

Chapter 5

Transcultural Identity

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Abstract

A brief analysis of transcultural identity in the Mexico-US border region, considering and inviting further exploration of its historical, geographical, political, cultural, economic, linguistic, artistic, ontological, axiological, deontological, racial, and wage aspects, as well as other inherent approaches, given that the subject is not exclusive to any particular discipline of knowledge and its study requires a transdisciplinary perspective.

On the borders of all countries, there are unique symbioses that are built in constant synergy. The participating cultures act dynamically, not statically, since the border is not only a geographical line but also an ontological space where evaluative, political, and social situations emerge that shape utopias and dystopias of identity. The border issue is addressed by scholars of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, cultural political economy, linguistics, migration, and international relations.

With regard to the Mexico-US border area, this space concentrates two diametrically opposed idiosyncrasies that make up a new cultural semi-sphere. Just a few steps between the two nations, obvious asymmetries stand out, whose differences lie in the political and linguistic model and where the similarities lie basically in geographical and historical aspects.

In a brief review of historical texts, we recall that when Mexico gained independence from the Spanish crown in 1821, it was called the Empire of Mexico and its domains extended from the south, which is now Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, to the north, which is now California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming, as well as parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska. Colorado, and Wyoming, as well as parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska. The invasion of the United States in 1845 with the annexation of Texas triggered a war that ended in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (), in which the Americans seized

more than two million square kilometers. In 1853, with the sale of La Mesilla, Mexico ceded the last portion of territory to the United States.^{2, 3}

This would be the reason why parts of the United States, streets, cities, and states retain their Spanish names (Los Angeles, San Jose, San Diego, New Mexico, San Antonio, El Paso, Colorado, Nevada, as well as the names of ethnic groups prior to English colonization in 1607 (Apaches, Navajos, “Redskins,” Anasazi, Inuit, Iroquois, Sioux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, etc.).

These are places that preserve in memory not only a name, but also a history ravaged by violence, bloodshed, extermination, injustice, reduction, discrimination, looting, imposition, and theft, even though attempts are made to euphemistically soften it as an encounter between two cultures, to the point of normalizing ethnic reservations as mere tourist attractions, when they were the clear majority. The growing Hispanic population in the south of the neighboring country, estimated at approximately 65 million people⁴, out of a total of 340 million inhabitants.

Since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the border has represented an incurable and historic scar laden with asymmetries. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, border cities such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Nogales, and Reynosa have witnessed the growth of informal economies, maquiladoras, and cycles of violence linked to drug trafficking and militarization.

The region presents enormous economic contrasts: while the minimum wage in the US ranges from \$7.25 to \$15 per hour, in Mexico it barely reaches \$10 to a maximum of \$15 per day. These differences generate intense migratory flows, structures of dependency, and a transnational labor market characterized by precariousness and legal vulnerability.⁵

² The border stretches 3,152 kilometers from Monument 258 northwest of Tijuana to the mouth of the Rio Grande in the Gulf of Mexico. The states bordering the northern part of the country are Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas.

³ <https://repositoriobibliotecas.uv.cl/serveruv/api/core/bitstreams/8bc-28c2a-3ed0-4d22-9833-ce45613da8c0/content>

⁴ They represent 19.1% of the country's total population, making them the largest ethnic minority in the US

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.33679/rmi.v1i1.2326>

Currently, this border is a dichotomous and multicultural threshold, concentrating people from various latitudes attempting to enter the US by becoming naturalized citizens, with work visas, or as illegal immigrants, in order to provide economic security for their families, fleeing crime, displacement due to war, and extortion. On the Mexican side, shelters, immigration services, and security are overwhelmed, with the federal government accepting more than 1.5 million undocumented immigrants since 2019 to date, legally granting them residency as Mexican citizens. All of these factors have caused this strip of land to become an ambivalent conflict zone, either due to rejection or support from human rights defenders. This space represents points of dissonance in diplomatic relations to the extent of conditioning free trade agreements, since migration is a key issue in the agreements between Mexico, the US, and Canada.

Among the dissonances that converge in the same space, we find utopias: a space for artistic originality, Chicano art, bilingualism, and commercial exchange. And dystopias: xenophobia, precariousness, migration, persecution, discrimination, labor exploitation, family separation and disintegration, gradual loss of language, and transculturation.

What should we do about disparities in wages, *modus vivendi*, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies? Should we adapt to the prevailing economy so as not to undermine our unequal relationship? Should we legislate provisions that favor our compatriots in the face of these border inequalities? Should we set up official support and advisory centers in these areas, independent of consulates and embassies? Should we modify international trade agreements? Should we provide frequent financial assistance from government programs? Should we allow this situation because remittances indirectly “balance” Mexico's balance of payments and poverty disparities? Should we leave them to their fate, as has been the case? We must not forget that remittances mean approximately \$5.2 to \$5.4 billion per month for the families who receive them. This figure alleviates the burden of deprivation for thousands of Mexicans living in extreme poverty. It is precisely the desire to raise their standard of living that is the main factor driving migration to the US: the eternal search for the American Way of Life.

From different perspectives, a transdisciplinary analysis is appropriate, as all kinds of elements converge with varying degrees of incidence.

Some authors refer to this area as dystopian and utopian with various names⁶, as its characteristics and peculiarities make it a unique space worthy of the most in-depth cultural study. Let's *take a broad look* at these characteristics:

Transcultural dimensions

The essential dimensions of the present analysis, for suggestive, synthetic rather than reductive purposes, are:

- Ontological: ways of being, idiosyncrasies, and cultural semiospheres
- Axiological: values, scale of values, beliefs
- Deontological: duties, obligations (e.g., human rights vs. immigration laws). Ethics and morals are considered substantive elements.
- Political: local, national, and international politics; citizenship, cross-border activism.
- Racial: racialization of ethnic peoples, mestizos, Latino migrants.
- Economic/wage: minimum wages, informal economy, remittances.

Linguistics deserves special attention. In technical terms, it is bilingualism, but in street slang, it is “Spanglish” as cultural translation, where there are new words such as “pocho,” “gabacho,” “gringo,” “mojado,” and “espaldas mojadas.” In fact, the phrase “hablar pocho” is used to refer to the ability to speak both English and Spanish and make oneself understood.

Idiomatic expressions such as “juats jápening boy,” “okey maguey,” “of course my horse,” and “relax” are common. Derivatives include *cachar* from *catch* (to catch, to grab), *checar* from *check*, *clica* (photo), *gankear* (to ambush), *wachar* (watch), *lonche* (lunch), *pari* (party), *parkear* (parking), *puchar* (push), *ride* (ride), *roll* (ride), *troca* (truck).

The concept of transcultural identity has become an essential critical category for understanding the experiences of subjectivity, belonging, and exclusion that emerge in contemporary border spaces. In particular, the Mexico-US border offers a living laboratory where identities are not fixed in cultural essences but are constantly negotiated at the crossroads of languages, values, institutions, historical narratives, and contradictory normative systems.

⁶ Cultural identity and hybridization (e.g., Homi Bhabha on the “third space,” Gloria Anzaldúa on borderlands).

Transculturality and the “third space.” From the perspective of critical anthropology, authors such as Homi K. Bhabha (1994) have proposed the concept of the “third space” as a place of cultural hybridization, where identities do not overlap or add up, but rather transform each other through constant contact. The border is therefore not a passive margin but a liminal space that allows the emergence of cultural subjects who do not belong entirely to one side or the other, but are constituted in an interstitial way.

This logic is akin to the thinking of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), who coined the term *borderlands consciousness* to describe the consciousness of those who live in permanent physical and symbolic transit. Anzaldúa describes the borderline “*mestiza*” as an ontologically multiple figure who challenges the dichotomies of race, language, nation, and gender, and whose existence is simultaneously resistance and affirmation.

Ontology and axiology on the border. Border ontology manifests itself in the way subjects define their being: neither fully Mexican nor completely American—despite having a visa or green card—but inhabitants of a cultural becoming. The ontology of the “in-between place,” as described by some postcolonial philosophers, implies a fragmented, contradictory existence that challenges closed systems of identity. This condition is not pathological, but rather a resilient form of the existential imaginary.

In axiological terms, this intermediate zone implies a collision of values: Anglo-Saxon meritocratic individualism comes into tension with the collectivist, family-oriented, and community values characteristic of many Mexican communities. Border life requires constant negotiation of moral codes, which can generate both crisis and ethical innovation.

Deontological and political dimension. Ethics on the border cannot be understood without addressing its deontological dimension, that is, the normative systems that determine what subjects “must” do or “can” be. U.S. immigration laws, for example, deny basic rights to certain groups based on their legal status, creating a hierarchical ontology of life. This legal denial translates into what Judith Butler calls “unmournable lives,” that is, existences whose loss does not generate grief because they are not considered fully human within the dominant normative framework.

From an ethical-political perspective, the border becomes an exceptional zone—in the sense given by Giorgio Agamben (1998)—where the

law is suspended in order to control, exclude, or eliminate, and where the border subject is always on the edge between conditional inclusion and absolute exclusion. This reality calls for critical ethical reflection that questions not only public policies, but also the philosophical foundations of the normative order that underpins such policies.

Language and identity. From a linguistic perspective, the border manifests itself as a space of permanent translation, both literal and symbolic. The use of “Spanglish,” for example, is not a simple linguistic deterioration but a cultural strategy of survival, creation, and resistance. According to Ofelia García (2009), bilingual speakers do not alternate between two languages but develop a “translingual repertoire” that allows them to adapt creatively to diverse contexts.

Language here not only communicates but also constructs ontological worlds: naming the world in English or Spanish is not equivalent, because each language activates different cognitive, affective, and moral frameworks. Language is, therefore, a field of identity and political dispute.

Culturally, the border is also a space of linguistic, religious, and educational intersection. Border communities are mostly bilingual and bicultural, although they often live under pressures of assimilation, racial stigmatization, or institutional exclusion.

Suggestions

Given the ontological, ethical, and political complexity of transcultural identities on the Mexico-US border, it is essential to propose concrete lines of action that articulate a critical, interdisciplinary, and contextualized intervention.

Below are five priority suggestions for the academic, political, educational, and cultural sectors:

1. Legal and cultural recognition of the cross-border subject

It is necessary to move toward a binational legal framework that recognizes the existence and rights of the cross-border subject. This includes the design of flexible forms of citizenship, multinational work permits, and recognition of the economic and social value of migrant populations. The legal figure of the “cross-border worker” must be endowed with full rights.

2. Promotion of bilingual, intercultural, and critical education

Education systems on both sides of the border must design programs that recognize the linguistic and identity realities of their students. Bilingual education should not be limited to translation, but should articulate a critical pedagogy that values indigenous cultures, “Span-glish” as a legitimate phenomenon, and the shared history of the border region. It is suggested that educational materials be developed jointly by teachers from both countries.

3. Institutional support for border cultural practices

Artistic and cultural expressions (Chicano theater, muralism, border literature, migrant music, etc.) should receive binational institutional support. These practices not only reflect the transcultural experience, but also generate resistant subjectivities, networks of solidarity, and spaces for political articulation. It is recommended that a Cross-Border Cultural Fund be implemented.

4. Redesign of public policies from an ethic of shared responsibility

Public policies related to migration, labor, health, and security at the border should be reformulated from an ethic of intergovernmental co-responsibility. This implies not delegating migration control exclusively to one country (as is the case with Mexico under US pressure), but rather assuming an ethical co-responsibility based on the principles of social justice, human rights, and a culture of peace, as paradigms to be incorporated into education, laws, diplomatic relations, and professional research.

5. Promotion of interdisciplinary and applied research

Research integrating anthropology, political philosophy, linguistics, sociology, economics, and law should be promoted, with specific application to border challenges. Research centers should abandon extractivist or purely descriptive approaches and take an active role in the social transformation of the border, in direct collaboration with local communities.

Proposal: Trans-Cultural Border Observatory (OTF)

As a strategic, feasible, relevant, viable, and sustainable proposal, we propose the implementation of the Trans-Cultural Border Observatory (OTF) as a binational and interdisciplinary platform with physical headquarters in the twin cities of Tijuana-San Diego and Ciudad Juárez-El Paso (other cities may be included) and with a multilingual virtual presence.

The main objectives of this OTF would be:

- A bicultural entity supported by universities in both countries, approved in their institutional projects to provide human and budgetary resources
- To be a collaborative space between universities in both countries, civil associations, and local governments.
- To systematically document and analyze transcultural processes at the border, with academic rigor and community sensitivity.
- Develop ethical-political diagnoses on living conditions, labor exploitation, symbolic violence, racial discrimination, and normative exclusion.
- Organize cultural and academic residencies for artists, teachers, researchers, and activists who work from and for border communities.
- Issue evidence-based public policy recommendations that serve as input for local, state, and federal governments.
- Educate and raise public awareness about the values and challenges of transcultural identity through publications, forums, educational materials, and collaborations with the media.

This observatory is based on the conviction that the border is not a line of separation, but a space of convergence where new possible futures are tested. The OTF would aspire to be both a center for critical thinking and a practical tool for social, legal, and cultural transformation in the region. It would collect data, publish reports, facilitate exchanges and residencies dedicated to research, and design bicultural programs. It would rethink citizenship and the sense of belonging, promote bilingual culture to compensate for language barriers, support cross-border cultural projects to reaffirm national identity, and explore the legal possibility

of legislating specific rights for children who will face, if they do not already, this complex problem.

Conclusions

The transcultural identity that emerges on the Mexico-US border cannot be understood in binary or essentialist terms. It is an identity in transit, in tension and in constant translation, marked by deeply intertwined historical, economic, linguistic, ontological, and ethical-political factors.

From an anthropological perspective, it is clear that the border is a space of active cultural production, where individuals construct new ways of being and belonging based on daily conflict and negotiation. Identity here is not a “being,” but a continuous “becoming” in relation to structures of power and resistance.

From a philosophical perspective, an ontology of radical *mestizaje* emerges, challenging the categories of modern Western thought, rendering it unclassifiable and generating new philosophical paradigms. The ways of being that emerge at the border question the logic of univocal identity and propose plural, complex, ambiguous forms of existence that claim ontological and epistemic legitimacy.

In the ethical-political sphere, the border situation reveals the contradictions of modern nation-states, which recognize universal rights in their constitutions but deny them in practice to millions of people who live, work, and resist without papers, without a voice, and without protection. The cross-border subject lives under a regime of partial visibility, which exploits them economically and excludes them legally, and which fails to neutralize their origin.

Finally, from a linguistic perspective, the border is a polysemic space where languages contaminate, reinvent, and expand. Far from being a purely linguistic phenomenon, border bilingualism is a form of cultural resistance and identity affirmation that must be recognized and protected.

In short, transcultural identity is not a pathology of globalization, but a complex and political response to the structural conditions imposed by the global order. It needs to be understood from the intersection of disciplines and paradigms that recognize its richness and transformative potential.

Transcultural identity is an undeniable fact that demands critical thinking and action from both countries, professionally and morally obligating institutions of knowledge such as universities, civil organizations, and professional associations. The day is not far off when the sarcastic prediction of filmmaker Sergio Arau in his film “A Day Without Mexicans” (2004) will come true, and we will be overwhelmed witnesses to the complex reality. Let us hope that reality does not surpass fiction.

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