



Photo by Guillermo Ariza/Associated Press.

## THE BORDER

Practitioners of “yoga without borders” meet on opposite sides of the Tijuana–San Diego border fence.

# Permeable Membrane

by Tyche Hendricks

**T**he hostility and frustration embodied in the new Arizona law empowering police to detain suspected undocumented immigrants bubbled up from a potent brew that includes a tough economy, border enforcement strategies that shifted illegal migration routes from California over to Arizona and the failure of Congress to act on immigration reform. In addition, during Arizona’s boom years, the state attracted both American retirees and younger immigrant workers, leading to a generational culture clash between older voters unaccustomed to Arizona’s historical ties to Mexico and newly arrived Mexicans.

The law’s passage triggered a renewed push for an overhaul of federal immigration policy, but it also led to predictable calls for more police and fencing to “seal” the 2,000-mile border. Indeed the “secure the border” stance has long been a popular — and easy — position for Democrats and Republicans alike. Federal outlays for

border enforcement have grown five-fold over the past decade, with \$11.4 billion budgeted for 2010.

My reporting in the borderlands made it clear to me that the problem of illegal immigration cannot be solved at the border. Nor is Arizona’s scapegoating of individual immigrants likely to be effective; unauthorized workers (more than half of whom are Mexican) come here in response to much larger forces embedded in the deeply intertwined economies of the United States and Mexico.

I first went to the border as a reporter for The San Francisco Chronicle to cover undocumented immigration — an issue most Americans now associate with the border. In my reporting in Mexico, I met migrants in Sonora waiting for the right moment to try their luck at jumping the fence: a brother and sister from Oaxaca carrying a Fresno phone number and a supply of leathery, homemade corn tortillas; a couple from Chiapas hoping to make it over with their two small children; a pregnant woman

from Mexico City who had become separated from her husband on their first attempt to cross. On the Arizona side of the line, I spent time with Border Patrol agents “cutting for sign,” or tracking migrants in the desert; with armed vigilantes who boasted of nighttime immigrant patrols; and with a county medical examiner working to identify the hundreds of bodies of those who died trying to make it to America.

In reporting their stories, the two sides of the line felt to me like parallel worlds, cut off from one another. That’s the way a lot of news coverage treats the border: as a divide. And if my reporting had ended there, that’s all I would have seen. But my editor let me go back to the borderlands. And in the course of multiple reporting trips over several years, other stories came into focus and with them a fuller sense of the borderlands as a dynamic region that straddles the boundary and extends into two countries.

I saw the way that both Mexican and American families have been drawn to the border by the maquiladora economy, the way that Mexican border cities are slammed by both cartel violence and growing drug addiction and the way that endangered species are further threatened by both countries’ diversion of Colorado River water. The two nations — and the people of the borderlands — are linked in myriad ways. Like a cell wall, the border regulates what crosses it, but there’s plenty flowing back and forth. And nowhere was that as vivid as at one rural ferry crossing.

The green-brown water of the Rio Grande swirls and eddies as it flows eastward past the overhanging trees on the shore at Los Ebanos, Texas, site of the last hand-pulled ferry crossing on the U.S.–Mexico border. The steel barge, tethered to a system of cables and pulleys, plies the river from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day. The ferry’s deck can accommodate three cars, a dozen pedestrians and a few stocky men in feed store caps and dusty blue jeans who grasp a rope spanning the river and pull rhythmically, leaning their bodies into the work. On the 39<sup>th</sup> pull, the ferry floats across the midline of the river, leaving the United States and entering Mexico.

Elsewhere along its length, the international line is marked by a steel wall flooded with stadium lights or a few strands of barbed wire tacked to wooden fence posts. At the San Ysidro port of entry, a painted yellow stripe across 24 lanes of traffic indicates the place where one country ends and the other begins. At Reynosa, a plaque in the center of a bridge over the Rio Grande marks the dividing line. Here at Los Ebanos, the river’s midpoint exists somewhere on the muddy bottom, but no sign points it out. It must be imagined.

When most Americans think of the border, they think of a line on a map or a fence erected in the desert sand. Politicians talk about “sealing the border” and debate how much hardware and manpower are needed to accomplish the task. The 1,952-mile border is indeed a boundary — a

dividing line between two countries with distinct histories, traditions and languages. It is the world’s longest frontier between a developed and a developing country. But the border is also a very permeable membrane where commerce and culture, air and water, workers and students, pollution and disease flow back and forth daily.

Here on the ferry on the river’s surface, people, cars, bicycles, groceries and small loads of goods travel back and forth. There are some tourists, drawn by the quaintness of this international gateway between two country villages,

but most passengers are local. They live in Los Ebanos, named for the grand ebony trees growing there, or in the Mexican town of Díaz Ordaz, a couple of miles down the road. They take the ferry (50 cents for pedestrians, \$2.50 for vehicles) to work, to the supermarket or to visit relatives. They know each other and the ferrymen and the customs inspectors on each bank. For them, the border is not so much a boundary line as it is a meeting point, a place where different parts of their lives converge.

More than that, the border is the axis of a region. There are obvious differences between life on the Mexican side and the American side. And each section of the border — from the Lower Rio Grande Valley to the Paso del Norte to the



A marker on the Tijuana–San Diego border.  
(Photo by Nathan Gibbs.)



Photo by Jerry Peek/photomondiale.com.

#### Los Ebanos Ferry.

high Sonoran Desert to the Tijuana/San Diego metropolis — has its own particular character. Some scholars have described these subregions as transborder corridors, each with a distinctive culture defined by its geography, economy and population. But in every part of the borderlands, and on both sides of the line, the region is defined by its proximity to the border and to the country on the other side. The land is one continuous place. The history is interconnected. And the people who inhabit the borderlands interact frequently across the international divide.

It's not as if there is no border line. Homeland security inspections are a fact of life, even at the rustic ferry crossing at Los Ebanos. And binational tensions play out frequently, whether over pollution or truck traffic or the causes and consequences of drug-related violence. But equally real are the relationships that link the two sides, just as the little hand-pulled barge does each day. The border's influence, like the muddy water, laps at both countries.

At this juncture where the United States and Mexico meet, a border culture has evolved that sets the region apart from other areas of either country. Michael Dear, a UC Berkeley geographer, calls the U.S.–Mexico borderlands a

“third nation,” a hybrid place where many residents have adopted a transnational mindset, conducting their lives in both countries, even as the border wall is being constructed between them. Journalist Ricardo Sandoval calls the border a seam that stitches the two nations together. For University of Arizona historian Oscar J. Martínez, who has examined the varying levels of transborder interaction in the lives of Mexican and American residents of the region, the borderlands is a binational region.

“Nowhere else do so many millions of people from two so dissimilar nations live in such close proximity and interact with each other so intensely,” Martínez has written. “What distinguishes borderlanders from the rest of the citizenry is the effect of the boundary on their daily lives. On the one hand, the border is a barrier that limits activity and hinders movement, but, on the other, it offers tremendous opportunities to benefit from proximity to another nation.”

Mexican migration to the United States is part of a complex interplay of economic, cultural and technological forces, argue Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand and Nolan Malone in their book *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican*

*Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration.* “Migration is a natural outgrowth of the disruptions and dislocations that occur in this process of market expansion and penetration,” they write. “The international migration of labor generally parallels the international movement of goods and capital, only in reverse.”

An immigration overhaul that includes legal ways for Mexican workers to enter the country — combined with tough sanctions on employers who flout immigration and labor laws, and probably a universal work authorization document for all U.S. workers — is a necessary first step in dealing with the issue of unauthorized immigration. But by itself, it’s not a sufficient solution.

Mexico is our neighbor and third-largest trading partner, and we are Mexico’s first largest. Mexicans have been migrating to the United States for over a century, taking jobs not only in border states but in the steel mills and stockyards of Chicago, the mines of Colorado and the orchards of Michigan. Our two countries — with their interconnected histories and economies — must work closely together to help Mexico provide meaningful jobs for her people and encourage investment at home.

There are plenty of opportunities. Joint investments in improving Mexico’s economy, infrastructure, educational system and the democratic and judicial institutions of civil society are more likely to deter migration than are billions of dollars spent on fences and policing. That’s a proposal put forward by American University Professor Robert Pastor and Jeff Faux of the Economic Policy Institute, among others. Why should American taxpayers worry about Mexican highways or schools or ports or courtrooms? asks former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda bluntly. “Well, because the countries are so intertwined that everything spills over. And if you don’t have jobs and you don’t have law enforcement and you don’t have cooperation on these issues between the two countries, you have consequences: you have drug trafficking, you have immigration, you have less trade, you have real dangers and problems for American citizens in Mexico.”

Until American and Mexican policymakers get serious about that collaboration, border residents, in Arizona and elsewhere, will bear the brunt of uncontrolled immigration, not to mention the brutal drug war. It’s not surprising that their patience is wearing thin. But border communities are also the places where we can most clearly see the ties that bind the United States and Mexico, where Americans and Mexicans conduct their lives on both sides of the boundary and grapple together with shared problems.

We can take inspiration from the doctors I met in Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, collaborating on health care improvements. Or the environmentalists in the Imperial and Mexicali valleys teaming up to fight polluters and protect the air and water that they share. Or the Texas university leaders encouraging Mexican students who wish to enroll in border universities because they understand that Mexico’s well-being affects their own state’s future. It’s that spirit — rather than profiling people with foreign accents — that will lead to solutions.

The border is a place that’s alive with the energy of cultural exchange and international commerce, freighted with the burdens of too-rapid growth and binational conflicts and underlain by a deep sense of history. It is much more complicated, indeed much richer, than most people who live hundreds of miles from it usually imagine. Both nations have made a symbol of the border, often with overheated rhetoric, but for 12 million people, it is simply home. It is more a borderlands than a border line.

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Photo by Sandy Huffaker Jr.