

# Commensuration in a Mexican Border City: Currencies, Consumer Goods, and Languages

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## ABSTRACT

*In Tijuana, Mexico, across the border from San Diego, California, dollars and pesos, English and Spanish, US and Mexican commodities circulate apace. Moving beyond both the old fascination with transnational flows and the emphasis on enforcement and prohibition in current research on international borders, this article examines the everyday pragmatics involved in engaging these disparate forms. In multiple contexts and for varied reasons, actors draw them together as sets of commensurables, attempting to claim equivalence between two national regimes of value and thus consolidate their own standing with respect to a range of interlocutors. But even as they do so, their forceful assertions of commensurability feather apart in the face of a persistent remainder which they themselves evoke: the excess value that may attach to US forms, a qualitative difference that seems to fly in the face of comparability. As this inequality emerges in moments of circulation (display, exchange, ascription of possession to others, and so on), it disrupts even the most quotidian attempts at arithmetic conversion, literal translation, or the seemingly straightforward practicalities of purchase. Not all, however, are equally positioned to reap the interactive benefits of either commensuration or the sense of disproportion that interrupts it. By tracking how different subjects move*

*between those two possibilities, the article opens a novel perspective on the complex interweaving of social difference across the border and within Mexico.* [Keywords: Commensuration, borders, US–Mexico border, Mexico, currency, commodities, language]

In Tijuana, Mexico, across the border from San Diego, California, dollars and pesos, English and Spanish, US and Mexican consumer goods circulate apace. Even as they move across the international border, though, these very different forms are ideologically bound together as congruent circulations; they come to stand in tandem for national, territorially bounded regimes of value (Appadurai 1986).<sup>1</sup> Through these sets of commensurables, broader claims to national equality may be made—but nationalist claims are always vulnerable, for commensuration here is never without remainder. Much as the Comaroffs (2006:109) describe the relationship between colonial and native currencies in 19th-century South Africa, these sets become metonymic of the differences in value—of the contestations and struggles—at the heart of a deeply asymmetrical political economy. In Tijuana, commensuration bears the everyday burden of mediating differential value and power between two formally equal sovereign nation-states.

Flung out at Mexico's northwestern-most corner, sprung up of the border's traffic itself, Tijuana is often viewed as incompletely Mexican. *Tijuanenses* love to tell how, in the old days, "everyone" bought their milk and eggs and did their laundry in the US,<sup>2</sup> or of how pesos were practically unknown until the devaluation of 1976 (which also allowed Mexican products, transported from the interior, to make significant inroads). A few decades ago, most goods and basic services still came from across the border, and "we," it is said, all speak perfect English thanks to having grown up watching US television. But this intimacy with the US and its forms does not always appear in such positive light. Nation-states have long tried to marshal the movement of currencies, commodities, and languages—to foment and restrict, channel and coordinate their flows—via institutional centers of authority.<sup>3</sup> The only legal tender in the US is the dollar; despite the interpenetration of markets, import–export regulations still make an important difference in what is available on either side of the border; and if English is not the US's official language, many in Tijuana believe it to be so. The nation-state territorializes itself in part by assembling

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radically different processes of circulation, of valorization and evaluation, under the sign of centralized authority. Thanks to the normative status of such territorialized circulations, Tijuana's permeation by US forms is all too often taken to indicate the failure or at least diminution of Mexican sovereignty. The casual proffering of a quarter or a dime is open to reframing in the direst terms of treason: the very legitimacy of the state seems ever at stake in the quotidian circulations of certain forms. The situation is not unlike that which Alaina Lemon (1998) describes of the US dollar in 1990s Russia, its prestige and desirability balanced against the force of the nationalist claims that the ruble had been invested with.<sup>4</sup> A dollar-saturated monetary environment must be navigated with care. But in Tijuana, it is not only dollars that present such an interactional challenge.<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, nationalism demands a certain defense of the symmetry of value across the border, an insistence on what might be called clean commensuration. On the other, the attraction of US forms is ultimately unavoidable, especially as it becomes available for reappropriation to myriad ends having little or nothing to do with national difference. Any of the sets of commensurables this article concerns itself with may serve as a metaphor for difference itself, for *more* and *less* in general, and they may be called on to organize social relations running from the gendered domestic economy to Tijuana's entire system of socioeconomic hierarchy. Thus, the difference that so offends from a nationalist perspective is simultaneously put to a plethora of productive ends—often by the very same people who champion clean commensuration and do their best to trample out any sense of excess value attached to the US.

As subjects engage foreign forms—in moments not just of exchange, but of all sorts of display, mention, ascription of possession to others, and so on—they may posit full commensurability between these forms and their Mexican counterparts. But a dollar bears a charge that 17 pesos do not, and *plis* adds a frisson that *por favor* cannot convey. From a nationalist standpoint, currencies, consumer goods, and languages at the border persistently evoke the frayed and tattered edges between two national regimes of value. The moral imperative of the nation-state, demanding in every routine act of commensuration to be balanced amidst and against its peers, must ground itself in a flux of activity in which incommensurability may appear far more intuitive. Under such conditions, one claims the premium of nationalism by becoming the subject of commensurative anxiety—but not all are equally well-positioned to do so. In this context of

dramatic social inequalities, access to both foreign and properly national forms is differential both at a bluntly material level and in terms of the subtler points of how individuals can take a stance in relation to them.

This article focuses on dollars, US consumer goods, and English insofar as they are marked as coming from beyond the border; it focuses, for instance, on the *plis* and *tenk yus* pointedly inserted into the flow of Spanish, rather than on the myriad semantic “borrowings” that have achieved relatively unmarked status.<sup>6</sup> These media are most often examined on their own. Here, I work between them to pick out the particular forms of tension between the nationalist imperative to commensurate and the very different productivity of *incommensurative* correlations, where the disproportion between terms can be analogically mapped onto other oppositions. The commensurative equation dollar : US :: pesos : Mexico flips to become dollars : pesos :: US:Mexico, which can then become dollars : pesos :: men : women, high class : low, and so forth. I begin with currency to show its capacity to index affective and aesthetic value in ways capable even of reversing economic value per se. Quantity begins to appear as itself a quality—simply “more”—that is ineffable, excessive, and beyond any possibility of commensuration. I then address consumer goods. In the face of a plethora of qualities the value of which likewise leans toward incommensurability, nationalism’s commensurative claims slip into the subjunctive, insisting on an essential equivalence between nation-states only perturbed by certain “external” marks of difference. Thus consumption of US goods can be justified as a concession to “practicality.” The article’s final section on languages follows this tendency through to explore the deeply self-contradictory use of English to claim status and proper belonging within Mexico—a practice that depends on commensurating class status across the border while simultaneously drawing on the incommensurability between nation-states to organize and articulate class distinctions between Mexicans.

In such trivial forms as coins and bills, goods ranging from the humble to the deluxe, or casual phrases in a foreign tongue, the US–Mexico boundary must be renegotiated at every turn—a boundary strung between the commensurative and incommensurative possibilities it tenders, its evocation now of proportion, now of disproportion. Before diving into ethnographic exploration of this day-to-day balancing act, I first lay out how commensuration as an analytic intervenes in the anthropological pre-occupations that gather around this border.

## Commensuration at the Border

The US–Mexico border is a well-known one. It has played a prominent role in the study of international borders, despite its striking peculiarity, lying not just in the contrast between the two nations it divides, but in the string of twin cities that have grown up along it. These urban agglomerations bespeak a necessary intimacy between the two sides, an intimacy boosters tout, even as the cities' whole *raison d'être* lies in the difference between them. This basic political-economic tension is at the heart of (in)commensurative practices here; it is what they offer a fresh lens to look upon.

Intimacy and separation are best broached, perhaps, from the point of view of economic history. The cities of the US–Mexico border, it should be remembered, were globalized before globalization became a keyword, less because of the goods from far away flowing north and south through them since colonial times than because of the vulnerabilities that accompanied those flows. Oscar Martínez's (1975) classic history of El Paso–Ciudad Juárez tells a tale of the vicissitudes, often resulting in crisis situations, entailed by a profound dependence. He shows, over the long run, no chance for these cities' self-consolidation, no chance for them to build their own hinterlands in any lasting way. They remain utterly open to influences from elsewhere, infrastructural connections that suddenly flood their markets, governmental decrees that just as suddenly stop them. Theirs are boom economies, the fragility of which, in Martínez's (1975) narrative, remains palpable. This was true in the 19th century, and it is true today, when so much of the Mexican border economy revolves around the assembly-plant industry; from early on, it became far truer of the Mexican cities than of their US counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than the detailed complexity of the differential mobilities in which these cities have been caught up, though, scholarship has tended to emphasize either the intimacy between the two sides of the border or their separation.<sup>8</sup> Against nationalist assumptions of cultural purity, a dominant strain of research emphasizing hybridity and transnationalism emerged in the 1990s (Kearney 1991, 1995; Alvarez 1995). The border became itself a highly mobile figure, a rhetorical image popping up anywhere transnational subjects might be found (Rouse 1991, Behar 1993; for an early critique, see Heyman 1995), to the extent that, it was path-breaking for Pablo Vila's (2000) ethnography of Ciudad Juárez–El Paso to point out the invidious stereotypes of race and class that divide the two cities both against each other and within themselves. Not so many years later, however, the accent

has shifted entirely. After widespread excitement over the demise of the nation-state, the retrenchment of international borders has increasingly demanded scholarly attention. Prohibition and enforcement both at the border and within the nation have now drawn the ethnographic spotlight (Magaña 2008, De Genova and Peutz 2010, Fassin 2011, Rosas 2012), though there were those in other disciplines who attended to them before (e.g., Dunn 1996, Nevins 2002). And yet, just as border enforcement was beefing up while enthusiasm over transnationalism raged, so now too the border is both more prohibitive and, for other flows, more porous than ever. Moreover, and despite all efforts to stop them, illegal flows do not seem to lose their vigor. These developments demand not just attention to the dramas of violent exclusion, but a finer-grained approach to the effects of border policing for all those who live in its very long shadow, in contact with any of the multifarious forms that traverse it.<sup>9</sup>

Commensuration opens a path that considerably expands an insight recent studies on deportation have offered concerning the border's function in lastingly marking circulating forms with differential value. Focus on commensuration opens an ethnographically precise way into what is perhaps the central paradox of contemporary globalization: the tension between ever-more massive movements across international boundaries and the enormous investment in fortifying these very boundaries. This tension, commensuration shows, is not just a practical problem for contemporary border bureaucracies (Heyman 2004), but a live challenge, undergone in fleeting moments of interaction, for anyone living under such a regime. This is not to say, of course, that the commensurative challenge is really new, for it grows out of older tensions between nation-states and prestige economies that valorize the foreign. But the border as a state apparatus certainly reorganizes and intensifies these contradictions. Commensurative processes—the balancing of values against each other, the comparative evaluation that makes things move—must be tracked far beyond the institutional centers that crucially mark forms in motion as legal or illegal, legitimate or not, appropriate to here or there, this person or that. In this article, I do not historicize the ethnographic moments I present in relation to the rise of the border as a policing apparatus. But it should be understood as an ineluctable backdrop to all the tiny frustrations and elations that may be had in engaging a penny or a peso, one or another language, a mango or a sandwich from here or there. As I noted earlier, even the most blandly arithmetic of commensurations produces a remainder. Those involved may

try to tamp it down and ignore it, or they may put it to other ends. To illustrate, let me begin with the case of currency.

## Currencies

Conversions between dollars and pesos are managed routinely in Tijuana by people from all walks of life—though not, to be sure, by all people. Petty transactions such as paying for bus fare or buying a taco can all be handled in dollars, and signboards advertising exchange rates, announcing the possibility of conversion, are ubiquitous even far out along the commercial axes stretching into the urban periphery. What can be lost or gained is doubtless a matter of strategizing, of jockeying each side of the border against the other: electronic goods, dog food, and potatoes cheaper there, rents and tortillas cheaper here, more bang for my congealed labor-power at one “House of Exchange” (*casa de cambio*) or another going either way. Such practices are well-established along the border. Josiah Heyman documents the emergence in the early to mid-20th century, out of older patterns of seasonal migration between Sonora and Arizona, of what he calls the “border balance family” (1991:110–161); these families split their domestic economy between the US and Mexico. As control of the border has tightened over the years, however, strategies for getting the best of both sides have shifted. Not all have legal access to the US, and, for those who do, wait times have become impossibly long. Nowadays, what one is willing to sacrifice to save a little in this bi-national economy is emblemized by the crowd that gathers at the Port of Entry in the wee hours each morning: the folks who drive to the border at 3:00 a.m. just to get in line to go to work.

The balancing of a domestic economy across the border depends on a keen sense of the arithmetics of conversion and of the economic rationality that permits one to function in whatever currency happens to be most advantageous at the moment. At one point during my fieldwork in 2006, for instance, late-night lines at the border lengthened with people crossing just to fill their gas tanks. But even in the most classic “border balance family,” dollar and peso are never really commensurable—indeed, the gap between them, their incommensurable qualitative difference, is often just the point of organizing domestic economies along their lines. Recently retired when I met him in 2006, Roberto had obtained US Permanent Residency in the 1970s and had worked in that country ever

since, but he always maintained a home in Tijuana. He fits to a tee the stereotype of an older generation of working-class tijuaneños: his English, though limited, has a colloquial fluency to it, and even with his meager pension (\$400 USD per month), he still keeps but dollars in his wallet.<sup>10</sup> He is also a rare find in this city of migrants, for he was born in Tijuana. His wife Dorotea, in contrast, arrived in Tijuana already middle-aged; though she dreams of emigration, she has only a few words of English under her belt, and her experience of the US has been restricted to brief, occasional sallies with her tourist visa. During one of our first conversations, I somewhat casually observed that, earning in dollars, Roberto must have to exchange currency in order to cover household expenses. I was taken aback by the alacrity with which he answered, sticking his thumb abruptly in the direction of his wife: “Not me. Her.”<sup>11</sup> He does not touch pesos, he wanted to make clear. The hinge between the two currencies is the hinge, in this case, between production and reproduction; the conversion of the fruits of Roberto’s labor into the consumable form of all sustenance begins with the conversion of dollars into pesos, and this is a womanly duty of which Roberto will not partake. Pesos are feminized and dollars masculinized, and Mexico as a whole appears as the domestic sphere alongside the US’s public sphere of labor.<sup>12</sup> The border, made circulatory in the difference between the two currencies, marks the boundary at the heart of Roberto and Dorotea’s gendered domestic economy.<sup>13</sup>

Dollars and pesos only organize Roberto and Dorotea’s exchanges because of the *d*isproportion between them: the dollar has an excess value—a value of qualitatively different type, even—that can be aligned with the masculine. This excess is implicit in many commonplaces. “To earn in dollars and spend in pesos” is a frequently voiced ideal and the pinnacle of the “border balance” approach. Here, dollars represent a maximum inflow of money, while pesos stand for a minimum outflow of it for basic necessities like rent and food. The phrase would seem to sum up the intensified calculative rationality of living in two currencies at once. But in this formulation, arithmetic commensuration is already compromised, for the issue in “border balance” practices is not of course currency per se, but the ability to split one’s productive and consumptive activities between two radically different economic systems. Dollars and pesos stand in, metonymically, for the national economies that they are, for the most part (but, crucially, not here), embedded in. This metonymic function, verging on the figurative, is commonplace. A contributor to an



online news forum writes, “Governments pay in pesos and organized crime pays in dollars.”<sup>14</sup> When elderly Inés inquires for a friend as to the price of an apartment to let, but finds it too high, she apologizes thus: “*Mi amiga gana en pesitos*” (my friend earns in pesos), using the diminutive to underline her currency’s humility with respect to its US counterpart. The rent would indeed have been set in dollars (as is common in Tijuana), but this is not the issue. In her oblique rebuke, dollars simply stand for “outrageously expensive” and pesos for “reasonable.” As metonymic figures, the two take on a differential value that runs straight against the grain of arithmetic commensuration.

Even in the unremittingly calculative “border balance” economy, then, the disproportion between currencies bears a weight that contradicts clean commensuration. More is at stake in a dollar than the practical possibilities of purchase that it opens. I ask a friend why tips for strippers seem always to be dollar bills. First she gives a rationalist, arithmetic explanation: the dollar bill is the “smallest” in value, and one wants to give as many tips as possible, to keep the stripper coming back to one’s table. Then, after a silence, she muses: “It’s funny, because even though it’s worth almost twice as much, a 20-peso tip would really look poor.” The observation sounds laconic next to 50-something Dara’s bald enthusiasm. As she explained Tijuana’s predilection for casual dress to me, the extra impact of the dollar erupted into our conversation as abruptly as she imagined it erupting between strangers on the street:

Aquí en Tijuana te encuentras a un cuate de botas, liváis, el pelo medio mal arreglado, una camisetucha así. ¡y te saca el fajo de *dólares!* fajo de billetes de *cien dólares*.

Here in Tijuana you run into a guy with boots, Levi’s, kinda messed-up hair, some funky shirt like so. and he takes out a *wad of dollars* on you! a *wad of hundred-dollar* bills.

As Lemon notes, “the perception of currency value is an affective and aesthetic matter, stretching beyond potential exchange force” (1998:23). A popular song puts the matter even more strongly, reserving true agency (and money’s full fetishization) for US currency, the peso mute and helpless before it: “And dollars,” the lyrics proclaim, “are always the ones that speak.”<sup>15</sup>

Affect, aesthetics, and even agency begin, perhaps, in the simple rub between two forms of numeric commensuration. Exchange rates may put a dollar at 12 or 13 (now 17) pesos, but currency conversion slips constantly into the disproportion of one-to-one correspondence, which it itself evokes. One almost never hears of what a peso is worth in cents, for instance; dollars appear in whole integers, for they are the commodity “bought” and “sold,” while their price is set in fractioned pesos. Elderly Mercedes, making a payment at a Sears in the US, counted out a slim stack of neatly preserved \$20 bills. At the bottom, however, a 20-peso note had slipped in. She smiled as she laid it aside: “*Pobrecito, cómo me lo desprecian*” (My poor little one, how they do disdain it). The idea that anyone could mistake a peso for a dollar provokes laughter—friends roared in hilarity over a young American who, newly arrived in Tijuana, decided to take public transport downtown. “Six,” the driver told him. “Six what, dollars or pesos?” the young man asked. “Dollars!” the driver replied, and he handed them over. The possibility of his being so royally ripped off is only testament to the infinite wealth in which Americans wallow, and which lacks any sense of measure or proportion. The story ends up as proof of the value beyond value that, in effect, dollars may come to represent.

Many of the same assumptions of excessive wealth and of the ensuing incapacity to distinguish dollars from pesos were behind one woman’s painstaking explanation to me, as an American, that while a child with a peso draws no notice, a child in possession of a dollar is a different matter. The image of the dollar in the Mexican child’s hand—shocking, attention-grabbing, out of place—rests on the unspoken presumption of its normalcy in the hand of the American child. It rests on the parallel elision of the poor American and of the wealthy Mexican child; dollar and peso again come to stand for an essentialized difference in national economic potential—the two children, dollar and peso respectively in hand, visualized in the moment in which they are poised to spend. Their economic agency is poignantly dissimilar.

One-to-one comparison is obtrusively disproportionate, but in a way that may threaten to exceed the very possibility of comparison. This is a subtext of the stories above: how could you ever explain to a being from the universe of the dollar how different they really are? Why commensurate at all, indeed, before a currency that drifts down from an entirely different order of value? A librarian told me of his anger when Mexican-Americans

(who presumably should honor the bond of national origins) underpay Mexican artisans. The latter accept because they assume that if the payment is in dollars, it must be worth a lot. Dollars could not possibly be measly, even if there are only three of them. The story undoubtedly serves the librarian to distinguish himself from the artisans. *His* arithmetic reason is not blinded by the dollar; *he* can remember that it is only worth so many pesos. But the story tells also of a general menace circulating within arithmetic conversion. The misunderstanding the librarian attributes to the artisans is only an exaggerated version of a disproportionate attraction he himself, perhaps, cannot entirely avoid, but only ward off or displace by means of narratives like this one.

Dollar and peso must be kept within proportion not just to avoid being ripped off, but because of a deeper, contaminating potential the dollar bears. If one does not school oneself in clean commensuration, if one lets oneself feel too strongly the dollar's pull, one might find that one has slipped beyond the nation and become a traitor to it. A group of engineers told me about a "*gringo*" regularly sent to their plant by US headquarters. "He's got our number," they sheepishly grinned, referring to his familiarity with Mexican culture. To illustrate, they described how he confronted a cabbie who, hoping to reap some extra cash, insisted on being paid in dollars. The gringo responded by hurling his pesos at the driver, shouting, "Mexican! You're in Mexico!" Whether or not the latter was effectively shamed by the nationalist accusation in the mouth of the gringo, the engineers at least feel its sting. They accept that proper nationalism means policing the circulations in which sovereignty is at stake—to each nation its own currency, and "we" are all responsible for ensuring that it is so. How embarrassing that a gringo should be a better nationalist than oneself. And so the engineers laugh at the taxi driver, staving off the sense they too might be vulnerable to similar accusations.

Between taxi driver and gringo, the asymmetry of national value forcefully erupts. Those party or present to such ruptures keep them in circulation as stories that attempt, failingly (the engineers' uncomfortable laughter, the librarian's frustration), to patch incommensuration over a posteriori. Dollars do not so easily commensurate into pesos, nor vice versa. In the face of such nationalist quandaries, claims in Tijuana abound as to a fundamental equivalence that goes far beyond that of the two monetary forms. Advertising a currency exchange business, a billboard puns: "Looking for the best guy/rate of exchange? We've got him/it" (see Figure 1). In the



PHOTO BY RIHAN YEH

Figure 1: Signage above a currency exchange business.

middle, the “best guys” face off in symmetrical array: five on the US side, five on the Mexican, two sets of national heroes symbolizing national historico-cultural value. The “best guys” are also, of course, the state’s guys, recognizably drawn from the bills on which they circulate. The billboard thus draws together the symmetry of valued national pasts with the everyday, arithmetic commensurability between dollar and peso.

But Mexico’s “best guys,” as should be all too clear by now, are never enough to secure the equivalence between sovereignties. A young bricklayer once explained to me what he described as a subtle and often unperceived difference in the Mexican and US signs for money. While the peso sign is run through by a single vertical line, he said, the dollar sign is run through by two.<sup>16</sup> In his analysis, this difference was but another indication of the gringos’ distended sense of superiority: “*se creen más*” (they think they’re better, or, literally, “they think they’re [worth] *more*”). The doubling of the line throws off the symmetry of the five-facing-five “best guys,” introducing a subtle sign of difference worthy, in this young man’s eyes, of nationalist outrage. He rejects difference and inequality; there is something false, he wants to say, in the dollar’s oomph. The gringos are not *more*; they just think they are. Like the billboard, he moves from the mere marks of currency to national value in the broadest sense, and like the billboard, too, he insists, ultimately, on equivalence. But his indignation, and the notion that there would be such an externalized mark

of difference at all, is but a reflection of the undercurrent of incommensurability that haunts all claims to either arithmetic or egalitarian correspondences across the border.

### **Consumer Goods**

In the heat of transaction, commensuration is not assured; the most routine interactions involving the two currencies are traversed by the traces of a difference between two forms that are supposedly fully commensurable one with the other. This difference is repeated and emphasized, for instance, when it is lined up with the gender distinction of the domestic economy. Contrariwise, nationalist claims to equivalence struggle to suppress the persistent sense that, in Mexico, value itself may be of a lesser order. The simultaneous productivity and threat of US forms also makes itself felt in the case of consumer goods. Here, too, quantity turns into quality—the sheer variety of goods available, for instance—and qualitative differences in themselves seem to defy commensuration.

“To earn in dollars and spend in pesos” may be an admired ideal, but the practice is often reversed as shoppers take their hard-earned pesos across the border and into the commercial paradise of Southern California. The pressure to “buy Mexican” has never, perhaps, borne much force here, especially since the abandonment of import substitution policies beginning in the 1970s. Indeed, academic discourse often frames nationalism as the concern of a centralized government cut off from the complexities of life at the border. But the shopping trip to the US, pleasure that it is, almost always comes thickly padded with rationalizations that evince the same nationalist anxieties shadowing US dollars.<sup>17</sup>

Betty is a young professional and a lifelong visa holder. When we met in 2007, she had recently, and very unexpectedly, been denied a student visa to pursue a Master’s degree in the US. It was “the work of chance,” she told me, that she was interested in Chicano Studies, a specialty “logically” unavailable in Mexico. “But if it were available here,” she clarified, “I would never have considered studying there.” With the word “logically,” she seems to acknowledge the history behind what degree is available where—and yet this very politically charged history, which presumably drew her to Chicano Studies in the first place, is reduced to a matter of consumer options.<sup>18</sup> No nationalist quandary here, she seems to insist. Commensuratively, one Master’s is as good as another, they’re just not all

available everywhere. She speaks to assure me, pre-emptively, that she has never looked beyond that sharply curtailed consumer logic to any future other than a prompt return to Mexico. "I don't like the US," she continued. "I never have. Um, except to go shopping, right?" The last statement was literally an exception slipped into the stream of Betty's discourse, marked off on the one side by a hesitation and on the other by a tiny appeal ("right?"). Amidst her hammering of asseverations framed to stave off which she could well believe me to believe as an American, the statement was more than a little incongruous. In our interview, Betty performed to the hilt her indifference to the US, in a kind of replay of the Consular interview in which her visa was denied on the basis of the (to her absurd) suspicion that she intended to live permanently in the US. But even in the midst of her assertions of disinterest, the exception of shopping nonetheless parthenetically had to surface.

Betty would have gone on, but I pressed her on the point. "Well, yeah," she explained, "because if you cross, you buy yourself some sneakers, cheaper than over here. Or, yeah, because, well, there are *stores*. There's a variety for purchase that if there were variety here, I'd buy here." With this last sentence, she repeats what she has just said about her Master's degree, confirming the consumerist register in which she framed it. But the word "*stores*," leaned into as if it bore some explicatory value in itself (*real* stores, not like the ones here), conveys again a qualitative difference that goes beyond a commercial distribution of available goods that one can lament or resign oneself to, but that does not compromise one's nationalism. "I love Mexico," she told me, and then, speaking not just for herself but for Tijuana at large, "If you go [to the US] it's because it's practical, right? Because it's cheaper, or because there's more variety. For me, if [you ask me if] I like to go to the other side [the US], [the answer is] no." Betty strips pleasure from practicality, locating each on either side of the border. But, as in her explanation of her choices in higher education, incommensuration peeks through her repeated insistences in all that is loaded into that single word, "*stores*."

To separate pleasure from practicality is itself a matter of qualitatively judging the two countries in contrast to each other. Against the briefly acknowledged thrill of "*stores*," Betty pits the fullness of affect and of gustatory taste as a realm in which it is Mexico that is, finally, *more*. Her early childhood was spent in California, and she reminisced of her mother's own nostalgia for Mexico. When they would eat the little mangoes available in

the US, her mother would tell her, “but in Mexico, there are *big* mangoes.” She would tell her about *jícamas* with chili, or about the Mexican *tortas* (a kind of sandwich) she saw on television. And when the family returned to Mexico, “the first thing my mother did was buy me *jícama*, and she bought me, she made me a ham *torta* because over there [in the US] they don’t sell the bread to make the *torta*.”

To turn the tables of disproportion by making Mexico the realm of affect is a standard move. It is not unrelated to the gendering of the two countries as seen with Roberto and Dorotea—the marking of each as respectively public and domestic—and in this sense, indeed, it is no real turning of the tables at all, for it only repeats the same incommensuration. In consonance with this division, Betty echoes the commonplace insistence that one shops in the US only for “border balance” reasons of cheapness and variety.<sup>19</sup> This rhetoric carries out a kind of subjunctive commensuration: all would be the same between the two countries if not for an unfortunate history that has made more and cooler tennis shoes, more and cooler degree programs, available in one. I can desire these goods without attaching them to the US. Nationalist rants and laments on this unequal distribution thus keep the commensurative impulse close by displacing it into the subjunctive.

Although most cars in Tijuana come from the US, when I took my own for the first time, a friend summarily informed me that, accustomed to the fine gasoline of the US, it would not survive the year. Similarly, a woman probed in surprise a bag of beans I brought her from the local supermarket. She had bought hers in the US for years on the assumption that the ones sold in Mexico are invariably shriveled leftovers—and she was, in fact, in the midst of a subjunctively commensurative rant on the topic (everything good is for export) when she discovered my gift. In both cases, (in)commensuration hinges on a judgment of quality between like goods, and in both cases, it is my interlocutors who insist on the superiority of the US versions, if only to make a point about the asymmetry of the binational political economy. Their commensurative complaints effectively inhibit nationalist accusations, and both continue to shop in the US. But incommensuration, even thus acknowledged, is not so easily put to rest.

Elderly Inés and Mercedes judged Tijuana’s deluxe department store overpriced and stuffy, but on trips to JCPenney and Sears across the border, they loved to linger over goods beyond their budgets, running their fingers across bathmats and gingerly picking up and putting down soap

dispensers and toothbrush holders. Their yearning and sighing over the softness of a towel is a mild form of the same kind of attraction described by Wilma. While Inés and Mercedes live in comfortable homes and have made regular shopping trips across the border for decades, Wilma obtained her US visa by a daring bluff—her means are far below required levels. She does not have even the social capital necessary to use her visa to facilitate illegal work in the US, as she openly declares she would like to do. But Wilma speaks too of the practicality and savings of US shopping; she lists chicken, beans, coffee, and bread as items she would like to buy there—though in 15 years, she never has.<sup>20</sup> She describes her limited sallies to the swap meets and stores immediately across the border, but the only item she mentions actually buying are some cookies which she says she used to bring home for her children. Nonetheless, she repeats multiple times that she likes to go, that she likes to go about looking at what is offered for sale there, that the things are very “pretty,” that “sometimes I even get dizzy from going around walking, looking... because there are very pretty things.” In the US’s consumer goods she can expose herself to something that might be called sublime. It is unas-similable, and results only in dizziness.

The US is a site of fetish desires for Wilma as for Inés and Mercedes; at very different levels of consumption, they share a sense of the ineffable in the goods available to be seen and touched (if only rarely purchased) in the US.<sup>21</sup> However, Inés at least is also full of compassionate disdain for those she sees as unreasonably attracted to the US. She would not liken herself to Wilma, and she does not hesitate to voice politically commensurative opinions in favor, for instance, of the restriction of illegal immigration to the US—the US for the Americans and, hopefully, Mexico for the Mexicans.<sup>22</sup> As the engineers attempted to distance themselves from the taxi driver’s desire for dollars, and as the librarian worried about artisans blinded by them, Inés tries to establish her own distinction from those whose desire for US goods is unrestrained. When Walmart opened in Tijuana in 2006, Inés was quick to check it out, but found it, predictably, overpriced and poorly stocked. The store was nonetheless mobbed, she reported. “I know my people,” she told me. “They think they’re getting the same thing as in the US, but they’re not.” The brand name “Walmart” does not mean the same thing in the US as it does in Mexico. To be blinded by the brand name, like being blinded by the dollar, is to be blinded into accepting lower value, lower quality—but in this case, Inés’s rhetoric realigns



*more* and *less* with the US and Mexico, respectively, rather than trying to break that disproportion. As with the dollar sign traversed by one versus two strokes, one must be able to distinguish subtle signs. Here, however, these signs openly divide social groupings—not the US versus Mexico, but those in the know and those not. The nationalist emphasis on commensuration gives way to an insistence on the very incommensuration it would demonize, as the disproportion between the US and Mexico is calqued onto class difference within Tijuana.

At this point, subjunctive commensuration gives way to an infinitely delicate, and ultimately totally self-contradictory, effort to put commensuration and incommensuration to work simultaneously. Many chains offer the cross-border equivalence of branded value without failing so miserably as Walmart did for Inés. Francisco, in his 50s, told me how “Let’s go for a hamburger!” used to be “the excuse” to pop over to the US. But now, “Carl’s Jr., Burger King, McDonald’s, you’ve got all of them here!”<sup>23</sup> Such a statement might seem fodder for nationalist lament, but Francisco means no such thing. The chains’ movement across the border shows they were never lodged in the US to begin with, and Francisco’s consumption in them poses no threat to his nationalism.

Those who view us from the center of the Republic think we’re the same [*nos equiparan*], they place us practically as if we were gringos...[but really] we’re defending the homeland, we’re here doing cultural work, we’re here, [if we weren’t here] this would already be gringo land. And, well, maybe that would have been in our interest [*nos hubiera convenido*], right?

It would have been in “our” interest to become American, but “we” know where to put a limit to the “border balance” logic. Francisco finds it ludicrous that southern Mexicans should think that tijuanaenses speak English: “Spanish, well, it’s our national language!” And a nostalgic recollection of Tijuana’s fully dollarized days rolls off his tongue as the reason for the southerners’ misapprehension. They posit currency and language as parallel circulations harnessed to the nation-state, they slip from dollars to English all too easily, and they fail to understand the “cultural work” of alchemic absorptions and spreadings “we” are engaged in, frequenting McDonald’s to make it Mexican, paying for gas in *cuodas* (quarters) to appropriate them likewise, and ourselves moving north of the border in a

seeping process not of Americanization but of Mexicanization: "San Diego is Tijuana's nicest neighborhood!" he chuckled, voicing a common joke.

All this transmogrification of national essences, these calibrated unhings of circulations one from another, serves to push the border back and reassert national differences at a point more advantageous for Mexico. The everyday commensurative conflict between nations is necessarily fought, Francisco seems to say, on a shifting terrain. But alchemic transformations of national essences also serve Francisco ultimately and above all against the southerners, who so offensively (or flatteringly?) "put us on a par" with gringos. Against them, Francisco does not hesitate to return to the border as fixed line and state apparatus. "I have a visa," he told me, "and I've not, I think it's been a year since I've been to the US." Southerners think that in Tijuana "we" drown in our desire for US goods, but it is, in fact, *they* who are "anxious...because they want to go to San Diego, they want to go to Disneyland, they want to go to Universal Studios, they want to go to Hollywood." Francisco speaks here not of the stereotypical labor migrant, but of Mexico City's well-to-do. Their desires give them away as low-class despite all their money. They want fantastic things that can't be had, fabulous façades; they fret over them; they are beset by "anxiety." Francisco unmaskes their desires as fetishistic—that is, he accuses them of a misunderstanding in order to draw a line of distinction. "We," in contrast, desire only a hamburger and some coffee, which we ingest in a casual, intimate meal, a rite of matrimonial harmony (he and his wife had lately gotten into the habit of breakfasting at Carl's Jr., he told me). As Inés looked down pityingly on the mob at Walmart, so Francisco sets himself and his Tijuana apart from the anxious, US-mongering South. And he does so, despite his nationalism, precisely by reinstating the disproportion between the two countries, the extra value of the US that he claims to have imbibed, according to the principle of "you are what you say about what you eat" (Silverstein 2004:644), over 30-some years of ritual self-transformation by hamburger.<sup>23</sup>

## Languages

Francisco is confident that the "brand-name coffee" he gets at the Tijuana Carl's Jr. lacks nothing next to its US counterpart. But Walmart is not the only chain to have disappointed with dissimilarity. Inés's daughter, Dara, whose enthusiasm for dollars I noted earlier, explained how "all

the people of Tijuana were in the habit of shopping at Sears,” which she pronounced as a Spanish speaker would read the combination of letters, *Syrs*. “But then,” she continued, “Sears [pronounced *Se-ars*] arrived.” *Syrs* was the store on the US side of the border; *Se-ars* was the Mexican concession run out of Mexico City. It shipped everything from the interior, including “little old lady clothes,” long skirts, somber colors, expensive appliances without warranty that broke immediately—until the 1993 flood wiped out half the merchandise, and *Se-ars* beat its retreat in chagrin.

Dara marks the difference between the two Sears phonetically: *Syrs*, approximating the English, and *Se-ars*, s-e-a-r-s as sounded out in Spanish. The difference itself is a joke on the ignorant. The brand name devalues on the Mexican side, and the linguistic corruption is an index of that. But these corruptions do not reflect on Dara or her Tijuana. “We didn’t like their clothes,” she said, “Tijuana’s style is more comfortable, more informal” (the US, of course, being the birthplace of the casual look). “We” tijuanses are the ones who know that *Sears* is not pronounced *Se-ars* but *Syrs*, just as we know how to recognize backward fashion from Mexico City masquerading under a US brand name. Dara’s “we” is the same as Francisco’s; it is also the “we” of Tijuana defined in contrast to southern Mexico. But in fact, as in the case of the librarian or of Walmart, what is at stake is class distinction within the city.

A sometime high school English teacher, sometime call center operator, Dara struggles to maintain her standing within the ranks of the middle class as locally conceived. As part of this effort, she flaunts her English fluency. But she is not less a purist for all that. Taking the tone of the native informant, Dara told me many times about *pochos*. The term is generally a derogatory one for Mexican-Americans, but Dara applied it specifically to people who had worked or even lived their whole lives in the US—typically, according to her, without learning (proper) English. Roberto would have been an example, and Dara, in fact, defined Tijuana’s older working class as *pocho*. She took pride in a particular kind of linguistic usage she associated with this working-class past, teaching me English loan-words that, she claimed, used to be common (*keiki* for cake, for example). Such words were another sign of Tijuana’s vaunted intimacy with US forms. But considering *pocho* linguistic practice in relation to the US, Dara was searing. Tutoring a friend in the US, Dara incessantly and loudly voiced her dismay: Linda’s vocabulary was small, she couldn’t handle verb tenses of any sort, and she was scared stiff of opening her

mouth. Explaining the term *pocho* to me in this context, Dara brought up Braulio, a retiree who, like Roberto, had worked all his life in the US while residing in Tijuana. Curiously, her disparaging illustration of his English consisted of a Spanish phrase composed of just the sort of loan words she otherwise cited so glowingly: “*Él ‘parquea’ la ‘troca’, pero hasta ahí*” (He “parks the truck,” but that’s it). Dara does her best to present herself as articulate and self-confident in contrast to what she portrays as the *pocho*’s abysmal linguistic incompetence. Not only did she boast to me outright about her English, she also loved to pepper our interactions with a variety of highly idiomatic phrases in English: “Thank you, baby!”, “Say what?”, “Scary!” In this, she was not, in fact, much different from Braulio or Roberto (from whom I never heard any such thing as *parquear la troca*)—except that she lacked their flawless accents.<sup>25</sup>

The radical devaluation of *pocho* English, however, is but a stop-gap measure against the breakdown of correlations between language and status.<sup>26</sup> Like the dollar, English is a sign of distinction. But disarray ensues when it is precisely the lower classes who, as laborers in the US, have the greatest access to that treasured linguistic resource. Against this menace, Dara vociferates her disdain, and parades her own supposed ease in English. America belongs to her, she insists, in a way it cannot belong to those who have staked their life-course on lower-status but higher-paying labor in the US. It belongs to her precisely because she chose to stay in Mexico and seek there her livelihood, her status, and her sense of self.

In the end, and even with Syrs rolling off her tongue, Dara stakes her all on a simple re-institution: “Language: Spanish. United States: English,” as a factory manager told me. “Language” here is but a shortened form of “national language,” *idioma nacional*, a phrase almost as common as *moneda nacional*, national currency, which is, in fact, how the peso is abbreviated, *m.n.* With these four terms, he gave the proportional formula at the basis of clean commensuration as applied to language. “You wanted to go to the US, you have to follow the US’s rules,” he declared. He positioned himself as the enforcer of parallel territorialized circulations that respect national boundaries, but he could not give up his own claims to English either. Like Dara, he insisted in our interview on his fluency. As a result of this logic, both are obligated to devise ever-finer systems for distinguishing types of usage which respect or don’t respect the border and the homogeneous circulations it, in principle, demands. Commensuration amidst such a cross-hatching of distinctions becomes a complicated matter indeed.

Chatting with a businessman in his shop, I asked how he thought a new law requiring US citizens to show their passports in order to re-enter the US would impact Tijuana. He declared that the effect would be null: "Just as we need them, they need us." The statement struck me as bizarrely out of touch with the political economy of dependency between the US and Mexico at large, as reflected in the very different reasons residents of the US and Mexico generally have for crossing the border. A few minutes later, on a different topic, he had occasion to ask (with notable stiffness) how a particular word would be said in English; he then proceeded to tease me about how I occasionally fail to roll my *r*'s—although I had not made this mistake at the time. After claiming symmetry in an economic register, he went on to perform it in a linguistic register. Two forceful assertions of commensurability served him to maintain equal footing with a foreign interlocutor. With his teasing, he pointedly reminded me that, though he may lack a vocabulary word in English, my Spanish is not perfect, either.

The international dimension of distinction was not the only one at stake in this interaction, though. The word for which this man requested a translation belonged, he told me, to a vocabulary used amongst "us" in his business, but which would be unintelligible to his (primarily working-class) clients. "That's how we talk here," he explained, suddenly sitting up very straight and spreading his arms in a mock oratorical gesture. What drove him to ask for the equivalent in English, then, was the worry that he might know only the "low" tongue. He would stand, thus, not in the position of the self-confident businessman, but be helplessly resignified as a lowly client before whatever English-speaking interlocutor he might have to deal with, thus replicating at the level of interaction the inequality he so emphatically denied in speaking of the trans-border economy. Across the national divide, he and I nonetheless trade our knowledge of the high tongue. The "we" of "that's how we talk here" subtly inflates to indicate a transnational class distinguished from the lowly "client." His efforts, indeed, are exactly parallel to Dara's repeated explanations of pocho English. With them, she reaches out to me to build an alliance and a sense of distinction that, each of us on our own side of the border, set us apart from the ignorant pocho. With her English, Dara and the businessman both do the same thing as Francisco with his hamburgers: they cross the border only to reinstate it; they commensurate themselves to their peers in the US by scaling levels of language and aligning them

with social differences in each country. But they can never be sure their English will command more recognition than they believe the *pochos'* does. They can never be sure the scales won't slip, and a different equation take their place: the US again to Mexico as more is to less, as high to low, or better to worse.

I always thought that Dara's habit of sprinkling in English phrases was an effect of her interlocution with me as an American, but this practice is typical of the tijuanaense middle class to which she aspires. Awaiting the trolley in downtown San Diego one night, I was surprised by well-coordinated voices singing English pop in harmony. A largish group of teenagers was approaching the station. As they passed me, one of the boys joked loudly, imitating some cymbal-type touch: "*Ah, sí, tshh-tshh, ¿verdad?*" (oh yeah, tshh-tshh, right?). Singing, I noticed no accent, but the comment in Spanish did not strike me, either, as that of someone who had grown up in the US.

The trains at that late hour are a drab scene: drab fluorescent lights, drab faces staring drably into space. The teenagers would have none of it. Without abandoning the same rhythm or volume of banter, they filed onto the train and marched back down its length to find a seat just in front of me. Like their banter, their garb bore daring notes: the oversized hot pink heart-shaped earrings of one, the black-and-white-striped cap of another. They switched between English and Spanish at a frenetic pace. As one of the boys rearranged his hat and hair, a girl looked on, smiling: "Oh my God. No. No." And then, again in English, "There you go." They reviewed each other's purchases: "*¿Qué es eso?*" (What's that?), one girl asked of another as she drew a compact out of her bag. The new proprietor held up her acquisition, opened it to reveal the powder, and then, theatrically, widening her eyes and pursing her lips, revealed a secret compartment, where the application brush was hidden. "I'm so *proud* of you!" squealed the girlfriend.

Though they displayed great confidence in tossing about these English phrases, when it came to more denotationally substantive issues, the preferred language seemed always to be Spanish: "*¿Va a venir tu papá por nosotros?*" (Is your dad gonna come pick us up?). It was the girl in the cap, boldest in her dress as in her English, initiating bouts in that language, who made the one mistake that marked their fluency as of a kind with Dara's: "Take us a picture!" she demanded, holding a shiny new digital camera out to one of the boys in front of her. Though

this construction is not entirely unused in US English, it is not widely recognized, and was most likely in this case a calque from the Spanish, *tómanos una foto* (take a picture of us).

Like the digital cameras, iPods, sleek cellphones, and cosmetics that made their appearance during the ride (casually, as if the whole trolley-full of adult commuters did not have their eyes glued to them), the songs, the clothes, and the names of stores on the shopping bags (The Body Shop, Origins, American Eagle Outfitters), these teenagers' English appears as an accessory that their mode of interaction depends on constantly picking up and dropping. The English comes as a whole effect, a persona quoted, a "social world" adopted and left behind in a single gesture. "*Me veía tan poser*" (I looked like such a poser), one of the teens lamented, and another smiled in sympathy, "*Súper poser*" (totally poser). Short-circuiting the problem of authenticity, they make clear that they pose on purpose. The expedition across the border within which these smaller gestures are embedded is, likewise, a profoundly repetitive and ambiguous rite of passage: one only accedes to a visa by convincing the US Consular officer—and, for the most part, oneself—that one is not the sort of person who would want to stay (illegally) in the US. Recall Betty's disappointment upon rejection for a student visa, and her fierce insistence she wanted nothing more than an M.A.: I take up the tokens of the other only to relinquish them; indeed, I can only come to possess them by having already relinquished them. To cross the border in this way is to become American only by forever abandoning the possibility.

The teenagers are not unique in their relationship to the US. Alongside Dara, they illustrate the coherence of Tijuana's "middle class" as a "culture of circulation," in Lee and LiPuma's (2002) sense, holding across a socioeconomic range. This culture of circulation appears entirely dependent upon the ideology that asserts equivalence between sovereign nations and the congruence of circulations within their bounds, but it reproduces this ideology only to contradict it in a temporal cycle of desire and disavowal repeated, in turn, ad infinitum. Even as assertions of equality struggle against the incommensurability that traverses everyday exchanges such as the conversations about tips for strippers, Walmart, or my inability to roll my r's consistently, status in Tijuana remains bound to the reproduction of just that unbearable qualitative gap that no commensuration can bridge between dollars, iPods, English, and their Mexican "equivalents."

## Conclusion

If commensuration slips and slides, this is thanks to a basic impossibility confronting efforts to assure Mexico's standing in a modern world of sovereign nation-states.<sup>27</sup> Commensuration in the broadest sociopolitical sense is an old project, and one continually perturbed by the persistent obtrusiveness of structural inequality. The quandaries of commensuration in Tijuana should not be understood as peculiar to border society—dollars, US consumer goods, and English are, after all, no rarity elsewhere in the country—but as outgrowths of this grand dilemma in which the nation is constituted. If any privilege in this dilemma is to be accorded the border cities, it is only insofar as they have commonly been regarded as “contact zones” where the nation's “dirty linen” is, humiliatingly, put on display before foreign eyes (cf. Lomnitz 2001), and, therefore, as places particularly in need of some good, nationalist shoring up.

But not everyone stands the same with respect to, or even stands to gain from, the nationalist projects of equivalence that may be read and productively recreated in each minute and humble move to commensurate, to translate, to compare the value of objects coming from “here” or “there.” Claims to equivalence are inevitably situated in the context of their voicing; as they attempt to renegotiate North American geopolitics, people are also pragmatically positioning themselves before a variety of interlocutors. Claims to general equivalence between nation-states may work, for instance, as discreet blows to pre-empt the always-anticipated presumptuousness of Americans (the businessman who joshed me over my r's is a case in point). Or, they may serve to build a transnational sense of distinction against those who, like Dara's pochos, cross the border in indiscriminate ways. These commensurations are magical incantations in Tambiah's (1985) analogical sense: they take one correspondence (dollars to pesos) and insist that, if these are cleanly convertible one to the other, then the general value of the US and Mexico must also be equivalent. If the one can be enforced, the other must be entailed. But the equation tends to flip, and with it the equivalences. *Syrs* and *Se-ars* split apart, each aligned with and indicating the regime of value in force on either side of the border. One is more and the other is less. The equivalence of national sovereignties slips in tandem with the minor slippages haunting everyday practices of commensuration at the border. Interactions involving such things as *cuodas* (quarters), a dexterously managed *tenk yus!*, or a pair of sneakers chronically fail to pare down to strict commensurability



the extra charge of value such forms of US provenance tend to bear. Indeed, they more often depend on evoking and recreating that extra charge as actors seek to to appropriate it for themselves, to mark their distinction from various sorts of others.

As it progressed, this article came to focus on a “culture of circulation” that is above all middle-class and visa-holding, as the quandaries of commensuration highlight conflicting modalities of distinction. But commensuration is not an interactive resource available only to the nationalist middle class. The tension between commensuration and incommensuration is alive, too, for those who find themselves disdained as *pochos* (people like Roberto or Braulio), or who, simply by virtue of their socioeconomic means and lack of a visa (like Wilma, or the bricklayer who told me about the double stroke in the dollar sign), have an entirely different relationship to the asymmetrical bi-national political economy. If Dara, Inés, Betty, and others like them strain to maintain the dignity of equal standing, an inverse commensurative claim may emerge from those whose legal and economic exclusion from the US is far more extreme. I would like to end with such a contrasting voice. The Flaco grew up in California, but was deported after several years in prison; should he return to the US, he would get many more years, if not life. He oscillates between low-paying jobs, a bit of marijuana retail, some trade in stolen car radios and such. Standing outside his house one day with several young men of his circle, one of them began to pester me with curiosity: what did I think, were things really better over there in the US? In what way, how? I hesitated, at a loss, and my eyes met the Flaco’s. It was to me and not the questioner, half-smiling, half-smirking, and with all the knowingness the English phrase conveys (a different kind of distinction, a different kind of leveling between us at stake here), that he replied: “Same shit.” ■

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Lomnitz (2011) also uses Appadurai to analyze the US–Mexico border, but focusing on the turn of the 19th century.

<sup>2</sup>In a 2000 study, Alegria (2009:86) calculated that 55 percent of Tijuana’s residents could cross the border legally. Though US citizens and Permanent Residents abound, the Border Crossing Card, in existence in different forms since 1918, is the main document for passage. It permits short trips to the US, but not work there.

<sup>3</sup>Peebles (2008) describes the historical process of money’s nationalization. With currency, it was imagined, “citizens are constantly forced...to gaze back upon the nation-state” (2008:258), thus binding them to it. For a brief history of this process in North America, see Helleiner (1999). On consumption in the US–Mexico borderlands, see McCrossen (2009) and Heyman (1991, 1994, 1997), on language and political space, see Gal (2010).

<sup>4</sup>Compare Iwabuchi’s notion of commodities’ “cultural odor,” where part of their appeal lies in their association with an “image of the contemporary lifestyle of the country of origin” (2002:27).

<sup>5</sup>Foster argues that, normally, currency’s indexical tie to the state “goes without saying and so goes unsaid” (1998:81). The same might be said of language or consumer goods. Strassler (2009) pursues the explicitation of this indexical link under conditions of economic crisis. But one might counter that a nation-state like Mexico (where the memory of a series of currency devaluations from 1976 to 1994 is still sharp) constantly suffers multitudinous miniscule crises of legitimacy, and so currencies, consumer goods, and languages—especially at the border—do point to the nation-state far more regularly than Foster (1998) or Strassler (2009) imply.

<sup>6</sup>Such linguistic use might be called “Mock English,” after Jane Hill’s (2008) coining of “Mock Spanish” to designate the importation of marked “Spanish” terms into US English. The indexical meanings attached to Mock English, however, are the polar opposite of those Mock Spanish evokes: suave, if somewhat absurdly pretentious, modernity. Thanks to Jéssica Coyotecatl for pointing out that the final s of *tenk yus* (usually written *tenquiús*) is calqued from the Spanish *gracias*.

<sup>7</sup>I focus on Ciudad Juárez–El Paso here because of the historical depth it offers; Tijuana has been, if anything, more an outlier of San Diego (Proffitt 1994, Davis 2005, Vanderwood 2010).

<sup>8</sup>One obvious exception is the literature on the assembly-plant industry (Fernández-Kelly 1983, Salzinger 2003, Lugo 2008). But in its focus on the plants themselves, it is very much a study of that which does not move: the labor.

<sup>9</sup>In a post-socialist context, Pelkmans’s (2006) focus on how borders divide rather than connect likewise leads him to a more subtle consideration of how cross-border differences and similitudes are negotiated in everyday life.

<sup>10</sup>Those who flash dollars know they pay for the privilege, for exchange rates on the street are not the best.

<sup>11</sup>All ethnographic quotes are originally in Spanish unless otherwise noted; the translations are my own.

<sup>12</sup>See Gal (2002) on public and private as a contextually applicable recursive distinction. The pair is crucial to the analogic calquing, in Roberto and Dorotea’s case, of gender and currency onto each other.

<sup>13</sup>This is not to say that there are not many women who work in the US. Those I have known, however, all happened to be widowed or separated, in one case, precisely because of the issue of disproportionate earnings.

<sup>14</sup>From a poll on the website of *Frontera*, a daily newspaper in Tijuana (accessed from [www.frontera.info/expresates/home.asp?exp=756#comentarios](http://www.frontera.info/expresates/home.asp?exp=756#comentarios) on April 16, 2006).

<sup>15</sup>The lyrics are taken from “La Ley 57,” by the Tucanes de Tijuana (1997).

<sup>16</sup>This is not actually true. According to some theories, the dollar sign in fact derives from the shorthand for the colonial Spanish peso (see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dollar\\_sign](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dollar_sign), last accessed on Dec 10, 2015); it is the trace of an era when it was the peso that set the standard of monetary reliability in North America.

<sup>17</sup>The custom of Mexican border residents’ shopping in the US began in the late 19th century with issues of differential supply on either side (McCrossen 2009:10–11). But such practices today are in dialogue too with the long-distance shopping expedition to the US from southern Mexico, which Coral (2006:110) associates with the mid-20th century boom of the middle class and the rise of US imports as indispensable status symbols. Nationalist anxieties around the consumption of US goods are by no means particular to the border.

<sup>18</sup>Moreover, Betty's personal relation to this history is brushed aside. Born in Mexico, she was raised until the age of six in California, and speaks of her mother's bad experience with racism there.

<sup>19</sup>These reasons are, in fact, often painfully thin once the cost of transportation is taken into account.

<sup>20</sup>It is hard to imagine she often has money to cover even transportation to the Port of Entry, let alone any substantial purchases on the other side.

<sup>21</sup>Here, I use "fetish" in a Freudian sense to indicate desires that cannot be satisfied by the object they fix upon, but that are only renewed in obtaining it (Freud 1963).

<sup>22</sup>This phrase was a slogan during the Mexican Revolution (Lomnitz 2011:214).

<sup>23</sup>Such franchises have a relatively shallow history in Mexico. McDonald's arrived in 1985 (see [www.mcdonalds.com.mx](http://www.mcdonalds.com.mx), last accessed on Dec 9, 2015), Burger King in 1991 (see [www.facebook.com/burgerkingmexico/info](http://www.facebook.com/burgerkingmexico/info), last accessed on Dec 9, 2015).

<sup>24</sup>When he tells me, three times over, that Carl's Jr. sells "brand-name coffee," Francisco engages in the logic of oinoglossia as a method for entailing distinction (Silverstein 2004). Anxious that I get the reference, Francisco responds to my automatic back-channel "yeah" by enthusing, "So you've seen it?" It is *he* who is casual and authentic, as he depicts his meals at Carl's Jr.

<sup>25</sup>It was years before I discovered Dara's English was not nearly as stellar as she had let on. Of the many, many people who, like her, told me their English was perfect, it was only those I came to know very well who ever gave me the chance to find out otherwise.

<sup>26</sup>On the complex interrelations between language and political economy, see Irvine's (1989) classic article.

<sup>27</sup>The problem is but a version of the classic post-colonial dilemma of "not quite" (Bhabha 1984): the colonial powers, as arbiters of modernity, at once tender and snatch away from the colonized the possibility of standing on a par with them.

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#### Foreign Language Translations:

Commensuration in a Mexican Border City: Currencies, Consumer Goods, and Languages

[**Keywords:** Commensuration, borders, US-Mexico border, Mexico, currency, commodities, language]

[**Palabras clave:** Conmensuración, circulación, fronteras, frontera México-Estados Unidos, México, moneda, mercancía, lengua]

墨西哥边境城市的通约性：货币，消费商品，和语言

[**关键词：**通约性，疆界，美墨边境，墨西哥，货币，商品，语言]

Соизмеримость в одном мексиканском пограничном городе: Валюты, предметы потребления и языки

[**Ключевые слова:** соизмеримость, границы, граница Мексики с США, Мексика, валюта, сырьё, язык]

Comensuração numa Cidade Mexicana Fronteiriça: Moedas, Bens de Consumo e Linguagens

[**Palavras-chave:** Comensuração, fronteiras, fronteira EUA-México, México, moeda, mercadorias, linguagem]

التقاييس في مدينة مكسيكية حدودية: العملات المالية، بضائع المستهلك، واللغات  
 كلمات البحث: التقاييس، الحدود، حدود الولايات المتحدة والمكسيك، المكسيك، العملات، السلع، اللغة

