

# BORDER BITES

## “Digesting the world’s borders

### ...One bite at a time”



As scholars who have spent much of our lives researching and writing about international borders, it is not uncommon for us to feel conceptually jaded and to treat as truisms notions that borderlands turn into borderlines under pressures of territorial sovereignty, that borders play a dual role of walls and bridges, and that living in border regions significantly affects one’s social and cultural identity. And, in fact, it was very much with this *déjà vu*—and *déjà* knew—mindset that on April 18, 2016 we embarked on a day trip to explore new developments near the Otay Mesa border crossing between the United States and Mexico.

Otay Mesa has always been an afterthought to the San Ysidro port of entry, which is just six miles east and has the distinction of being the world’s busiest, with nearly 48 million individual crossings in 2015. San Ysidro also led much of the local news on changes along the U.S.-Mexico border over the last two years due to a significant expansion in the number of car lanes and renovation of the pedestrian crossing terminal, all part of a nearly \$1bn development. While yielding major socioeconomic benefits on both sides of the border, these changes still appeared to us as quantitative, as a matter of scale or degree.

## BLENDED SOVEREIGNTY: EXPERIENCING THE US-MEXICO BORDER BRIDGE

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Conversely, developments at the Otay Mesa crossing made us think that a qualitative change could be afoot -- something that might give us a few insights outside what passes for conventional wisdom in border research. On April 7, 2016, Otay Mesa saw the formal inauguration of a \$120-million, private, for-profit cross-border airport terminal. The ceremony featured the San Diego mayor, tourism authority president, and other dignitaries from the U.S. and Mexico. The facility has no equivalents in the world. It links an airport in one country—the Tijuana international airport in Mexico—with an airport terminal extension in another country. Crucially, the two are linked via a pedestrian bridge that runs over the border fence. Ticketed passengers pay a \$12 fee, clear standard airport security and cross the border without the hassle of going through immigration and customs. The extension and the border bridge—officially known as the Cross-Border Xpress (named after the company that built and operates it)-- started working in mid-December 2015. It was several years in the making and San Diego residents anticipated it with some guarded excitement. Now that it has demonstrated its viability and become a reality, we drove to Otay Mesa to examine the border bridge area first hand.

**Second Course**

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We conducted focused observations, or what some of our Russian sociologist colleagues would call “turned-on observation”—as if to delineate the difference between simply perceiving the world around us and actively engaging with this world, forcing oneself to pay attention to as many details as possible, plus thinking, assessing and contextualizing them as intensively as possible. Besides, we had the benefit of each other’s company, so we could discuss our impressions, test hunches, and push each other’s boundaries of observation.



This is how we came to realize we experienced “blended sovereignty.” Not that some elements of it did not exist before in the U.S.-Mexico border region, but that the border bridge brought them into sharp focus. The concept came to us toward the end of our day trip. By then we had had time to be positively impressed as to how convenient the Cross Border Xpress (CBX) facility was on the U.S. side of the border and how many new travel horizons it opened. Road access was ideal. We exited off a major freeway and followed a wide and perfectly maintained road toward CBX. While taking advantage of free and plentiful street parking within a three-minute walk to the terminal, we also noted a vast and well-maintained paid parking lot alongside the facility. Inside, the terminal lifted our spirits. Part of it was leaving behind the rising desert heat outside as we entered a neat, spacious, and perfectly temperature-controlled departures hall of glistening glass and golden brown stone floors. As we stopped to take a few pictures, we discussed how wonderful it would be to check in for a flight right there and then walk over the bridge to the flight gate at the Tijuana airport as if the international border did not exist.

Standing in that space made it easy to imagine precisely such an act of essentially borderless travel – and imagining it particularly at a time when the front-runner in Republican presidential primaries, Donald Trump, forcefully promoted more fences, more barriers, more control over the U.S.-Mexico border. The great thing for us, however, was that even thinking of that border debate seemed outlandishly esoteric and immaterial in the CBX departures hall.

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Where were we? Certainly, we were still technically on the U.S. soil, but all the airlines serving the terminal were Mexican. We were looking at the Aeromexico airline signs at the check-in counter. It is the dominant carrier at Tijuana airport. The only other airline counter was for a low-cost Mexican airline, Volaris. And on the Departures/Arrivals information screen all destinations were in Mexico—a cornucopia of options hitherto unavailable to those in San Diego (or those anywhere else in the United States). Aside from the obvious destinations such as Mexico City and Cancun, we noted a dozen or so nonstop flights to locations we never heard of around Mexico. All of them were available now, and the entirety of Mexico suddenly felt more than just a neighbor. We might as well have been standing at domestic terminals in some airport in the United States or Japan and looking at the list of local nonstop destinations inside each country. Except, here we were looking at the same array of options but abroad. And so, the sovereignty-blending experience started unfolding, even though we were not yet categorizing it as such—being inside and outside the United States and inside and outside of Mexico at the same time.

The blending experiences kept building. As we approached the entrance to the passenger security screening—something that looked very much like a typical TSA screening area in the U.S. airports—we talked to an employee who



checked that anyone who entered had a valid boarding pass. He was a well-mannered young professional Mexican male. He spoke some English—enough at least to explain to us that passengers who cleared the security screening then just crossed the bridge over the border to the main Tijuana airport terminal where they could board their flights. It was exactly the kind of conversation we have experienced in many places worldwide, outside our home countries, where one can rely on local airport employees to have minimum English skills to make sure you can find your way to the plane. It felt we could “apparate”—like the wizards in the *Harry Potter* stories who could instantly disappear in one place and reappear in another—with the bridge and its accompanying security guard serving as our porthole.

This “apparating” lens also magnified our experiences in the next hour or so, after we went back to the car to drive across the border and see where the border bridge led on the Tijuana side. These experiences were not necessarily new and not directly tied in with the border bridge. They have been typical of U.S.-Mexico borderlands—and some people in the United States have found them threatening to what Samuel Huntington called “the American creed” (read, Anglo and Protestant). But they, in retrospect, clearly enhanced the sense of sovereignty blending in ways we would not necessarily feel without exploring the border bridge complex.

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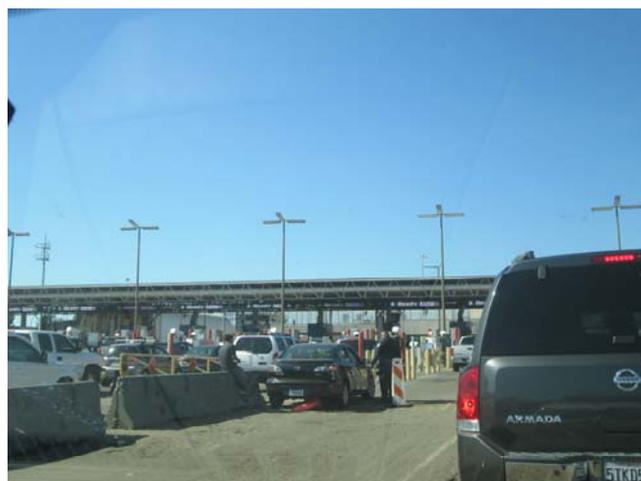
Second Course



One experience awaited us at the Exxon gas station where we stopped to fill up and get directions to the nearest Mexican auto insurance office. Mexican insurance is mandatory and U.S. insurance does not apply there. The woman at the

checkout counter understood my English, but she could only give us directions in Spanish. And so another employees, a man probably in his early twenties, came to the rescue and interpreted. Again, even though something like this would not be uncommon around San Diego, in the shadow of the border bridge, this encounter felt more like we could have been in Puerto Vallarta or Chile. Our sense of here-and-elsewhere simultaneity was heightened. Perhaps, implicitly, the positive sense of blending also emerged subliminally, arising from the fact that the gas station store was well stocked and, in addition to standard American snacks it had also Mexican snacks—some enticing, some suspicious to our imaginary palates, but all more likely to be found south rather than north of the border. And, similarly, being primed by the border bridge, we felt more transitional and transnational in the auto insurance office. The icing on the cake was a seemingly eternal computer-printer interface problem the two Mexican ladies who ran the office experienced and which infused a different sense of time into our day trip, a *mañana* (tomorrow-no-problem) sense of relaxation, something that engulfs visitors to Mexico's tropical resorts.

Again, at that point, we were not yet processing these experiences as blended sovereignty. This realization came after we crossed the border. At first, the sense of contrast was predominant. Roads were rougher and dustier, exits and turns not intuitive, signs non-existing, half-hidden, or misleading. Negotiating deep gashes and potholes on dirt-and-gravel side streets where some of those signs somehow directed us, we were glad we drove Mikhail's four-wheel drive trail rated Jeep Grand Cherokee. Suddenly, barely half a mile away from the United States, our driving could apparate us for thousands of miles to any rugged spot in the developing world, anywhere across the globe. Luckily, the maze of these roads was small and we soon rejoined the main paved road that took us to our desired destination—the Tijuana international airport. Here we were, the border bridge again in full view and the sparkling new extension terminal—but this time from a different side, looking right over the border fence with its tangled razor wires to deter illegal crossings.



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The closer we got to the airport, the more we felt that we were rejoining the first world. The parking garage was easy to navigate and well-maintained. The carports were about as wide as anywhere back in the U.S., and wider than in some insanely packed underground garages in San Francisco and New York. A short walk and we entered the Tijuana airport main terminal. We were back in the sparkly, clean, and shiny climate-controlled universe of glass, stone, and tile. It was like the CBX terminal on the other side of the border – only much larger and more fun. It felt global, pleasantly Americanized with ample Mexican cultural flavors. We ordered Chinese green tea at Starbucks and took a walk around, past boutiques and cafes and around the security screening entrance—the latter being a spacious area with stanchions and retractable belts to organize the passengers into orderly lines.

It might have been the contrast between this local micro-universe of the first world and the desert heat outside and the dust-filled air around our Jeep as it bumped along the dirt roads that made us want to stay longer in the terminal. The idea suddenly looked even more attractive than venturing into downtown Tijuana. Besides, time was ticking away, we were already very much into the late lunch territory, and so we clicked the paper cups with China Green Tips tea and decided to celebrate the day at the airport. We saw a perfect place for it—a restaurant called Wings, with an inviting open layout behind and an attractive red-burgundy granite bar with local Mexican beer on tap.

We liked what we saw and experienced so far that day. In fact, just ten days before our tour, the *San Diego Union Tribune* reported that the new cross-border airport bridge was already having substantial positive effects in both Mexico and the United States and that these effects were likely to increase. Already in the first quarter of 2016, according to the newspaper, passenger traffic at the Tijuana airport increased by 40 percent. The bridge traffic over that same time period had accounted for about one fifth of the 14,000 passengers traveling through the Tijuana international port daily. More expansion and renovation were underway, worth an estimated \$70 million. Total traffic was projected to expand by 5 to 6 million passengers in 2016. But experiencing these changes on the ground felt more impressive and deeper, more inspiring. It was clearly a toastable moment.



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And that's when we thought of the traditional Mexican beverage—a Margarita, an uplifting mixed drink based on tequila and lime juice over ice. For some reason, we thought of blended Margaritas, the ones where the ingredients, including ice, are liquefied in a food processor and can be sipped pleasurefully through a straw. From there, it was just a short conceptual step to categorizing what we experienced in some sort of fun, but seriously scholarly manner. Our experience was of Blended Sovereignty. Someone some day will come up with a more precise definition of this phenomenon, but its two most distinctive components are in this story. First, it is the intermingling of economic and cultural civilizations, as in Aeromexico counter and Mexican insurance office on the U.S. side and the Wings café and a fluently English speaking bartender, Pedro, on the Mexican side. Second, and most importantly, it is more than permeation, it is something that feels naturally to be part of one and the same whole, of the AmeriMex life, perhaps a reincarnation of a denser and richer way of the borderland life that prospered fifty years ago at the juncture of the U.S. and Mexico, but later eroded under the combined pressures of migration and securitization.



It was heartening to realize, as we cheered these changes, that border fences may assert sovereignty, but as they do so, blended sovereignty keeps making headway.