Linguistic Anthropology

Book Review

Passing: Two Publics in a Mexican Border City. *Rihan Yeh.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pp. xv + 295

ELIZABETH FALCONI
University of West Georgia
efalconi@westga.edu

Rihan Yeh's book, *Passing: Two Publics in a Mexican Border City*, is situated at the intersection of two bodies of anthropological literature on Mexico and Mexican communities. In her attention to United States–Mexico border politics, Yeh's work intersects with recent anthropological scholarship focused on the experiences of Latin American migrants to the United States. Her discussion of the devaluation of undocumented migrants, as resulting from the hierarchical ordering of humanity imposed at the U.S.–Mexico border, "a line of insurmountable difference" (p. 13), resonates with Jason De Leon's 2015 book, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (University of California Press, 2015), which describes the fatal impacts of the U.S. policy of prevention through deterrence on the border. Her concerns echo those of other scholars who examine "the border's role in instituting the illegal alien in the United States" (p. 4) (see *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Mae Ngai, Princeton University Press, 2004), and the discursive "conflation of immigrant illegality with 'south-of-the-border immigration'" (*Words of Passage: National Longing and the Imagined Lives of Mexican Immigrants,* Hilary Parsons Dick, University of Texas Press, 2018).

The book, in her words, "asks how the border, as it blends enticements to passage and stern prohibitions, splits Tijuana" (p. 2). Yeh vividly portrays the role of structural inequality as a driver of global mobility, and the ubiquitous experiences of suffering among those who make the choice to begin anew somewhere different, only to encounter still more suffering along the way:

> the suffering of the frontier is generally the consequence of an earlier, originary suffering that drove the migrant from his or her home. Insofar as migration arises from a desire not just for upward mobility but for a narrative that will place one's poverty in the past, the second suffering ultimately repeats the senselessness of the first. (p. 240)

The author's evocative, and oftentimes poetic, prose brings the geopolitical quagmire of U.S.–Mexico relations to life, highlighting how the history of "territorial contiguity" (p. 50) between the two nations has systematically eroded Mexican national sovereignty and devalued Mexican nationality.

Much of Yeh's book diverges from other anthropological literature on this topic in its innovative exploration of the nuances of subjectivity, class, and belonging in a city sharply defined by the looming proximity of the border, viewed through the lens of pronomial reference. She announces in the introductory pages that "two 'we's' will be this book's protagonists . . . Mexico's *clase media* . . . [and] the pueblo 'the people' as paradigmatically plebeian" (p. 2). It is in her attention to subjectivity and class, and particularly her discussion of the "paradigmatically plebeian" pueblo, that Yeh clearly locates her work within another body of scholarship on Mexican communities which has sought to pin down the essential characteristics of those whom the novelist Mariano Azuela so aptly named *Los de Abajo* (The Underdogs).

From Robert Redfield's ethnography of "folk" in the Yucatecan village of Tepotzlan (*Tepotzlán: A Mexican Village*, University of Chicago Press, 1930), to Oscar Lewis's exploration of the culture of poverty in five impoverished Mexican families (*Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, Basic Books, 1975), to Wolf's analyses of "closed corporate peasant communities (*Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World*, University of California Press, 1957), and Bronislaw Malinowski and Julio De la Fuente's

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description of markets in Oaxaca (*Malinowski in Mexico: The Economics of a Mexican Market System*, Routledge and Keegan, 1982), anthropologists have long plumbed the depths of everyday life among Mexico's poorest citizens. Yeh's work stands out from much of this scholarship for her close attention to the oppositional production of identity between middle-class and "plebeian" residents of Tijuana. Amid the insidious influence of the United States border apparatus, with "its relentless sorting of subjects into those fit and unfit to cross it legally" (p. 10), Yeh brings to the fore how the geopolitical relations between the United States and Mexico are reflected in "the micromechanics of interaction through which collective subjectivity comes to life" (p. 5). She deftly interweaves vivid historical and ethnographic description with theoretical analysis of how "passing" permeates all levels of daily life in Tijuana. For example, she encapsulates the entirety of the Mexican American War and the annexation of northwestern Mexico by the United States as a "double gesture of consumption and spitting out … [through which] the United States established a novel and highly ambiguous quasi colonial dynamic" (p. 13). This then undergirds her analysis of "all the complication of desire and rejection, recognition and evasion, displacement and disavowal that arises from the pressure to pass" in contemporary Tijuana (p. 12).

The introductory chapter lays the foundation for Yeh's use of "publics" as a framework for exploring "voicings of we-ness" in Tijuana, a city that many consider "not really Mexico" (p. 18) and "not even close" (p. 19) to the United States. More specifically, she considers how "having US documents underlies and undermines the city's 'we's'" (p. 23), arguing that this binational relationship "should be understood in terms of the larger question of mass we-ness in an evolving global system of imperial power" (p. 23). One of the most powerful figures in Yeh's book is that of the "laser visa," an object of intense fetishism that is only available to Mexicans, and which "condenses the ambivalence of in-between-ness" (p. 52) of life at *la Linea* (the Line).

In chapters two, three, and four Yeh introduces the reader to focal research participants whose narratives serve as vehicles for exploring subjectivity and class in this liminal border zone. The narratives of Ines, and her daughter Dara, for example, are presented as "typical of documented Tijuana" and representative of a "middle class moral community" (p. 53) in their preoccupations with local socioeconomic hierarchies of prestige. She then presents us with the "the plant manager" of an assembly plant who deals regularly with "a gringo … regularly sent down by the company's US headquarters" through which we can see that everyday operations within the plant proceed according to a "principle of equivalent sovereignties" (p. 76), a fantasy used to bolster the moral and socioeconomic foundation of "Tijuana's documented public" (p. 80). Throughout these individuals' narrative portraits Yeh demonstrates how an ideology of "middleness" undergirded by neoliberal reforms emerged out of the wreckage of the "Mexican miracle" and the "national narrative of progress" (p. 91) that shaped the post-revolutionary era. These themes are crystallized in her analysis of an interview with Gerardo, one of a class of Tijuanense businesspeople granted privileged "commuter status" who broadly repudiate unauthorized immigrants, emphasizing their own entry into the United States "through the front door" (p. 133).

In part two of her book Yeh turns to the recent history Mexican migration, which swelled enormously in the 1990s following a decade of domestic financial crisis, the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and which ushered in the "democratic transition" (p. 148) of 2000, which was presented as a campaign to elevate Mexico to the status of a middle-class nation. It will be fascinating to see if the 2018 election of Andrés Manual López Obrador (AMLO), purported populist champion of the disenfranchised, alters Yeh's suggestion that "with the consolidation of the imaginary of Mexico as middle class, the pueblo has continued to slowly lose its voice" (p. 149). Yeh also emphasizes that the "stigma of lawlessness and criminality" (p. 150) has become intertextually linked with Mexico, making "the repudiation of lawlessness an indispensable part of performing a middle-class subject position" (p. 150).

In this oppositional discursive context "the 'we' of the pueblo" becomes a kind of "anti-state," amid the stark reality that "in contemporary Mexico citizenship constitutes a degraded baseline for relations in public" (p. 155) as it is a privilege of the elite, documented public. She evokes this contrast vividly while describing the reaction of a middle-class Tijuanense pulled over by a police officer who responds: "Here's my license fine me" (p. 156) and the Pueblo rhetoric used to dissuade corrupt authorities from targeting the most marginalized Tijuana residents: "Don't be assholes" (p. 158).

In the final third of the book Yeh examines the "Visa Interview" as a site where middle-class subject positions are ratified, as "quite literally, the visa certifies that one is not an unauthorized labor migrant in potentia" (p. 161). These interviews carry with them the weight of centuries

"in a country in which access to state institutions has been a central idiom of social status since colonial times" and which demand of applicants an idiosyncratic mix of documentation and persona, including racialized physical and cultural attributes such as "tone of speech, and the color and softness of the skin and hair" (p.162). As one engineer from the assembly plant explained, "You and I know it's about class [clase]" (p. 162). The interview has the power to grant one newly privileged status in relationship to border crossing, aka passing, but as Yeh explains:

> conversely … thanks to the specific mechanics of the visa interview that social distinction is enmeshed with US state recognition so that one may bear the stigma of the 'illegal alien' without ever having crossed the border. (p. 169)

Those who are turned away join Tijuana's no-man's land, comprised of people who seek escape from past traumas, some of whom Yeh describes as living in a kind of underworld "outside of meaning and life" (p. 239). She describes Mrs. E, a woman who desired "to go crazy and to go far away" (p. 238) following the death of her son, and who, when asked about her experiences with migration responded, "Oh, you mean you want to know about my suffering" (p. 240).

This last chapter of Yeh's book keenly reminded me of my own work with indigenous Mexican migrants in Oaxaca, Mexico, and Los Angeles, California, among whom the circulation of narratives of pain and suffering related to migration forms part of a shared body of cultural knowledge upon which their transborder community is created and maintained (see "Transborder Contact: Shifting Patterns of Linguistic Differentiation in a Zapotec Transborder Community," Elizabeth Falconi, in *The International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2016: 64–81). Yeh's book effectively illustrates how the border apparatus between the United States and Mexico functions to entrench existing divisions between illegal and legal migratory flows. Her discussion of the role of the "laser visa" evokes Aihwa Ong's discussion of "flexible citizenship" (*Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Duke University Press, 1999), and more broadly to "a global reconfiguration of social hierarchies currently underway" (p. 249).

One aspect of the book was difficult to untangle, as a reader anchored firmly in linguistic anthropology. As her discussions of class and subjectivity were bound up with analyses of pronominal reference, these became hard to follow when English translations were foregrounded and Spanish source material was largely relegated to footnotes, since pronominal reference is constructed quite differently in those languages. Yeh gestures to this herself toward the end of the book when she analyzes Mrs. E's repetition of "'I wanted … I wanted … I wanted—'accentuated because it is not necessary in Spanish to articulate it as a separate word" only briefly mentioning the Spanish equivalent phrase "*Yo quería*" later on (p. 238). Additionally, I would have loved a lengthier exploration of her fascinating but brief discussion of local terms of identification, such as "*Tijuanense*" used by the better off, "*Tijuaneros*" used by youth in the *colonias populares*, and the emergent term "*Tijuaneado*," which describes the second life of used goods brought to Tijuana from the United States (p. 245). These few points notwithstanding, Yeh's book is a compelling and innovative examination of "the limits of life and subjectivity, of their point of breakdown" (p. 245) in this quintessential border city.