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Pursuing Freedom: American Expats in Tijuana, BC, México

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Latin American Studies

by

Kathryn Mary Garcia

Committee in charge:

Professor Rihan Yeh, Chair
Professor David FitzGerald
Professor Elana Zilberg

2024

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EPIGRAPH

The persistent lure of Tijuana seems to nudge, even challenge, something quite profound in the American psyche. Crossing the border evokes a feeling of “freedom,” not just raising hell and having a good time, but as *Liberty* put it, a sense of “playing hooky from the world’s greatest supervisor of morals—Uncle Sam.”

Paul Vanderwood, *Satan’s Playground*

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Pursuing Freedom: American Expats in Tijuana, BC, México

by

Kathryn Mary Garcia

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Rihan Yeh, Chair

The number of Gen-Z and Millennial American expats who have relocated to Mexico has grown exponentially in the past five years. While a sizable amount of academic research on immigration focuses on forcibly displaced populations fleeing to the United States, the ethnographic research in this thesis analyzes the immigration of upper to middle class Gen-Z and Millennial American expats who have relocated from the United States to Tijuana, Baja California, México. I argue that the neoliberal urbanization of Tijuana creates opportunities for expats to reactivate the ideological schema of United States superiority over Mexico in the ways in which they pursue individualistic value in their lives in Tijuana. Ultimately, the freedom that expats seek living in Mexico relies on restriction and the creation of asymmetric borders between themselves and “others” in Tijuana.

INTRODUCTION

When thinking of immigration along the US-Mexico border, the first thing that comes to mind for the majority is asylum seekers attempting to enter the United States in search of safety, a better life, economic opportunities, and the pursuit of liberty proposed in the US Constitution.¹ However, there is another group of immigrants that is not seeking entrance into the United States: in fact, they are young middle to upper-class American nationals flocking to live in Tijuana. Gathering quantitative data on the true numbers of Americans² who have relocated to Tijuana, and to Mexico more generally, is a challenging task as many expats either refuse to answer survey questions inquiring about their status in the country,³ or they are living without authorization in Mexico and thus are not counted in state and governmental census records. However, the number of Americans officially granted residency in Mexico has grown over 75% since 2019, with 17,829 registered in 2019 compared to 31,273 total in 2023.⁴ While economic reasons appear to be at the forefront of the logic behind this reverse migration, there are more complex, cultural driving factors and motivations amongst the expats who relocate. Accordingly, I argue that the neoliberal urbanization of Tijuana creates opportunities for expats to reactivate the ideological schema of United States superiority over Mexico in the ways in which they pursue individualistic value in their lives. Consequently, the freedom that expats seek living in Mexico is what Irvine and Gal label as “fractally recursive” because it flexibly reactivates their imagined superiority and depends on restriction and the creation of what Maher and Carruthers label as asymmetric borders between

¹ Sheila L. Croucher, *The Other Side of the Fence: American Migrants in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2009), 4-8.

² While indeed a complicated category, “Americans” in this case constitutes individuals with United States citizenship.

³ Croucher, *The Other Side of the Fence*, 13-14.

⁴ “Estadísticas Migratorias 2019 & 2023” Unidad de Política Migratoria Registro e Identidad de Personas Gobierno de México, Gobierno de México, accessed May 14, 2024, <https://portales.segob.gob.mx/>.

themselves and “others” in Tijuana.⁵ This freedom also relies on the expats’ fantasies of Mexico - while perhaps imagined, nonetheless grounded in realities that reproduce expat’s assertion of their power over others - dominating socially, over landscapes, and optically through a contemporary expression of coloniality.⁶

Irvine and Gal theorize that fractal recursions occur as a flexible dichotomization process that repeats and reactivates at different scales ideological schemas of hierarchy and opposition that are inherently tied to power dynamics. The dichotomies that fractal recursions create and reproduce, such as freedom/restriction, safety/danger, good/bad are malleable in that the binaries can be evoked depending on the situation, parties involved, and context, and can occur on both the smallest interpersonal scale and a larger societal scale.⁷ Further, Sarah Luna expands Irvine and Gal’s theorization in that she argues fractal recursions create hierarchies of value that are produced through the mediation of the ideology of the US-Mexico border, which replicate the hierarchy that upholds the United States’ superiority and “constructs Mexicans as a threat to the social and national fabric.”⁸ Recursions ultimately materialize when the hegemonic ideological schema is reactivated - in this case, that of US superiority - as a result of the influence the country exerts over Mexico.

Similarly, the fractal recursion of freedom/restriction that exists for expats in Tijuana carries with it the hierarchical nature of implicit superiority of the United States and its citizens as similarly enforced through the ideological, judicial, social, and militarized construction of the

⁵ David Carruthers and Kristen Hill Maher, *Unequal Neighbors: Place Stigma and the Making of a Local Border* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶ Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA; Blackwell Pub, 2005).

⁷ Judith T. Irvine & Susan Gal, “Language ideology and linguistic differentiation.” In P. V. Kroskrity, (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities*. (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2000), 35-84.

⁸ Sarah Luna, *Love in the Drug War: Selling Sex and Finding Jesus on the Mexico-US Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), 51-52.

border which defines who is legally entitled to freedom in the United States contrasted with those deemed illegal and unworthy. Hence, the largest scale of recursion in my research is that of the border which separates the United States and Mexico. The binaries that exist because of the border, namely, freedom/restriction ultimately follow such. As Gloria Anzaldúa succinctly proclaims, “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds... Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*.”⁹ The freedom that expats experience in Tijuana is largely *dependent on* the restriction of others, precisely as enforced by the United States’ jurisdiction that relies on the distinguishing of the superior “us” over “them.”

Moreover, physical borders, such as the US-Mexico border wall, serve to palpably separate people: architecturally prohibitive, surveilled, and weaponized, they demonstrate the ultimate recursion of freedom and restriction - to be free on one side, there must be a restriction of the “other.” Irvine and Gal state, “Fractal recursivity involves the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level.”¹⁰ This dichotomization indeed occurs on a physical level in the case of the US-Mexico border; however, the binary of freedom/restriction is also reactivated at different smaller scales amongst expats in their interactions, relationships, and other capabilities to assert their dominance both socially and spatially. In all the recursions, one facet remains salient: to experience and feel freedom in Tijuana relies on the restriction of others, and through this, “power is exercised rather than possessed.”¹¹ In doing so, expats create asymmetric borders between themselves and “others” that permits expats’ distance from the violent and unpleasant realities of the border.

⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 25th anniversary, Fourth edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 25.

¹⁰ Irvine & Gal, “Language ideology and linguistic differentiation.” 38.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 26.

Maier and Carruthers theorize that asymmetric borders are not merely denoted by national geographic boundaries, but rather are created and reinforced “spatialized hierarchies or inequalities” that distinguish between an imagined superiority and inferiority.¹² In that manner, the asymmetric borders that my expat research participants create are not necessarily demarcated by the physical, militarized boundary between the United States and Mexico, but rather, they move beyond spatialized inequalities and into the creation of new borders that grant expats freedom through the restriction of others, thereby reinforcing the expats’ imagined superiority attitudinally and in a variety of spaces and interactions. Asymmetric borders are also delineated in expats’ capabilities to ignore and maintain distance from the violent realities of the border’s purpose to regulate others, as well as in reinforcing the place stigma of the city that paints Mexico as a dangerous and poverty-stricken country. Expats likewise acknowledge and perpetuate this place stigma to further authenticate value in their lives. When these hierarchies materialize in interactions, they connote a flexible space of contact amongst American expats, Tijuanaenses, and other Mexican nationals in Tijuana wherein expats reproduce their imagined superiority.¹³ Lomnitz bolsters Pratt’s concept of “contact zones” as he asserts there are four different “contact frames” that exist to produce national identity.¹⁴ Through different contact frames that American expats find themselves in, including “the material culture of capitalism, the ideological tension between tradition and modernity, and the entropy of modernization,”¹⁵ ideas of freedom in Mexico appear to reflect an identity expats presume of the Mexican nation state: that of a new frontier.

¹² Carruthers and Maier, *Unequal Neighbors*, 22-23.

¹³ I draw here on Barth’s classic essay *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* to establish that ethnic boundaries are delineated within interactions amongst both individuals and other social groups.

¹⁴ Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, 130.

Admittedly, identifying the terminology for particular groups of immigrants is a common topic of debate riddled with classificatory struggles that social scientists often contend to define.¹⁶ I, too, agree and acknowledge the hierarchical inequity that comes into play with the language use of “expat” over “migrant” or “immigrant.” In fact, during one of my days of fieldwork at a ranch in La Misión, a frequented destination by two of my primary interlocutors, the Mexican ranch owner’s white, expat wife aptly pointed out to me, “Why is it that when we Americans move to Mexico we are called ‘expats,’ but when other people move to the United States we call them ‘immigrants’?” In this case, I utilize the widely contested¹⁷ terminology of “expat,” the shortened version of *expatriate*, signifying an individual residing outside of their home country, to refer to the Americans who have moved to Tijuana, as this is how my American research participants self-identify.¹⁸ Class likely plays a large role into who is considered an “expat” - all my expat interlocutors assured me that they could afford to live in San Diego, but they preferred to move to Tijuana. Future scholars should be sure to address race, ethnicity, class, and gender in more complex ways that extend beyond the parameters of this thesis. Significantly, the expats in my research are not the retired Americans that one may traditionally associate with the term “expat” - all my expat interlocutors are in their 20’s and 30’s.

The ethnographic anthropological research in this paper was conducted by me between August and December of 2023 and consisted of participant observation in Tijuana as well as several semi-formal, open-ended interviews with American expats, Tijuanaenses, and other

¹⁶ David Scott FitzGerald and Rawan Arar, “The sociology of refugee migration,” *Annual Review of Sociology* (2018), 44:387-406.

¹⁷ Kieran Nash, “The difference between an expat and an immigrant? Semantics” *BBC*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170119-who-should-be-called-an-expat>

¹⁸ The roles of ethnicity, race, and stereotypes were complicated in both my research process and during the writing of this thesis. Further research should inquire as to “who is a migrant?” compared to “who is an expat?” As stated, my expat interlocutors self-identified as “expats,” and both their and my categorization of such includes both Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans.

Mexican nationals living in Tijuana. I recruited the majority of my expat participants on various Facebook group pages such as “Expats in Tijuana,” however, some of my research participants I met through snowball sampling in addition to everyday interactions during my time in Tijuana. Most of my research interlocuters were male.¹⁹ Namely, John, Betran, and Mateo, expats who became three of my primary interlocuters, are all heterosexual men who it is possible had ulterior motives in wanting to participate in my research. The three of these men responded to my Facebook research inquiry in the expat group pages and had access to my Facebook profile, which has photos of me (a woman). It is also important to acknowledge that while I identify as Mexican-American and speak Spanish, I am often identified as Anglo-American and this may inform levels of comfort particular research participants may have felt with me in terms of sharing their experiences, especially Mexican nationals who may not have wanted to say anything negative about Americans in my presence. Furthermore, most of the Tijuanaenses and Mexican nationals with whom I interacted with in Tijuana were Uber drivers, bartenders, baristas and service professionals.²⁰ This fact may have skewed the information I gathered about Tijuanaense and Mexican national perceptions of Americans towards a more positive light, as part of their livelihood relies on Americans spending money in Tijuana. Likewise, because I am young woman who conducted fieldwork entirely on my own, I did not feel comfortable venturing into remote areas of Tijuana to hear the perspectives of Tijuanaenses or Mexican nationals living in these areas. I believe I would have drawn unnecessary attention to myself in these neighborhoods, as I look

¹⁹ It is unclear if most expats living in Tijuana are indeed male, however, I do want to assert that my thesis is a rather small glimpse into the lives of my interlocuters, and not necessarily a generalization of *all* expats who live in Tijuana.

²⁰ This excludes Pablo and Vanessa (who I knew as friends prior to the research), Guadalupe, and two other Mexican national men who responded to a Facebook recruitment message I posted.

Anglo-American. Guadalupe, however, did not live centrally within Tijuana and I am grateful that she met with me in downtown Tijuana.

Additionally, I am an American citizen who holds Global Entry, a US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) preclearance service that allows for accelerated processing when entering the United States, and I must address the privilege that comes along with this legal status and the flexibility it allows me in crossing the border. I could freely cross between Tijuana and San Diego at the San Ysidro Port of Entry without question for the duration of my fieldwork, and it is crucial to note that the US-Mexico border wall and its surrounding desert has been weaponized for decades, with thousands of individuals dying in the desert in attempts to cross into the United States for a better life since the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper in 1994.²¹ During this research I continued living in San Diego, California, but I have lived in Mexico in the past. My experience previously living in Mexico and being American gave me an “insider” perspective to relate to the Americans in my research.

I begin with a discussion of some of the historic factors that contributed to Tijuana’s negative image and how various actors developed neoliberal strategies to “revitalize” the city to draw in high-paying consumers such as American expats. I then move on to discuss the ways in which expats in Tijuana engage in what Josiah Heyman theorizes as “border balancing” to maintain their freedoms and social lives in Tijuana while continuing to work in the United States; I argue that in the act of border balancing and crossing boundaries spatially and socially, expats nonetheless create new asymmetric borders that allow themselves to remain dominant in the social hierarchy in their illusions of Mexico. I further demonstrate how expats undergo experiences of freedom in their mobility to effortlessly cross the US-Mexico border, a process which ephemerally

²¹ Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

enacts their imagined superiority through restricting others. I consequently establish how expats create value and establish authenticity in their lives through transforming fantasies of Mexico's national identity into that of a new frontier and positively leveraging the place stigma of Tijuana. Finally, I end with an ethnographic discussion of New City, a residential development that is a direct outcome of Tijuana's neoliberal urbanization and a physical space that replicates the securitized spatialization of the US-Mexico border.

I. TIJUANA'S "REVITALIZATION" – IT'S WORKING (FOR SOME)

Tijuana is situated opposite of San Diego, California, and the contrasts between the cities extend beyond their geographic separation. Fondly labeled "America's Finest City," San Diego is a predominantly white and high-income²² locale that was recently designated by the U.S. News and World Report as the most expensive place to live in the United States in 2023-2024.²³ Contrastingly, Tijuana is a city that contains staggering levels of poverty and income inequality, with 22% of the population experiencing "moderate poverty."²⁴ This can in part be attributed to the rise of the maquiladora industry (low-wage assembly plants) in Tijuana which began in the 1960s and boomed beginning in the 1980s. This effect of globalization brought in large numbers of migrants from other parts of Mexico and eventually created socially excluded and marginalized sectors of the population as the "costs associated with constructing a competitive labor force" fell

²² "Economic Development - Population," The City of San Diego, accessed May 18, 2024, <https://www.sandiego.gov/economic-development/sandiego/population>

²³ "Most Expensive Places to Live in the U.S. in 2023-2024," U.S. News & World Report, accessed May 18, 2024, <https://realestate.usnews.com/places/rankings/most-expensive-places-to-live>

²⁴ "Tijuana Economy" Gobierno de México, accessed May 18, 2024, <https://www.economia.gob.mx/datamexico/en/profile/geo/tijuana-99203?povertySelector=povertyOption>

onto the workers and their communities.²⁵ Additionally, due to Tijuana’s neighbored proximity to San Diego, the Mexican border city became a highly-contested zone that various cartel groups have fought to control since the 1980s, beginning with the Arellano Félix family’s stronghold.²⁶

In the shadow of San Diego’s positively gleaming reputation, Tijuana has gone through numerous efforts to assert its place on the global stage. Currently, the historic and intentional “up and coming” nature of Tijuana draws Americans in with ramifications that ripple through the city. It is clear that the city has recently changed visually and spatially, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The housing crisis in San Diego, wherein more than half of renters in San Diego County are housing-burdened (spending over 30% of their income on rent or mortgage payments),²⁷ coupled with the rise of remote work, pulled many Americans to Tijuana - and real estate developers responded gleefully. The result of this influx in new inhabitants is high-rise luxury apartments sprouting up throughout Tijuana, ultimately displacing local residents²⁸ and causing the cost of rent to surge twice as fast as within San Diego, as “rents in Tijuana grew by 63%, compared to 30% in San Diego” between 2016 and 2022.²⁹ There appears to be never-ending construction all throughout, especially within eyeshot view from the border facing south. Regardless, the history of Americans retreating into Tijuana for cheaper commodities and to revel

²⁵ Kathryn Kopinak, “Globalization in Tijuana Maquiladoras Using Historical Antecedents and Migration to Test Globalization Models” in *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, edited by Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 71–93 (Duke University Press, 2012) <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv113168p.9>, 82.

²⁶ David A. Shirk, “A Tale of Two Mexican Border Cities: The Rise and Decline of Drug Violence in Juárez and Tijuana.” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2014), 29 (4): 481–502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2014.982470>.

²⁷ The Nonprofit Institute at the University of San Diego, “Housing” <https://www.sandiego.edu/soles/centers-and-institutes/nonprofit-institute/signature-programs/dashboard/housing.php>

²⁸ Iván Cruz, “Boom inmobiliario en Tijuana atrae a extranjeros, desplaza a habitantes y beneficia a desarrolladoras,” Borderhub, August 6, 2023, <https://www.borderhub.org/es/noticias-especiales/boom-inmobiliario-en-tijuana-atrae-a-extranjeros/>

²⁹ Gustavo Solis, “Tijuana rents rising twice as fast as San Diego's,” *kpbs.org*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/border-immigration/2023/09/21/tijuana-rents-rising-twice-as-fast-as-san-diegos>

in luxuries goes back over a century,³⁰ and retired baby-boomer American expats have long relocated to Mexico to enjoy their golden years in a process coined by Omar Lizárraga as “pleasant expatriation.”³¹ However, the more recent changes seen in Tijuana and the permanent relocation of young, working “professional” expats into the urban sprawl is largely the outcome of the transformation of the fantasy of the frontier beyond the border wall coupled with the seemingly inevitable result of neoliberal urbanization.

Grandin asserts that “The concept of the [American] frontier served as both diagnosis (to explain the power and wealth of the United States) and prescription (to recommend what policy makers should do to maintain and extend that power and wealth),” but once the physical frontier was closed off, its ideology “could easily be applied to other arenas of expansion, to markets, war, culture, technology, science, the psyche, and politics.”³² Thus, because the myth of the limitless American frontier is now closed, he argues that the border wall currently serves as America’s new illusory symbol standing “for a nation that still thinks ‘freedom’ means freedom from restraint, but no longer pretends, in a world of limits, that everyone can be free—and enforces that reality through cruelty, domination, and racism.”³³ To Grandin, the border creates limits and the fantasy of the frontier is over. However, I argue the fantasy of the frontier is not over for the expats in Tijuana precisely *because* they are able to surpass the limits of the border to create highly asymmetric new opportunities for themselves. Expats are accordingly enchanted by, yet seemingly reject, the border; their fantasy of freedom and expansion now surpasses the border wall through their own

³⁰ Paul Vanderwood, *Satan’s Playground: Mobsters and Movie Stars at America’s Greatest Gaming Resort* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

³¹ Omar Lizárraga, “Enjoying the Advantages of Freedom: Multi-Local Practices of US ‘Pleasant Expats’ in Northwest Mexico” in *Expatriation and Migration: Two Faces of the Same Coin*, by Sylvain Beck (Leiden; Brill, 2023), 113-131.

³² Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. First edition. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 3.

³³ Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 273-275.

creation of asymmetric borders. In expats' abilities to surpass, ignore, and maintain distance from limitations, they replicate the ideology that they will always preserve their freedoms - but, as Grandin points out, only through the domination and restriction of others.

Nonetheless, the notion of Americans pursuing freedoms that are otherwise restricted in the United States through indulgence outside of the jurisdictional bounds of the states and into Mexico can be traced back to the Prohibition Era and beyond. With the development of Agua Caliente Resort and Casino and its affiliated racetrack in 1928, Americans began flooding into Tijuana to get a taste of the hedonism provided with English speaking, world-renowned amenities while the other side of the border in the United States experienced the woes of Prohibition and the Great Depression. Within four years of the establishment of Agua Caliente, the number of bars in Tijuana doubled from thirty to sixty - all with inviting names such as El Caballito and the Black Cat.³⁴ As demonstrated, the beginning of such an industry arose in Tijuana for the sake of satiating Americans' unquenchable thirst, both literally and figuratively. Much like how the expats I met bask in the higher standard of living that they can afford while living in Tijuana, at Agua Caliente, celebrities and the middle-class of the US could rub shoulders with one another in the gambling halls, hotel grounds, and racetrack. The architecture, food and beverage, and entertainment options which included gambling along with the consumption of alcohol, moreover, "endeavored to immerse customers in romantic escapism with exotic overlays."³⁵ This romantic escapism that American visitors in Tijuana experienced nonetheless has echoes to this day in the current "vice" of the sex tourism industry that lives on in the red light district of Tijuana, the cheaper prices for

³⁴ Vanderwood, *Satan's Playground*, 107.

³⁵ Vanderwood, *Satan's Playground*, 40.

high-end goods (specifically food and beverage offerings at restaurants), and the “economic freedom” that expats frequently described to me.

Agua Caliente Resort and Casino’s heyday fizzled as quickly as it arose, but efforts to attract visitors to Tijuana through high-end developments and signals of urbanization continued on long after the closure. In the 1970’s, thousands of families were violently displaced out of their “informal” settlements in an area dubbed *Cartolandia* (due to the majority of the construction being made of cardboard, plasterboard, and sheet metal) to make way for what is now the bustling Zona Río: a proposed symbol of modernity spearheaded by Luis Echeverría Álvarez and José López Portillo that they believed would create a positive image of Tijuana for tourists who would come to visit.³⁶ Currently in 2024, a new *Cartolandia* exists further from the center of the city, next to which is a newly-constructed Amazon warehouse that shadows the plasterboard and sheet metal constructed homes. In these cases, urban lower-income individuals are expunged, overshadowed, and removed to make Tijuana a more appealing place to visitors and to project an aura of modernity.

Further significant efforts to revitalize Tijuana came about during and after the Felipe Calderón presidency between 2006-2012 on behalf of several different actors with varying motivations as to how they wanted to restore the city. During Calderón’s presidency, Tijuana, and Mexico in general, went through an “image crisis” during which time highly publicized cartel violence soared in response to Calderón’s militarized efforts to combat drug trafficking throughout the country. Maher and Carruthers propose that the city went through a process of “image work” to symbolically transform Tijuana’s image away from violence and towards a more positive light.³⁷

³⁶ Marco Antonio Samaniego, “Tijuana, una ciudad en constante proceso de gentrificación,” *Boletín Científico Sapiens Research*, Vol. 8, Núm. 1 (2018): 117-128.

³⁷ Carruthers and Maher, *Unequal Neighbors*, 241-270.

Approaches to renovate the image of Tijuana came about from both top-down and bottom-up strategies with an assortment of proposed frames to bring money back into the city and to lure national and international visitors. The main frame that succeeded in its endeavors to transform Tijuana's image is the "world-class city" frame that would bring investors in and steer tourists to "museums, galleries, upscale restaurants, and cultural attractions."³⁸ Because Tijuana became promoted as on-tier with other "world class cities," this also brought on "neoliberal global standards of what it means to be cosmopolitan"³⁹ and sparked such places of consumption that the Americans I met view as "good" in the city: more expensive, upscale, and removed from lower-class neighborhoods. Currently, Tijuana is filled with new restaurants, breweries, bars, and cafes amongst all the new construction.

Similarly, Alejandra Leal describes the neoliberal urbanization of Mexico City, which followed a comparable process of revitalizing the city's historical center and engaging in a discourse of rescue.⁴⁰ Tijuana's violent history of clearing out *Cartolandia* is echoed in the removal of street vendors from the center of Mexico City and through the destruction of older buildings that were either torn down or renovated to make way for upscale lofts.⁴¹ Upscale lofts were not necessarily built directly over the former *Cartolandia*, however, the optics of reinventing the city remain pertinent, especially considering that New City's exclusive high-rise facilities are some of the first buildings one sees when looking South into Tijuana. As these spaces shift, young professionals are pulled into the renovated spaces along with brand-name clothing stores and new restaurants and bars; and as such urban spaces develop to fit more "cosmopolitan tastes," those

³⁸ Carruthers and Maher, *Unequal Neighbors*, 250.

³⁹ Carruthers and Maher, *Unequal Neighbors*, 260.

⁴⁰ Alejandra Leal Martínez, "'You Cannot be Here': The Urban Poor and the Specter of the Indian in Neoliberal Mexico City" *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, (2016), 550.

⁴¹ Leal Martínez, "'You Cannot be Here'"

who are deemed unfit for participating in such spaces are created as “others” who are “impermeable to modernity.”⁴² Leal fundamentally argues that neoliberalism both transforms the city’s social geographies and engages in “political discourses and practices that inform particular subjectivities and sensibilities”⁴³ which creates a cosmopolitan “us” that self-regulates its freedom of citizenship and legality as opposed to the “others” who are viewed as restricting the potential of the city to completely modernize. Therefore, while political discourse and practice originally shapes the cosmopolitan “us” compared to the “others,” the process becomes self-regulating in that the “cosmopolitan” individuals themselves create exclusive senses of belonging that specifically delegitimize others’ attempts to be a part of the social fabric of the city. Therefore, who is deemed a citizen deserving of belonging to the city and *to be seen* is no longer solely determined by state or city actors, but rather, through the interactions and imagined superiority held by the “new” urban population.⁴⁴

The “image work” and neoliberal urbanization of Tijuana has proven successful and thus brought tourists back to Tijuana alongside the expats that are moving into the city - but to the dismay of some of the locals. What brings expats the freedom to spend in Tijuana ultimately creates literal restrictions for Tijuanaenses and those who have lived in the city for decades. Many Tijuanaenses see the influx of Americans as a “problem” because the traffic has gotten worse, basic necessities are getting more expensive, and people are getting priced out of their neighborhoods. For example, Carlos, a Mexican-American vegan restaurant owner in Tijuana who has lived in the city for almost twenty years, and his wife, a Mexican national who has been living in Tijuana for over 30 years, described some of the changes they’ve noticed in the city: namely, that many

⁴² Leal Martínez, ““You Cannot be Here,”” 552.

⁴³ Leal Martínez, ““You Cannot be Here,”” 542.

⁴⁴ Jacqueline Kennelly, “You’re Making Our City Look Bad: Olympic Security, Neoliberal Urbanization, and Homeless Youth.” *Ethnography* 16:1 (2015): 3–24.

businesses have begun catering solely to Americans through prioritizing US dollars and American consumers, and that the cost of living has gotten astronomically more expensive. Whereas many people would be able to support themselves years prior either on their own or living with their families, there is a rise in people now needing to live with roommates because they cannot afford rent without them. Furthermore, Carlos described how the class division in Tijuana is getting wider because of this, and that he has felt the effects firsthand because expenses for his business went up and his family had to relocate farther from the center of the city to afford to continue living in Tijuana. Carlos also let me know that most people who come to his restaurant are Americans, but this could possibly be because, he supposes, veganism is not currently as popular in Mexico as it is in the United States. For Carlos, the freedoms that Americans have both to spend in Tijuana and their flexibility in crossing the border for cheaper goods such as food themselves restrict Tijuana's middle and lower class's ability to keep up with the rising costs. Unfortunately, once my fieldwork concluded, Carlos had to permanently close his restaurant in Tijuana.

However, not all Tijuanaenses believe that this group of Americans moving to Tijuana is a bad thing. Likewise, in several of my Uber rides throughout the city and chatting with people in restaurants, bars, and cafes, the idea was consistently brought up that Tijuana is a "melting pot" (usually stated in English, despite the rest of the conversation being in Spanish) and so it is normal to see the free flow of people in and out of the city. Oftentimes, Tijuanaenses mention the different waves of migration that the city has gone through, most recently noting the Haitians that arrived after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti as well as Ukrainians and Russians due to the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, many Mexican individuals I spoke to brought up the idea that Americans spending money in Tijuana, both through visiting and living there, is boosting the city's economy. These

respondents follow the neoliberal logic of encouraging economic freedom through an open market that embraces globalized consumers and appears to self-regulate.

As demonstrated, Tijuana has gone through several purposeful changes to bring Americans in, but usually at the cost of negatively impacting Tijuaneños or other migrant groups in the city. Currently, Tijuana is facing the effects of neoliberal urbanization: the city is indeed free and open to the highest-paying interests, both personal and business-wise, and thus “increasingly immured within the neoliberal requirement to become self-regulating, the city attempts to polish its image as a clean and livable locale,”⁴⁵ that brings individuals such as American expats in. Those that are deemed unworthy of being perceived in the optics of the city are violently displaced, such as seen in *Cartolandia* in the 1970s, or overshadowed by proposed pinnacles of modernity that are purported to be “great for business” and the Tijuana economy, with the current *Cartolandia* being consumed by a 21-million dollar 32-thousand square-meter Amazon distribution center.⁴⁶ Americans easily flow into Tijuana for cheaper goods where their dollar goes further, precisely as the efforts to “revitalize” over the centuries have desired, while locals pay the ultimate price - in the extreme sense of death and displacement as occurred with *Cartolandia*, through being priced out and restricted in their spending capabilities, and in being transformed into “others” who are seen as unmodern and thus restricting the full “cosmopolitan” potential of the city.

II. BORDER BALANCING & FREEDOMS IN TIJUANA

Expats engage in what Josiah Heyman theorizes as “border balancing” to maintain their freedoms and social lives in Tijuana while continuing to work in the United States - a phenomenon

⁴⁵ Kennelly, “You’re Making Our City Look Bad,” 16.

⁴⁶ Alexandra Mendoza, “Nuevo centro de distribución de Amazon en Tijuana genera elogios y controversia.” *Los Angeles Times*. September 11, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2021-09-11/nuevo-centro-distribucion-amazon-tijuana-elogios-controversia>

that has occurred amongst populations of Mexican nationals for over a century, but is now happening amongst expats with increased mobility in crossing the border. Heyman defines a border balance family as “a household that receives its income from the U.S. side of the border but maintains its residence, its reproduction, and its social life in the Mexican border town.”⁴⁷ Specifically, all the expats I interviewed work for companies in the United States, either remotely or through flexibly commuting across the border, and spend the majority of their free time in Mexico. In Heyman’s historical descriptions of Mexican border balancing families in northern Sonora, border balancing exists within a framework in which immigrants face “legal barriers and openings provided by the American economy and government,” but nonetheless create value through a meaningful social life in Mexico.⁴⁸ In the case of the expats, there are no legal barriers faced in their value-making, although the American economy and government are indeed viewed as limiting their capabilities to reach their lives’ full potential. Just as the Mexican immigrants in Heyman’s ethnography are able to have a higher social standing and more fulfilling social life in Mexico through holding their US-paying jobs, expats in Tijuana maintain a similar balance. Additionally, even though the immigrants in both cases have the capability to reside permanently in the United States, the freedoms that are afforded living in Mexico are more advantageous.⁴⁹

For example, John, a 30-year-old expat who works in the finance sector, emphasized the flexibility his current lifestyle offers straddling the two countries: “If I don't like interest rates in Mexico, I can go to the United States to get a loan, which there'll be lower interest rates, or vice versa... If clothes are cheaper in the United States than in Mexico, I'm gonna go about the United States to buy my clothes - But food in Mexico is cheaper, so I'm gonna go to Mexico to buy all my

⁴⁷ Josiah Heyman, *Life and Labor on the Border: Working People of Northeastern Sonora, Mexico, 1886–1986* (University of Arizona Press, 2018), 125.

⁴⁸ Heyman, *Life and Labor on the Border*, 128.

⁴⁹ Heyman, *Life and Labor on the Border*, 127-128.

food, right, those kinds of dynamics.” John, like all of the expats, is therefore able to maintain a cross-border lifestyle that allows him to pursue a sense of freedom he was otherwise lacking while living in the United States. Thus, through the restrictions faced in the United States in both cases, a higher level of freedom is granted living in Mexico. Expats may not maintain status in the highest upper-class while in the United States, however, they can pursue feelings of such within Mexico. This crossing, from the United States and into Mexico, is part of a “magical transformation” that Lomnitz describes “through which practically any white North American became part of a new aristocratizing identity in Mexico” during the 20th century and onwards with the creation of the Mexican nation state’s racialized mestizo identity.⁵⁰

Commuting from Tijuana into San Diego for work is nothing new for Tijuaneños and other Mexicans, but the capabilities of remote work held by expats as well as the ease and flexibility at which they can cross the border grants these individuals more free time and a perceived sense of leisure that they associate with Mexico in general.⁵¹ Sergio Chávez discusses cross-border strategies utilized by Mexican nationals that can nonetheless apply to expats as well. He states, “This cross-border practice is an attractive livelihood strategy for migrants to Tijuana as well as for locals, providing the best of both worlds: higher wages in the United States and the cultural comforts of living in Mexico.”⁵² For example, Bella, a 24-year-old expat who works in biotechnology, recalled a sense of “simplicity” that she can find only in Mexico, describing how people can do “whatever they want” there. She elucidated that the lifestyle in Mexico is more

⁵⁰ Claudio Lomnitz, “Por mi raza hablará el nacionalismo revolucionario: ¿cómo se forja la unidad nacional? ¿Qué papel juega la racialización --es decir, la naturalización de las diferencias sociales-- en la formación del sujeto nacional? ¿Qué relación tiene ‘la raza’ con la nacionalidad mexicana?” *Nexos México* 32 (2010): 386.

⁵¹ Timothy Henderson, *Beyond Borders: A History of Mexican Migration to the United States*. (Malden, Massachusetts 2011).

⁵² Sergio Chávez, *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana*. 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 2016), 6.

“relaxed and unproblematic,” countering the “work, work, work” culture in the United States that plagues Americans with consumerism and obsession over designer clothes and cars. However, this is in stark contrast to a comment Guadalupe, a middle-aged Oaxacan woman who relocated to Tijuana to seek work in a *fábrica* (manufacturing plant), said with the exact same wording: in Tijuana, the culture is “*trabajo, trabajo, trabajo*,” leaving no time for any socialization or capabilities of leisure activities. In this case, the dichotomized description of the culture of Tijuana for Bella, an expat, compared to Guadalupe, a working-class Mexican national, evokes a fractal recursion; these two moments reactivate the ideological schema of Mexico’s national identity in a way which projects an opposition onto two separate levels. This binary is what ultimately creates an asymmetric border between Bella and Guadalupe. Moreover, the disparity between Bella and Guadalupe’s perspective is echoed in Lomnitz’s description that one of the contact frames in which the ideological construct of national identity is produced is within the tension of the formulations of “tradition” and “modernity.”⁵³ Hence, Bella associates Mexico with more stereotypical impressions of a leisurely Mexican national identity. Meanwhile, Guadalupe conceives of the culture of Tijuana more alongside the hegemonic, albeit highly flawed, 1960’s-onwards canonical formulations of “modernity,” which is usually associated with higher employment rates and economic prosperity⁵⁴ and further perpetuates “state discourses of ‘progress’ evinced in economic development policy [which] create, legitimate, and rely on cultural images of the Mexican working-class (variously referred to as *la clase popular, el pueblo, el pelado*): a group posited as

⁵³ Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico Silent Mexico*, 132-135.

⁵⁴ Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto* New York, New York 1990 [third edition].

emblematic both of Mexico's potential for political economic 'advancement' and of its failure to advance."⁵⁵

Additionally, Bella's conception of the laid-back culture in Mexico is partly what gives a sense of freedom to living in Tijuana for these young expats. Mateo, a millennial expat originally from Fresno who lives in Tijuana and works remotely for an insurance company, echoed Bella's sentiment that the people in Mexico are more easy-going: "people are a lot more relaxed. Their bodies are open, their arms are spread wide, their feet are pointing out like this, indicating they're open to conversations - or if I were to approach them, they wouldn't give me a weird look and say, 'what do you want?'" This perception that Mexican nationals are friendly and relaxed consequently spurred Mateo's new sense of adventure when he described "being down here [in Tijuana] and exploring the different things that Tijuana has to offer, that's the difference [between Mexico and the United States]." Mateo recalled that he was previously shy and nervous around others, but living in Mexico has inspired his confidence to live his life in a way in which "every day is like an adventure," and has even taken up salsa dancing - something he said he never previously would have considered doing had he not lived in Tijuana.

This association of adventurism and living in Tijuana further illuminates the value that expats seek through their relocation to Mexico. In elaborating on the differences between the United States and Mexico, Bella said that for her, living in Mexico means emphasizing experiences, which is illustrated in the ways in which John and Bella spend most of their free time. After moving to Tijuana, Bella purchased a horse, two new motorcycles, and a Miata: all items that feed her adventurous spirit. While indeed material items, all of them allow for Bella to pursue an exhilarating sense of adventure and mobility throughout Mexico. John and Bella first met at the

⁵⁵ Hilary Parsons Dick, *Words of Passage: National Longing and the Imagined Lives of Mexican Migrants*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 31.

ranch where she boards her horse in La Misión, and over the course of my fieldwork they developed a romantic relationship with each other. Both of their favorite pastimes are riding their horses as fast as they can on the beach and through the valley where the ranch is, about an hour and half drive south from Tijuana. When not riding their horses, the couple spends time wine tasting in Valle de Guadalupe, going on road trips throughout Baja California either on their motorcycles or in John's truck, trying out fancy bars and restaurants in Rosarito and Tijuana, or enjoying the luxury of New City, where they both live. I asked Bella at one point what else she had explored in Tijuana. She replied that she had not yet explored much, but when she does in the future she will likely stick to the touristy parts because "that's all you'd want to go to." Hence, in this case, the constructions of socially desirable places as the "good" in John and Bella's mental maps in Tijuana are limited to spaces that are specifically designed for upper-class, American, and/or tourists, which accordingly "enforce[s] norms and social inequalities," as other spaces that may have more lower-income or local populations are deemed as unwanted and othered.⁵⁶

Similarly, Betran, a 29-year-old expat who works remotely for a San Diego-based defense-contractor company as an engineer, directly told me that he is able to have more "freedom" through living in Mexico. He acknowledged that he could very well afford to live in San Diego, but if he did, he might not be able to balance as many gym and martial arts memberships as he currently maintains both in Tijuana and San Diego - his passion takes both time and money that would be restricted had he been living in the United States. Betran expanded on this by saying that his ability to have the free time to immerse himself in activities he enjoys in turn aids with his overall mental health and gives him "a sense of peace." Hence, Betran opportunistically engages in border balancing as he comes and goes at will between Tijuana and San Diego to seek out activities that

⁵⁶ Carruthers and Maher, *Unequal Neighbors*, 17.

bring value to his life. Betran also maintains a higher social standing in Tijuana as he frequently dates middle to lower-class women who, according to him, envy his capability to freely cross the US-Mexico border and fulfill the “housewife” stereotype, as he would often reminisce about his Tijuana ex-girlfriend cleaning his apartment and cooking. For Betran, value is produced through his freedom to spend his time as he pleases and in replicating gendered hierarchies that he idolizes.

Betran not only experiences the freedom to allot more time to do what he enjoys, but he also expressed the freedom he experienced in choosing to move to Tijuana in the first place. Growing up in Imperial Beach, he tells me, he was able to see the US-Mexico border wall separating the two countries, but Mexico remained an unfamiliar place to him despite his occasional trips to visit his grandfather, who built a house in Tijuana. Later in his life, in his mid-twenties, Betran chose to move because of his desire to “experience Mexico” in the manner that felt right to him. He described how “what you project on TJ is what you get, not what TJ projects on you.” Betran has the privilege to make living in Tijuana an experience that is compelled by his freedom of choice - in contrast to the thousands of forcibly displaced immigrants who arrive to Tijuana as their last destination before attempting to cross into the United States in search of asylum. Thus, in the act of choosing to move to Tijuana, Betran creates an asymmetric border which, as Maher and Carruthers affirm, ultimately generates an “unequal contact zone that serve[s] to preserve inequalities.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, they elaborate that “Unequal contact zones tend to emerge in any number of contexts in which there are crossings from places of privilege into so-called bad neighborhoods, even when those crossings are not primarily intended as a means to experience

⁵⁷ Carruthers and Maher, *Unequal Neighbors*, 33.

domination or privilege.”⁵⁸ Therefore, all of the expats in Tijuana create unequal contact zones specifically because they are crossing from the United States into Tijuana. As I will describe later, Betran’s conception of Mexico indeed reinforces the place stigma and associating “the real Mexico” with the “bad” - the violence, poverty, and lawlessness that he conceives as Mexico’s national identity. Correspondingly, in Betran’s current and past crossings from San Diego (place of privilege) into Tijuana (a so-called bad neighborhood), Betran perceives the border not as an obstacle, but rather, as a gateway allowing him to always maintain a safe distance from Tijuana when desired. In doing so, Betran constructs an asymmetric border between himself and those who do not have such capabilities to leisurely cross the border to pursue serenity.

Through each expat’s image of Mexico, they possess the freedom to seek what they desire without restriction. Meanwhile, the exclusive walls they draw between themselves and others are expressed in distinctive ways. All of the expats in my research engage in border balancing and cross boundaries spatially and socially, yet it is only creating new ones that allows the expats to remain dominant in the social hierarchy in their illusion of Mexico. John and Bella purposefully avoid and look down upon lower-income places in Mexico, only spending time in upper-class, tourist, and American-saturated areas. Clearly demarcating the “bad” areas in their mental maps and associating value in their lives through their capabilities to avoid places they have deemed as undesirable, John and Bella indulge in activities that fuel their sense of adventure in “good” parts of Mexico. Additionally, for Mateo, the capability to take advantage of “all that Tijuana has to offer” has transformed not only his sense of self, but also his presumptions of Mexican nationals. For Betran, Mexico is seen as a place where “traditional” gender norms are still enacted, more so than within the United States, and his propensity to date Tijuana women of lower economic

⁵⁸ Carruthers and Maher, *Unequal Neighbors*, 36.

status than him allows him to cross socio-economic barriers all while reinforcing his hierarchy within them. Thus, the imagined identity of the Mexican nation state transforms into a fantasy that fulfills the expats' desire to create more meaningful lives in various ways - through their upholding of a higher social status and seeking adventurous experiences, expats perpetuate their dominance in what they have fabricated as their new frontier. They all may be able to ignore the violence of the border, but the logic of the value in their lives is nonetheless grounded in inequity.

III. FREEDOM IN MOBILITY

As follows, expats' perceived freedoms in Tijuana are accorded in their mobility to cross the US-Mexico border, which has been otherwise weaponized to restrict and define who is deemed legal/illegal and worthy of crossing the international line.⁵⁹ The recursion of freedom/restriction is illuminated in the fact that through the expats' increased mobility, asymmetric borders are produced that create further inequity. Heyman argues, "Mobility, however, does not necessarily mean that places become more similar or equal. The movement of people and capital may—and often does—create or reinforce difference and inequality, as well as blending or erasing such differences."⁶⁰ Thus, because of the flexible movement across the border, the differences between who is permitted to cross with ease compared to who is restricted is affirmed.

Bella and John live together in New City next to the SENTRI vehicle line, a similar pre-clearance to Global Entry but specifically used for crossing the Mexican and Canadian border by land, which they quickly cut through on their motorcycles. Both are therefore able to cut *la línea* to cross the US-Mexico border by weaving through traffic and heading straight to the point of

⁵⁹ Roberto Hernández, *Coloniality of the US/Mexico Border: Power, Violence, and the Decolonial Imperative* (Tucson, Arizona 2018).

⁶⁰ Josiah Heyman, "Ports of Entry as Nodes in the World System," *Identities* Yverdon, Switzerland (2004), 305.

entry. They are allowed even further expedited entry back into the United States due to their possession of Global Entry. Moreover, the speed at which Bella and John travel on their motorcycles throughout Tijuana lends them little time to spend in parts of the city that they view as undesirable and allows them to avoid the traffic jams that locals say are plaguing the city because of the recent surge in Americans that have moved there with their cars. Through this, John and Bella express a sense of lawlessness and avoidance of the collective experience of sitting in traffic that has come to dominate living in Tijuana.⁶¹

Similarly, Betran lives towards the center of downtown in Tijuana, a mere 10-minute drive from the US-Mexico border. Because he is a salaried employee who works remotely and holds a SENTRI pass, Betran can cross the border back into San Diego whenever the line is the shortest. One evening, he and I were driving from Tijuana back into the United States together in his baby-blue 95' Buick sedan that is licensed and registered in California. As we approached the checkpoint, Betran notified me that he never tells the CBP agents that he actually lives in Tijuana, despite him now maintaining dual-citizenship status in both the United States and Mexico. Betran joked with me that he usually tells the agents that he was just in Tijuana for the day “to get tacos” to avoid any questioning as to why he lives in Tijuana. Upon arriving at the checkpoint window, the border agent quickly glanced at us, checked our SENTRI/Global Entry cards, asked if we had anything to declare, and let us go on our way. Similarly, in Yeh’s description of visa-holding border crossers who joke with agents at US checkpoints, “the jokes’ argument is that, just as the state is split, so too is the citizen split, responding reasonably to the state’s questions, yet holding in reserve his or her authentic identity, and potential for disruption and even violence.”⁶² Betran

⁶¹ Rihan Yeh, “Three Types of Traffic in Tijuana: Heteronomy at the Mexico-US Border” (Durham, Duke University Press, 2018).

⁶² Rihan Yeh, “Visas, Jokes, and Contraband: Citizenship and Sovereignty at the Mexico–U.S. Border,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (2017): 154–182, 159.

therefore contradictorily disconnects and binds himself to the US surveillance state in his act of lying to the border agents. Similar to John and Bella, Betran can “cheat” the border due to his American nationality and possession of SENTRI, thereby taking advantage of the saved time and money to pursue other things he enjoys on both sides of the border.

It is not a coincidence that individuals who do not have the capabilities of quickly crossing the border experience hours of sitting in traffic jams both throughout the city and in waiting to cross through the legal ports of entry: acts of waiting serve as “temporal processes in and through which political subordination is reproduced.”⁶³ Further, John described how through living in Tijuana, he has more “disposable time,” which he “budgets” for incorporating time for engaging in activities he enjoys, effectively avoiding the political subordination that is created for those who do not have such privilege. He thereby creates an asymmetric border between himself and those who are purposefully left waiting. In this case, John’s imagined superiority is enacted in both time and space - through saving time and surpassing the spatialized nature of waiting to cross the border, his freedom to do so is enacted through the restriction of others. Furthermore, borders, and in this case the enacted asymmetric border, are “not merely [designed] to give individuals from different social classes different experiences of the law, the civil administration, the police and elementary rights, such as the freedom of circulation and freedom of enterprise, but actively to differentiate between individuals in terms of social class.”⁶⁴ Thus, in possessing the capability to have a more favorable experience of civil administration that surpasses the need to wait, John is also differentiated from the inferior “others” that do not have such privilege. John and Bella render those who are waiting in the general line invisible both in the moments in which they physically

⁶³Javier Auyero, *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

⁶⁴ Étienne Balibar *Politics and the Other Scene* (London; Verso, 2002) 81-82.

cross the border and in their spending of “disposable time” that they possess through averting having to wait. Accordingly, Bourdieu writes that “The all-powerful is he who does not wait but who makes others wait” and that “Waiting implies submission.”⁶⁵ Although John and Bella are obviously not the jurisdictional CBP agents nor the United States nation state that legally enforces waiting and processing at the border, John and Bella nonetheless replicate the ideological schema of domination/subordination and freedom/restriction that grants them the capacity to surpass the need to wait, as there can not be submission without domination.

Bella, John, and Betran therefore have the advantage of maintaining geographic flexibility in their abilities to cross the US-Mexico border. When they do cross, it is as fast as possible: something that many individuals who do not drive motorcycles, possess Global Entry/SENTRI, or work remotely are unable to do. I also have Global Entry and can “cut” *la linea* coming back into the United States, but not without the displeased looks of the hundreds of people I must breeze by when walking to enter the processing center. This experience is theorized by Auyero as the “tempography of domination” in his description how the “dominated,” in this case those waiting in the general line, “perceive temporality and waiting, how they act or fail to act on these perceptions, and how these perceptions and these (in)actions serve to challenge or perpetuate their domination.”⁶⁶ Because those in the general line are stuck waiting, this reinforces the asymmetric border that designates them as inferior to those who can cross with ease.

When confessing my discomfort in blowing through the separate SENTRI line walking past the hours-long trail of people waiting in the general line, nearly every American that I’ve spoken to in Tijuana has instructed me to “ignore them” and that it is “their fault” that they do not

⁶⁵ Pierre Bourdieu *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press. 2000), 228.

⁶⁶ Auyero, *Patients of the State*, 4.

have SENTRI. In this sense, the physical border crossing between the United States and Mexico becomes another place of contact for the Americans: by having the capability to skip the foot and vehicle traffic that plagues the border line, expats are immune from both the structural and symbolic violence of the militarized border. Crossing with Global Entry/SENTRI is designed to allow for less scrutiny from the US CBP agents, and in that fashion these expats can maintain their directly enacted superiority within Tijuana, especially when walking or driving by those in the general line. This freedom to cross the US-Mexico border ultimately results in the shaping of value that expats experience in Tijuana, “revealed by practices through which mobilities are differentially allocated to and impeded for classes, nationalities, genders, commodities, and activities.”⁶⁷

San Ysidro Point of Entry is the busiest land border crossing in the Western Hemisphere,⁶⁸ and the ultimate recursion that the physical border enacts, in establishing United States superiority over Mexico through restricting who is permitted to enter and *how*, occurs both within the environmental space of the US-Mexico border on the grander scale, but also individually in the moments during which the expats cross *la línea* - a physical space which is designed to define, regulate, and restrict who is worthy of being granted the possibility of legally crossing the US-Mexico border. Expats themselves do not have the jurisdictional power to legally or physically restrict who enters the border, however, the ideological schema of US superiority is enacted in their process of crossing, as they maintain the capability to avoid the topography of domination. This ephemeral moment that expats undergo in their process of crossing the border *depends* on the restriction that the US-Mexico border militantly enacts; for if the ideological schema of US

⁶⁷ Heyman, “Ports of Entry as Nodes in the World System” 323.

⁶⁸ “San Ysidro Land Port of Entry” U.S. General Services Administration, Accessed on April 11, 2024 <https://www.gsa.gov/about-us/gsa-regions/region-9-pacific-rim/land-ports-of-entry/san-ysidro-land-port-of-entry>.

superiority and border control did not exist, there would be no freedom that is ultimately dependent on the restriction of others. Additionally, through the capabilities that these expats have to freely cross in separate lines and with intentionally less inspection from CBP, this movement highlights the fact that others are restricted in the highly asymmetric hours-long foot and vehicle lines. Furthermore, expats enact their imagined superiority over others while crossing the border, as they have the *choice* (either consciously or not) to ignore and/or look down upon those who may not have Global Entry/SENTRI as well as the individuals that are otherwise pushed into the desert to cross illegally. John and Betran both told me they would not have moved to Tijuana without Global Entry, and even before Bella received her Global Entry status, she was still able to cut *la línea* on her motorcycle. Thus, because the US-Mexico border seemingly fades away and no longer serves as a boundary for these expats to literally and metaphorically cross, the need to create new boundaries arises in iterations that continually serve to replicate the border's ultimate recursion of granting freedom through restricting others.

IV. CREATING VALUE AND AUTHENTICITY IN TIJUANA

Value for my expat interlocutors is fractally recursive and results in the creation of asymmetric borders between expats, spaces, and “others” in Tijuana. In expats’ fantasies of Mexico, namely that of viewing Tijuana as a frontier *and* a dangerous city, expats spatialize value in ways that allow them to conquer landscapes and maintain distance from areas that are formulated as “bad” in expats’ mental maps. Additionally, the “place stigma” of Tijuana contributes to shaping and perpetuating stereotyped narratives that expats utilize to manufacture a sense of authenticity through living in Mexico. I align myself with Sarah Luna’s usage of the term “value,” in which my expat interlocutors “devote their time and attention to relationships,

activities, and things that they find meaningful and that make life worth living to them” as opposed to solely shaping their actions on abstract-models of profit-maximization.⁶⁹ However, the freedoms that expats experience in Tijuana recur in iterations that for others create senses of restriction, with moments of such fractal recursions ultimately shaping asymmetric borders and perpetuating fantasies of Mexico’s national identity.

Economic freedom, due to the overall lower costs of living and expenses in Mexico, is one obvious facet of the freedoms expats experience living in Tijuana, but the bliss that is coupled with living in a place that expats have formulated as an unrestrained new frontier is one of the true bases of the value that expats create in their lives in Mexico. The romanticism of the frontier as a space of individual freedom and “perennial rebirth” that is unique to American social culture stems largely from Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis.”⁷⁰ Although Turner’s thesis is highly flawed, the notion of unrestricted expansion and individualism amongst people, land, and commodities reverberates amongst the neoliberal logic that has constructed Tijuana as a desirable space for expats. Turner’s frontier thesis indeed served its time as a US national myth, but its ideology continues to perpetuate nationalistic identities in the United States and in the minds of expats. John echoes Turner’s problematic theorization that “A primitive society can hardly be expected to show the intelligent appreciation of the complexity of business interest in a developed society”⁷¹ in the expansion of the frontier. Specifically, through his discussion of how most Mexican people do not understand the economic benefit of expats living in Mexico, John thereby classifies the Mexican people as what Turner would label “a primitive society.” John states: “If you have Americans coming down spending that kind of money, well, guess what - that's where security comes from.

⁶⁹ Luna, *Love in the Drug War*, 10.

⁷⁰ Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 8-9.

⁷¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of The Frontier in American History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J, 1961), 58.

That money spent is driving the economy, the economy drives wages, wages drives growth, and so on... Do they [Mexican people in Tijuana] understand that? Probably not, but those who do are grateful for it. Those who don't will complain, but they also understand that the money needs to move." Thus, the neoliberal idea that money needs to flow freely can be traced in John's idea that despite the majority of people in Mexico not understanding the economic significance of expats moving into Mexico, the city will transform into a place that is more "secure." Additionally, when John refers to "they" who do not understand, John further asserts his imagined superiority and creates an asymmetric border between himself and those who he claims do not understand the "business interest" of the situation. Alejandra Leal describes a similar phenomenon amongst her research participants gentrifying Mexico City; my expat interlocutors similarly view themselves as "new" whereas the prior residents or locals are seen as different socially, economically, culturally, and conclusively, the movement of Americans into these spaces is depicted as part of the revitalization of the national public space that is in need of rescuing.⁷²

Furthermore, John described for me the ecstasy he experienced shortly after the accompanying struggles he dealt with during his relocation from San Diego to Tijuana:

When I was sitting on my bed looking out the window on a Saturday morning, I was like: if I could pull that off [moving to Tijuana], there really isn't anything you can't do. Apart from going to space. So this whole thought of "what's really holding you back?" "What are the things that you care about?" "How bad do you really want it?" Those kinds of questions really became simple for me from that point forward. If I want to go do something, it's gonna get done. Or if someone says, "Well, you can't do that." I'm like: [apart from the illegal stuff - you can't do that] why not?

John's discussion of how his life has changed through living in Tijuana emphasizes the value he now holds in the freedom to do what he wants with seemingly no limits; the only confines for John

⁷² Leal Martínez, "You Cannot be Here" 550.

are either going to space or engaging in illegal activity. Tijuana, in this sense, is a place of endless opportunity and personal transformation - two key elements of the “frontier.” Additionally, Yeh describes how the narrative of Tijuana as a “frontier” is echoed in Tijuana public narratives. Living in Tijuana is commonly described as living in *la frontera*, which usually means “the border.” Nevertheless, the term can also literally be translated to “frontier.” Moreover, in discussing how a spread published in the newspaper *Frontera* echoes Turner’s frontier sentiment, it is made clear that Tijuana can indeed be considered a new frontier: “For them, the *frontera* is not a limit or a fence, it’s the place where anything can happen, because they know they are capable of achieving it.” As Yeh points out, this limitless individualism can be traced back to Turner’s 1893 eulogy to US frontiersmen: “that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are the traits of the frontier.”⁷³ In this sense, the freedom that John experiences manifests through the conception of Tijuana as the frontier.

However, while John morally limits himself to only engaging in legal opportunities, Raúl, a 25-year-old Mexican national who has lived in Tijuana since he was five years old, brings this idea a step further. Raúl believes that Tijuana is “una ciudad de adicciones” (a city of addictions), with individuals being granted the freedom to engage in gambling, prostitution, and drug use, and when you “break the rules” and get caught engaging in illegal activity, you are set free as long as you can pay any necessary bribes. All of this, Raúl asserted, is because of the demand brought on by the Americans for these “vices” in Tijuana - ultimately contrasting with John’s self-imposed limit in restricting himself in such. To John, opportunities abound, and he upholds his claim that despite being pulled over multiple times by the police, he manages to talk his way out of any

⁷³ Yeh, *Passing*, 133-136.

bribes. Further, as a middle-aged Uber driver who has also lived in Tijuana for over 20 years purported, one can do whatever they want and be who they want to be in Tijuana: “todo depende de la gente” (everything depends on the people). What constitutes “good” and “bad” in the choices that one makes is completely up to the individual. Thus, the value that John finds in his life is dependent on his conception of Tijuana (and Mexico in general) as a new frontier, but through this creation, individuals like Raúl see the exploitation of such freedom, both “good” and “bad.” Therefore, the notion that Tijuana is a frontier becomes an ideological schema that is reactivated in discourse amongst both expats and Mexican nationals.

In Turner’s thesis and other frontier mythology, the frontier is nonetheless purported to be a place of danger and “savagery,” an element that adds excitement to living in Tijuana. For Betran, the perceived lawlessness and violent history of the city is part of the thrill of living in Tijuana, and the “real TJ” to him consists of the areas that are considered more dangerous and spaces in which there is frequently known cartel activity, instances of violence, and higher poverty rates. Therefore, while Tijuana for John is a limitless frontier of positive opportunities, Betran conceptualizes Mexico’s identity as one aligned with violence and possible danger. In this moment, the ideological schema of Mexico’s national identity fractally recurs. Because of the binaries that are evoked which nonetheless exist within the same framework (Mexico’s national identity), what is considered undesirable and ignored (the “bad” and violent) by John in his conception of Mexico is precisely what projects opposition and creates Betran’s conception of “the real Mexico.” In both cases, John and Betran reinforce the imagined superiority of the United States over Mexico in their replication of the hierarchy that relies on negative stereotypes of Mexico.

On one occasion, Betran and I drove to the neighborhood where his grandfather built a house decades prior. Pointing out the gang-graffiti, dilapidated houses, and unpaved roads, Betran ironically played the song “Ghetto” by Akon and sang along with the lyrics, echoing that the “streets remind me of quicksand.” As we slowly weaved through the neighborhood, Betran stated that he truly feels like he is in Mexico when he is in neighborhoods such as this. He brought to my attention that we were making our way through the *colonia* that had one of the curfews imposed on it a year prior when the cartels were lighting cars on fire.⁷⁴ He jokingly declared to me that even though there was violence going on and a few cars lit on fire, the media was overhyping the situation and most people in the neighborhood disobeyed the curfew and continued on with their weekly *sobreruedas*. Because of the spatial restriction of being in a vehicle that framed the view of the neighborhood, this created distance between the viewer and the view that evoked the experience of the sublime for Betran - what Burke describes as the strongest emotion humans feel that brings pleasure in keeping certain distance from that which evokes terror.⁷⁵

In this case, the sublime is evoked for Betran within the *colonia* due to the extreme landscape that signifies danger and constitutes a “bad” area in his mental map. However, through the spatialized distance between himself and the environment, due to being in a car and later at his grandfather’s house, he is able to prevail over the possibility of danger. This experience of the sublime brings Betran to his conception of Mexico and his freedom to conquer the possible danger within. The thrilling experience of the sublime is dependent on the physical and mental distance one maintains between the view that evokes danger in one’s mind, but does not actually pose a

⁷⁴ Sandra Dibble, “Burning Vehicles in Baja California: An Outlier or the ‘Beginning of Something Worse?’” *Voice of San Diego*, August 22, 2022, <https://voiceofsandiego.org/2022/08/22/burning-vehicles-in-baja-california-an-outlier-or-the-beginning-of-something-worse/>

⁷⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Garland Pub, 1971).

real threat. This view that Betran and I perceived while driving through the neighborhood encompasses individuals who are actually living *inside* of the view in the *colonia*. Indeed, Betran will always replicate the hierarchy of his superiority in these moments of viewing because he will always be the viewer instead of facing the perhaps darker realities inside of the view. The positive experience of the sublime for Betran ultimately creates an asymmetric border because of his removal from these realities which others may not possibly be able to remove themselves from. Much like John, Betran can perceive a sense of freedom because of the distance he maintains from spaces such as these that have been constructed as “bad,” but nonetheless draw him in to his idea of “the real Mexico.”

Ultimately, there also remains a sense of risk and “place stigma” that is associated with Tijuana that both the expats as well as their friends and family residing in the United States internalize. However, *because* of the sense of danger associated with the city, this allows for a sense of adventure and freedom that the expats experience in Tijuana that is *dependent on* the constructed stigma associated with the city. Carruthers and Maher theorize that images and reputations of places are socially constructed from “the ways they are represented in visual imagery, language, and framing stories or narratives,” especially in mass media such as news.⁷⁶ Betran thus reinforces the place stigma of Tijuana through the language he uses and ways in which he frames neighborhoods such as the *colonia* where his grandfather’s house is. Place stigma conclusively plays a significant role in the production of spatialized inequalities as well as producing and reinforcing asymmetric borders; to expats, areas that are deemed “bad” in Tijuana are associated with inferiority of the area, and by proxy, the people who inhabit these spaces.

⁷⁶ Carruthers and Maher, *Unequal Neighbors*, 14-15.

Hence, while Betran is proud of the “bad” areas of Tijuana which he has lived in, such as the one described as well as an additional *colonia* named La Sánchez Taboada, where he briefly lived with his Tijuana girlfriend, his linking of “the real Tijuana” to lower-income neighborhoods with higher rates of violence inadvertently reinforces the place stigma that clouds the city and creates an asymmetric border between himself and the individuals who live in these neighborhoods. At one point I asked Betran why La Sánchez was considered such a bad neighborhood or how it got that way, and he replied that he is not sure but perhaps the “sketchiness” was “like a bubble that started off small yet continued to grow over time.” Contrastingly, Guadalupe also lived in Sánchez Taboada, but suggested to me she was not aware that it had such a dangerous reputation. Betran’s narrative of these neighborhoods as violent created a reality of it being a “bad” place in his mental map, even if other individuals like Guadalupe who live there do not necessarily agree with this formulation. This is a supplementary example that the “danger” in Tijuana is recursively constructed and dependent on the mental maps that individuals draw of the city. The same neighborhood, in this case La Sánchez, can be viewed as dangerous by an expat who has the capability to maintain distance (in his ability to live elsewhere and go back to the United States as he pleases), compared to a Mexican national who lived there (because of the neighborhood’s proximity to the fábrica that she worked at) and ultimately did not perceive a sense of danger.

Additionally, all my expat research participants told me that a majority of their friends and family refused to visit them in Tijuana because they were scared to. At one point, Bella revealed that some of her friends will only come into Tijuana if Bella drives them across the border. Even though many of Bella’s friends have traveled internationally on their own, they still refuse to walk across the border out of fear: not fear of the US Border Patrol, but fear of the mysterious and

ambiguous danger in Tijuana. Likewise, Mateo described an incident when he asked one of the partners at the San Diego-based insurance firm he works remotely for if he ever visits Tijuana. Mateo recalled that the partner of the firm told him he probably would not because he “has a one-year-old” and would “worry about dying in Tijuana and leaving behind a fatherless child.” Because the partner’s wife is Mexican-American, Mateo told me, “I think as Mexican Americans, we’ve been told. You know our families [both Mateo and myself are Mexican-American as well] - they’re used to some of this, like the hard Mexico, the rough Mexico,” ultimately echoing Betran’s formulation of the “real Mexico” as a place that is full of risk and tainted by its place stigma. Thus, the assumptions that Tijuana is dangerous extends to Mexican-Americans based on what they have either seen on the news or heard about from family members.

This is also supplemented in the notion that Tijuana, and Mexico in general, is seen as a “Third-World country,” and preconceived notions of the city frequently fall into the hegemonic trope that associates poverty with Mexico and Mexican people.⁷⁷ Betran asserted to me that before he moved to Tijuana, he indeed viewed the city as “Third-World” and inferior to the United States. Further, Betran mentioned that his family who has spent most of their lives in the United States was surprised when he told them that Tijuana is an urban city with similar amenities to the United States such as Uber Eats, a popular food delivery service. This is substantiated through Pablo Vila’s study in which American individuals (both Anglo and Mexican-American) incorrectly identified photographs of poverty that were taken in El Paso (Texas, United States) and assumed the photos to be taken in Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua, Mexico). Not only does this reinforce the

⁷⁷ Pablo Vila, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders: Social Categories, Metaphors, and Narrative Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Frontier*. 1st ed (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2000) 81-127.

place stigma of Mexico, but this also “others” Mexican nationals who live within Mexico as belonging to another world and time of the past.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, it is not only Americans and Mexican-Americans that internalize the place stigma of Tijuana as a dangerous city to be avoided: Mexican nationals, both Tijuana residents and individuals from other parts of Mexico living in Tijuana, also internalize the place stigma even while living there. To contextualize, in 2022, the homicide rate in Tijuana was 107.5 per 100,000 residents,⁷⁹ compared to 3.7 per 100,000 residents in San Diego.⁸⁰ Numerous Mexican Uber drivers would ask me if I felt safe in Tijuana because of the place stigma they realize is associated with the city - even if they had never personally witnessed instances of violence occurring. It is worth noting, though, that it is unclear if these individuals truly believe that Tijuana is dangerous, or if they brought this up because they presumed that I believe it is dangerous. Correspondingly, Raúl warned me that I should be careful during my fieldwork. He advised me that much of Tijuana is controlled by the cartels and that it is a city filled with robberies, kidnapping, and murder. When I asked if he had ever seen such a thing, he responded that he had not, but that he sees it on the news and hears about it. As demonstrated, the narratives about Tijuana being violent and dangerous are perpetrated through the power of both visual imagery and narratives precisely as Carruthers and Maher theorize.

The expats who live in Tijuana claim that they are aware that the media shapes the negative public perception of the city, and frequently describe the violence in Tijuana as “overhyped” and/or

⁷⁸ Vila, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders*, 81-127

⁷⁹ Bernardo de Jesús Saldaña Tellez, “Opinion: Sky-high homicide rates in Tijuana and Rosarito demand a constructive government response,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/commentary/story/2023-08-24/opinion-high-homicide-rates-tijuana-rosarito-mexico-government-police-cartel>

⁸⁰ Teri Figueroa and David Hernandez, “Homicides claimed 107 lives in San Diego last year. Here’s who they were, and how they died,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, June 18, 2023, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/public-safety/story/2023-06-18/san-diego-county-fewer-homicides-2022>

contained to certain areas, however, they rely on the place stigma to fuel the narrative of adventure and uniqueness that they fulfill through conquering the frontier of Tijuana. Sharon Zukin describes how cities such as Brooklyn became gentrified and authenticated a sense of coolness, asserting that “Gritty’s appeal was in the postindustrial spirit of the times and in the symbolic economy’s ability to synthesize dirt and danger into new cultural commodities.”⁸¹ In this case, the “grittiness” and perceived sense of danger that is associated with Tijuana becomes a part of what Bourdieu would describe as “cultural capital”⁸² that authenticates expats’ personalities as adventurous. For example, when discussing his attraction to Bella and the courage of another female expat’s decision to move to Tijuana, John stated: “it baffles me... I hate to make it sound sexist or anything like that, but like, especially for ladies to do it on their own... because it's scary, man. It's not an easy thing to do. And the amount of courage and adventurous personality you got to have to do that - which I absolutely admire. And I give them props 100% because they pulled it off better than I did.” Despite John’s emphasizing to me that Tijuana is otherwise “up and coming,” moving to Tijuana is nonetheless viewed as a risky act that requires a sense of adventure because of the place stigma and perceived danger of Tijuana - a move that to him is impressive for a woman to do.

Bella pointed out that she did not have fear of moving to Tijuana because she is aware that the news in the United States, and more specifically San Diego, usually only publishes stories regarding Tijuana when something exceptionally bad happens. Furthermore, Bella echoed the perception that Tijuana is what you make it, and if someone is looking for trouble then they can certainly find it. Bella detailed an example of two men in their twenties who had just been killed

⁸¹ Sharon Zukin, “How Brooklyn Became Cool.” In *Naked City* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 51.

⁸² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984).

in Playas, but described that the reason they got shot was because they were “being stupid” and seeking out drugs. Thus, when instances of violence occur such as this one, expats are able to extend the asymmetric border beyond simply a “bad” place in their mental maps, but even further onto condemning people who are seen as deserving of the real violence that does affect particular individuals in the city, or, similarly as concluded earlier in blaming those that are forced to wait while crossing the border. Nonetheless, all of the expats indeed had mental map constructions of where the “bad” parts of Tijuana were - mainly in lower-income neighborhoods or places that are on the edges of the city.

The value that expats create through living in Tijuana is reliant on the creation of asymmetric borders between themselves, spaces, and “others” in Tijuana. The myth of the American frontier may be closed, but expats such as John have opened a new chapter of neoliberal supremacy in manufacturing recursions of freedom for themselves in Tijuana. Notably, the frontier is historically viewed as a place filled with inherent danger, especially of the “others” who may already be present within the land; because of the place stigma that clouds Tijuana, expats have the capacity to define the boundaries of what is safe/dangerous and maintain the freedom to assert their accomplishment for making the move to Tijuana. Binaries of good/bad, legal/illegal, and safe/dangerous that are reinforced for many by the US-Mexico border are now spatialized and created by the expats themselves. Thus, these fractal recursions replicate the ideological schema that forges Tijuana as a space to be conquered, ultimately reinforcing the expats’ imagined superiority in these spaces. Betran is proud to show off “the real TJ” *because* he is not geographically restricted to these physical spaces, meanwhile, others such as Guadalupe are. The ultimate ability to define and cross the boundaries of what may be deemed unsafe for some

consequently transforms into a freedom that illustrates the highly asymmetric social understandings that expats hold of the city as a whole.

V. NEW CITY AND NEOLIBERAL URBANIZATION

For expats in Tijuana, the US-Mexico boundary of restriction has been surpassed in their free-flowing mobility across the border, and consequently, expats like John and Bella found a space that was constructed for individuals like themselves who rely on the restrictions of others to manufacture their freedoms: New City. New City is one of the most fascinating outcomes of the neoliberal urbanization of Tijuana: it is a towering, exclusive, recently built series of buildings that juts out of the Tijuana skyline directly across the US-Mexico border a simple ten-minute walk from the San Ysidro pedestrian crossing. Housing “the best medical tourism facilities,” a luxury hotel and spa, an upscale food hall named “The Park,” a shopping center, and private residences, New City is a place in which the material culture of capitalism can be indulged in for those willing to pay a premium.⁸³ Additionally, New City can be designated as a “fortified enclave,” as theorized by Teresa Caldeira, in that such spaces are “privatized, enclosed, and monitored spaces for residence, consumption, leisure, and work”⁸⁴ which purposefully separate upper classes from the greater public life through extreme security measures, walls, fences, and armed guards, ultimately enforcing segregated notions of exclusion and inclusion.⁸⁵ Further, the activation of the recursion of freedom/restriction is flexibly evoked within the grounds of New City in that several of the amenities, such as the food hall, are technically open to the public, however, the implemented

⁸³ “New City Medical Plaza,” accessed January 2024, <https://newcitymed.com/>

⁸⁴ Teresa Rio Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (University of California Press, 2000), 213.

⁸⁵ Caldeira, *City of Walls*, 258.

securitization measures and prohibitive architecture ultimately creates an asymmetric border that purposefully keeps many who are part of the greater public of Tijuana out.

John recently bought a showroom unit condominium in New City. On one of my first visits to the extravagant food hall with him he asserted, “Regular Mexicans don’t come here.” John again reiterated on a separate occasion that “normal Mexicans” do not patronize New City nor any of its amenities as he encouraged me to look around at the mostly light-skinned, well-dressed clientele where we were having brunch at Farmer’s Table Restaurant (also on New City property). Evoking an asymmetric border between himself as an American expat and the general “others” of Tijuana, John effectively lumped the *clase media* and the *pueblo* to be “regular Mexicans” - anyone who does not appear to be in the highly racialized upper echelons of Mexican society. Indeed, on a different date while I was having drinks with Pablo and Vanessa, two mid-twenties Tijuanaenses, a discussion of New City arose - the *chisme* they tell me that they know because of hearing rumors about the facilities is that the only people who can afford to buy a condominium there are “*Narcos* [individuals who partake in organized crime in Mexico, particularly surrounding drug trafficking] and rich Americans,” and that they have never dared to step foot onto the premises. They aren’t wrong - occasionally, local news in Tijuana pops up regarding residents of the complex who have been assassinated due to ties with organized crime, along with dead bodies being discovered with *narcomensajes* (*Narco* messages) on the premises.⁸⁶ The couple explains that New City was created “so that you don’t have to leave,” and expressed no desire to venture into the secluded establishment. Pablo and Vanessa were also correct in that New City is, in fact, a place in which it is possible to remain within the fortified walls and access all of life’s necessities without

⁸⁶ Redacción Zeta, “Encuentran mochila con cabeza y manos en New City, también dejaron narcomensaje” *Zeta Tijuana*, April 16, 2019, <https://zetatijuana.com/2019/04/encuentran-mochila-con-cabeza-y-manos-en-new-city-tambien-dejaron-narcomensaje/>

venturing out; along with all of the amenities provided to the public (such as the medical center, shopping plaza, and food hall) inside of the residential plaza there is a school for young children, a barbershop, and additional food and drink options for residents only. This further echoes Caldeira's description of the "closed condominium" category of fortified enclaves that create social separation though providing "five basic elements: security, seclusion, social homogeneity, amenities, and services," described further as "an enclosed, fortified, and isolated residence, a secure environment in which one can use various facilities and services while living exclusively among equals."⁸⁷

Thus, the interactions that do take place amongst Americans, Tijuaneños, and other Mexican nationals are highly asymmetrical in New City, as the design of the space intends, and the recursions of freedom/restriction are engaged in varying levels. Within the secure environment of New City, one mainly only interacts with a purposefully regulated population. Architecturally, the entrance into the main commercial building is ambiguous coming from the street level. The first time I visited New City after walking from the border crossing, I asked (in Spanish) one of the multiple security guards on the sidewalk outside how to enter The Park. He responded to me in English and showed me precisely where to enter: by going up a menacing escalator that passes through a black corridor, at the bottom of which it is impossible to see what is at the top. There are numerous employees that stand on the sidewalk leading up to the main New City building: various security guards at each point of entry as well as several valet workers. From the outside, New City replicates the optics of restriction modeled on the US-Mexico border: towering walls, security, surveillance, and guards. This performative prohibition, local news, and rumors of what goes on

⁸⁷ Caldeira, *City of Walls*, 264

within the buildings echoes how “performative rumors of violence shape the way power feels.”⁸⁸ The power that New City exudes to define who is permitted inside or not is reflected in the rejection and anxiety that Pablo and Vanessa had expressed to me regarding visiting New City based on the narratives that they had heard.

Contrastingly, John and Bella love the segregated luxury and sense of security of New City, and the exclusionary nature of the facilities is precisely what draws high-paying consumers and residents such as themselves there. Hence, advertisements for closed condominiums in São Paulo are almost identical to the marketing of New City in that they indicate that “security and control are the conditions for keeping the others out, for assuring not only seclusion but also ‘happiness,’ ‘harmony,’ and even ‘freedom.’”⁸⁹ This is clearly demonstrated on the main web page for Newcity Developers, the development company responsible for building New City. It reads (translated from Spanish):

NewCity Residencial, an immersive living experience that has marked a before and after in luxury vertical housing and that combines a privileged location, added value and quality of life. In 2006, the residential complex with the most amenities in the city to date was born. We have had the honor of being the home of families who seek security and exclusivity for their loved ones and who also became happy investors in their return on investment.⁹⁰

In this advertisement for New City, the security, luxury, exclusivity, and privilege that the facilities offer creates both economic and social happiness. Once inside the residential plaza, the five New City residential buildings (each of which is named after a different precious gemstone: Diamante, Esmeralda, Zafiro, Onix and Rubí) surround a large pool with a waterslide, a bar, and numerous tables and chairs alongside manicured landscaping. Further amenities include outdoor tennis

⁸⁸ Sarah Luna, “Affective Atmospheres of Terror on the Mexico-U.S. Border: Rumors of Violence in Reynosa’s Prostitution Zone,” *Cultural Anthropology* (2018), 59.

⁸⁹ Caldeira, *City of Walls*, 266.

⁹⁰ “¿QUE ES NEWCITY DEVELOPERS?” Newcity Developers, accessed March 2, 2024, <https://newcitydevelopers.com/newcity-residencial-developers-tijuana/>

courts, a soccer field, a sand volleyball court, a dog park, and a spa. With a sense of extreme privacy, individuals can carry on with their lives with everything they desire and need at their disposal - all while never having to leave the premises to interact with the greater public of Tijuana. Furthermore, the interactions that one has while in New City are controlled and regulated through both the tight security and performative rumors that surround the grounds, which ultimately keeps many Tijuanaenses and others living in the city out, drawing an asymmetric border between those permitted inside and the “regular Mexicans,” such as Pablo and Vanessa, outside as John described.

There are multiple points of entry into New City each maintaining a varying level of securitization to enhance the exclusion of who is permitted in and out of the facilities. It is worth noting that when crossing by foot from the United States into Mexico at the San Ysidro Port of Entry, one must pass through two separate large, full-body size, metal turnstiles - one when entering the processing building of Instituto Nacional de Migración Puerta Este and one that allows exit off the concrete walkway that spits out into the constantly-bustling Avenida Frontera. Similarly, mimicking the enforcement of the flow of bodies across physical spaces but even more privatized, New City maintains a private “backdoor” entrance for residents that utilizes facial recognition software to allow entry through an analogous-to-the-border style full-body metal turnstile that shoots one out to the residential plaza. To gain access to this entrance, one must first pass through a door that is key-fob regulated and practically invisible as it is hidden in a corner that lays in the backdrop of The Park. Moreover, the only other pedestrian and valet entrance to the residences at New City is guarded 24/7, and when guests are entering, only with permission of a resident who lives inside, one of the half dozen security officers present will take physical

identification, such as a driver's license or passport, and keep it in their possession until retrieved on departure from the facilities.

The measures taken to securitize New City follow the logic of creating neoliberal subjects as described by Daniel Goldstein. He states that, "Suspicion is a key component of this neoliberal disposition, with each individual encouraged to assume a habitually anxious, cautious engagement with anyone or anything deemed unfamiliar and potentially threatening."⁹¹ Thus, the installment of numerous security guards and surveillance measures utilized at New City symbolically creates the satisfaction that what lies within is worthy of protection from what is "out there," even if there is no true external danger. Goldstein elaborates that security is self-referential in that "security is that which authorized actors are able to securitize, not what might actually exist 'out there' as a real social threat."⁹² For instance, John and Bella are fully aware that *Narcos*, whom one may consider a threat considering their history of violence, reside in New City; however, John and Bella feel safest while inside the facilities. This is starkly contrasted with Pablo and Vanessa's fear of those who reside inside. Hence, John and Bella become the agents that are in need of security and experience a sense of freedom and safety that exists *because* of the restriction that the greater public of Tijuana experiences in accessing the grounds. The power New City and the expats hold to create the need for security ultimately maintains its authority and control, thereby granting freedom to the expats who have unfettered access while restricting those who are not permitted inside - the "regular Mexicans," as John described. Equivalently, Setha Low argues "that adding walls, gates, and guards produces a landscape that encodes class relations and residential (race/class/ethnic/gender) segregation more permanently in the built environment."⁹³ Thus, similar

⁹¹ Daniel Goldstein, "Toward a Critical Anthropology of Security." *Current Anthropology* 51 (2010), 492.

⁹² Goldstein, "Toward a Critical Anthropology of Security," 492.

⁹³ Setha M. Low, "The Edge and the Center: Gated Communities and the Discourse of Urban Fear." *American Anthropologist* (2001), 45.

to how border policing symbolically reaffirms the state's territorial authority,⁹⁴ the measures taken to securitize New City symbolically maintain asymmetric borders between the American expats that are worthy of protection from the "others" of Tijuana. The freedom to access the restrictive facilities is only afforded to those deemed worthy; and the power to assert *who* is deemed worthy lies at the discretion of the security, image politics, and neoliberal logic that grants access to those who hold the economic power to purchase condos in the residences or afford the US-level pricing at The Park.

Similarly to how Yeh argues that limits of national belonging and legality in Tijuana are produced by the border, not necessarily at the border itself,⁹⁵ the border serves as an additional level of recursion whereby expats experience freedom *through* the restriction of "others." The highly-militarized border wall and the confinement of New City, which can largely be considered symbols of restriction, is precisely what creates freedom for these expats. Caldeira succinctly states, "Residents of closed condominiums think of their fortified enclaves as spaces of freedom."⁹⁶ Freedom does not exist without restriction - regardless of the reminders of the restriction being ignored - and the possibility to cross through such restrictive places with ease renders the restriction that is dangerous for some to be unremarkable to John and Bella. For instance, while standing amongst the manicured lawns and by one of the multiple outdoor pools in the residential plaza of New City, one can visibly see the physical, legal confinement of the US-Mexico border wall snaking up the hill adjacent to the property. Yet, to John and Bella, the border wall simply blends into the landscape and is forgotten. "Oh yeah, I guess you can see it," they brushed off as I, shocked, brought the optics to their attention. In this situation, the capability to not perceive the

⁹⁴ Peter Andreas, *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide*. 3rd edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

⁹⁵ Yeh, *Passing*.

⁹⁶ Caldeira, *City of Walls*, 289.

view of the border wall, much like how expats choose to ignore those subjected to the tempography of domination while waiting in *la línea*, protects and distances John and Bella from the reality of the purpose of the border: to violently restrict and define who is allowed to be free and who is not.

Shaping understandings of who is considered “free” - and thus deserving of liberties such as the pursuit of freedom - contrasted amongst those who are not considered worthy of such rights and legality, is precisely the outcome of the border’s purpose of “symbolically reaffirming the traditional political boundaries of an ‘imagined community.’”⁹⁷ Correspondingly, whereby the border itself serves as an ideological construction that creates the dichotomy of legal/illegal, or as Yeh describes, the two “we’s” of Tijuana, the *clase media* and the *pueblo*, a new “we” with a neoliberal set of value is created through the recursion of freedom/restriction that mimics the border’s jurisdiction in Tijuana. Namely, the recursion of freedom/restriction as enforced by the US-Mexico border is played out in New City. Interestingly, freedom in New City is afforded simultaneously *outside* and *inside* of the usual limits and one of the ultimate symbols of restriction: the border wall. While the United States may frequently be viewed as the land of the free, expats like John and Bella feel the most freedom while on the other side of the wall in Mexico, but only because they seek out spaces that restrict others. Within New City, securitization measures and prohibitive architecture reactivates the recursion of freedom/restriction that is militantly and jurisdictionally enforced by the border whereby freedom is reliant specifically on the restriction of others. Ultimately, the recursions of freedom and restriction occur in varying degrees, simultaneously overlapping at times, but always replicating hierarchies of value that allow expats such as John and Bella to mirror their imagined superiority over others.

⁹⁷ Andreas, *Border Games*.

CONCLUSION

At both New City and the border, expats physically, socially, and psychologically surpass limitations that otherwise purposefully restrain others. Grandin claims that currently only the ruling class of the United States is permitted such freedom as mythologized in earlier American frontier discourse. Yet, through the transformation that expats experience living in Tijuana, they, too, can pursue a limitless world - but indeed only through new mystification and domination. Consider Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey*, in which he describes the psychological transition that individuals underwent when faced with the shocking technological advancement that allowed individuals to ride on trains during the Industrial Revolution:

The sinister aspect of the machinery that first was so evident and frightening gradually disappeared, and with this disappearance, fear waned and was replaced by a feeling of security based on familiarity... One might say that he felt secure because he had forgotten how disquieting the technological conveyance still was, how tremendous and potentially destructive were the amounts of energy it contained. This forgetfulness was possible because the technology itself helped it along by eliminating or obfuscating all its initially anxiety-producing manifestations⁹⁸

For John and Bella, the violent nature of the border wall and what it represents becomes familiar and yields a sense of safety - a recursion that provides freedom for themselves through the constraint of others. Further, the securitization and fortified "protections" of New City serve as a form of technology that obscures any anxiety-producing manifestations of what the border aims to keep out: the "danger" of Mexico and the brutal ways in which this "danger" is restricted. This process of feeling safe because of the ability to forget the oppressive power of the border shifts both the behavior and the perception of John and Bella in a way which dissolves the violent reality of the border's jurisdiction.

⁹⁸ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, 1st ed. (Oakland, California: University of California Press 2014), 160-161.

Thus, the US-Mexico border is designated as unremarkable to expats as they straddle both countries in ways which are maximally advantageous to themselves. In the surpassing of the boundary that previously defined “us,” the Americans, as distinct from “them,” the Mexicans, currently expats create new distinct borders between themselves and others in several unique ways: some subtle and others physical. The capabilities that expats maintain to choose to ignore the purview of the border and effectively avoid the topography of domination instigated through processes of waiting creates asymmetric borders in the ephemeral moments during which time the border is physically crossed and in the blaming expats place on “others” who do not possess such capabilities to cross *la línea* with ease. Additionally, expats construct fantasies of the Mexican nation state that align with the value they seek in their lives that bring freedom to themselves; but ultimately which diminish those formulated as the “others” in their vision. “Regular Mexicans,” or those who “don’t understand,” as John asserted to me, are encapsulated in expats’ constructions of Tijuana as a new frontier. Betran, despite his efforts to fully integrate himself into what he believes to be the “real Mexico,” nonetheless distinguishes himself in his capability to maintain distance from the true lived experiences of those in the communities which he idolizes. Finally, expats like John and Bella find comfort in their highly-securitized home that replicates the physical regulation of the US-Mexico border. While all these ways in which expats create asymmetric borders are distinct, one thing remains constant: the freedom and value that expats pursue in their lives through living in Tijuana exists precisely in the restriction of “others.”

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