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The Robust Mestizaje of the Borderlands: A Mexican Professor's Perspective from San Antonio

After 24 years of service at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and having acquainted myself with most countries in the Americas through international cooperation with business schools, I am now living for the first time in the United States. The UNAM granted me a year-long leave from my teaching and research duties in our Mexico City main campus for a year-long sabbatical at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW) in San Antonio.

In Latin America's border regions, differences and divisions between the bordering countries exist for various reasons. These include geographical barriers like the Andes Mountains, economic disparities as seen between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and even tensions exacerbated by allegiances to national soccer teams. As a Mexican residing for the first time in the United States, and more specifically in South Texas, I'm now experiencing a different type of border dynamic. I'm struck more by the connection and blending of cultures and societies, than by tensions or stark differences between the United States and Mexico. The common Latin American perspective of the U.S.A., as a formidable neighbor, or even an opponent, does not mesh with what I'm seeing here. The reality before me is much more complex than the dichotomy often depicted.

Border regions are characterized by shared and fluid societal elements that coexist with the more static symbols and official icons, such as anthems and flags, that celebrate and preserve specific national identities. The case of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is no exception, but the strong fluidity that defines this border's reality has for centuries been overshadowed by ideas, representations and even laws that impose distinct identities, loyalties and language. The dominant historical narratives, for example, have emphasized and reinforced the differences, rather than the close relationships, between the two neighboring nations. We clearly see this in Mexican official history, which underlines Mexico's tensions with its northern neighbor, often celebrating how Mexican heroes have resisted U.S. hegemony. It is worth recalling, however, that in Mexico's deeper historical archives we find ample evidence and stories of emblematic exiles who found in the United States the freedom to effect significant change for their Mexican homeland. Figures like Francisco Madero, Benito Juárez, and Juan O'Gorman not only transformed their families' lives but impacted Mexican society and history at large while living in the United States. Similarly, countless individuals, away from the spotlight and their original homeland of Mexico, contribute to the evolving Mexican family life and the broader borderland culture, economy, and political landscape.

Borders are fluid, shaped by the era, prevailing political climates, and the often stark differences between perceived and actual realities. The complexity of the border transcends the mere demarcation of political lines, which may seem permanent but will always evolve over time. The map below offers a Mexican perspective during the Mexican War of Independence from 1810 to 1827. It demonstrates that the current border region between the United States and Mexico once belonged to more unified territories, not yet divided into the states we recognize today.



Map of Mexico in 1823, showing the original extent of its territories in central and western North America. Source:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Political_divisions_of_Mexico_1823_%28location_map_scheme%29.svg

At the University of the Incarnate Word and the Lewis Center of the Americas, I have discovered a privileged vantage point from which to observe immigration, the pursuit of the American Dream, the quintessential Texan lifestyle (if such a thing exists), and the opportunities and disparities inherent in border issues. Certainly it is a privilege to witness, albeit temporarily, the interwoven lives of a binational region. The fluid blending of nations and cultures challenges those caricatures of contrast that have interpreted and helped complicate the diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States for two centuries.

From the perspective of my primary place of residence

in Mexico City, I always conceived of the U.S.-Mexico border as a political dividing line, marked by the necessity of passports and visas, where legal status and language shift instantly upon crossing a river. However, anyone who more deeply explores life along the 1,958-mile border will encounter a blended cultural zone rather than two distinct realities on opposite sides of a clean line. The U.S.-Mexico border is a tapestry of shared and divergent border issues, and a series of conflicts and contradictions that characterize a region distinct from the clear-cut nations we see from the centralist perspective that is so widespread in Mexico City.

What is remarkable is that the natural interplay of languages, foods, music, art, and tourism—among many other shared aspects—often cultivates a separation from the countries of origin, rather than a tension between the people residing along this border. Thus, it becomes essential to articulate the distinct features and initial impressions of this region. In San Antonio, there is a concerted effort to recount history from various perspectives, to preserve our native language, festivals, traditions, faith, sense of community, and, more subtly, the resilience of personal identity. All these elements contribute to the rise of a composite culture with its own distinct identity, as seen across the 35 countries of the Americas. This melding of diverse factors fosters a unique identity and character that transcends any city, county, or state.

Among the many cultural phenomena I have witnessed here, and which have made a powerful first impression on me, is the fluency with which individuals switch between English and Spanish, blending the two languages in their minds through the amalgamation of words that take on significance in daily life. It is not uncommon to witness a conversation where one person speaks Spanish and the other responds solely in English, with both parties understanding each other completely. This scenario is quite typical at UIW and is especially prevalent in families where one parent is a native English speaker and the other's first language is Spanish.

Another example of cultural fusion is the merging of traditions, where on the same day, one might dress up for “trick or treating” and also prepare an altar at home with photos of deceased loved ones for the Día de los Muertos. This blending allows for a two-hour party for children, typical in the United States, or an extended Mexican fam-

ily gathering without a set end-time. It's a culture where one could go to the Dallas Cowboys stadium to enjoy songs by Jay-Z and Vicente Fernández, or savor tacos for breakfast and brisket for dinner.



Map showing the current border between Mexico and the U.S.A, and the string of Mexican and American cities that help define the borderlands. Source: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/usmxborder/map.html>

In Mexico, there's a humorous notion about our *norteños* (i.e. the residents of Mexico's northern states) feeling more "American" than Mexican; and in Texas, it's often said that the United States truly begins in Austin. These are reflective, mirror-like perceptions. It's commonplace for Mexicans to cross the border for shopping in San Marcos, or for U.S. residents or citizens to make a swift trip south for affordable medications or dental treatments, practices that are both convenient and practical for enjoying the best of both worlds. These stories reveal a society with robust values and a social structure distinct from the encompassing nations, which seem to envelop and embrace them from a distance. Yet, we must also confront the inequalities that drive migration and the search for legal (or illegal) means to mitigate these disparities. These inequalities underscore the need for further international and intercultural cooperation to address the persistent challenges faced by many residents of the borderland and the millions moving to and through this great region.

December of 2022 marked two centuries of diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States, an important milestone for this region. We should also recognize that three additional centuries have passed

since the establishment of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, which encompassed the entirety of today's borderlands for many generations, and helped form the present identity and culture of the region. Furthermore, there are the preceding centuries of the original inhabitants across the expanse we now know as the border territory (from California to Texas), a living history that is richer than we currently comprehend and which it is our duty to research, understand, and contextualize to address the imbalances and foster inclusion in the contemporary era.

In conclusion, living on both sides of the Mexico-United States border, and especially understanding the borderlands—a region that interweaves family spaces, shared interests, and concerns while also blending tastes, cultures, and innumerable elements of a shared past—is an enlightening life experience. It's something I would hope for anyone to appreciate, as it helps us to understand that as a society, we are more interconnected than we may realize, deeply rooted in our past and our shared origins.

About the Author



Tomás Rosales Mendieta is a Professor of Finance and Business Ethics at Mexico's renowned UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). He held the post of Executive Secretary of ALAFEC (Asociación Latinoamericana de Facultades y Escuelas de Contaduría y Administración / Latin American Association of Accounting and Administration Colleges and Schools) and was a member of the UNAM's Comisión de Honor (Commission of Honor) and Comisión de Legislación (Legislative Commission). He is a doctoral candidate specializing in administration sciences and his research has focused on anti-corruption practices and non-financial management metrics. His sabbatical at UIW is for the purpose of advancing his studies of the case method, the reality of the border from a financial perspective, and the culture of the Texas-Mexico border.

About the Translator



Gabriel T. Saxton-Ruiz is Professor of Latin American Literature & Culture at the University of the Incarnate Word. His extensive experience traveling and working abroad has led him to place an emphasis on intercultural dialogue in his teaching, research, and service. His research interests include contemporary Latin American literature, cultural gastronomy, ecocriticism and representations of violence in various types of cultural productions. In addition to his research and teaching, Dr. Saxton-Ruiz has found time to complete a number of literary translations, including the recently published anthology of Peruvian fiction, *Paciencia Perdida*.