

# Tijuana Transa: Transa as Metaphor and Theory on the US–Mexico Border

---

JENNIFER REIMER

“Since its big bang, there exists a Tijuanalogy,” the authors of *Here Is Tijuana!* (2006) declare in the introduction to their photo-textual study of contemporary Tijuana.<sup>1</sup> Fiamma Montezemolo, an Italian anthropologist; Rene Peralta, a Mexican architect; and Heriberto Yépez, a Mexican scholar/writer, explain that *Tijuanalogía* refers to the fascination with Tijuana by governments, agencies, tourists, travel writers, artists, scholars, residents, and visitors—all of the ways and all of the different times Tijuana appears in public and private discourse. In *Here Is Tijuana!* the authors participate in the creation of and fascination with *Tijuanalogía* but with an important difference. “Tijuana,” they insist, “instead of a city, more often than not, is a transa.” The authors define *transa* as “agreement, bribery, business, intention, reflection and project. Transa refers to the illegitimate and what happens on the verge; not only of illegality but also of any non-conventional initiative. It is derived from ‘transaction.’ A transaction within another transaction—this is how Tijuana functions, Tijuana muddles everything up—Tijuana transa” (4).

Drawing on the authors’ use of the Spanish slang term for transaction, in this essay I explore the varied potential of *transa* as a new metaphor to describe the transactions out of which the US–Mexico borderlands emerges in the twenty-first century and the formal transactions the authors use to create *Here Is Tijuana!* I identify certain “*transa* techniques” in the book, which connect their reader-viewers to a practice of reading-viewing (both text and city) that contests US and Mexican stereotypes depicting Tijuana (and the borderlands writ large) as a city of vice, illegality, poverty, or a cultural wasteland. Or, as the authors state, “as hybrid, illegal, happy, Americanized, postmodern, pure myth, new cultural Mecca—and all of this is simultaneously real and imaginary.”

*Transa*, as metaphor and interpretive lens, makes *Here Is Tijuana!* different from the many other texts produced in and about Tijuana—a large number of which are

cited in the book itself. I expand the authors' usage of the term to offer a theoretical-aesthetic intervention into the existing discourse not only on Tijuana itself but also on the US–Mexico border at large and on practices of visual studies. As an extension of reflexive approaches to image studies, such as Sarah Pink's, the transa techniques used in this book help "account for how photographs interact with, cross-reference and produce meaning in relation to other elements in the text, and how these connections are given meaning by discourses and gazes that exist outside the text."<sup>2</sup> According to Gregory Stanczak, a reflexive approach to image studies argues that "images cannot, or more particularly should not, fit into the already existing methodologies" for how people "think in and about various social worlds."<sup>3</sup> Thus visual studies requires "a new grammar" and a variety of different tools. *Here Is Tijuana!* offers a provocative example of how investigations into social life are enriched by the combination of the visual with a range of other tools.<sup>4</sup> Transa offers an alternative approach to visualizing experimental cultural productions produced in and about the US–Mexico border that enliven existing conversations about the US–Mexico border as a war zone, contact zone, site of fusion versus fission, a postmodern laboratory, a *maquila* town, a dump, or any of the other metaphors that have been used by scholars, the media, and politicians to describe the US–Mexico borderlands, while also engaging a central question in visual studies research: "How are aesthetic assumptions or truths bound up in the process of image making, selecting, and reading?"<sup>5</sup>

Through transa techniques that include textual-visual collage, pastiche, juxtaposition, and sampling, *Here Is Tijuana!* documents and visualizes a series of geopolitical and cultural phenomena encountered in Tijuana, such as free trade, uneven urban development, border crossings and migration, labor struggles, and urban and traditional art practices. These are the familiar stories of the US–Mexico border that the authors retell, using transa as metaphor and aesthetic to link Tijuana to both transnational and national structures, processes, and motivations of Mexico and the United States. These transactions tell stories about how we encounter and represent the US–Mexico borderlands through culture. Through transa techniques, the authors depict a brutal yet thriving border city—a city (re)crossed by transboundary flows of people, goods, services, and capital. The book forces reader-viewers into its transas to offer new ways of "reading" or "seeing" the US–Mexico border (through Tijuana) that testify to the contradictory power of the US–Mexico border to transgress—and even render obsolete—national boundaries, while also heightening the perceived power and presence of states and cohesive national identities.<sup>6</sup> As Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez has written, "a city like Tijuana, an outpost in the middle world, delights not in the totalizing gaze of a singular reading but rather in the multiple answers it presents to questions posed by those who practice it."<sup>7</sup>

As a formal technique, transa describes the book's composition: a coffee table-sized production of 190 collaged pages of photographs, quoted material (the textual "sound bite" or "sample"), statistics, interviews, testimony (*testimonio*), demographic

data, and internet postings. Not quite a traditional photo essay but dominated by visual material and the complex relationships between text and image, *Here Is Tijuana!* occupies the borderlands between genres and discourses. Traditional photo essays have been defined as statements about human affairs that endeavor to represent reality.<sup>8</sup> However, scholars such as Pink argue that “subjectivity cannot really be avoided” in any constructed discourse.<sup>9</sup> According to Pink, a photo essay isn’t necessarily comprised “solely [of] photographs, but an essay (book, article or other text) that is composed predominantly of photographs,” which may also include various textual elements, and which raises questions about “what written words can express that photographs cannot, and vice versa” (134). In negotiating between the visual and the textual, the “real” and the intangible, photo essays demonstrate how “visible elements of experience will be given different meanings as different people use their own subjective knowledge to interpret them” (24).

The experimental photo essay may indeed be emerging as a form uniquely suited to representing transnational spaces and identities. A recent work by Jill Anderson and Nin Solis documents the lives of undocumented youth who have returned to Mexico using similar techniques. In *Los Otros Dreamers* (2014), Anderson and Solis collected twenty-six *testimonios* from undocumented youth living in Mexico and elsewhere. The *testimonios* are complemented by a series of photographs: portraits of each contributor, interior shots of their homes, and exterior shots of the landscapes they inhabit. The work combines art and social justice in a community-driven project aimed towards giving voice to the thousands of lives rendered voiceless by border militarization and binational processes of state security. Like the authors of *Here Is Tijuana!*, Anderson and Solis are “telling a story in words in images, . . . asking questions and weaving narratives within narratives.”<sup>10</sup> The combination of first-person narratives and photographs not only “give a face and place” to experiences that may seem “inconsequential” to nonmigrant citizens, they also ask reader-viewers to “reflect upon the private architecture of immigration between Mexico and the US.” In ways similar to and different from *Here Is Tijuana!*, the authors “offer multiple voices in multiple registers in order to better understand life experiences that can never be completely captured by a theory.”

*Los Otros Dreamers* reinforces *Here Is Tijuana!*’s claim that life in the borderlands, or lives directly shaped by the social, economic, and political structures of North American transnationalism, cannot be represented with a singular voice, a singular theory, or a singular art practice. Both texts contend that only unique combinations of voice, text, and image can render the complex social identities and social realities of transnationalism. However, *Here Is Tijuana!* pushes this theoretical-aesthetic project further with its more overtly experimental composition. The photographs included in *Los Otros Dreamers* are constitutive elements of the first-person *testimonios* and aren’t necessarily calling attention to their constructed nature, as do the visual (and textual) elements of *Here Is Tijuana!* Ultimately, *Here Is Tijuana!* invites a more reflexive approach to the reading-viewing process that calls into

question the nature of reality and representation itself, allowing reader-viewers to confront and question their own subjective interpretative lenses. Nonetheless, both texts convincingly document the need for alternate forms of borderlands representation that are “transa-national,” “transa-genre,” multivocal, and multi-perspectival.

*Here Is Tijuana!*’s innovative combinations of text and image bring multivocality and nonhierarchical reading-viewing practices to the traditional text and image, a technique I identify as a *transa aesthetic* in order to emphasize the how specific material realities of Tijuana and the US–Mexico borderlands always already map Tijuana into existence. Transactions within transactions. The authors “decided the book would have to be a transaction of disciplines and disagreements, a transaction between the many discourses about Tijuana (statistical, literary, academic, popular etc.) and its rich visual cultural [sic].”<sup>11</sup> One of the discourses the book indirectly references is Néstor García Canclini’s *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1995). In *Hybrid Cultures*, Canclini effectively illuminates how the cultures of the US–Mexico borderlands reflect the larger forces of conflict, change, resistance, and continuity in Latin America.<sup>12</sup> *Here Is Tijuana!* complicates and advances Canclini’s work by documenting what remains specific to the city itself, in spite of (or because of) its national *and* transnational influences, and also by reminding us that Tijuana, as a transa, cannot be abstracted into a “laboratory of postmodernity.”<sup>13</sup> Significantly, *Here Is Tijuana!* uses experimental aesthetic techniques in the composition of the text itself to offer visual-textual transas that not only reflexively mirror the juxtapositions and multiplicity of the city itself (and, I would argue, the borderlands) but also more effectively represent the specific forces at work in our encounters with the US–Mexico border, by drawing readers and viewers into a web of transas that force us to confront our own expectations about how we represent these encounters in culture. In particular, by inviting reader-viewers into new ways of reading-viewing, *Here Is Tijuana!* dramatically visualizes how images are made meaningful through a range of other discourses.<sup>14</sup>

The journey through the book’s three sections—“Avatars,” “Desires,” and “Permutations”—shows us Tijuana’s historical and contemporary relationship to the global coloniality of power.<sup>15</sup> That the city is seen as a “transfrontier metropolis,”<sup>16</sup> *maquila* town, dump, and hedonistic tourist attraction always already influences how we imagine and encounter Tijuana. The book’s formal structure transacts between sites of “reality” (social, political, economic) and how we encounter these sites through culture. “Avatars” depicts the multiple forms of border movement—legal and illegal immigration, tourism, working, shopping—and the mutable identities these activities engender, while “Desires” explores Tijuana’s sex industry, booming music scene, and other cultural performances.<sup>17</sup> “Permutations” examines the unequal architecture of change versus decay (or history versus present) in a city of *maquilas* (assembly plants), police brutality, commercialization, poverty, and uneven development. Ultimately, the book challenges us to become part of the transa process

itself, as our own expectations, experiences, and knowledges transact between, within, and against the transas captured in its pages. As part of a reflexive visual-narrative practice, the book has the potential to work outside the context of this particular text to suggest a more engaged and complex way of encountering experimental cultural texts in and about the US–Mexico border in general.

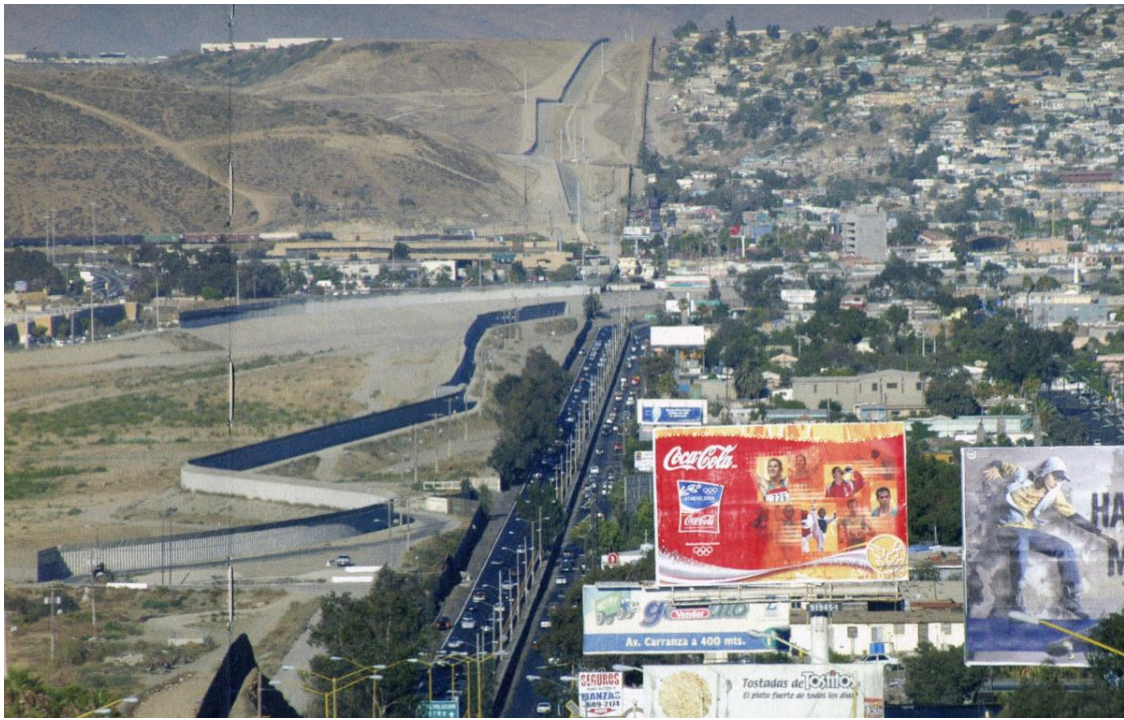


Figure 1. Photograph by Alfonso Caraveo. Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 8–9.

“Avatars” opens with a two-page photographic spread of the San Diego–Tijuana border (see Figure 1).<sup>18</sup> On the left, the stark military outpost of San Diego contrasts with the brown hills of tightly packed houses and billboards on the Tijuana side on the right. Looming in the foreground is a red Coca-Cola billboard. The red of the billboard stands out against the drab brownish-grey of the Baja California landscape. Quoted text from different sources border the photo on the left side of the page. The contrast represents the tendency of urban spaces to reflect the underlying values and means attached to space. “Space,” as Nina Glick Schiller tells us, “is not a product of nature but is socially delimited by the intersections and overlays of institutions of family, economy, school, culture, and politics.”<sup>19</sup> Even in spaces of high interdependence, such as the border, “neighboring cities reflect the pull of national politics and culture, which generate distinct built environments and spatial structures.”<sup>20</sup> In this case, the photo dramatizes a major difference in spatial organization along the San Diego–Tijuana border: wealthier Tijuana residents live downtown,

just meters from the international boundary, while, in San Diego, the wealthy live away from the border (133). The relatively empty space on the San Diego side of the border, marked by high fences and official-looking compounds, reflects the US's emphasis on distance, security, and surveillance, while the bustling highway, middle-class homes, and colorful billboards on the Mexican side reflect commerce, activity, and movement. The Coca-Cola billboard pulls the viewer's gaze to the lower right-hand corner of the image. Although not quite the "post-apocalyptic landscape wasted by neo-liberalism" that the quote from scholar Jesse Lerner on the page describes, the advertisement reflects the overwhelming power of the market to shape space along the border. The lack of similar advertisements on the United States side reinforces Herzog's observation of the "highly uneven" nature of economic space in San Diego-Tijuana, where Tijuana's ties to commercial processes in California are much stronger than San Diego's (formal) commercial ties to Tijuana (185). As an "establishing shot" for the "Avatars" section of the book, the photographer uses the international boundary to divide the image neatly in half, reinforcing the image's message of division and difference. Yet the authors have arranged the layout on the page so that the book's spine creates another line of separation across the far left of the image (on the US side). By allowing the photograph to bleed across the gutter, the page layout deemphasizes the international border's overly neat separation of spaces, challenging and reinterpreting the photographer's gaze while also calling attention to the constructed nature of the page itself and the ways in which the authors are manipulating space as a transa technique.

Throughout the book, the authors invite a reevaluation of the overly simplistic representations of Tijuana, the US-Mexico border, and the way both are encountered in culture as an (unequal) synthesis of two separate nations or two separate cultures. Transa invokes the unequal transactions that refuse synthesis as a way of representing the city and, I would argue, the US-Mexico borderlands itself. In their book, the authors use transa techniques to frustrate readers with contradictory research, with images and data that celebrate and condemn, sometimes simultaneously, and by designing the layout of each page differently to draw readers into the book so that it becomes difficult to simply flip through or skim over its pages. The interplay between the visual and the textual is important here. The design and structure of each page demonstrates, as Pink has argued, how photographs may be interpreted in relation to written text but not illustrated by it or explicitly captioned by it.<sup>21</sup> This is a transa technique that carries over into other cultural productions about the US-Mexico border, which all too easily become oversimplified or overly complex. Thus the authors ask us to think carefully about not only how the border itself can become an avatar for US-Mexico relations but who or what we fashion into avatars for the border.

"Avatars" continues by complicating one-sided notions of "the immigrant." *Here Is Tijuana!* portrays Tijuana as racially diverse: a destination for thousands of immigrants from Central America and interior Mexico who use Tijuana as their staging area for crossing into the United States and who often end up as permanent city

residents. In this section, the authors transact between competing representations of Tijuana that portray the city as more racially and ethnically homogenous than it actually is. As readers, we are pulled into this discussion—a transa technique—that forces us to confront how our own ideas about Tijuana’s demographics have been influenced by prevailing discourses. The authors cite data from the National Institute of Migration in Baja California that state that, within the first years of the twenty-first century, the majority of undocumented foreigners detained in Tijuana were from Guatemala. Brazil took second place.<sup>22</sup> On the same page, data from the Casa del Migrante (2004) tell us that Tijuana has received 130,000 migrants between 1987–2004 from other parts of Mexico and Central America. Immigration scholars have documented dramatic increases in immigration from Central America to Mexico and the United States since the 1980s, when political unrest and civil wars created a massive influx of refugees fleeing the violence and poor conditions in their homelands.<sup>23</sup> Corresponding “pull” factors include employment opportunities in the *maquiladora* industry along the border and in the informal economy of US border states and cities.<sup>24</sup>

Yet Tijuana’s racial and ethnic diversity extends both more globally and locally. One of the “avatars” this section of the book engages and then rejects is the poor Mexican migrant, either living in squalor in Tijuana or just waiting for their chance to cross to the United States. Page 21 is dominated by a half-page black-and-white photograph of the cars waiting to cross over the border and a man selling shaved ice to those who are waiting.<sup>25</sup> A quote below from the Chief Police for Tourism discusses the costs of crossing illegally in the trunk of a car. This page reinforces dominant narratives about “the Tijuana experience” or “the illegal immigrant.” Yet the authors use the transa technique of juxtaposition and collage to complicate this image on the previous page, which shows photographs that emphasize the diversity of the city (20). A quote refers to the “unprecedented mixing” along the border, where “there are more Chinese restaurants in Tijuana than any other city in México.”<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere in the section, the authors quote a street vendor on Revolution Avenue who mixes English and Japanese when addressing his clients: “Chicken [she can] try it. And if you want, I can hara kiri [the] price.”<sup>27</sup> Not only does the vendor racialize his clients (two Asian women<sup>28</sup>) as foreigners who don’t understand English, he also assumes they are Japanese, reflecting the common stereotype of the ubiquitous “Japanese tourist.” By drawing attention to the global population of the city, *Here Is Tijuana!* undermines popular representations of Tijuana as a city-sized slum full of poor Mexicans. Instead Tijuana is represented as a transa nexus in a larger historical and contemporary circuit of transnational and global movements and processes—“a city that is actively shaping its identity on the rocky ground between culture as global critique and culture as global capital, and between globalization’s perils and its tempting, taunting promises.”<sup>29</sup> Again, the idea of the border city as a transa nexus, as opposed to a place of security, surveillance, crime, and illegality, offers a potentially new understanding of other border cities along the US–Mexico border and a new way of reading their cultural representations. For example, how could a transa reading better illuminate the



possibilities and limitations of Gregory Nava's 2006 film *Bordertown*, starring two actors who have themselves become global "avatars" for Latino/a cultures—Jennifer Lopez and Antonio Banderas—and which takes places (unofficially) in El Paso–Ciudad Juárez?

"Avatars" continues to draw readers into Tijuana as *transa*, sometimes forcing reader-viewers into emotional transactions with themselves through the viewing of particularly haunting, sobering, or explicit images that create feelings of guilt, shame, pleasure, or discomfort. In one of the book's most sobering and ironic photographs, a young woman sits on the sidewalk with a baby cradled in a shawl around her neck and a plastic cup in her hand (see Figure 2). She looks in consternation away from the photographer, down the street. Her baby leans its head back in her arms, its gaze extended in the opposite direction of the mother. Both are bundled as if against the cold. The image visualizes statistics from the online newspaper *Frontera* on the page: "From 1996 to 2004, the number of women migrants who arrive at this border in search of a better life has grown by more than 400%. The majority of them are mothers between 20–30 years of age. Eight of each ten have completed only the sixth grade."<sup>30</sup>



Figure 2. Photograph by África Arreola. Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 41.



The direction of the mother's gaze draws the viewer's attention to a bold sign hanging in the window of the shop behind her, which advertises, in English, "WE NOW HAVE THE / LOW WAIST CUT JEANS / ASK FOR THEM!!" The photo suggests several things: the hegemonic influence of US culture as evidenced by the use of English and the jeans (a classic US product now manufactured outside of the country); the way fashion trends market women as sexually desirable bodies; and the implication that such fashion trends—or at least these jeans—are a relatively new commodity in the city. The photograph emphasizes the distance between the woman and child, begging for coins on the street, and the potential consumer with the money to buy jeans. The provocative implication of women in "low waist cut jeans" contrasts uncomfortably with the woman in the picture, whose sexuality has ceased to be a fashion statement and is embodied in the child cradled against her body. The unease the photograph produces in reader-viewers is twofold: the emphasis on consumers and commodities reminds reader-viewers that the book they are reading is itself a consumer item, and that the book's readers are more likely to identify with the potential shopper than with the woman in the photograph. This creates tension in the reading-viewing process that works not negatively to infuse readers with guilt but instead to encourage a more engaged and complicated dialogue with the material on the page. It is, in essence, a transa technique to draw readers into complex transactions between subject position and the reading process, between the consumer and commodity, and between who has the power to buy, to read, to view, and who doesn't. This is a productive tension that could enrich other dialogues in US–Mexico borderlands studies about who has the power to consume (or read) and who doesn't. Transa, as metaphor and methodology, illuminates how often the most interesting and complex cultural productions to emerge from the US–Mexico borderlands (books like Canclini's, for example, or even the excellent, insightful scholarship on the popular B-movie *Machete*) are consumed by those who have the power of time, money, social status, and education.

The photograph also reflects one of the largely unacknowledged uncomfortable truths about increasing the availability of goods and services across borders: these policies have failed to improve the lives of non-elites and have actually worsened conditions in Mexico. Jeff Faux argues that, as a result of privatization policies and the opening of Mexico's economy, "the [Mexican] poverty rate rose from 45.6 percent in 1994 to 50.3 percent in 2000. The share of Mexicans in extreme poverty, defined as people who cannot maintain the bare minimum of nutrition needed to remain healthy, rose from 27.9 to 31.9 percent."<sup>31</sup> Faux demonstrates how neoliberalism rewards a global class of wealthy and elite capitalists and punishes the poor, disenfranchised, and working classes. Thus, while "Avatars" celebrates and claims Tijuana's diversity, the suggestive juxtaposition of text and image—as transa—reminds readers of its conflictive context and the very disastrous effects global restructuring has had on America's (North and South) most abject peoples.

One tension the book transacts with is the need to diversify and complicate our understanding of the kinds of movements that occur at the border (and who does the moving) while never losing sight of the fundamental inequalities and asymmetries between Mexico and the United States. “Avatars” devotes several pages to border crossings often overlooked: working, shopping, and traveling. The photos represent a diverse array of crossings, and the contradictions embedded in them, to contest assumptions about cross-border movement that characterize it solely as a steady stream of “illegal aliens.” These collaged pages force reader-viewers to acknowledge that the movement of people in Tijuana cannot be separated from the economic motivations and transactions of the various travelers and crossers.

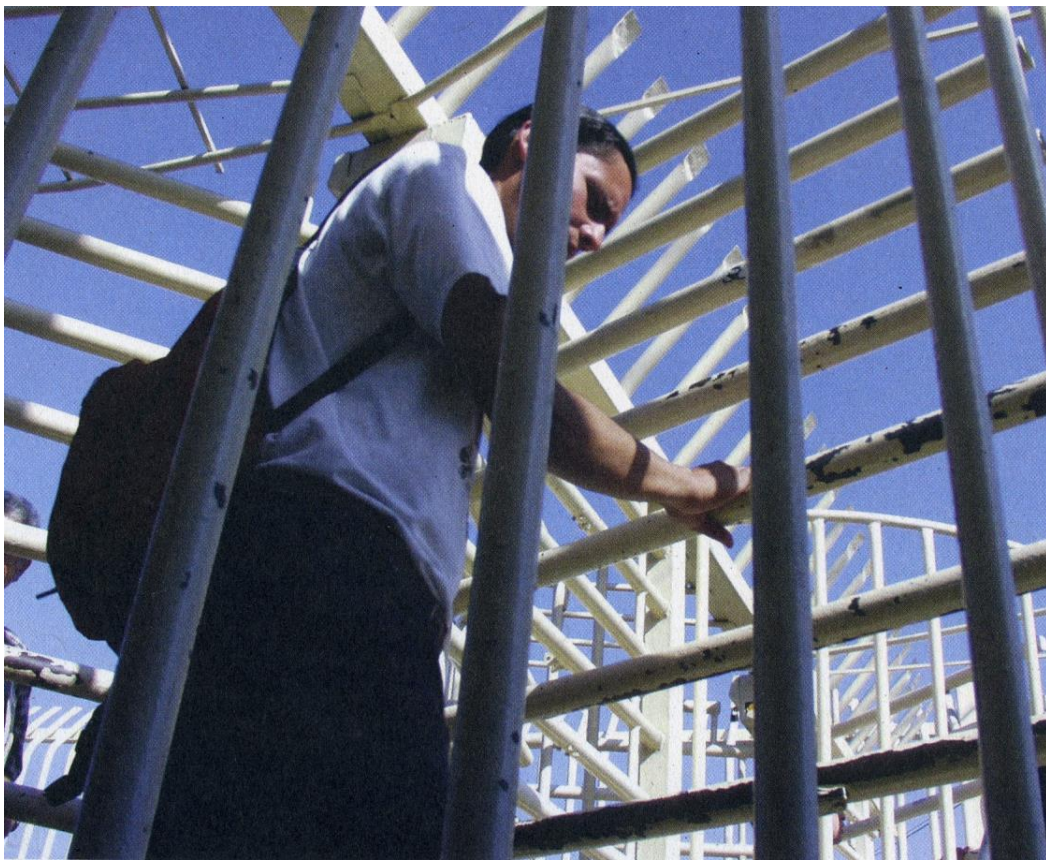


Figure 3. Photograph by Alfonso Caraveo. Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 15.

A large color photo dominates page 15 (see Figure 3). Shot from ground level, the photo captures a man with a backpack pushing through the gated turnstile of the international pedestrian crossing point. The turnstile has been fitted into a long white metal fence. The photographer’s gaze looks up through a maze of crisscrossing bars and lines, emphasizing containment, security, claustrophobia, and regulation. The

photo's composition makes reader-viewers feel as if they are looking out through a barred window into a barred and gated world. In contrast, the man with his furrowed brow is captured in the midst of movement—pushing through, possibly on his way to work, to shop, or to visit family or friends. A quote above the photo reminds us that, among the daily “population movements, the best known and perhaps the most important is that of the commuters, who are persons whose residence is in one country but who move, sometimes every day, to the neighboring country to work.”<sup>32</sup> Herzog claims such labor flows are largely ignored because of the overwhelming attention given to undocumented workers. But, he claims, such ““frontier workers’ represent an important component of US–Mexico transfrontier social geography. They reflect a regionalized response to the social context of production in the border zone: lower standards of living south of the border, and greater availability of jobs at higher wages to the north.”<sup>33</sup>



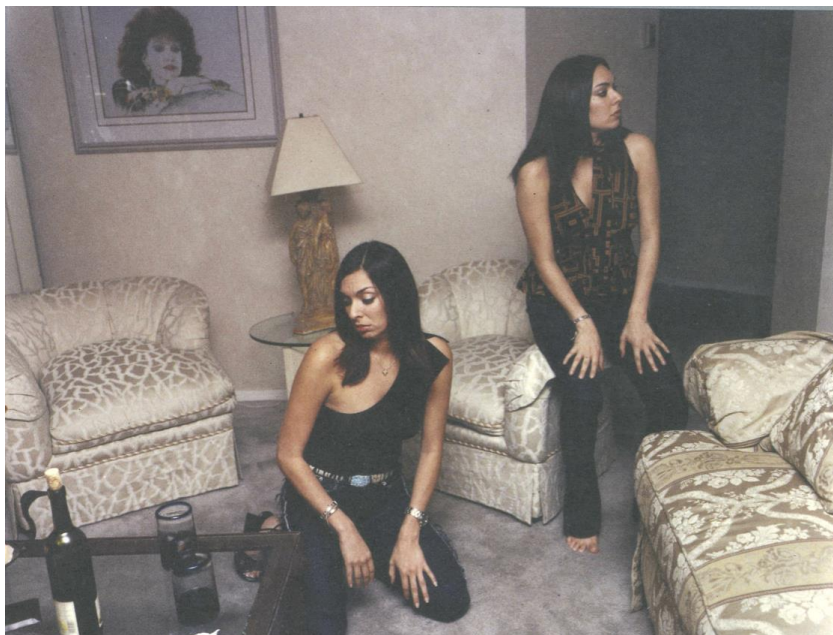
Figure 4. Photograph by Larry Herzog. Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 17.

Theories of transnational traffic, cross-border networks, and transnational urban planning have dominated recent US scholarship on Tijuana, according to Kun and Montezemolo.<sup>34</sup> While Herzog and others have focused on the shared traffic and transnational movements of people, Kun and Montezemolo “worry” about how similar this discourse is to the discourse used by the *maquiladora* industry in celebrating the “Tijuana–San Diego megaregion,” “where national edges function more as market openings and less as state partitions” (12). Such critical interventions in popular urban-planning scholarship on Tijuana are made visible in *Here Is Tijuana!* as well. The following pages continue with a series of shots of the vehicle crossing point (see Figure 4). These shots, taken at a high angle looking down at the border, suggest the view from planes, helicopters, or other vehicles of state surveillance—partitioning and containment instead of transboundary flows. Yet the viewers can also see the east–west running pedestrian arches, fences, and immigration checkpoints, penetrated by the north–south flows of cars in heavy traffic. Once again, the book’s



visual elements dramatize the clash (*choque*) of opposing forces as a *transa*, in this case security and containment versus movement and flow.<sup>35</sup> Through the use of *transa* technique, reader-viewers begin to question not only the nature of border crossing in San Diego–Tijuana but how, when, why, and who crosses the border in general.

Halfway through this first section we have a two-page, full-color photo spread of domestic scenes, as if to remind us, as Peggy Levitt says, “the economic initiatives, political activities, and sociocultural enterprises they [individual actors] engage in are powerfully shaped by the social fields in which they occur.”<sup>36</sup> These scenes of people at the dinner table (where Coca-Cola features prominently), and of two women artistically posed in a comfortable-looking living room, drinking wine (see Figure 5), are the first photos that take the viewer away from dizzying cityscapes filled with people moving through public spaces and into the interior, domestic, and private spaces of Tijuana. These photos are important as they balance the book’s bleaker representations of public life with cozier portraits of everyday lives and domestic rituals. These photos introduce a discourse of class status in order to reflect the multiple social classes occupied by Tijuana’s residents and to complicate the stereotype of pervasive poverty. Also the repeated image of Coca-Cola, as a *transa* collage technique, recalls the earlier image of the Coca-Cola billboard in the minds of reader-viewers, forcing a comparison between the domestic interiors and the so-called postapocalyptic landscape introduced earlier. Through visual repetition, a *transa* aesthetic, reader-viewers become part of the book’s cycling *transas* themselves, creating connections and disconnections that continually interrupt and inform the reading-viewing process. The photograph’s composition visually enacts tension and disruption. The two women, while centered in the frame, are facing and looking away from each other, pulling the viewer’s gaze in opposite directions simultaneously.



*Figure 5.*  
Photograph by  
Ivonne Venegas.  
Reproduced by  
permission from  
Montezemolo,  
Peralta, and Yépez,  
*Here Is Tijuana!*, 43.

The photos also force a comparison between the focus on boundary crossing and tourism, and more local scenes of engagement. Here, photos of tourists and fences give way to images of hospitals, school children, and local *loncherías*. As a transa technique, the book doesn't allow us to linger long in the comfortable scenes of the domestic. The section ends where it began, with images of movements. In the final pages of "Avatars," the authors show us city buses, taxis, a bus terminal, and the international airport, where families are greeting or saying goodbye to one another at the terminal. These images render a bustling urban space where residents are constantly on the move, in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons, from transas to transas.

"Avatars" refers to how mutable identities become embodied and represented in virtual reality. By invoking this process, *Here Is Tijuana!*'s "Avatars" portrays Tijuana—and the US–Mexico borderlands—as a site of multiple realities, some virtual and some painfully, violently real, as well as how certain images, ideas, forms, and peoples become avatars for Tijuana and the international border within these many spaces. Yet *Here Is Tijuana!* does more than simply provide a lens through which to view Tijuana's many avatars. By grounding representations in material realities and by calling attention to how various avatars themselves are constructed through specific ideologies (of racism and inequality or aesthetics, for example), the book presents this transa technique to battle the disembodiment that often occurs when something is translated into virtual reality. While offering up its own carefully chosen selection of avatars and, to some extent, even offering Tijuana itself as an avatar for the US–Mexico border at large, the authors remain deeply ambivalent and wary of losing sight of the constructed nature of these choices. In the slippery way that virtual avatars can traverse the borders of our real and virtual worlds, avatars are also tricky transas that blur boundaries between who is transacting and what is being transacted. Within this complex system of representation, it's easy to see how commodities can gain agency and certain agents become commodities on the border—a transa that becomes embodied in the lush, erotic, and kinetic photography in "Desires."

"Desires" begins with a historical vignette of Tijuana as a vice destination for US tourists seeking relief from the strict laws of Prohibition but goes on to humanize Tijuana's female sex workers through the use of testimony as transa technique. The section highlights a series of quotes from historian David Piñera Ramírez: "During the 1920s increasing numbers of bars, night centers, liquor dispensaries, and casinos appeared not only in Tijuana but all along the border."<sup>37</sup> Heriberto Yépez, Humberto Félix Berumen, Lawrence Herzog, and Joseph Nevins have also commented on Tijuana's enormous growth during US Prohibition.<sup>38</sup> Berumen writes, "During the 1920s, the panorama that established the archetype of Tijuana as the city of vice par excellence is unmistakable: dozens of cantinas ready to sate the thirst of the refugees of the Ley Seca, caravans of automobiles crossing the border each day to lose themselves in the complicity of the night."<sup>39</sup> Gangsters from both sides of the border controlled the city in the early twentieth century, a deadly foreshadowing of the



*leyenda negra* (black legend) and drug cartel/narcos domination in the early twenty-first century.<sup>40</sup>

While Prohibition was eventually repealed, and hard economic times in the US in the 1930s and 1940s had a negative impact on Tijuana's booze and vice industry, its reputation remained vibrant, and, over time, Tijuana reestablished itself as a decadent tourist "playground." Sex, drugs, and rock and roll have earned Tijuana the title of "Happiest City in the Republic," according to more quoted material from *Frontera* (2004).<sup>41</sup> This title was satirized in an episode of *The Simpsons*, when Krusty the Clown says, "Tijuana is the happiest place on earth," which is cited later in *Here Is Tijuana!* and juxtaposed with a photograph of a border installation art piece consisting of painted coffins nailed to the border fence and labeled with a year and the corresponding number of crossing-related deaths (see Figure 8). Krusty references the well-known slogan for Disneyland as "The Happiest Place on Earth," suggesting that Tijuana has become a demonic simulacrum of Disneyland's intoxicating mix of pleasure, patriotism, nostalgia, empire, and consumerism. And the intentionally ironic juxtaposition of quote and image works as transa strategy to criticize Tijuana's global reputation as a pleasure site.

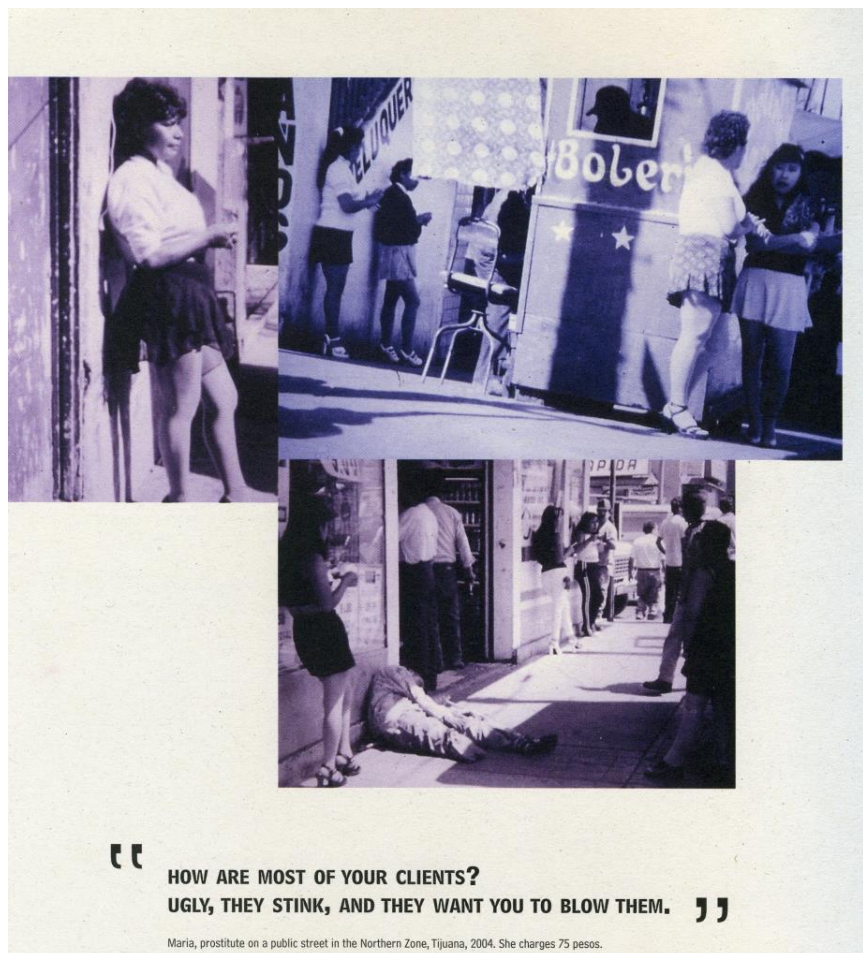


Figure 6.  
Photograph by  
Javier Hernández.  
Reproduced by  
permission from  
Montezemolo,  
Peralta, and  
Yépez, *Here Is  
Tijuana!*, 82.

Figure 6 contains photos of female sex workers on the streets.<sup>42</sup> The women are identifiable as sex workers by their short skirts and high-heeled shoes and the large, bolded excerpt from an interview with María that appears below in English: “How are most of your clients? Ugly, they stink and they want you to blow them.”<sup>43</sup> On their own, the photographs might invoke a realist approach—a documentary style to show people and social worlds “as they really are”—but, collaged together and with textual excerpts, the effect is much more reflexive. The images are made meaningful through their relationships to each other and to the text, as well as through the multiple gazes and interpretations of the reader-viewer. In one photo, a woman leans against a storefront and next to her a man is slumped over on the ground, passed out. As he is positioned directly above the quoted text, the book encourages reader-viewers to connect this man with the ugly, stinking, blowjob-seeking customers that María describes. Included in this section is a “price list” taken from the internet that lists the going rate of all kinds of sexual services, from a \$20 “trick,” to \$500 “vaginal sex with a ‘Cherry Girl’” (85).

If the statistics and internet content threaten to objectify or reduce these women, “Desires” uses interviews from sex workers juxtaposed with the objectionable internet content to give them a voice and depict them as sophisticated social actors making conscious decisions in a complex world where women’s choices are often limited. These interviews are *transa* techniques because they force reader-viewers into a confrontation of their own expectations about what kind of women become prostitutes, transacting among the stories we’ve been told (or experienced), the stories the book offers, the photographs, and the textual “clips” on the page. As *transas*, the life stories reproduced here also recall another form of life writing that has become associated with Latin America in particular, as well as other non-Western traditions—the *testimonio*.<sup>44</sup> Although *testimonio* as a genre, particularly in its Latin American form, has been defined by some scholars such as John Beverley as novel-length, others scholars such as Linda J. Craft argue for greater variation within the form: “The form of testimony may vary, adopting narrative discourses such as autobiography, historical novel, interview, photographs, prison memoirs, diary, chronicle, letter, newspaper article, anthropological or social science documentary; it can be fiction or nonfiction.”<sup>45</sup> I argue that the interviews included in *Here Is Tijuana!* not only share some similar characteristics with the *testimonio* narrative form but also contribute to expanding the form as *transa*. The sex workers included here speak (through their interlocutors) from conditions of subalternity that would normally deny or limit their voices in the public sphere. As René Jara has written, *testimonio* is “an ‘emergency’ narrative—involving a problem of repression, poverty, marginality, exploitation, or simply survival that is implicated in the act of narration itself.”<sup>46</sup> As witnesses to subalternity, *testimonio* is metonymic: “Each individual *testimonio* evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences” (573).

In *Here Is Tijuana!*, the interviews with María and Nirvana function similarly—not only do their voices speak back against their social erasure, they become

representative of female sex workers in Tijuana more broadly. For instance, Nirvana is a twenty-one-year old prostitute from Acapulco: “She’s been in Tijuana for two months. . . . She doesn’t know the city but says that she has been treated well. She says that all her girlfriends are from Mexico City, Acapulco, Oaxaca, Guadalajara. None from Tijuana.”<sup>47</sup> How does Nirvana deal with the gritty realities of her job? She visits the doctor for exams and STD tests every fifteen days. Her motto: “With soap and water you erase the footprints of any idiot.” Nirvana’s words portray her not as a victim of sexual exploitation but as a confident and savvy—even humorous—woman who has strategies for survival. The authors of *Here Is Tijuana!* use *testimonio* as *transa* by combining interviews with prostitutes with photographs of sex workers, in addition to textual material taken from the internet, which advertises or explains (see the advice quotes from [worldsexguide.org](http://worldsexguide.org) on page 86) sexual services in Tijuana. *Testimonio* becomes both “thicker” and louder, taking on a polyphonic quality that invokes not only the voices of the witness and the interlocutor but also the exploiter and the customer (or potential exploiter and customer). The juxtaposition of the textual with the visual broadens the *testimonio* across sensory, cognitive, and aesthetic platforms, speaking to the necessity of using multiple forms to capture the complexity of these women’s experiences and, indeed, of “desire” itself in Tijuana. *Testimonio* as *transa* technique draws us into a larger, more multifaceted narrative about sex work, not only in Tijuana but also in other areas along the US–Mexico borderlands, such as El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, which also have historic reputations as sexual playgrounds for (mainly gringo) tourists.

As several studies suggest, most female sex workers in Tijuana have *chosen* sex work as a lucrative alternative to other kinds of jobs and as a way to escape a low quality of life.<sup>48</sup> The *testimonios* from the book reinforce and bring to life important research on sex work along the US–Mexico border. Common reasons female sex workers say they enter their profession include the desire to earn enough money to support their children and families, buy a house, pay for schooling, and/or otherwise advance themselves economically. The women quoted in interviews for *Here Is Tijuana!* testify to the same motivations for pursuing sex work. As Castillo, Gómez, and Delgado, and Katsulis have shown, many female sex workers turn to sex work to escape the brutal working conditions of the *maquiladora*, where unionizing is prohibited or controlled by the company and women are routinely sexually harassed by male supervisors.<sup>49</sup> In such a patriarchal and male-dominated system where women have few choices, sex work, according to testimonies from women in the book and in scholarly studies, represents an alternative choice in which they can make (more) money for doing things they already had to do at their old jobs. In their new professions, women have more flexibility with their schedules, can set their own hours, and, in the case of legally registered sex workers, are eligible for a variety of benefits, including free health care and regular STI tests.<sup>50</sup> *Here Is Tijuana!* makes this story visible to readers through their *transa* representation of female sex workers and “audible” to reader-viewers through the memorable voices of women like María and

Nirvana in ways that the scholarly research cannot. Thus the *testimonio* as *transa* can travel outside the limits of Tijuana to encourage a reevaluation of stereotypes about female sex work in and along the greater US–Mexico borderlands.



Figure 7. Photograph by Alfonso Caraveo. Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 88.

On the next page, one of the most disturbing images in the entire book takes up half the page: the body of a woman curled into a fetal position on the street (see Figure 7). Her back is to the camera, but we can see that her pants are down around her thighs and her dirty buttocks are exposed, with only twisted underwear covering her exposed backside. She is wearing a t-shirt with “MEXICO” in large capital letters on the back. Above, a quote from Humberto Félix Berumen claims that “those with economic power . . . have assumed the task of getting rid of the negative image of Tijuana, so they can increase the amount of foreign investment.”<sup>51</sup> The photo protests the attempts by economic and political elites to disavow uncomfortable realities, the same realities that are often created or exacerbated by foreign investment and subsequent economic and social restructuring. As Kun and Montezemolo point out, in a global city like Tijuana, globalization’s “uneven, precarious, and often destructive nature” reveals itself. And while globalization “might produce new markets and new consumers as neoliberal victories,” it also produces “a border citizenship that is unstable and fragile and a combustive urban infrastructure defined by informal, or ‘shadow,’ economies (including drug and human trafficking) as much as by the formal flows of global industry.”<sup>52</sup> The way the page draws reader-viewers into a *transa*



between text and photo, with a visual emphasis on the word “MEXICO” spelled out across the woman’s half-naked back is a brutal indictment of a country that is at times unwilling to recognize and confront its problems and that continues to reject or ignore its most abject citizens. *Here Is Tijuana!* does the work for them, exposing the ugly consequences of inequality, the persistent social problems that plague the residents of global border cities, and the ways in which elites from both sides of the border contribute to ongoing struggles for survival.

The remaining pages of “Desire” explode with full-page color spreads of a variety of cultural activities: ballet, wrestling, symphonies, bullfights, community dance projects, marathons, and moviegoing. Such images portray cultural alternatives to the illicit party scene, reminding viewers that Tijuana has much more to offer than prostitutes, bars, and black markets.<sup>53</sup>

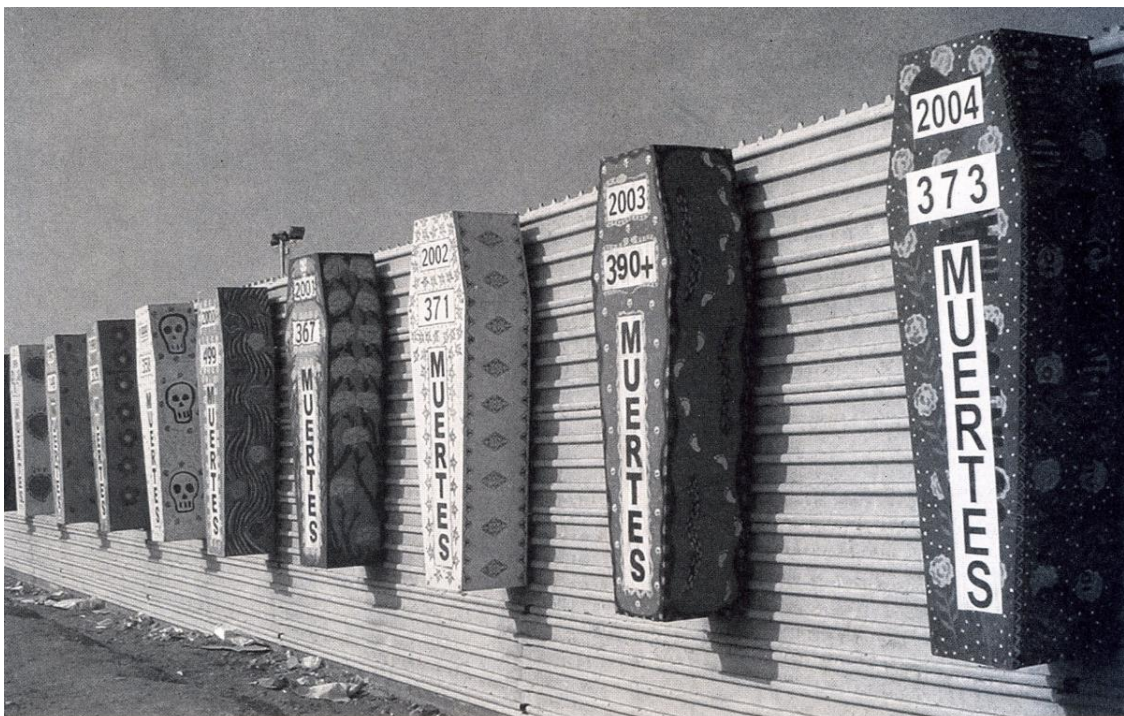


Figure 8. Photograph by Tarek Elhaik. Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 127.

The section’s final page contains a black-and-white photo of a piece of border installation art: painted coffins nailed to the border fence and labeled with a year and the corresponding number of “Muertes” (deaths) as the result of attempted border crossings (see Figure 8). The blatant use of text and image in this photograph recalls a variety of other moments in the book thus far: the previous photograph of the exposed woman in the “MEXICO” t-shirt, the images of prostitution that accompany the internet postings about the availability of sexual services in Tijuana, or even the



giant Coca-Cola billboard juxtaposed against the border geography in the book's opening pages. As transa technique, the authors continue to demonstrate the power of juxtaposing image with text in ways that invite reader-viewers into reflexive relationships between and across image and text. This haunting photograph bears witness to Joseph Nevins's observation: "In the context of increasing boundary enforcement since 1994, the number of migrant deaths has increased notably."<sup>54</sup> In Southern California alone, the number of crossing-related deaths, as the result of Operation Gatekeeper, reached an alarming 500, up from 23 in 1994. According Manuel Rueda of ABC News, by 1998, the total number of crossing-related deaths was down to 263, but, by 2012, the number had risen again to 477 deaths, despite increased security measures and policing efforts in the wake of 9/11.<sup>55</sup> The horizontal shot emphasizes a vanishing line of coffins, off into the infinity of left-hand space. The somber black-and-white tone of the photo, combined with the perspective that emphasizes the serial and seemingly never-ending accumulation of deaths, properly contextualizes the section's "desires" within their lethal consequences. While the authors certainly celebrate the desires that create cultural vibrancy—for instance, the many photographs depicting Tijuana's dynamic music scene—and reflect the desires that unite us as humans—the need to belong to communities, to express ourselves creatively, to experience the world metaphorically and physically—the choice to end the section with this particular photograph is a transa that deliberately emphasizes the costs of happiness in Tijuana. This is the "kidnapped city" that Kun describes in his essay in *Tijuana Dreaming*: "a border metropolis . . . where poverty grows daily on hillsides made of recycled cardboard," where "evil is banal; death and killing carry no moral rebuke, no ethical doubt, no human problem."<sup>56</sup> It also emphasizes the potential of art as a socially symbolic practice capable of intervening in processes of violence. In its multilayered significance, the photograph of the border art installation reminds us of the power of art to protest, to remember, and to render visible the invisible victims of the darker sides of "desires" on the US–Mexico border. In other places along the US–Mexico border and with large Latino/a communities, other types of art and cultural practices are becoming increasingly common. As a theoretical lens for reading and viewing these kinds of art practices, transa captures the contradictions between what we see and what we are told (in the media, from our families, from other cultural texts), between uncomfortable truths and *la historia oficial* (the official story), and also of reader-viewers' discomfort when faced with contradiction and displacement (of expectation, of narrative).

Here *Is Tijuana's* final section, "Permutations," tells a variety of stories, from the rapid expansion of the city's population in recent times and the corresponding architectural and spatial changes to the city's landscapes, to more politically charged portrayals of corruption, police brutality, poverty, exploitative labor practices, and crossing-related violence. The authors use transa techniques through juxtaposition and collage to critique oversimplifications of the changes Tijuana has experienced in the past few decades. Yet, when they address the growth of Tijuana's *maquila* industry

and their workers, the selection of photographs and text creates a pointed critique of such exploitative labor practices and the deadly ironic gap between the rhetoric of globalization, neoliberalism, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the realities free trade imposes on workers.

A two-page spread called “Assemblyland” provides a brief history of the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), which is credited with bringing the first factories to the border region.<sup>57</sup> Over forty years later, Evelyn Hu-DeHart cites a recent report that “counts twenty-seven hundred *maquiladoras* in Mexico, which . . . , after the enactment of NAFTA, spread from the northern border zone deep into the Yucatán of southern Mexico.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed *Here Is Tijuana!* reports that, with 562 plants, Tijuana has the most assembly plants of any Mexican city.<sup>59</sup> The overwhelming majority of assembly plant workers are women. In fact, the book reports that, of the 1,550,383 Mexicans working in the assembly plant industry, 516,048 are women, whose average age is 29.4 years (145). In 1995, 57.2 percent of the total employees of the assembly plant industry of the border states were women (144), who are generally favored due to the common perception that they are innately suited for work requiring little skill and a light touch. In addition to being seen as “nimble fingered,” women are often thought to be less likely to unionize and easier to control.<sup>60</sup>



Figure 9.  
Photograph by Julie Orozco.  
Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo,  
Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 144.

Images of domination and control are reinforced through photographs taken inside a *maquila*. Figure 9, a color close-up, depicts women's hands attached by a cord and wristband to the assembly line they are working. The photo focuses on the bright yellow wristband and emphasizes the continuity between woman and machine. The photo's perspective reveals an endless line of workers, stretching down the assembly line, in the same way the picture of the coffins nailed to the border fence emphasizes a seemingly endless line of victims. The similar composition of both photographs, and their placement in the same book, uses repetition as transa technique to critique the dominant narratives about the US–Mexico borderlands. As we recall the previous photograph while viewing this one, we create a visual palimpsest. This layering technique invites reader-viewers into reflexive dialogue, where both photographs inform the meanings and narratives we see and read into them. Next to this photograph, the authors quote Norma Iglesias: "All of the women had assimilated the fundamental words of being an industrial worker: enter, leave, push, pull, hurry, pull the handle, 'push' the button, produce."<sup>61</sup> This visual-textual juxtaposition recalls Ursula Biemann's observations about the relationship between women and machinery in *maquila* work. Not only are the women themselves described in language normally used to describe machines—efficiency, speed, and production numbers—but also devices such as the wristbands photographed here "render the worker's body inseparable from the machine she works at."<sup>62</sup> This lack of separation blurs the distinction between the organic body and machine, contributing to the "technologizing" of women's bodies and the gradual erasure of their humanity.

The gap between free trade's happy rhetoric and its brutal realities reinforces the authors' interest in the relationship between Tijuana and representation itself as transas within transas. Without lapsing into oversimplifications and yet paying careful attention to how regimes of representation create real effects for citizens, TV manufacturing emerges as one symbol of the complicated relationship between representation and the city. Several photographs in "Permutations" depict televisions in various stages of assembly. These photos are accompanied by statistics: "Since 1989, Mexico has been the first exporter of color televisions to the United States. . . . In 1996 the five television set companies located in Tijuana absorbed 16% of the employment in their area."<sup>63</sup> Indeed Yépez reports that seven out of ten televisions in the world were made in Tijuana.<sup>64</sup>

In black and white, Figure 10 shows a pile of discarded, outdated televisions half-buried in dirt and stacked in intervals like a staircase rising out of the dump. Next to it, also in black and white, and cropped to exactly the same size, is a picture of middle-class rooftops, similarly stacked. The televisions themselves call attention to the ways in which Tijuana, the border, and Mexico are represented through media and cultural forms and discourses, yet the authors use the transas between the images and the statistics—combined with the other forms of textual information on the page—to highlight the disparity between how Tijuana is represented through public discourse and the real-life experiences of citizens and visitors. This particular photograph

solemnly captures this tension: the ascending “staircase” of discarded televisions invokes all the images of the US–Mexico border as seen on TV, while their disposal into a trash heap recalls the worst of the region’s poverty, where assembly plant workers do not earn enough to purchase one of the new color TVs they assemble every day. The juxtaposition with the photo of middle-class rooftops reinforces another transa—the relationship between public and private spheres of representation. The rooftops frame domestic, interior spaces where people come together to participate in social rituals, such as watching TV. Thus televisions also serve as sites where public discourses, images, and representation in general are translated into private, domestic spaces. Both photographs comment on the tension between the public spaces of the working classes (who are often denied the privilege of private, interior spaces) and the private spaces of the middle and upper classes (who get to have interiors). While the rooftops contain domestic scenes, the photo emphasizes their uniform exteriority, and while the old televisions represent a site where public and private spheres collide, here they have been relegated to a public city dump. Adding a final transa to this multilayered collage, the photos themselves are yet another form of representation, whose construction, composition, and placement on the page are not neutral acts.



*Figure 10.* Photograph by Rogelio Núñez. Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 167.



Just as it began, *Here Is Tijuana!* ends with a similar east–west photograph of the San Diego–Tijuana border, separated by a long metal fence (see Figure 11). Juxtaposed against a now-familiar scene is a close-up shot of one of the series of metal dots in the pavement that signifies the actual territorial borderline. The close-up of the metal dot on the left diminishes the border’s power by reminding reader-viewers that borders are constructed and often arbitrary, still allowing people, ideas, culture, and capital to roam back and forth. Yet the photo of the two geographies cut by a metal fence reminds us of all the ways that the border does, in fact, separate, divide, and displace. The opposite page represents the reality that the fence signifies—a list of deaths along the border since the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper, a textual reinforcement of the sentiment expressed so powerfully through the previous photo of the painted coffins nailed to the fence.<sup>65</sup>

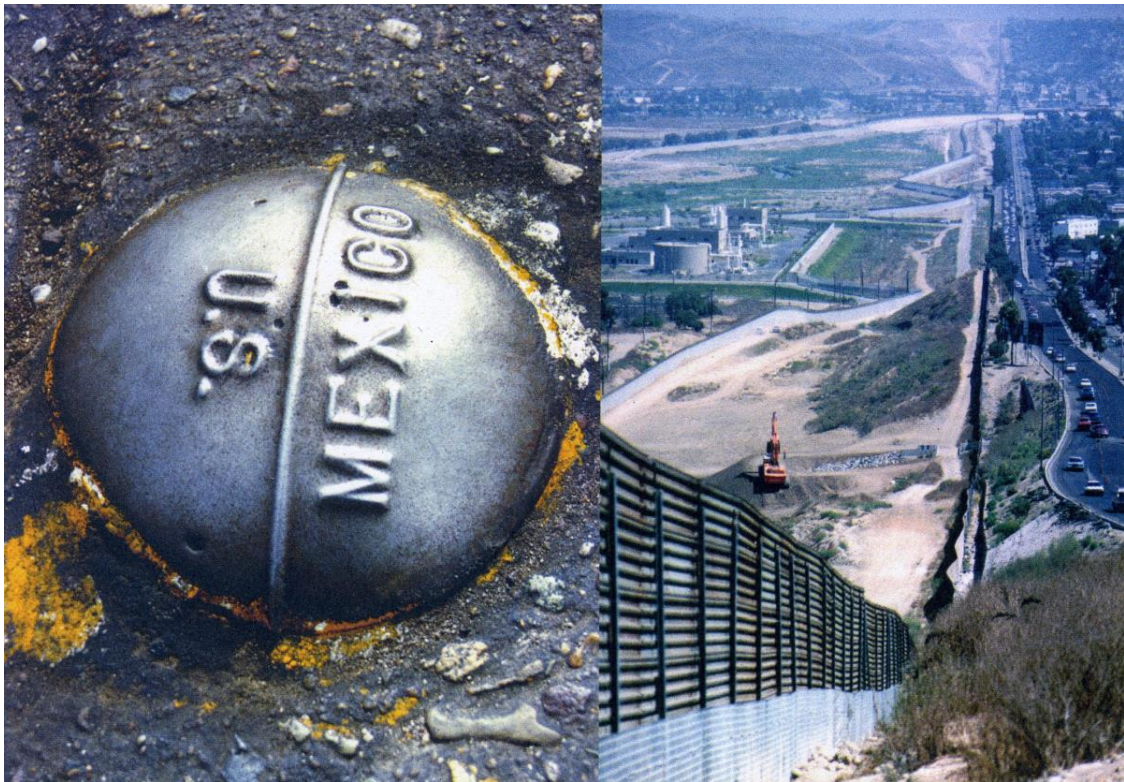


Figure 11. Photograph by Alfonso Caraveo. Reproduced by permission from Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 178.

While security, surveillance, and control have emerged as significant themes throughout the book, the final pages directly engage with the increased militarization and patrolling of the international boundary as a result of Operation Gatekeeper and responses to 9/11. Information from various websites, nonprofit coalitions, and magazines reinforces arguments made by Peter Andreas and Nevins—that



Gatekeeper has not stopped migration; it has only driven migrants to take increasingly desperate and riskier measures, resulting in an increased number of crossing-related deaths. As Andreas has noted, escalated “border policing is not simply a policy instrument for deterring illegal crossings but a symbolic representation of state authority; it communicates the state’s commitment to marking and maintaining the borderline.”<sup>66</sup> This “*expressive role of law enforcement*” is just as important as other “*instrumental goal[s]*,” according to Andreas, who argues that “*gestures*,” such as the appearance of heightened control and policing, convey powerful messages to society (11). Thus the border is not only an international boundary but has increasingly become a political stage, where politicians, lobbyists, and law enforcement agencies perform ceremonial practices—such as high-profile drug seizures and arrests—in order to reassure society that our borders are safe and secure.

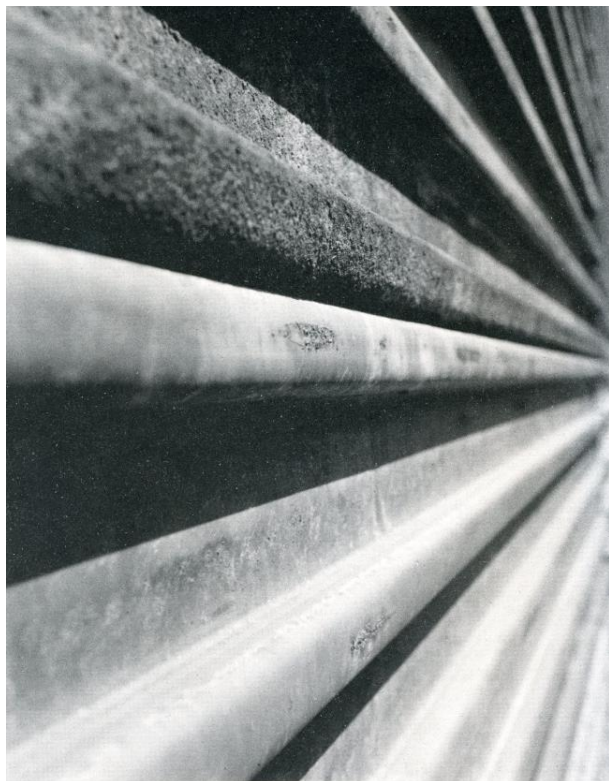


Figure 12.  
Photograph by Alfonso Caraveo.  
Reproduced by permission from  
Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez,  
*Here Is Tijuana!*, 172.

*Here Is Tijuana!*'s *transa* techniques blur the divisions between seemingly discrete elements, thereby demonstrating their profound interrelationships: between the textual and visual, the “real” and symbolic, social structures and the ideology they produce, and the physical and cultural landscapes of the city, for example. The online commentary quoted at the end regarding architectural means of control are further emphasized in the book’s final photographs, which capture various images of the walls and fences that constitute the international boundary. Some photographs depict other kinds of installation art: crosses constructed out of clothing and nailed against

the fence; another shows children clinging to a chain-link fence. Figure 12 shows a close-up shot of corrugated metal where the grooves in the metal appear to extend on into infinity. All of these physical structures reflect what Michel Foucault called “biopower”—how the modern state controls and regulates bodies of people through subjugation. Through the exercise of biopower, political processes and ideologies are mapped onto the architecture of the US–Mexico border, an architecture that, in turn, enacts processes and ideologies onto the bodies of subjects, often in deadly ways. As *Here Is Tijuana!* demonstrates, encounters between the many landscapes (real and representational) of Tijuana can be violent and fatal while also celebratory and productive.

### **Tijuana ≠ Tijuana**

*Here Is Tijuana!*’s many-voiced, multi-perspective transa techniques question, trouble, contradict, and render visible the complex processes through which Tijuana is represented and encountered. These transa techniques juxtapose both macro- and micro-level transactions to document and expose their mutually constitutive relationships, while also drawing reader-viewers into the process of interrelationship and representation themselves. As the book visualizes a series of transa-border encounters, from the most intimate to the most abstract, the book itself becomes yet another series of encounters that forces reader-viewers to reflect on how representation works through culture on the US–Mexico border. Although the authors favor a multiplicity of readings and meanings, the Tijuana that emerges from the book’s pages continually asserts itself, with its unavoidable difference and its refusal to be collapsed into or consumed by the metaphors that would attempt to describe it. Ultimately, the book offers a productive opportunity to draw on the authors’ opening claim of Tijuana as transa and to expand transa’s field of reference from the site-specific pages of *Here Is Tijuana!* to a new metaphor for confronting, encountering, and interpreting cultural texts in and about transnational North America.

In transa, we hear the echo not only of transaction but also of the transnational, transboundary, and many other concepts that have become increasingly popular in cultural studies of the Americas. Transa, as slippery slang with its deviant connotations, also reminds us that cultural practices, even the most aesthetically innovative or experimental ones, cannot be solely abstracted into new metaphors. Transa as metaphor for the US–Mexico borderlands continually brings us back to the social-material realities of the everyday lives of border dwellers and border crossers. The exciting opportunities for transa to enter into other discourses about the US–Mexico border is precisely its inelegant elegance: transa offers a way of reading-viewing-interpreting that embraces the postmodern and experimental but can never be delinked from lived experiences. I propose transa as metaphor for cultural productions of and from the borderlands, not to contain them within neat theoretical concepts but to more fully inhabit them and enliven them with potentially radicalizing diversity.

Perhaps it's in the transas—in the unfinished places, the questions that remain, the ideas yet to be realized, the thoughts not fully formed—that we can begin to adapt to new realities. These new realities must be visionary. They must imagine and create worlds where justice, equality, diversity, and difference are both foundations and fault lines for transnational North America, with the diverse subjects and stories created and circulated within and across *la frontera* and, indeed, all of our many borders.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fiamma Montezemolo, Rene Peralta, and Heriberto Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 137.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory C. Stanczak, "Introduction: Images, Methodologies, and Generating Social Knowledge," in *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society, and Representation*, ed. Gregory C. Stanczak (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 12.

<sup>4</sup> See Steven J. Gold, "Using Photography in Studies of Immigrant Communities: Reflecting Across Projects and Populations," in Stanczak, *Visual Research Methods*, 142.

<sup>5</sup> Stanczak, "Introduction," 18.

<sup>6</sup> See Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.–Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez, "Postcards from the Border: In Tijuana, Revolución Is an Avenue," in *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 120.

<sup>8</sup> See John Grady, "The Visual Essay and Sociology," *Visual Sociology* 6, no. 2 (1991): 23–38.

<sup>9</sup> Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 134.

<sup>10</sup> Jill Anderson and Nin Solis, *Los Otros Dreamers* (Mexico City: Jill Anderson and Nin Solis, 2014), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> In a more recent work, Canclini has rethought the concept of hybridity and his earlier assessment of Tijuana as "one of the biggest laboratories of postmodernity." Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 233. By including theories of interculturality as part of hybridization, Canclini has remarked that it's perhaps more accurate to call Tijuana "a laboratory of the social and

political disintegration of Mexico as a consequence of a calculated ungovernability.” Fiamma Montezemolo, “(Conversation with) Néstor García Canclini, on How Tijuana Ceased to Be the Laboratory of Postmodernity,” in Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*, 94.

<sup>13</sup> See Montezemolo, “Néstor García Canclini.”

<sup>14</sup> See Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 131.

<sup>15</sup> See Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–32.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence A. Herzog introduces the term *transfrontier metropolis* to describe the rapid development of international twin cities along the US–Mexico border in the second half of the twentieth century. See Lawrence A. Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S.–Mexico Border* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> “Avatars” as a name takes its inspiration from Montezemolo’s previous work cofounding a cultural magazine in Italy called AVATARS. Fiamma Montezemolo, personal communication with author, February 6, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 8–9.

<sup>19</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, “Lived Simultaneity and Discourses of Diasporic Difference,” in *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*, ed. Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 160.

<sup>20</sup> Herzog, *Where North Meets South*, 121.

<sup>21</sup> Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Claudia Dorrington, “Salvadoran Immigrants and Refugees: Demographic and Socioeconomic Profiles,” in *Asian and Latino Immigrants in a Restructuring Economy: The Metamorphosis of Southern California*, ed. Marta López-Garza and David R. Diaz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 393–424.

<sup>24</sup> See López-Garza and Diaz, *Asian and Latino Immigrants*.

<sup>25</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Tijuana has had a historic role in Chinese immigration to the Americas. When the US Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) outlawed Chinese immigration, many were smuggled illegally into the US through Tijuana. In addition, many Asian-based smuggling networks operated out of Tijuana during the early twentieth century, smuggling opium across the border. The networks required to facilitate such operations created a lasting Asian presence in the city. The transnational linkages between Asia, Mexico, and the United States continue today. As Claudia Sadowski-Smith notes, “under the cooperation of



human cargo smugglers—Chinese ‘snakeheads’ and Mexican ‘coyotes’—the U.S.–Mexico border has become one of the major transit points for Chinese immigration.” Claudia Sadowski-Smith, “Reading across Diaspora: Chinese and Mexican Undocumented Immigration across U.S. Land Borders,” in *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 76.

<sup>27</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> The text identifies the two women as “Asian American” (ibid., 35).

<sup>29</sup> Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, “Introduction: The Factory of Dreams,” in Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Jeff Faux, *The Global Class War: How America’s Bipartisan Elite Lost Our Future—and What It Will Take to Win It Back* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 139–40.

<sup>32</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here is Tijuana!*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Herzog, *Where North Meets South*, 156.

<sup>34</sup> Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Statistics above the photos inform us that “24% of all North-bound border crossing is to work in San Diego and that 1/10 of Tijuana’s workforce works in San Diego” (17). In his fieldwork with Mexican commuter workers, Herzog has identified that most Mexican commuter workers cross into San Diego to work in the service industry—in restaurants, hotels, auto repair, and private households. Other major employment sectors include manufacturing and construction (Herzog, *Where North Meets South*, 159). While some of these commuter workers hold documentation that allows them to work in the United States, many others use their “white cards” (permits granted to residents of a Mexican border city to stay for up to seventy-two hours in the United States within twenty-five miles of the boundary) to work illegally in the United States. According to Herzog, more than one million Mexicans along the border possess these cards, and immigration services have admitted that they simply do not have the resources to monitor Mexicans who may abuse their “white card” privileges. Contrary to public perception, Herzog notes that most Mexican commuter workers come from established middle- and working-class neighborhoods near Tijuana’s city center, and not from the most destitute squatter settlement zones (157–61).

<sup>36</sup> Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>37</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 80.

<sup>38</sup> Entrepreneurs from the US invested in bars, nightclubs, cabarets, and other forms of recreational activities during this period, rapidly speeding up Tijuana’s transformation from a ranching settlement to a major center of transboundary activity (Nevins,

*Operation Gatekeeper*, 43). See also Heriberto Yépez, "Tijuanologies: An Urban Essay," in Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*, 47–70; Herzog, *Where North Meets South*; and Humberto Félix Berumen, "Snapshots from and about a City Named Tijuana," in Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*, 25–46.

<sup>39</sup> Humberto Félix Berumen, quoted in Yépez, "Tijuanologies," 54.

<sup>40</sup> See Yépez, "Tijuanologies."

<sup>41</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 97.

<sup>42</sup> Debra A. Castillo, María Gudelia Rangel Gómez, and Bonnie Delgado suggest that the number of female sex workers in Tijuana has reached close to fifteen thousand. Debra A. Castillo, María Gudelia Rangel Gómez, and Bonnie Delgado, "Border Lives: Prostitute Women in Tijuana," *Signs* 24, no. 2 (1999): 403. In Tijuana, sex work is legal and regulated but only in certain zones of the city and only if workers register themselves at a local clinic.

<sup>43</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 82.

<sup>44</sup> See Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney, "Voices for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin America," *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (1991): 3–14.

<sup>45</sup> Linda J. Craft, *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 22.

<sup>46</sup> René Jara, quoted in John Beverley, "Testimonio, Subalternity, and Narrative Authority," in *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klaren (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 572.

<sup>47</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 87.

<sup>48</sup> See Castillo, Gómez, and Delgado, "Border Lives"; and Marisa B. Ugarte, Laura Zarate, and Melissa Farley, "Prostitution and Trafficking of Women and Children from Mexico to the United States," in *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*, ed. Melissa Farley (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Maltreatment & Trauma Press, 2003), 147–65.

<sup>49</sup> Castillo, Gómez, and Delgado report, "Over and over again the women describe a societal structure based on male dominance in the workplace and male rights to women who are perceived as stepping out of their traditional roles, whether by remaining unattached to a male protector or by attempting to enter the realm of paid labor" (Castillo, Gómez, and Delgado, "Border Lives," 404).

<sup>50</sup> Despite the availability of such resources, sex work is certainly not easy or comfortable, even for legal, registered sex workers. Both legal and illegal sex workers often experience the physical and mental stresses that one might expect: infection, poor self-image, violence at the hands of customers, and drug addiction. Yet the situation is worse for sex workers who do not voluntarily choose their work but are trafficked into it from other parts of Mexico, Europe, and even the United States. Statistics quoted in *Here*

*Is Tijuana!* suggest a sobering reality: “Each year 50,000 women and children are trafficked illegally to the United States for prostitution. The Tijuana–San Diego region is one of the main corridors of this traffic”; and “At least 900 minors prostitute themselves in Tijuana” (Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 83–84). This phenomenon has been well documented in recent media, including an extensive investigation by Peter Landesman published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2004. See Peter Landesman, “The Girls Next Door,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 25, 2004, [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/25/magazine/the-girls-next-door.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/25/magazine/the-girls-next-door.html?_r=0).

<sup>51</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 88.

<sup>52</sup> Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> For more work on the cultural life of Tijuana in the early twenty-first century, see Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*.

<sup>54</sup> Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper*, 145.

<sup>55</sup> Manuel Rueda, “US Mexico Border Deaths are Increasing Report Says,” ABC News, March 21, 2013, [http://abcnews.go.com/ABC\\_Univision/ABC\\_Univision/us-mexico-border-deaths-increasing-report/story?id=18784948](http://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/ABC_Univision/us-mexico-border-deaths-increasing-report/story?id=18784948).

<sup>56</sup> Josh Kun, “The Kidnapped City,” in Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*, 361.

<sup>57</sup> BIP was an outgrowth of a larger effort on behalf of the Mexican government during the early 1960s to “beautify” Mexican border towns and attract greater levels of tourism (Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper*, 45). The BIP “established the border zone corridor of export processing industries known as *maquiladoras*. The stated intention of the program was to create location-specific magnets for economic growth and thus serve as a development engine for the entire northern border” (45). Additionally, the BIP sought to reduce unemployment in border towns. See also Kathryn Kopinak, “Globalization in Tijuana Maquiladoras: Using Historical Antecedents and Migration to Test Globalization Models,” in Kun and Montezemolo, *Tijuana Dreaming*, 71–93.

<sup>58</sup> Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “Globalization and Its Discontents: Exposing the Underside,” in *Gender on the Borderlands: The Frontiers Reader*, ed. Antonia Castañeda, with Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 246.

<sup>59</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 142.

<sup>60</sup> See Hu-DeHart, “Globalization,” 252; and Ursula Biemann, “Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnational Bodies, and Technology,” in *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 105–6.

<sup>61</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 144.

<sup>62</sup> Biemann, “Performing the Border,” 102.

<sup>63</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 146.

<sup>64</sup> Yépez, "Tijuanologies," 58.

<sup>65</sup> Montezemolo, Peralta, and Yépez, *Here Is Tijuana!*, 127.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the U.S.–Mexico Divide*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 8.

### **Selected Bibliography**

Anderson, Jill, and Nin Solis. *Los Otros Dreamers*. Mexico City: Jill Anderson and Nin Solis, 2014.

Andreas, Peter. *Border Games: Policing the U.S.–Mexico Divide*. 2nd ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009.

Berumen, Humberto Félix. "Snapshots from and about a City Named Tijuana." In *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 25–46. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

Beverley, John. "Testimonio, Subalternity, and Narrative Authority." In *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klaren, 571–83. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

Biemann, Ursula. "Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnational Bodies, and Technology." In *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith, 99–118. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Canclini, Néstor García. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Castillo, Debra A., María Gudelia Rangel Gómez, and Bonnie Delgado. "Border Lives: Prostitute Women in Tijuana." *Signs* 24, no. 2 (1999): 387–422.

Craft, Linda J. *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997.

Dorrington, Claudia. "Salvadoran Immigrants and Refugees: Demographic and Socioeconomic Profiles." In *Asian and Latino Immigrants in a Restructuring Economy: The Metamorphosis of Southern California*, ed. Marta López-Garza and David R. Diaz, 393–424. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Faux, Jeff. *The Global Class War: How America's Bipartisan Elite Lost Our Future—and What It Will Take to Win It Back*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006.

Gold, Steven J. "Using Photography in Studies of Immigrant Communities: Reflecting Across Projects and Populations." In *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society, and Representation*, ed. Gregory C. Stanczak, 141–66. London: Sage Publications, 2007.



- Grady, John. "The Visual Essay and Sociology." *Visual Sociology* 6, no. 2 (1991): 23–38.
- Gugelberger, Georg, and Michael Kearney. "Voices for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin America." *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (1991): 3–14.
- Herzog, Lawrence A. *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S.–Mexico Border*. Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1990.
- Hu-DeHart, Evelyn. "Globalization and Its Discontents: Exposing the Underside." In *Gender on the Borderlands: The Frontiers Reader*, ed. Antonia Castañeda, with Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon, 244–60. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- Kopinak, Kathryn. "Globalization in Tijuana Maquiladoras: Using Historical Antecedents and Migration to Test Globalization Models." In *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 71–93. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Kun, Josh. "The Kidnapped City." In *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 355–69. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Kun, Josh, and Fiamma Montezemolo, eds. *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Levitt, Peggy. *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- López-Garza, Marta, and David R. Diaz, eds. *Asian and Latino Immigrants in a Restructuring Economy: The Metamorphosis of Southern California*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Montezemolo, Fiamma. "(Conversation with) Néstor García Canclini, on How Tijuana Ceased to Be the Laboratory of Postmodernity." In *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 94–116. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Montezemolo, Fiamma, Rene Peralta, and Heriberto Yépez. *Here Is Tijuana!* London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006.
- Nevins, Joseph. *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.–Mexico Boundary*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Pink, Sarah. *Doing Visual Ethnography*. London: Sage Publications, 2001.
- Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America." *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–32.
- Sadowski-Smith, Claudia. "Reading across Diaspora: Chinese and Mexican Undocumented Immigration across U.S. Land Borders." In *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith, 69–97. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

- Schiller, Nina Glick. "Lived Simultaneity and Discourses of Diasporic Difference." In *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*, ed. Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee, 159–69. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Stanczak, Gregory C. "Introduction: Images, Methodologies, and Generating Social Knowledge." In *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society, and Representation*, ed. Gregory C. Stanczak, 1–21. London: Sage Publications, 2007.
- Ugarte, Marisa B., Laura Zarate, and Melissa Farley. "Prostitution and Trafficking of Women and Children from Mexico to the United States." In *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*, ed. Melissa Farley, 147–65. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Maltreatment & Trauma Press, 2003.
- Vaquera-Vásquez, Santiago. "Postcards from the Border: In Tijuana, Revolución Is an Avenue." In *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 117–35. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Yépez, Heriberto. "Tijuanologies: An Urban Essay." In *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 47–70. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.