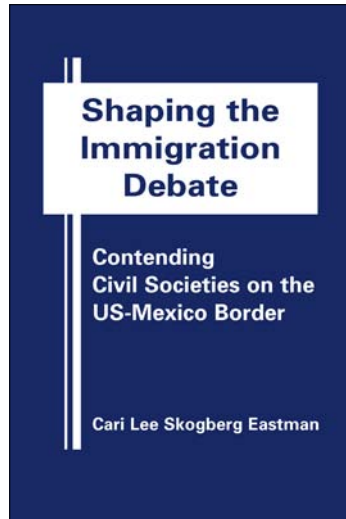


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Shaping the
Immigration Debate:
Contending Civil Societies
on the US-Mexico Border

Cari Lee Skogberg Eastman

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telephone 303.444.6684
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1

Disorder on the Border

“Borders are scratched across the hearts of men, by strangers with a calm, judicial pen, and when the borders bleed we watch with dread the lines of ink along the map turn red.”

Marya Mannes, American Author (1904-1990)



Memorial crosses along the San Diego/Tijuana border fence. January 2006 (Eastman photo)

What exactly is a border?

Is a border meant to block something out or keep something in? Does it separate or simply define parameters? Is it transparent or concrete? How does the creation of a border reflect upon its creators, or upon those separated by it? Questions like these and divergent views about the functionality of a border make it a difficult entity to describe. The meaning and importance of any border varies according to the role it plays in the lives of the people creating and defining it. Likewise, each border's particular history adds complexity to the way it is understood and the view of how it should function.

The borders of the United States are most commonly classified in terms of location, such as the northern U.S. border, southern U.S. border, or the U.S./Mexico border. However, such broad descriptive sweeps fail to recognize the complexity of the smaller regions comprising these borders that hold their own challenges, historical precedents, cross-border ties and interactions. It is difficult to fully understand such differences without living or spending time in the varied border regions. Residents of border regions will attest that the area separating San Diego from Tijuana is vastly different than the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez border and all those crossing points in-between. Each landscape, each pair of communities separated by a demarcation line confronts unique challenges related to physical and social environments, culture, and even language. In recent years, as borders have become a key component in the debate about U.S. immigration policy failures, those differences have too often been misunderstood.

I, too, misunderstood the complexity of the United States / Mexico border prior to spending time at various points along the line. During my doctoral studies, I thought I had cultivated a fairly broad understanding of the nature of our nation's boundaries. I had pored over a wide array of border-related articles and books and had taken a vested interest in border-related news stories in newspapers, magazines, and television reports. I read extensively about the problems and issues surrounding the increased numbers of migrants passing through Arizona's southern corridor and kept abreast of developments in border-related policies and social issues.

However, it was the experience of physically stepping across the invisible line that best helped me understand how varied the Southwest U.S. border really is. I crossed from El Paso, TX into Ciudad Juárez where I visited communities in the poorest border neighborhoods, and ventured from San Diego to Tijuana to hear the stories of migrants seeking help at a shelter there. These experiences enabled me to better understand the look and feel of critical crossing areas along the

southwestern border. By incorporating these experiences with the knowledge I had gained from scholarly articles, photos and journalistic reports, I thought I knew what to expect in the Sonoran Desert as well.

However, when I began conducting research on media and civil society in the desert of southern Arizona, it quickly became apparent that my preconceived ideas about the geography, population, and appearance of the Arizona/Sonora border were far from accurate. In many parts of the rugged desert terrain, cow trails formed the only demarcation line separating the United States from Mexico. There was rarely any type of fence or other apparent barrier designating a physical boundary between two nations. More often than not, steep mountains or vast expanses of lonely shrubs and cacti hundreds of miles from the nearest town marked the separation. In many cases, even the rough, kidney-jolting secondary roads that connected farms or communities were located miles away from the border itself, leaving no vehicular access to any crossing point except the eight primary Tucson Sector stations already under the surveillance of the U.S. Border Patrol.

In other areas, the border crosses Tohono O'odham Reservation land – or more accurately, the reservation crosses the border and extends into northern Mexico. Tribal members flow freely back and forth across what the U.S. Government has defined as a dividing line, but what the tribe considers part of a united, sovereign territory. Migrants often cross here too, seeing the vast expanses and scattered roads as opportune remote entry points. Unfortunately, those same isolated expanses have also been sites of tremendous desperation and loss of life for individuals who lose their way or succumb to heat exhaustion or other desert dangers. In 2007 alone, sixty bodies of unauthorized border crossers were recovered on Tohono O'odham Nation lands, making illegal immigration one of the primary concerns of the tribe today (McCombs, 2007, August 19).

This was not the border I had read about in Texas, seen in San Diego, or pictured in my mind before coming to Arizona.

As my familiarity and knowledge of this place grew, what became most stunning to me was the sheer magnitude of critical issues arising from the seemingly stark Arizona desert. This is not just a location where a handful of migrants have lost their lives trying to enter the United States. This is the site of a major human tragedy unfolding on U.S. soil. Hundreds upon hundreds of individuals have died along the Arizona/Sonora border in the past decade – a staggering statistic considering there were only seven documented crossing-related deaths across the entire Arizona border in 1996 (Cornelius, 2001).



*Typical migrant pick-up site. Bisbee, Arizona.
May 2007 (Eastman photo)*

In addition to the tragedy of human deaths, environmental impact is also a primary concern along the U.S./Mexico border. Vehicles trying to elude or escape law enforcement often abandon major roads and attempt to maneuver through the cacti and brush, destroying primary habitat for desert wildlife and often damaging fences enclosing grazing lands. Those who are unsuccessful at steering their way through the spiny obstacle course leave wounded vehicles, or components of those vehicles, littering an otherwise untarnished landscape. When human smugglers from within the United States arrive in the desert to pick up their “loads,” they require border crossers to abandon everything that might disclose their identities as unauthorized travelers who have just survived a trek through a hot, rugged desert. Thus, huge piles of backpacks, clothing, water bottles and other trash are left behind on

migrant trails and in pick-up areas. The amount of waste is not incidental; tons of garbage are removed every year from federal, state and private lands, and tons remain strewn amid the spiny vegetation in washes and along dusty trails.

The economic impacts of the current phenomena are stunning on many levels, but perhaps most of all because illegal passage through the desert has brought great wealth to a powerful underground network of human smugglers. The costs of hiring a coyote (human smuggler) have more than tripled in recent years. The required payment is hardly a paltry sum; Mexicans pay between \$500 - \$5000 USD¹ per person, depending on the type and location of the attempted entry. Citizens of other countries pay much more. Fees for Chinese border-crossers, for example can range from \$35,000 to \$60,000 (Cornelius, 2006). The fees are often an entire life savings for an already poor family.

Finally, the demographics describing the border crossers themselves are stunning. The same desert trails that once led young, working men northward are now the routes for women, children, and elderly grandparents, all seeking work and/or a better life en “el norte”² (Alba, 2004; McCombs, 2007, August 3). Add to this mix a conglomeration of drug dealers and human traffickers who also transport their goods through the same corridors and it becomes frighteningly apparent what a strange mix of humanity – from those motivated by hopefulness and humility to those possessed with greed - can be found on the secluded routes leading north from the Mexican border.

Immigration is not a simple black and white issue, and its many complexities are revealed in the migration taking place along the southern border of the United States. For this reason, the southern border has become the line “scratched” into the sand which has motivated civil society groups to try to effect change in immigration policy, be it for benevolent concern or for reasons of national security. An honest and fair analysis of the motivations and implications of unauthorized border crossing and of the responses of active civil groups requires a dismissal of common stereotypes and a commitment to deeper exploration of the complex relationships and needs that inspire such movement.

As a scholar who intentionally acknowledges that any issue – political, economic, social, or otherwise – is driven by human decisions, I seek not only to uncover the details and consequences of the issue itself, but also to understand the motivations of the individuals who produced it. I feel it is critical to explore questions of “why” and “how,” so as to better understand what it is that provokes human reactions to politically-charged issues such as immigration. Because I am convinced

that exploration of any issue is incomplete without the stories of the individuals who shape it, my research is very deliberately poised around questions of human agency and human response to official policy.

I also wish to acknowledge my personal biases in this approach to the study of media and civil society along the Arizona/Sonora border. I have studied and traveled abroad extensively, spending time in 16 different countries, learning two languages other than English and earning my Master's degree in Spanish at a foreign university. Those rich experiences have given me a great appreciation of what it means to be a minority, an outsider, a foreigner and a guest in a country that is not my own. I am thankful for the way those experiences have shaped my perceptions of the world community. As a U.S. citizen in a foreign country, I have often been challenged to look critically at my country's relationship with other nations, particularly in terms of power and negotiation. I learned to see foreign policy from the perspectives of those directly affected by the decisions of my country's political leadership, and have wrestled with the ethical issues involved when actions taken by the United States have created animosity and distrust abroad. I have been forced to place myself in others' shoes when evaluating the effects of U.S. strategy, and I have come to value the insight gained through thought-provoking, often fiery discussions with those critical of my country's chosen role in world affairs. Engaging in thoughtful dialogue with people who see things differently has made me a more appreciative citizen, and has strengthened my conviction that public involvement and debate are critical to a healthy democracy.

Finally, prior to beginning my doctoral studies, I taught Spanish for seven years at middle school, high school and college levels. I led groups of students on study trips to four different Spanish-speaking countries. As a teacher and a mentor, I am very passionate about helping students develop critical thinking skills that enable them to view the world and its complex issues from multiple angles. The goal of my instruction has always been to help willing minds master not only a language, but also an appreciation of the histories, geographies, cultures, and people from whom that gift of language has come. It is my hope that by recognizing the value of diversity and cooperation within any society, we can all become more knowledgeable and productive citizens of an increasingly globalized world community.

Together, all of these life experiences have enriched my scholarship as well as my own development as a citizen and human being. I do wish to recognize that my experiences abroad and my teaching background shape the way I approach my research. I have visited impoverished villages in Mexico, Central and South America. I understand, at least to

some degree, the poverty and desperation of many of our southern neighbors because I have seen and confronted it face to face. I have witnessed the despair of parents who cannot afford to send their children to school or provide nutritious meals for their families. Given adequate opportunities and resources, I cannot help but believe they would not only survive, but thrive.

At the same time, back on U.S. soil, I appreciate the challenges of a citizenry concerned about security – particularly in the wake of 9/11.³ I was personally touched by the heartache caused by the domestic terrorist attacks, and was witness to the impassioned pleas of concerned citizens who feared that unsecured borders would invite subsequent acts of violence. I recognized frustration in the faces of ranchers living along the border who described livestock deaths caused by the consumption of plastic bags and other garbage discarded by border crossers. I documented stories of families unable to travel and celebrate holidays with relatives for fear of leaving their border properties unattended. I examined pools of blood dried into the dirt at a secluded desert site where a human smuggler had shot the hand off an escapee of his group. These, too, are valid concerns of human beings whose lives have all been affected by immigration policy.

Because I see the application of human rights and appreciation of divergent perspectives as critical to a healthy worldview, my study of this issue is driven by questions about the consequences of immigration for people on both sides of the border. I do not apologize for approaching my research from a perspective that places concern for the human at its center. As scholar Santa Ana explains, “Placing justice at the center of the research agenda creates socially engaged scholarship. In such an enterprise, at minimum, injustice can be addressed through a scientifically principled research agenda that leads to deeper understanding” (2002, p. 17). It is my hope that such an approach to immigration-related issues will encourage productive, reflective dialogue and cooperation among those best equipped to offer meaningful resolutions. We are, after all, neighbors in a global community. Learning to understand immigration from the point of view of the people most affected by it will enable us as a citizenry to appreciate the conditions and perspectives that inspire civil action along the border. I hope it will also inspire us to seek solutions that give priority to one another’s well-being — no matter which side of the border we call home.

Notes

¹ United States dollars.

² “El norte” is the Spanish term for “the north” (the United States).

³ 9/11 refers to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on United States soil in which more than 2700 people were killed.