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On the Possibility of Imagining an Open Border

In Tijuana, Mexico, middle-class desires for an open border with neighboring San Diego, California, are riddled with tensions and contradictions that derive from the way in which local ideals of citizenship are entangled with securitized US entry protocols: legal access to the US is basic for local belonging. This article examines the limitations that haunt both these tijuanaenses' nostalgic memories of free passage in the past and their projects to reestablish it in the future. The most glaring contradiction, I argue, lies in the forgetting of the predicament of those without authorization to cross the border, even as expedited legal passage is invested with political hopes for a more just future. The article focuses on young, highly binational professionals, whose socioeconomic and legal privilege puts them in the vanguard of the tensions of an emerging global regime of citizenship to which "flexible" borders are key. [borders, citizenship, US–Mexico border, Tijuana]

In late November 2015, an article popped up on my Facebook feed: "During December You Won't Need a Visa to Enter the U.S. If You Were Born in Tijuana" (Jornada Meridiana n.d.).¹ Tijuana is a city of some two million inhabitants, the second largest along Mexico's northern border, and though the main port of entry connecting it to San Diego, California, is regularly cited as the most traversed in the world, wait times to cross always climb unbearably during the holiday season.² On the Sunday before Christmas in 2014, for instance, it took me four hours. Many of the crossers are long-distance vacationers, saving money by flying to Tijuana and then taking a bus to their final destination in the United States. Most, however, are Tijuana residents intent on holiday purchases. Given the United States' investment in developing the border to restrict the entry of, predominantly, Mexican citizens, the "You Don't Need a Visa" article would clearly seem a spoof poking fun at the situation. Judging from her approving commentary on Facebook, though, at least one of my friends seemed to have taken the announcement as a serious measure.

If the article can be believable in Tijuana, this is thanks precisely to what it satirizes: not just the chronic issue of wait times for holiday shoppers but also the local regime of citizenship in which full belonging is wedded to legal access to the United States. Within Mexico, Tijuana is geographically the farthest point from the country's center; Ciudad Juárez, the largest city along Mexico's northern border, is half the distance to the capital. Thus, Tijuana has had, throughout its history, a particularly intimate relation with the United States. The dependence on markets to the north, characteristic of Mexican cities along this border (Martínez 1975; McCrossen 2009), is exacerbated, and nostalgic narratives abound of the time when such basic tasks as buying milk or doing the laundry were all accomplished in the United States. Still today, many people rely on certain staples from across the border (for one person, it might be potatoes; for another, beans), preferring to stock up when other business takes them to the United States rather than buy in Mexico. This is not to mention all those who commute north for work; some twenty thousand strong, commuters are often cited as proof of the intensity of cross-border interaction, even though they represent but

a tiny fraction of Tijuana's labor force (Orraca Romano 2015).³ As evidence of the city's intimacy with the United States, such practices of shopping and working are a constant reference point in the production of a local "we."

All of these people moving back and forth across the border do it legally, through the San Ysidro and Otay Ports of Entry and upon inspection by a US officer.⁴ Over half of Tijuana's inhabitants possess some kind of documentation authorizing entrance to the United States (Alegría 2009, 86).⁵ In addition to the documentation indicating US citizenship and permanent residency, the Border Crossing Card (hereafter, "the visa," as it is best known locally) has existed in different incarnations since 1918.⁶ In Tijuana, access to the United States is not just a must-have emblem of social distinction but also a basic criterion for belonging.

"You Won't Need a Visa" plays on the contradictions of this association by speaking to a figure that, from the dominant perspective, is a living contradiction in terms. It speaks to people like a young friend of mine, a technician in an assembly plant whose coworkers continually harassed him: "This guy says he's from Tijuana, but he doesn't even have a visa!" The teasing reveals how, even for assembly-plant workers, being *tijuanense* and having a visa can be equated. By the territorialized birthright logic of citizenship, natives should belong fully. However, without a visa (which is not, of course, actually a birthright), they are stuck as second-class citizens. Nevertheless, in this city of migrants, the native-born are but a fraction of all those erased or forgotten every time the belief that "everybody has a visa" (as a university professor told me) is resurrected.

"You Won't Need a Visa" satirizes the dream of an open border as it appears in Tijuana today. This is not a dream for an open border in an absolute sense, for such a dream is well-nigh impossible where the border's adjudications of inclusion and exclusion have saturated Mexican senses of citizenship. Instead, it is a dream plagued by provisions (as the article states, *if you were born in Tijuana*) and thus stunted and contradictory, seeking to include the dreamer while leaving the larger regime of exclusion in place. The dream of an open border in Tijuana is a "fantasy of immediation" (Mazzarella 2006, 499) that fixates on "access" as a social panacea, but ultimately produces more exclusion. Much as Mazzarella describes of the Internet, the desire for unmediated access paradoxically relies on ever more robust technologies of mediation—in this case, the border itself—to produce the effect of immediation. By probing the always-limited, always-contradictory possibility of imagining an open border, this article lays bare the lacunae that sustain Tijuana's local regime of citizenship and the complications with the border that this regime requires. I examine narratives and interactional practices that produce both nostalgia for what seems, in retrospect, like free passage and desires to recuperate it in the future. Together, these dreams of an open border in both the past and the future provide poignant evidence of the double bind afflicting efforts to inhabit the position of the proper citizen in Tijuana. However fierce one's criticisms of the border, one remains beholden to it. As the state apparatus of the border has developed dramatically in recent years, I argue, so this double bind has been tightening.

I begin by sketching recent developments in border policing and what Tijuana can tell us of how these developments are reconfiguring social hierarchies on a global scale. I then look closely at one personal narrative of free passage in the past to unpack the contradictions with which this emergent global regime of citizenship charges historical memory. These contradictions grow out of, split, and complicate intimate narratives of self and family history. Then, I move to a case of public interaction as an example of efforts to build spaces of rational debate engaged with policy formation not in Mexico but in the United

States: a public sphere oriented toward a foreseeable future in which passage can once again be (purportedly) free. The article closes with a meditation on the implications of these ethnographic moments for transformations of citizenship in the shadow of the border.

Borders at the Border

In Tijuana, US state recognition plays a crucial role in supporting a middle-class citizenship that is strongly oriented toward liberal ideals and that can be claimed, inhabited, and defended through an array of practices, such as voting, refusing to pay bribes, or (crucially for my argument here) expressing opinions on matters of public concern (Yeh 2012). Those who subscribe to these ideals often take the visa as a simple ratification of their identity as good Mexican citizens who, having done reasonably well for themselves as well as being conscientious law-abiding folks, would not be interested in becoming “illegal aliens” in the United States. This ratifying role has much to do with the mechanics of the consular visa interview. As ritual, the interview powerfully combines the details of self-presentation with documentary evidence of all the attributes of status most salient in Mexico. Proof of employment, education, and property ownership are the weightiest, but even water bills or marriage certificates may also be requested. All of these, of course, reiterate the basic status marker of having documents to begin with.

Beyond this rite of passage, the idea that being tijuanaense and having a visa go hand in hand is reinforced in multiple ways in everyday life, from circulating texts (e.g., “You Won’t Need a Visa”), to casual remarks (“This guy doesn’t even have a visa!”), to the public scene of border-crossing itself (Yeh 2009). While the emphasis is on the Border Crossing Card (BCC), US citizens and permanent residents can position themselves similarly as dedicated tijuanaenses, as long as they did not obtain their US papers by themselves living “illegally” in the United States. Thus, through a panoply of practices and everyday discursive moves, US state recognition authorizes not just individual status but also a local “we” that, often, likes to imagine itself at the forefront of properly modern, properly liberal citizenship in Mexico. In contrast to Ong’s “flexible citizenship” (1999), here cosmopolitanism does not necessarily cut one loose from the nation. Even for dual citizens (as I will show), US state recognition can reconfirm rather than diffuse their Mexican citizenship, just as it reconfirms their local belonging. Of course, not everyone in Tijuana identifies with this liberal “we.” While it is not my focus here, it is important to underline the force and mass in Tijuana of a diametrically opposed political imaginary, in which unauthorized border crossing provides a powerful summation of a whole series of exclusions suffered in Mexico by the lower classes at large. It is precisely the growing distance between middle-class and popular senses of collectivity that makes urgent the task of understanding how middle-class dreams for an open border have been curtailed.

In Tijuana, those with documents may see those without as deficient in their Mexican citizenship practices, and the lack of a visa as a simple reflection of that fact; they may assume those without visas must be recent migrants who have not yet absorbed the city’s ethos of hard work and upward mobility, or they may assume them to be stubbornly backward and even criminally inclined in refusing the opportunities the city affords. After all, despite the visibility of gross inequality, Tijuana has historically had among the highest wages and lowest rates of unemployment in Mexico.⁷ While people do voice sympathy for the plight of the migrant, denigration and prejudice can be quite strong. Today, deportees are more salient figures than would-be migrants, and are widely perceived as a burden foisted on the city; for the better-off, deportees are more targets for aid than fellow citizens. In Tijuana, the divide between those who can cross the border legally and those who cannot shapes the city’s dominant sense of itself as a collectivity and its relation to all those who

do not measure up to the entangled standards of liberally oriented Mexican citizenship and securitized US protocols for entrance.⁸

Scholars often point out that legal and illegal are not only codependent categories but also are nebulously intermixed in practice (Heyman 1999). Nordstrom (2007), for instance, describes how illegal commodities are best smuggled in the same containers with legal merchandise. Similarly, many visa holders in Tijuana do not orient to liberal, middle-class norms regarding legality, and use their visas precisely to facilitate illicit labor in the United States (Chávez 2016). For those trying to live up to the dominant paradigm, this fact can intensify the anxieties associated with middle-class status everywhere: even with a visa, one may still be suspected (not just by US officers but also by one's peers) of wanting to become an "illegal." Such anxiety constitutes an especially subtle admixture of legal and illegal, in which legal is never legal enough. Embroiled in the legal complexities of multiple cross-border flows, local critics of centralized policymaking in both countries often represent distinctions between legal and illegal as arbitrary definitions imposed by the state. From this point of view, the distinction is simply an artifice inadequate to human practice on the ground. Here, however, I want to make the opposite point: while legal and illegal border crossing will always blur productively, in Tijuana the distinction between them has become an ideological social fact with inestimable repercussions.

When I conducted my main fieldwork in Tijuana in the mid-2000s, the reciprocal relation between the US border and local senses of status was already patently clear. Since then, the border's role as a policing apparatus has intensified dramatically. Illegal entry into the United States has been criminalized to an unprecedented extent, and a veritable "deportation regime" (De Genova and Peutz 2010) has arisen. Thus, while throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s transnationalism ruled academic debates on borders in general and on the US–Mexico border in particular (Alvarez 1995; Kearney 1991, 1995), over the past decade the emphasis has shifted to border policing and prohibition (De León 2015; Fassin 2011; Rosas 2012). However, just as the emphasis on transnationalism tended to ignore processes of border enforcement that were skyrocketing during the 1990s, the emphasis on policing and prohibition downplays processes for expediting legal transborder flows that have been developing apace. As the worldwide trend of "smart" and "flexible" borders suggests, legal and illegal flows must be thought through together to grasp the shifts at stake in recent transformations of borders globally. In De Genova's (2010) words, in "contemporary neoliberal reconfigurations of 'globalized' citizenship . . . restricted mobility or outright immobility for some is paralleled by enhanced freedom of movement for others" (61).

Building on Étienne Balibar, De Genova notes the role of borders in creating a "bifurcated humanity" (54); Heyman (2010), in turn, proposes that the world is witnessing a new "global apartheid" (58). Summary observation of a port like San Ysidro yields the sense of a multiplicity of subtle distinctions among crossers: pedestrian versus vehicular; ReadyLane documents versus regular ones; those vetted for fast passage versus everyone else. However, these distinctions do not obscure the basic division between authorized and unauthorized; they simply replay at finer levels the sorting of lower-risk from higher-risk crossers. For Heyman (2010), risk is the basic criterion of distinction under securitization. It lumps together everything from terrorist threats, to drug trafficking, to unauthorized labor. Risk assessment and profiling have thus become key to the seemingly contradictory ways in which contemporary borders simultaneously retrench large geographic blocs, reinforce racial and class distinctions within nation-states, and remain intensely individualizing.

Securitized risk assessment protocols have become foundational for what, already in 1997, Balibar (2002) called a "color bar" that does not just divide a global north and south but "runs through *all* societies" (82). Tijuana reveals with painful clarity the border's

role in establishing such a bar in Mexico. To see how it does so, I build on the robust literature that describes the border's role in dividing US society by instituting in those who cross it in unsanctioned ways the perduring status of "illegal alien" (Fassin 2011; Nevins 2002; Ngai 2004). Along with deportation, the border plays a fundamental role in creating and sustaining a vulnerable workforce within the body of the nation. In light of this literature, but also attending to the ways in which legal and illegal flows work together, what Tijuana brings to the table is how the border supports processes of social differentiation and buttresses distributions of social legitimacy and illegitimacy beyond the territorial boundaries of the United States itself. By showcasing how the border, with its constant filtering of documented from undocumented, feeds into and potentiates forms of social distinction common throughout urban Latin America, Tijuana suggests the crucial role of borders in the contemporary reconfiguration of social hierarchies globally. As differential mobilities are streamlined, borders serve not just to delimit large zones of access (such as the European Union) but also to distinguish sectors of national populations. Thanks to its history and location, Tijuana highlights this transformation: increasingly, the border divides Mexicans from each other.

Borders are one of the main institutional mechanisms producing and entrenching inequality in the contemporary world; they represent the maximal form and extension of the policing practices that shape differentiated life possibilities within national territories. Justice may be impossible to concretize in law (cf. Derrida 2002), but it is nonetheless imaginable to different degrees under different circumstances. In Tijuana today, a truly open border is practically unimaginable. To those who can already cross, flexible borders appeal; they seem to offer the possibility of free passage as it once was. Flexible borders, however, involve finer sorting and harder lines of distinction. They expedite some flows, which also means making them more comfortable, at the same time that they cut off others all the more absolutely. With its sorting of legal from illegal, the border makes it ever more difficult to address or even recognize issues of disparity not only within the United States but also within Mexican society.

To highlight this difficulty, the ethnographic cases that follow focus on a very specific social type: highly binational and upwardly mobile professionals who are in their twenties and thirties.⁹ These types may not jive with Tijuana's image as a raunchy border city and one of the main hotspots in Mexico's so-called "war on drug trafficking," launched in 2006. Since the most disruptive phase of violence subsided in 2011, a range of projects to revitalize both Tijuana's economy and its image have burst into visibility (Maher and Carruthers 2014). A significant part of this activity echoes the hipster-driven model of development made famous by Brooklyn, New York, in which "places for cool consumption develop an attractive image for an unlikely neighborhood, which then sparks a commercial revival" (Zukin 2010, 37). Tijuana has art, design, and cutting-edge architecture aplenty; a bustling, trendy bar scene; a boom in gourmet food trucks; the Baja Med haute cuisine movement; and a bid to position itself as the national epicenter of craft beer; in short, the city is flush with new styles and spaces of consumption. The class and generation of tijuanaenses I focus on do not just frequent these venues; they are also the principal movers of many of these projects, and feel the recent transformations in the city to be theirs.

With all this entrepreneurial effervescence, with a strong emphasis on the creative professions, it would not be out of place to speak of a hipster precariat: well to do, to be sure, but cut loose from economic securities many of their parents enjoyed. For this neoliberal generation, sheer enthusiasm, as well as cultural savvy, constitute ever more crucial capital. These types do not form a large demographic group, but because of their privilege, they stand at the vanguard of the exaggerated exclusions and apparent paradoxes upon which

Tijuana's revitalized version of liberal citizenship depends.¹⁰ For this generation of middle-class tijuanaenses, the utopic imagination of an open border has been perversely absorbed by a flexible, technologized border that is a key component in a global reconfiguration of differentially distributed human mobilities. Ultimately, their push for free passage requires forgetting the predicament of the unauthorized border crosser, Tijuana's other half, who do not possess documents to cross.

The Open Border of the Past

I remember that before, when we were little [. . .] we lived in Playas [Tijuana's beach neighborhood]. We'd go walking to the other side [of the border], and they wouldn't say anything to us because there wasn't, um, any fence, for crossing. We'd walk all the way up to San Diego, and we'd come back! [Laughs.] [. . .] They wouldn't say anything to you. And now you cross there, [and] they're like pointing a machine gun at you. [Laughs.]

Daniel's childhood transpired at Tijuana's edge, nestled against what has become one of the most spectacularized sections of the US–Mexico border, and he remembers its physical transformation: how the fence was thrown up, and how it was extended all the way to the sea, and even into it.¹¹ After our interview in 2007, he would see it multiply into three layers. The beach where he grew up, as he points out, is known as the Corner of Latin America, and he cannot get over how this space, that was so intimate to him, is visually familiar even to Europeans he has met. It is in this context that he narrates a past that he assumes will be unimaginable to me, as it has become a bit unimaginable even to him.

Daniel's nostalgia posits a utopic past of free passage, bathed in innocence, in jarring juxtaposition to the violent prohibitions that mark the border today. It seems to provide a counternarrative to what in his story looks like an increasingly oppressive US state, the growing weight of which has, over the past decades, been fully felt in the lives of tijuanaenses: Mexican citizens resident then and resident now in Mexico. However, the dream of an open border emerges only under such a state regime—and that regime deeply compromises it.

Daniel's reminiscence is an exemplar of a very common genre in Tijuana: the personal anecdote of crossing in an age predating the bulking-up of the border. Daniel points to Operation Gatekeeper, a milestone border security operation launched in 1994 (Nevins 2002). In the face of the stark contrasts between “then” and “now” that these anecdotes paint, it should be remembered that although the fortification of the border intensified dramatically over the last twenty years, Tijuana, to a great extent, postdates many of the basic steps in the border's institutionalization. Tijuana was but a village in 1918, when the first special crossing card for border residents was created, a move already anticipating a bureaucratic apparatus of surveillance to monitor residents' casual comings and goings. By the 1930s, when the first mass deportations of Mexicans took place, Tijuana had mushroomed with Prohibition business (Vanderwood 2010), but was still a town of just a few thousand residents. Daniel's own family missed all of this, as did almost the entirety of the city's population. His family arrived only in the 1960s, when “illegal alien” was already a consolidated legal category and a widely recognized social type.

The border, thus, was never so simple as tijuanaenses' nostalgic memories of free passage would have it. Indeed, Daniel's story perhaps represents an extreme in this sense. Most narratives of free passage focus not on walking across a then nonexistent line but on crossing through the port of entry. However casual, these stories register at least some need for dissimulation. Many times I heard a similar tale: “Oh yeah, we used to go across all the

time for parties, to visit friends, no papers. You'd just come up to the officer and say, 'US citizen.'" Nonetheless, these stories are, like Daniel's, bathed in innocence: the innocence of youth, but also the innocence of leisure, of passage for purposes that (unlike work) have never been criminalized.

When we spoke in 2007, Daniel was in his late twenties; I was surprised to hear such a story of free passage from someone so young. He crossed as described in the quote above, he told me, as late as 1992. Hearing Daniel, one would never imagine, for instance, how migrants in the 1980s used to gather en masse in the open spaces along the border, waiting for the opportune moment to rush across (Chavez 1992, 41–48). I asked him what he and his friends would do on their excursions across the border. "That was the whole outing," he told me. "We'd just go walk on the beach." At this point, Daniel shifted from himself to his father, reaching even further into the past: "My dad says that when he came to Tijuana, he worked in the US, and, well, he didn't have a passport." This "passport" is the *Forma 13* (Form 13), commonly known as the *pasaporte local* (local passport); it was one incarnation of the border crossing card first created in 1918. The Forma 13 was eventually phased out in favor of the "laser visa," a biometric card, but legally it permitted the same thing: crossing into the United States for leisure but not for work.

When Daniel was a child, then, his father did not have a *pasaporte local*, which in any case would not have authorized his labor in the United States. Later on, his father would obtain his *pasaporte*, and would use it to continue working in the United States without authorization. Daniel, however, wants to dwell on the earlier moment in his father's history. To do so, he steps into his father's voice:

I'd go walking [*caminando*, i.e., by foot] right here, I'd cross the, the [. . .].
You [or he] would go down the hill [*se bajaba el cerro*] and I'd go walking
from here by way of the hi- [hill], there's like a path [*vereda*].

At this point, the boundaries between Daniel's speech and his father's blur. As Daniel moves between them, he slips between past and present in his verb forms.

Hay como una vereda [. . .]. Aquí había, este, como una vereda. Haz de cuenta que lo único que había era esta carretera y el puente ese. Había como una veredilla, una veredita que se empieza aquí y salías directo.

[There's like a path [. . .]. Here there was, uh, like a path. Imagine that the only thing there was, was this highway and that bridge. There was like a little path, a little path that starts here and you'd come out *directly*.]

Haz de cuenta (imagine, or make like it is so) is a phrase Daniel used repeatedly in his own first-person narration of his childhood crossings; now he puts it in his father's mouth, as he enacts his father telling him about a world that was already gone by the time Daniel was born. This landscape's central feature is the *vereda* that Daniel circles back over, runs along repeatedly, affectionately, with his words—*vereda*, *veredilla*, *veredita*—recalling almost the touch of his father's feet daily, repeatedly along it. The *vereda* recalls Daniel's own youthful walking twenty-some years later, but there was no *vereda* for him. Its magic was already gone: "[It] starts here and you'd come out *directly*."

The magic of the *vereda* is the magic of true immediation (cf. Mazzarella 2006), as it can appear only in retrospect, as an irrecoverable past. A gap remains between his father's free passage and Daniel's, even as he does his best to draw them together into a single past utopia, even as he elaborates the poetic parallel between his father's walking and his own, and even as he moves into his father's voice in such extended fashion that I have to stop

him to ask, “But you didn’t live any of this yourself?” This same gap is registered, too, in the slippage between the two laughs of disbelief he proffered in the excerpt that opens this section, when he first introduced the whole theme of free passage into our conversation: “We’d walk all the way to San Diego and we’d come back [he laughs],” and then, a moment later, “Now you cross here, [and] they’re pointing a machine gun at you [he laughs again].” The second laugh came at the way the border has closed, but the first returns more forcefully as our conversation continues.

Speaking of his father, Daniel explains (or, rather, fails to explain):

But he never . . . I don’t know why, really. [Laughs.] Even now I can’t, can’t, can’t understand it, but he never. He never got his green card [US permanent residency] or anything.

Daniel’s incomprehension speaks precisely to the historical distance between his father and himself. It is as if he wants his father to have operated with the benefit of hindsight, to foresee and forestall against a future in which the border would be closed. It is unbelievable that as kids they would just walk back; it is unbelievable his father never thought to get papers. Daniel, subject of the full-blown regime of the border and its unremitting separation of populations, would not make such a mistake. He is a professional, he holds a college degree, and has a good job; he has never worked in the United States, and he would not jeopardize his legal passage by doing so. Instead, our next two hours of conversation revolved around the topic of his new US girlfriend. We did not openly broach the possibility of his eventually marrying her and thus obtaining US permanent residency, but it remained an undercurrent animating our talk.

Daniel’s generation may indulge in nostalgic reminiscence of the purportedly open border of their youth, but their status in the present depends on a wedge driven ever deeper between their own legal crossing and the crossing for work that has been increasingly criminalized and stigmatized since the time when Daniel’s father was a young man. Again, Daniel’s story reveals a subtle breach. While his father’s passage and labor stand as the history of free passage at the basis of a tijuanaense “we,” the crossers who triggered Operation Gatekeeper and the definitive acceleration of the border’s closure are, for Daniel, outsiders, and it is because of them, not “us,” that things changed. “There were a lot of people who couldn’t cross to the United States. And then they [the United States] started to put, like [. . .], a chain-link fence so the people couldn’t cross,” he explains. As a moral community of legal crossers, Tijuana is founded on the erasure of the unauthorized labor migrant and his or her exclusion from the “we tijuanaenses.” This erasure both enables and infects middle-class tijuanaenses’ nostalgia for what they imagine used to be an open border, just as it enables and infects the desire for what seems like it could be, again, an open border.

The Open Border of the Future

Jorge is about the same age as Daniel, and he is also a professional. He received his Bachelor’s degree at a university in San Diego and is an expert in border issues; as a dual citizen, he works the precarious labor market of local politics in both Tijuana and San Diego. Jorge is an ardent crusader against what he sees as the illogical, damaging, and deeply unjust division between the two countries. On Facebook, for instance, he posted in English: “Impressive to see how on one hand both governments promote the \$500 B trade relation but on another hand create thicker and thicker [*sic*] borders that hurt.”¹² Another post noted that “in this day and age (when we have drones exploring the surface of mars) we should not be making honest law-abiding people [. . .] wait in line for hours when they are

crossing to shop in the United States.”¹³ A smart, flexible port is perhaps the most open border one can imagine under current circumstances, and Jorge’s political project should be read in light of his generation’s utopic memories of an open border. What, however, are the hidden assumptions of this new kind of purportedly free passage for which he fights? What future might it herald?

One summer night in 2014, I sat in a hip, new, repurposed space in downtown Tijuana with some fifteen people, most of us in our twenties or thirties, listening to a presentation by Mónica Schroeder, the dynamic young founder of TJ Te Quiero (TJTQ; TJ I Love You).¹⁴ TJTQ is a project to improve the border-crossing experience. In its scant year of existence, Schroeder told us, TJTQ had, out of a tiny storefront alongside the pedestrian line, bombarded crossers with bubbles, perfume, upbeat songs like John Lennon’s “Imagine” or Arlen and Harburg’s “Over the Rainbow,” and even free parasols. To celebrate the project’s anniversary at its storefront location, Schroeder had passed out balloons, which were then released en masse to drift across the border as they would. Indeed, she handed some out to us, inviting us to blow them up and post pictures on Twitter with the hashtag “borderunity” (in English). Our indoor, nighttime pictures would then join those posted from the celebration at the storefront, merging the literal sky with the transnational “cloud” of cyberspace.

With a sort of Valley Girl verve marked by the inflections of young, upper-class Mexico City, Schroeder reenacted herself asking a US Customs and Border Protection Officer, “Why the bad vibe? It’s a transborder community, don’t you get it?” Her audience responded with enthusiasm, but when one of the organizers—himself a young professional with a degree from a US university—asked her to expand on her government connections, she became serious. The US government does not care, she explained, because they do not know. She outlined the extremity of conditions—no shade, no place to pee, people passing out, a man who died, a woman who aborted—and confidently declared, “I believe that if someone sees what’s happening at the border, they’ll want to fix it.” When a young woman in the audience put forward that what we were talking about was a “human rights violation,” solemn nods and murmurs of assent went around the room.

In the midst of this concerned consensus, an older man raised his hand. Only 30 percent of the city’s population has a visa, he pointed out, adding that many people do not care about conditions at the port because they cannot legally cross.¹⁵ “There is a lack of democratization,” he declared. Nonetheless, he went on to outline his own civil society *iniciativa* (initiative) to *agilizar el cruce* (make the crossing more agile). He cited statistics and academic studies, and hinted at the links his group was cultivating in Tijuana’s government and business sectors. As he went on, it was easy to see how the younger people might perceive him as an old-school activist, lecturing them on the “right way” to do politics, and I was not surprised when one of the organizers curtly cut him short. Whatever the issues of style, though, he was the only person willing to remind the little gathering of the other Tijuana, composed of all those without papers and without any stake in the comforts and qualities of legal passage. After he was silenced, no one returned to this question.

My companion that night was another tijuanaense of the same generation as Daniel, Jorge, and the event organizers; he too is a professional with a degree from a US university, living in Tijuana but legally employed in San Diego in his area of expertise. Afterward, in a critical mood, he noted that Schroeder’s project was not ultimately a project to speed up crossing. He wanted to know what I thought. I told him that it seemed to me odd to rest one’s faith in the benevolence of the authorities when, further east along the border, people are dying in the desert in droves and have been doing so for decades (De León 2015). Crossing at

the port is frustrating and unpleasant, I said, but to call it a “human rights violation” struck me as disproportionate. My companion’s response was a stare of utter confusion: “But . . . we’re legal,” he said.

The desire for a more “agile,” user-friendly border has absorbed this generation’s dream of an open border, rooted in family memories of a time when the border did not draw such crucial lines of social distinction. As I explore elsewhere (Yeh 2015), unauthorized border crossing has played an important role in imaginaries of *el pueblo* (the people) as paradigmatically plebeian, not only at the border but also in Mexico at large. As these other senses of we-ness react against Tijuana’s dominant middle-class orientation, they articulate themselves in ways powerfully deconstructive of the liberal “we.” In the utopic imaginary of citizenship promoted by those who fight for an “agile” border, however, there is no room for a pueblo of “illegals.” This pueblo is not just forgotten; it is radically delegitimized and even dehumanized. If human rights are usually understood to move the concept of rights beyond the sphere of the nation-state, my companion’s remark runs in the opposite direction, back toward a basic notion of the rights-bearing subject determined by territorial belonging. This vision’s innovation lies in the fact that the state that determines who has and who does not have rights is not the subject’s own state, or even the one controlling the territory in which the subject finds him or herself. Instead, it is a foreign state. Against the free passage of an undocumented pueblo, this vision proposes a strange enclave: the supra-national community of the documented.

With their emphasis on transnational mobility, these young professionals believe they are politically radical; they believe they break with the model of national citizenship. Their use of Facebook and Twitter draws on the widespread valence of social media as contestatory and democratic, a valence that has helped legitimize (and animate) mass social movements the world over.¹⁶ However, if Occupy (to take a major recent example) was often accused of representing a restricted constituency (Juris 2012), the disjuncture between who such movements include and who they leave out can be even deeper where, as in Latin America, liberal democratic pretensions have a long history of paradoxically feeding status claims (Mazzarella 2005, 12). Moodie (n.d.) describes the *Zapatazo Limpio* (Clean Boot) in El Salvador, a middle-class movement, mostly composed of people in their twenties, and organized explicitly along the lines of Spain’s *Indignados* (Indignants). When a protest outside the national legislature was convoked, it produced a thrillingly grassroots snowball effect as only social media can. At the protest itself, however, a second group of demonstrators—seasoned union activists—showed up and, to the consternation of the first group, ran them off the square. In the reactions Moodie describes, they were as bewildered as my companion at the TJTQ event. That day, she argues, two conceptions of politics collided. I have seen few such cases of direct, face-to-face pushback in Tijuana; contestatory discourses (like those that frame the Mexican pueblo as undocumented) remain for the most part segregated both spatially and in the media. My companion’s confusion indicates how rare it is, in his social world, for legal crossing to be framed as privilege, a move that would relate authorized crossers to those lacking legal access. If the irony of “You Won’t Need a Visa” reveals a rich dialogism with the voices that conflate local belonging with holding a visa, my companion’s blank stare hints at how that discourse is becoming increasingly monologic (Bakhtin 1981).¹⁷

If social media often involve both inflated democratic promise and blindness to their own reproduction of inequalities, they do so in a register of immediation (Mazzarella 2006). In Tijuana, however, the fantasy of immediation invested in social media takes on even broader dimensions. The access at stake here is, above all else, access to the United States, which must be not only temporally immediate but also as unmediated as possible by the border:

by the filters of the state and the reminder they can force that one's "right" to cross is not a right at all. As Mazzarella points out, "one of the great structuring ironies of our age is the tendency for increasingly elaborate systems of mediation to be deployed in the pursuit of immediation" (500). Just so, the demand for expedited passage ends up, paradoxically, feeding into intensified processes of state mediation. These processes can never restore the beloved veredilla, the footpath of Daniel's father's youth. It should be remembered, though, that while for Daniel the veredilla is a nostalgic fantasy of immediation born of the current regime of border securitization, his father's past practices and attitudes connect to a live and ongoing world of illicit passages, senses of collectivity, and political imaginaries born of the stigma, marginalization, and sheer exposure to death associated with unauthorized crossing.

Despite its democratic, transnational framing, the demand for expedited passage resurrects the state as arbiter of a new rights-bearing "humanity," whose model for state-citizen relations is that of customer satisfaction. This is not the old nation-state, however, but the imperial US state. The people gathered at the TJTQ event clamor for this state's recognition, not just as individual visa holders but also as part of a liberal public that debates, that makes demands, and that prides itself on its civic conscientiousness.¹⁸

This public prepares itself to speak to US state authority from what it considers the margins of recognition. It does not formulate its complaints on the basis of the dual citizenship that many in this demographic niche hold but on the basis of the authentically transnational concept of purchasing power. "What do you think," Schroeder asked us in a provocative tone, "when you go to a five-star hotel and something goes wrong?" In Mexico, as elsewhere in Latin America, being made to wait is a major form for disciplining subjects into a diminished citizenship (Auyero 2012). In this context, middle-class subjects become politicized by exercising the customer's right to complain over poor service: over being made to wait. Recall Jorge, who has made a career of campaigning for a better border. The first time we met, he and another friend excitedly exchanged updates on just these complaints, marveling at how new the phenomenon was, wondering how to stimulate it, and repeating to each other that the border really is a service and must be approached as such. By this logic, the "we" of those who feel they have the right to have rights, to be heard and attended to, is a "we" of consumers. Human rights, as my companions at the TJTQ event seemed to understand them, are essentially consumer rights, in a context where the border appears as the biggest block to participation in the United States' on-demand economy, around which this group's "politics of immediation" revolve (Mazzarella 2006).¹⁹

Epilogue

On September 17, 2014, just a few months after TJTQ's anniversary event, wait times at the border abruptly went down (Associated Press and NBC 7 2014). The new port, which had been under construction for several years, was finally opened. Now, San Ysidro has thirty-four vehicular lanes with a total capacity for sixty-two simultaneous inspections; this is aside from the pedestrian crossing, which is also slated for expansion even though it already handles up to fifteen simultaneous inspections. These infrastructural improvements have been made alongside technological ones, such as the ReadyLane system, with revamped identity documents that can ostensibly keep security at a maximum while speeding up the inspection process. Indeed, when the new vehicular lanes opened, wait times of just a few minutes seemed possible—for a brief moment, at least, before they climbed again.

Given the remodeling of the port, all the urgency of debate at the TJTQ event might seem a futile exercise. While those gathered shared their sense of concern and outrage, their sense of not being recognized by the US state and of collectively poisoning themselves to demand

that recognition, the US state had already, years before, undertaken a massive infrastructural investment aimed to remedy just the issue at hand. As I hope to have shown, though, this kind of public-making discourse fulfills a key function within Tijuana. Affectively grounded in historical memories like Daniel's (themselves fraught and contradictory), debates like this one help produce an ever more tightly regimented vision of what Mexican citizenship should be, deepening the divide between those who can cross legally and those who cannot. Not only do the latter not participate in these debates, but they are not even a legitimate topic of discussion. The "agile" border and the prohibitive border finally go hand in hand, and the empowerment of the transnational subjects I have presented here is essentially their empowerment as clients of the border. The technification of their public interaction on social media ultimately complements the technification of the border itself. Both forms of action (one "bottom-up," the other "top-down") rely on the supposed capacity of technological modernization to potentiate all social capacities and resolve all social tensions. At the end of the day, the political demand for an "agile" border requires the forgetting (although this term by now should seem far too gentle) of the undocumented—not just "illegal aliens" in the United States but everyone in Mexico without papers for authorized entry. This forgetting itself follows the model of the border and the new global regime of citizenship it augurs. It reflects the privilege, palpable in San Diego, of forgetting that Tijuana is even there at all.

Notes

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1. All ethnographic quotes were originally in Spanish unless otherwise noted.
2. In 2014, just over eighty thousand people a day, on average, entered the United States through the San Ysidro Port of Entry. I calculated this number based on US Department of Transportation statistics (transborder.bts.gov/programs/international/transborder/TBDR_BC/TBDR_BC_QuickSearch.html).
3. Orraca Romano's numbers are from 2010 and include only Mexican-born commuters.
4. In 2014, as compared with the eighty thousand who entered the United States daily through San Ysidro alone, Customs and Border Protection apprehended a daily average of 1,333 "illegal aliens" in the entirety of the United States (calculated from US Customs and Border Protection N.d.:8). Apprehensions are generally assumed to represent a fair portion of unauthorized entries.
5. Alegría 2009 cites his own 2001 study. I believe that his calculation (55 percent of the population) still reflects the current rate in ballpark terms.
6. President Woodrow Wilson established the forerunner of the Border Crossing Card (BCC) by executive order (Rules and Regulations Governing the Issuance of Permits to Enter and Leave the United States. Executive Order No. 2932, August 8). A BCC is good for ten years, and renewal is widely considered a mere bureaucratic process. By 2008, more than 9.5 million Mexican citizens held one. US Department of State statistics on visas (travel.state.gov/content/visas/en/law-and-policy/statistics.html) provide a straightforward basis for this number, as the BCC was merged with the regular tourist

- visa for all Mexicans from 1998 to 2008. In comparison, an estimated 5.6 million unauthorized Mexican immigrants resided in the United States in 2014 (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015).
7. For historical wage and income statistics, see Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (2009, 439–40) and Zenteno (1995, 127–28). On unemployment, see Coubès (n.d.).
 8. By dominant, I do not mean numerically prevailing but socially and politically powerful.
 9. I have not conducted research on this social niche per se, and none of the examples involve people I know well. However, I have interlocutors of many years who belong to the same circles as the individuals I discuss, and who have helped me contextualize my encounters with them. Twenty-two months of fieldwork, between 2003 and 2007, laid the basis for my understanding of citizenship in Tijuana; my engagement with these social circles in particular has increased in my field stints since 2012.
 10. I cannot say how many fit in this niche, but the group of those who can consider themselves *clases medias* (middle class) in Tijuana is substantial. To give a sense of the city's prosperity as compared with the rest of the country, in 2005 only 10 percent of Mexico's economically active population earned above five times the minimum wage (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía 2005a). In Tijuana, 31 percent earned over five times the minimum (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía 2005b).
 11. My interlocutors' names are pseudonyms.
 12. Jorge's Facebook page, March 7, 2015. On the securitization of US ports of entry, see Heyman (2010).
 13. Jorge's Facebook page, January 6, 2015.
 14. "TJ" has long been "spring breaker" slang for Tijuana, but now hip tijuaneños have taken it up, too.
 15. I have not confirmed this statistic, but it is not inconsistent with the estimate by Alegría (2009, 86), cited earlier.
 16. Coleman (2010) identifies two historical moments of hype around digital connectivity and its sociopolitical potentials. While the first, focused on the Internet itself, largely died out by 2000, a second wave began in 2004 with the advent of social media and has not subsided. As Mazzarella (2010) points out, however, it is not sufficient to debunk the hype: one must also ask what it produces.
 17. In 2006 and 2007, I found the sense of Tijuana as a city of documented border-crossers to be politically dominant but far from hegemonic. Articulations of the dominant vision of the city always involved subtle or blatant refutations of versions that would put the accent on the poor and the undocumented (cf. Yeh 2009).
 18. I use public in Warner's (2002) sense: of a group that exists in its own imagination of itself. While Warner focuses on how people orient to circulating texts, gatherings like the one I describe here can likewise plug into and evoke imaginaries of a broader group. For this effect, the intertextual links among the TJTQ event, social media, and actions at the ports of entry are crucial.
 19. Recall "You Won't Need a Visa" and the fun it poked at those who would like to cross the border to shop without restrictions. Historically, local business associations in the United States have indeed been among the stronger pressures for keeping the border open (e.g., Heyman 2001, 234).

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