying to do everything right," but they were still having trouble with

the application process for legal papers. Manuel said that rather than being able to explain themselves, they were treated like criminals or illegal merchandise. “We aren’t bad people, we hadn’t done anything wrong or bad. There were cop cars surrounding our house. We live in a nice neighborhood. The neighbors looked at us as if we were some type of criminals.”

Manuel, seriously ill and celebrating a three-week old marriage to his American wife, suddenly became a criminal in the eyes of the *migra*. Laura was separated from her husband, son, and baby. Can the law put a border around motherhood? Treating the family as criminals was used as a justification for separating their family.

Dusting Crystal- Things Never Get Clean:

I went to buy my daily soda at one of the wooden stands poking out of people’s homes that scatter themselves throughout the *colonia*. I had never been to this particular one, but it was near the house where I had just finished conducting an interview.

“We sell hamburgers here,” one girl said in perfect English when I approached the stand. I looked at them, one twelve and the other thirteen, both dressed in jeans with straight black hair. They were watching TV as they manned their stand. I continued in Spanish before realizing that they were more comfortable with English. “They call us *gringas* too,” said the younger one. “My Spanish is not too good.”

Since most people in the *colonia* do not speak English or only a few words, these girls struck me as out of place. We got to talking. The older one, Cristina, related their story:

> We were deported here a few weeks ago. I got home one day from school and found my mom crying. We were in the process of applying for our legal papers. In the process they deported my mom since they saw she was here illegally. We were able to show the documents they were using weren’t right, but then they found all of us and deported us all. They said we have to spend two years here before applying again…A two-year *punishmen*t or something…We had about a month to leave so at least we were able to take everything with us. It looks just like home. We have all the same stuff: our clothes, videos, and furniture, even our crystal. It’s just like home, well…until you go outside.

Both I and the girls questioned what they were being punished for, as Cristina spoke of the “punishment” with sarcasm. Speaking Spanish like *gringas*, they had to wait two years for

the legal technicalities to allow them to call their home "home." The government told them they had to be Mexicans for two years in order to become Americans again. "People laugh at us here as if we had some sort of weird accent or were doing something wrong."

When they first got deported, all six members of their family slept in one room on one mattress in downtown Tijuana. Luckily, they had a friend of the family who then found them a house in the *colonia*, a place they never thought they would end up living, or even seeing. "We knew more people were getting deported lately, but never thought it would be us. We had to leave school and everything and explain why we weren't taking finals." The younger daughter, Erica, was born in the U.S. and is thus a citizen, yet how could the family leave her alone? "Yeah, they made me come too," she laughed.

Not only has their deportation changed their claim to American identity, but they are also outsiders in terms of identifying with Tijuana or Mexico. They don't fit in. Their daily roles and experience of what it means to be teenagers have already been drastically altered. According to Cristina,

> This house was practically unlivable when we got here. There wasn't even a bathroom. Now I am here all day working the stand or helping my mom clean the house. We brought all this crystal we had with us. It is so dusty here. It never gets clean. We just keep cleaning and the dust keeps coming back. Before I was just a regular kid and would come home from school and do my homework or hang out with my friends. Now I have to work all the time.

Cristina says she has met a few friends in the *colonia*, but Erica has not and still writes to and calls her old friends, although it is getting expensive and it is "not the same." Cristina's friends in the *colonia* are mainly male and she says the girls are different here. They also contrasted feelings of safety in California with their experience in Tijuana:

> Here, you have to really stay right in front of your house. There are no police here. In California you could call the police and they come. Here it doesn't happen like that.

Cristina and Erica's story reveals the complexities involved in defining citizenship and nationality, where their assigned nationality does not coincide with their experience and emotions.

Come Miguelito (Eat little Miguel!)- Bordering Families:

Miguel's (almost 3 years old) mother, Ana, and uncle, Juan forced open Miguel's mouth to swallow medicine to stimulate his appetite. He hadn't eaten more than a few bites in the past week. All he wanted was soda…

And his dad….

"Miguel and his father were inseparable." It was really something special according to Ana. "Everywhere my husband went, he took Miguel. Whenever he wasn't there, Miguel would ask for him." Miguel continues this habit of asking where everybody is when he wakes up, even incorporating me. But he no longer asks for his dad.

Miguel's dad calls every night. "He wouldn't speak to his dad last night. He knows. He's mad and thinks he left him," Ana sighed.

Ana and Miguel had moved in with Ana's mother and siblings after her husband, Sergio, crossed the border illegally to work in the U.S. seven months ago. Ana's father, who has legal papers and comes home once a week, helped Sergio get a job in agriculture in Los Angeles where he works. There he can make about six dollars an hour, as opposed to a few dollars a day in Tijuana peddling ice cream. Sergio and Ana have been married four years and are both Mixteco, yet speak Spanish together since their Mixteco dialects are not mutually intelligible. According to Ana, they were also inseparable since they were married. They had never been apart.

Sergio had never been sent to school. His parents wouldn't allow it. Instead he helped his father peddle ice cream in the local markets. Sergio couldn't support his family. He was ineligible even for factory work, which still only pays $50 a week, because he was illiterate. If they ever wanted to move into their own home and give Miguel an education and better life, they would need to find another way to support themselves. Migration therefore wasn't merely a choice for Sergio, but rather, a necessity to support his family.

Ana would like to attend university in the U.S. one day to continue her education and send Miguel to school there. She makes plans daily to cross illegally and to send Miguel, guided by a legal relative, across with falsified papers. Yet, being smuggled is expensive, $2000 a person on average, and dangerous. Death along the border has become increasingly common as border restrictions have pushed illegal migrants to attempt to cross in more dangerous areas such as mountains and deserts. Additionally, since smuggling humans and drugs have recently become more overlapping enterprises, migrants now run the risk of violent confrontations with armed smugglers and border patrol.

Yet this is not what scares Ana. What scares her is not being with her husband and its effect on the family, especially Miguel.

> I don't know what he is doing or if he is okay. If he had a problem, I couldn't do anything about it. That is insecurity… He worries about us too. He can't come back and see either since the risk in crossing back into the U.S. is too expensive and dangerous.

Sergio needs to work in the U.S. to support his family and his boss who owns the farm in Los Angeles needs "cheap" Mexican illegal labor for his business (Cornelius 1989). However, artificial lines delineating citizenship personalize, legalize, and police this otherwise basic process of supply and demand for labor. Those who suffer are the individuals and families.

CONCLUSIONS:

Each example here, while meriting fuller attention and research, begins to shed light on the political and emotional consequences of security policies and the categories they employ and take for granted. Understanding who the people are that policies, demographers, and other social scientists label as criminals, migrants, or families reveals the complexity of the politics of migration and security. Positing such categories, in addition to those of the border and national identities, as natural givens leads to their perpetuation. Such naturalization additionally leads to internalization (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004), as border residents come to view each other with suspicion in an environment characterized by high crime rates where many people are transitory and strangers to one another.

Policing the border, a place often conceived in the U.S. media as one of "conflict, of threat, of invasion," proceeds as a method of "nationalism on the defensive," feeding the "current national obsession with 'foreign' drugs and 'crime' that are 'penetrating' into 'our nation'" (Kearney 1991: 59 (2002: 7)). Yet such "national security concerns" translate into insecurity and fear on the part of those they affect, who often have little input over the categories to which such policies assign them. Often, such notions of security are not only politically constructed, but infused with gendered and ethnic elements that stereotype images of the criminal, the migrant, and the family. Recognizing such categories and the emotions of fear and insecurity they instill or naturalize, as socially and politically constructed, rather than objective realities, reveals their potential to be transformed, overcome, and reversed (Green 1999).

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[1] All names of informants have been changed to protect their privacy and anonymity.