DESTINATION TIJUANA
CROSSING THE BORDER TO RESEARCH THE MAQUILADORA INDUSTRY

Jonathan Saxon

> "Once you show interest in your labor rights the maquilas get rid of you."[1]

Upon our arrival in Tijuana on February 24, 2007 the air seemed to take on a different quality. The harsh smell of exhaust penetrated the van even though the windows were rolled up. Dust floated in the air as it was kicked up from the dirt roads that surrounded the paved thoroughfare. Elderly indigenous looking women stood along various intersections begging for handouts from the cars that passed by. These are the sights, sounds, and smells of a border town that I was reading about. Now I was experiencing them first hand.

During the Winter Quarter 2007 I had the unique opportunity to travel to Tijuana, Mexico under the direction of Professor Eric Michael Schantz. Dr. Schantz invited members of his graduate course on recent scholarship on the Mexican Border to travel to Tijuana in order to see first-hand the sites, sounds, smells, and squalor we had read about. This particular trip focused on the maquiladora industry in Tijuana. "Maquiladora" (sometimes

[1] Testimony of a maquila worker (Rogelio) at the *Centro de Información para Trabajadoras y Trabajadores, Asociación Civil (CITTAC)*, Tijuana, Mexico, February 24, 2007. The English translation of CITTAC is the *Worker's Information Center*. *Asociación Civil* translates into *Non-governmental Organization*.

referred to as "maquila") is the Spanish term used to refer to the factories along Mexico's northern border. Dr. Schantz arranged for our group to be a part of a delegation that would visit different sites associated with the maquiladora industry. The delegation was led by the San Diego Maquiladora Workers' Solidarity Network (SDMWSN), a grassroots organization dedicated to improving the lives of working people in the boarder region.

The interviews, field notes, observations, and photographs that I collected were the result of visiting the following places: the now defunct maquliadora known as Metales y Derivados, a smelting plant that recycled the lead in old car and ship batteries; Colonia Chilpancingo, an impoverished makeshift village made up mostly of maqulidora workers that lay just six hundred yards downhill from Metales y Derivados; Centro de Información para Trabajadoras y Trabajadores (CITTAC—Workers Information Center), a grass roots community center that specializes in distributing information about worker's rights in the maquiladoras; and the patron saint Juan Soldado's shrine at Cemetery #1. Our last stop of the day at Cemetery #1 was not part of the maquiladora delegation. It was related to our study of the history of early twentieth century Tijuana.[2]

Recent scholarship on the U.S.-Mexico border, known as Borderland Studies, analyzes and interprets how the border has changed over time. Although Borderland Studies evolved from the study of the American "frontier," it differs greatly from Frederick Jackson Turner's paradigm of the American frontier as described in his well-known address delivered at the American Historical Association in 1893.[3] One of the central debates regarding Turner's thesis surrounds his notion that the American frontier was denoted with "a triumphalist and Anglocentric narrative of continental conquest."[4] Borderland Studies addresses the Anglocentrism of

[2] Paul J. Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[3] Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[4] Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *The American Historical Review* (June 1999): 814-841. Historians such as Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron have made a clear distinction between the frontier and borderlands. Both define the frontier as "a meeting place of peoples in which geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined." They see

Turner's work by giving a voice to the social and cultural history of subaltern groups (i.e. the working class poor, women, and Native Americans) along the U.S.-Mexico border. As the border has transformed from a frontier wilderness to a strictly enforced dividing line between the U.S. and Mexico, the field of Borderland Studies has emerged as a way to highlight the dynamics in the ebb and flow of cross-border social, cultural, political, and economic interaction between the U.S. and Mexico.

Prior to 1848 and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe the U.S.-Mexico border was a porous and poly-centered area that allowed an easy flow of cultural mixing and economic exchange between Native American, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo-American groups.[5] Although the border remained fairly pours for several decades after 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe marked the beginning of the U.S.-Mexico border as an unambiguous dividing line between two nations. From 1848 to the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 the boundary between the U.S. and Mexico began its transformation from frontier to border.[6] Economic integration between the two nations, U.S. dependence on Mexican migrant laborers, and the shaping of national identities emerged as critical factors in the development of the two thousand mile-long border that separated the U.S. and Mexico.

Between 1910-1930 the U.S. agricultural industry relied heavily on Mexican migrant labor. On the U.S. side of the border, ideas of racial superiority, xenophobia, and ill conceived fears of disease regulated various border crossing points with mandatory sterilization baths and delousing of anyone entering the U.S. from Mexico.[7] During this time the U.S. agricultural industry relied on

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borderlands as "the contested boundaries between colonial domains" (i.e. the border between the United States and Mexico). With this in mind, the U.S.-Mexico border has changed in many ways between 1800 and the present.

[5] For more on this era see Andrés Reséndez, *Chaning National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

[6] Juan Mora-Torres, *The Making of the Mexican Border: The State, Capitalism, and Society in Nuevo León, 1848-1910* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

[7] For an excellent article on the United States Public Health Service Mexican Border Quarantine see Alexandra Minna Stern, "Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910-1930," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* (February 1999): 41-81. Also, see Stern's article on the establishment of the U.S. Border Patrol, "Nationalism on

cheap labor provided by Mexican migrants from the interior of Mexico.[8] Another critical moment in the history of the U.S.-Mexico border occurred during the 1930s with the forced repatriation of U.S. citizens of Mexican decent, as well as Mexican migrant workers.[9] The years 1942-1964 saw the implementation of the Bracero Program—an agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments that allowed millions of Mexican nationals to legally work in the United States. In 1965 the Border Industrial Program (BIP) replaced the Bracero Program.[10] However, as job opportunities along Mexico's northern border became available as the result of the 1965 BIP and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—an agreement between the United States, Mexico, and Canada to eliminate tariffs—the number of Mexican migrants flocking to Mexico's northern border increased dramatically. As a result of 9/11 the U.S.-Mexico border has evolved into a zone of militarization and hyper-surveillance that has been unprecedented since 1848.

This was my first time conducting oral interviews, the first time I traveled to the site I was studying, and the first time I utilized my own experience and photographs as part of my academic work. As such, my hope in writing this article is to provide a springboard for a much needed discussion among undergraduate and graduate students about ethnography and conducting field research. [11]

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the Line: Masculinity, Race, and the Creation of the U.S. Border Patrol, 1910-1940," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, eds. Samuel Truett and Elliot Young (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 299-323.

[8] Cary McWilliams, *Factories in the Fields: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1969).

[9] Francisco Balderrama, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).

[10] "Mexico decided, under its Border Industrial Program (BIP), to create duty-free industrial zones in a 2,000-mile wide, 12-mile-deep strip on the Mexican side of the border with the United States. The goal was to increase trade between the countries and provide jobs for former braceros. But BIP also swelled the populations of such cities as Tijuana, Juarez and Nogales." Ian Robinson, "Why Mexicans Head for our Border," *Michigan Today* (Summer 2003). Ian Robinson received his Ph.D. from Yale in 1990 and is co-director of the Labor and Global Change Program at the Institute for Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Michigan.

[11] For more on the use of ethnography by historians studying Mexico's history see *The Hispanic American Historical Review Special Issue: Mexico's New Cultural History: Una Lucha Libre* (May 1999).

Our first stop in Tijuana was at *Las Crusas* (*The Crosses*) along the U.S.-Mexico border fence. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of white crosses hung on the border fence (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Las Crusas (The Crosses), Feb. 24, 2007. Photo by Jonathan Saxon

Each hand-painted cross told the name and birth place of a different person that died in their attempt to cross the border from Tijuana into San Diego.[12] This particular count began in October 1994 with the inception of the U.S. Border Patrol's Operation Gatekeeper, a vigorous program designed by the U.S. government to halt or decrease the amount of illegal border crossers. Although the number of deaths posted on the border fence reads 4,045, Enrique Davalos, our guide from the SDMWSN claimed that the current number is closer to 4,500.

Our next stop was at Metales y Derivados, an American owned lead smelting plant that was shut down by Mexican officials in 1994. Since its closure the owner, José Kahn, has refused to clean up the immense amount of toxic waste the plant generated. In 1995 Kahn "crossed the border back into San Diego. Mexican arrest warrants were outstanding, charging him with gross environmental

[12] For more on Mexican immigration in the U.S. since 1965 see Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

pollution."[13] Approximately two years ago the site burned to the ground leaving all toxic waste, mostly lead from hundreds of smelted batteries, in huge mounds exposed to the elements (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Metales y Derivados, Feb. 24, 2007. Photo by Jonathan Saxon

Jonathan Treat, a journalist and independent documentary filmmaker who writes regularly for the Americas Program at the International Relations Center wrote in 2002:

> The NAFTA-created North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (NACEC) issued a report in February (2002) acknowledging that the more than 6,000 tons of battery acid, lead, arsenic, and other toxic substances stored at the Metales site potentially pose a "grave harm to human health" and recommended that corrective action be taken.[14]

To date, the site remains unabated.

[13] *Washington Post*, "A Toxic Legacy on the Mexican Border: Abandoned U.S.-Owned Smelter in Tijuana Blamed for Birth Defects, Health Ailments," February 16, 2003.

[14] Jonathan Treat, "Update on Metales y Derivados: NAFTA Commission Findings Confirm Border Toxic Waste a Threat but Offers No Remedies," Americas Program at IRC, http://www.irc-online.org/content/1608 (2007).

While exploring the Metales y Derivados site I had a moment to walk back to where we parked on Dos Oriente Street. I wanted to find someone to interview when the rest of the group was not around. The purpose for this was to provide a sense of privacy and confidentiality to anyone willing to discuss the *maquilas*. When I noticed a man walking by the site my Spanish translator, Sisi Medina, and I approached him. Sisi is a public school teacher who lives and works in Los Angeles; she is fluent in Spanish, and has family living in other parts of Tijuana. I asked Professor Schantz if Sisi would be able to join us on our trip because I knew I would need assistance conducting interviews in Spanish. Unfortunately, I was not yet fluent enough in Spanish in order to conduct a quality interview. Clearly, this is one of the reasons why learning a foreign language is a requirement for a Master's Degree in History. My translator told the man, Angel Pastrana, that I was from Los Angeles and would be writing about my experiences in the area. Mr. Pastrana was in his mid to late thirties, about 5'4", with shoulder length black hair. I could tell he worked with his hands because they were tough, weathered, and worn. He was extraordinarily humble and spoke with a soft, but confident voice.

The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Q: Do you work in a maquiladora? Which one?
A: I work on that side (pointing to the other side of the industrial park*). Estrapa Technologies*.
Q: What do you do there?
A: I make wooden furniture.
Q: Do you like working there?
A: Yes I do. I like working with wood.
Q: What do you do with the wood?
A: We work with machines. We detail furniture.
Q: Is there something you don't like about the job?
A: Well, since I work in carpentry, I love working with wood and I have no complaints.
Q: Is it a Mexican company or are they from the other side?
A: They're from the other side.
Q: Are there more men or women working there?
A: Most of the people working there are men. Very few are women because the work is too heavy for a woman.
Q: Do you know anything about this maquiladora (pointing to Metales y Derivados)?

A: They had intended on, I mean, when it burned down they left a lot of chemicals and to this date it is still left exposed to the open air, the things they left here.
Q: How many years have you noticed it this way?
A: Like this? About two years now.
Q: Where are you from?
A: Puebla.
Q: How long have you been in Tijuana?
A: I've been here about eight years.
Q: Why did you come here?
A: I came here to work.
Q: Because there's no work in Puebla?
A: Exactly!
Q: Do you have family here?
A: Yes, I have family here.
Q: Can we take a picture of you?
A: Yes.

Since this was my first time interviewing someone in the field I found that I left out a few important questions. First, I did not ask Mr. Pastrana his age. Second, I did not ask him to clarify anything that was unclear to me such as the name and country of origin of the maquila he worked for. Third, I did not obtain any contact information in order to do follow-up interviews. With regard to his maquila's country of origin, I assumed that "the other side"[15] referred to the United States. The name of the company, *Estrapa Technologies*, is a difficult name to translate because when a Spanish speaker pronounces an English word that begins with the letter 's' sometimes the short 'e' sound precedes it. So, in this case *Estrapa* could be pronounced *Strapa* in English. I searched for *Estrapa, Estrappa, Strapa,* and *Strappa Technologies* on the internet and could not find any information under either name. Finally, having a quality recording device is crucial for oral interviews. In my case, I already owned a Sony digital mini-disc recorder and a quality Sony digital condenser microphone. Prior to the interview I briefly tested the equipment to make sure everything worked

[15] "The other side (el otro lado)" translates into "the other side" of the border and is a common Spanish term used by Mexicans to refer to the United States.

properly.[16] Since we were outdoors I turned up the recording level so that our voices were not drowned out by wind or cars passing by.

This brief interview suggests Mr. Pastrana's furniture detailing position required some skill. When asked about whether there are more men or women working in the furniture maquila where Mr. Pastrana was employed he replied, "Most of the people working there are men. Very few are women because the work is too heavy for a woman." These types of positions are filled by men not necessarily because the work is too hard, but because maquila management believes that a mostly female unskilled workforce is easier to control. Therefore, many *maquilas* keep women in unskilled positions on the assembly line while their male counterparts supervise them. Compared to the garment industry and the consumer-electronics *maquilas* the furniture assembly sector had the highest percentage of men workers.[17] In Mexico there has been a steady rise in the number of men working in maquiladoras. In 1975 almost 80 percent of the maquila workforce was female. In 1990 women accounted for approximately 62 percent of the maquila workforce.[18] As the maquila industry grew, more men have been recruited to work in supervisory and skilled positions while most women have been kept in the unskilled positions.

Upon leaving Metales y Derivados, we drove for five minutes and arrived at Colonia Chilpancingo, an impoverished squatter's town just six hundred yards downhill from Metales y Derivados. When we arrived at this site I was aghast at the conditions of the village. Makeshift homes were built with plywood and old discarded garage doors for walls. Plumbing was nonexistent. Addresses such as "C-51" and "C-52" were spray-painted on ramshackle walls on the outside of each home. Traversing an old rickety wooden bridge over filthy, murky, black-brown water led us into the village (Figure 3).

[16] For more information on conducting oral interviews see, Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[17] Devon G. Peña, *The Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender, & Ecology on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: CMAS Books, 1997), 258.

[18] Peña, 258.



Figure 3. Colonia Chilpancingo, Feb. 24, 2007. Photo by Karen Hernández

Crossing that bridge was like crossing into another world. The toxic water from Metales y Derivados, the maquila we just visited, flowed down hill and merged directly into the water. As the *Washington Post* reported in 2003, "every time the wind blows or the rain falls, more of the toxins end up in Colonia Chilpancingo."[19]

While walking through Colonia Chilpancingo I encountered a young boy who approached me as we were standing along the dirt and partially muddy roadside. His name is Cristian Jonathan Harana. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Q: What grade are you in?
A: Fifth.
Q: How old are you?
A: Nine.
Q: What is the name of your school?
A: Emiliano Zapata School.
Q: What are you doing here?
A: Waiting for my dad to come home from work so he can buy me a pizza.

[19] "A Toxic Legacy on the Mexican Border: Abandoned U.S.-Owned Smelter in Tijuana Blamed for Birth Defects, Health Ailments," *Washington Post*, Feb.16, 2003.

Q: Where are your parents?
A: They are both working.
Q: Where are your friends?
A: (Just a shrug of the shoulders as if to say "I don't know").
Q: Do you have any brothers or sisters?
A: No.
Q: Do a lot of people come here like this?
A: The brothers come here. Are you with them?
Q: No. We are students.

I did not intend to interview a child. However, with my recorder handy and my translator at my side the interview spontaneously happened. Conducting interviews while accompanying the delegation was difficult because we were on a schedule that allowed us a limited time at each stop. As a result of this experience, I found that it would be much easier to schedule a trip solely for the purpose of conducting interviews. In this way, I would not have to follow anyone's schedule which would allow for the flexibility that is required when conducting oral interviews in the field. However, on our next stop at Centro de Informacíon para Trabajadoras y Trabajadores (CITTAC—Workers Information Center) I had a chance to record the testimonies of a few maquila workers. I was not able to interview anyone at CITTAC, but was fortunate enough to listen to and to record maquila workers testifying in front the delegation regarding the abuses they suffered while working in various maquiladoras.

The Centro de Informacíon para Trabajadoras y Trabajadores (CITTAC) is a grass roots information center that serves as a hub where maquila workers can receive assistance regarding labor rights issues. On the day we arrived at CITTAC the organization also conducted a presentation about its work.

Rogelio, one of the speakers telling his story at the center that day, discussed his recent dismissal from his maquila job of sixteen years. He lost his job over a release he was ordered to sign in December of 2006 regarding hours that he worked. Rogelio explained that he refused to sign the paper because it contained an inaccurate tally of the hours he had worked. Although it was difficult to follow the details of the case through the words of CITTAC's translator, Rogelio's case mirrored the types of exploitation that workers suffer throughout the maquiladora industry. For example, Rogelio stated that, after working for the

same maquiladora for fifteen years, he was eligible to become a supervisor. He refused to take a supervisory position because he did not want to become part of the management and act as their enforcer on the assembly line floor. Solidarity in the *maquilas* is especially important for combating management's attempts at co-opting a single worker's loyalty. Maquila managers recruit individuals into supervisory positions by enticing them with benefits such as financial incentives or leniency regarding absences and tardiness. Many workers often refer to supervisors as *rompecolas* (ass-busters), or *traicioneros* (traitors)[20]. In order to avoid the recruitment of *rompecolas* workers attempt to forge a strong solidarity among each other. In his presentation, Rogelio demonstrated a strong sense of loyalty to his coworkers. Loyalty toward each other is stressed over loyalty to the management. This feeling of solidarity, friendship, and belonging was quite evident during my visit at CITTAC.

Rogelio remarked during his presentation at CITTAC, "Once you show an interest in your labor rights the *maquilas* get rid of you." Another testimonial by a different maquila worker at CITTAC mentioned that complaints to the Mexican Secretary of Labor were futile because "Consequences go on to the worker because the factories have a relationship with the government. The government tells the maquilas who complained." On the day we visited CITTAC three of the maquila workers present were fired because they were beginning to organize. David, a thirty-two year old man that had been working in a maquila for six years was invited by CITTAC to organize workers. He was involved in taking information from the center and disseminating it among his co-workers. In particular, he was interested in reducing the ten-hour work day, allowing more time for breaks, and raising the standards of health and hygiene in the *maquilas*.[21] He stated that it is very difficult to make these changes because "Fear is used to keep workers in line."[22]

Workers seeking an alternative to the unfair labor practices, hazardous working conditions, and unsustainable living conditions

[20] Peña, 117.

[21] As a result of the 1986 Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), many U.S. companies have set up shop in Mexico because they do not have to abide by U.S. labor laws such as the eight hour work day, mandatory breaks during the work day, as well as specific safety and environmental guidelines.

[22] Maquila worker testimonial at CITTAC. Tijuana, Mexico, Feb. 24, 2007.

that exist throughout the maquiladora industry, often risk their lives crossing the border in order to make a better life for themselves and their families.

Since crossing the border is so treacherous many people make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Juan Soldado and pray for a safe passage. Although the Catholic Church does not officially recognize Juan Soldado as a saint, people frequent Juan Soldado's shrine at Cemetery #1 on a regular basis to ask for divine assistance in crossing the U.S. – Mexico border. We were fortunate to visit the shrine on our last stop of the day. With Operation Gate Keeper and the heightened overall security imposed after September 11, 2001 making it more difficult to cross into the U.S., the assistance of Juan Soldado is more eagerly sought.[23]

While visiting Juan Soldado's shrine I learned a vital skill in conducting research—the art of negotiation. When our group arrived at Cemetery #1 the city-employed caretaker was locking up the gates. I immediately walked up to him and offered him ten dollars to let us in for a few minutes. He shrugged off my offer and proceeded to lock the gates. Subsequently, Dr. Schantz, a fluent Spanish speaker, had a quiet conversation with the man. As a result, the caretaker decided he would give us thirty minutes to look around. Upon our departure from the cemetery Dr. Schantz reached into his pocket to tip the caretaker. I was completely unaware at the time that the caretaker saw me as a foreigner that thought money was the answer to all problems. In contrast, Dr. Schantz offered a tip at the end of our visit. This way, the money was seen as a sign of appreciation rather than as a bribe. Ultimately, an exchange of this type is much more dignifying for all parties involved. It was an embarrassing way to learn a valuable lesson.

Seeing first hand some of the conditions I had been reading about—abandoned factories, men that moved from the interior of Mexico to the border in order to find work, workers losing their jobs when they try to organize, toxic waste spilling into squatters' villages, the dangers of crossing the border—made the material come alive in a way I never would have expected. A one-day visit to Tijuana, Mexico was a great end to a graduate level course on Borderland Studies because it confirmed what I had read about. The visit has motivated me to increase my fluency in Spanish and inspired me to go back to Mexico one day to immerse myself in the

[23] Paul J. Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 270.

workers' culture. Moreover, I gained valuable experience conducting my first oral interviews in the field. Finally, I acquired a passion and appreciation for ethnography and the way that it provides historians with an opportunity to give voices to people whose testimonies are not found in official records and archives.