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“Between Borders: a comparative study of traditional and fronterizo migrants”

Abstract: My research project seeks to break down gendered generalizations along the U.S.-Mexico borderland to demonstrate the diversity of the borderland experience based on one’s location and gender and furthermore, to show how women exhibit their agency in various facets of life regardless of the machismo culture. It further examines gendered migration by exploring its nuances at different points along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Overview: “Between Borders” paints a picture of a multi-dimensional borderland region by taking the local specificities of two twin-city pairs: San Diego, California and Tijuana, Baja California and Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas into account and by exploring how proximity alters and impacts gendered labor roles. The international borderland is a hotbed for the study of gender because cultural norms from country to country clash along the border. Mexico’s close proximity to the United States makes it a crucial research interest for American institutions. Its interests are intertwined with those of the United States even when it seeks to create some distance from its powerful northern neighbor. Migration studies are of particular importance because immigration has been, and will continue to be, a hot-button social and political issue for both countries. Gender must be considered as a component of migration because the twentieth-century saw a shift in the reason for female migration, in gendered assumptions about labor and an increase in female migration as a whole. According to Pew Hispanic Research Center, female legal migration to the United States increased steadily throughout the latter half of the twentieth-century—rising to 53.2 percent by 1980.¹ Migration has transformed the demographic composition of the United States and Mexico, and it affects borderland life on a daily basis.

Twin-cities generally develop due to geographic circumstances where cities that face each other across a river or cities established in close proximity to one another blend into each other over time. Culture, people, and commerce flow constantly between the two cities, and their identities become deeply intertwined and sometimes indistinguishable. I have chosen the Tijuana-San Diego and Matamoros-Brownsville twin-cities because they are the east and west geographic end points of the U.S. – Mexico border and provide a wider range of regional and cultural distinctness by encompassing four different states.

**Hypothesis:** My dissertation breaks down gendered generalizations to demonstrate the diversity of the borderland experience based on one’s location and gender and furthermore, to show how women exhibit their agency in various facets of life regardless of machismo culture. I hypothesize that gender norms in Mexican border cities transform at a quicker rate because of their liberal and overbearing northern neighbor. Moreover, I posit that gender norms evolved faster and more radically in Matamoros-Brownsville than in Tijuana-San Diego.

**Research Directive:** My dissertation furthers examinations of gendered migration by exploring its nuances at different points along the U.S. – Mexico border, and I suggest that women’s migration experiences differ from one another on the basis of location. I do this by studying the ways migration patterns illuminate the complex position of women in twin-city labor markets and their households. I explore the following questions: How do migration patterns illuminate the complex position of women in twin-city labor markets and their households? How have gender norms evolved in the borderlands? Did United States influences affect the rate of change of gender norms in the borderlands? How common is it for women to live and work in the United States but have permanent homes in Mexico? I contest the notions that a) Mexican men are the key breadwinners in their households; b) women are second-hand contributors to the
labor market; c) women migrate predominantly as “associational” migrants, that is, the woman follows the primary male migrant; and d) the border crossing experience is similar at any point on the United States – Mexico border. Analyzing gendered concepts from the perspective of twin-cities specifically offers a look into how the international boundary influences the transformation of accepted gender norms. It allows one to see how the fluidity of twin-city life results in a unique blended culture that diminishes the further one moves from the U.S. – Mexico border.

**Periodization:** My project begins in 1942 with the start of the Bracero Program, a contract-laborer program instituted by the U.S. and Mexican governments that provided temporary paid labor, shelter, and food for Mexican citizens in an effort to offset U.S. labor shortages during World War II. I chose to start at this point because the program ignited a wave of internal and transnational migration that persisted throughout the twentieth century despite the termination of the program in 1964. I end my study in 2000 because it provides ample time to assess the transformation of gendered migration in the aftermath of the Mexican economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s.

**Scholarly Contributions:** For much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and political scientists have driven the scholarship of migration, making a strong historical perspective, such as mine, long overdue. These studies typically emphasize the male migration experience as all encompassing with minimal attention to the family or female experience. Fortunately, the boom of women’s and gender studies in the

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1970s and 1980s introduced a wave of migration and borderland scholarship that emphasizes female agency. However, these studies neglect the ways gender is experienced differently based on location. This is especially the case for gender along the U.S. – Mexico border, a diverse region that tends to be thought of as homogenous. Scholars have yet to perform a comparative study on the influence of local circumstances in relation to the transformation of women’s gender norms and their daily lives. In the case of the two twin-cities of focus here, my supposition is that women living in Matamoros-Brownsville experience a more drastic cultural transformation because the smaller city population on each side of the border has made these twins more culturally intertwined than Tijuana-San Diego. Additionally, the Matamoros-Brownsville pair is much older than Tijuana-San Diego, having been established following the Mexican–American War of 1846, in contrast to Tijuana-San Diego’s development in the 1930s and 40s. Thus Matamoros-Brownsville has a longer history of cultural pressures from the U.S. than does the other twin pair. Even though I suppose gender norms in these twin-cities follow a similar trajectory, I propose that San Diego’s population, larger than both Brownsville and Matamoros’ from 1900 to present-day, contributed to a faster-pace Americanization of gender norms in Tijuana.

Sociologist Susan Tiano’s chapter in *Women on the United States-Mexico Border* challenges Mexican gender stereotypes through the historical event of Mexico’s economic crisis


in the 1980s. My dissertation builds off of Tiano’s study in two ways: first, it highlights the falseness of gender stereotypes in the twin-cities and the variance of gender expectations in each twin pair; second, it considers the transnational component of the labor market and its affect on female employment. The transnational labor market is the subject of John Mason Hart’s *Border Crossings*. Hart’s anthology considers the experiences of Mexican and Mexican American migratory laborers despite the political boundary that separates their two nations. His study documents transnational continuities between Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States labor force, emphasizing that the international boundary does not dictate the working relationships that exist across the border. “Between Borders” expands on Hart’s scholarship by examining how women influence and are influenced by the transnational labor market in the twin-cities.

Norma Iglesias Prieto’s *Beautiful Flowers of the Maquiladora* discusses the dominance of migrant women working in “feminine” professions, specifically maquiladoras. She touches upon the widespread lack of men in these jobs but does not explore the experience of men who, despite gendered stereotypes, choose to work in “feminine” jobs. In contrast, Christine Williams finds advantage for men working in female professions in *Still a Man’s World* because their gender is seen as an asset whereas women working in male dominated fields are typically viewed as inferior. My research fills voids left in Prieto’s and Williams’ monographs by examining the delicate relationship between gender, sexuality and accepted labor force gender norms.

**Preliminary Research:** Moramay López-Alonso, my dissertation advisor, is a renowned economic historian of Mexico. Her education has been transnational, having completed her undergraduate education at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México before receiving her

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M.A. and Ph.D. at Stanford University. As such, she is well connected in both the United States and Mexico. López-Alonso has provided me with several invaluable institutional connections in Mexico including Instituto Mora, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. With her assistance I secured two summer research positions at Instituto Mora and CIESAS-Occidente.

Dr. María Eugenia de la O Martínez, who specializes in the anthropological study of transnationalism, women, urban life, and labor on Mexico’s northern border, from CIESAS-Occidente served as a mentor during my three weeks in Guadalajara. Working alongside de la O Martínez provided me with unique access to the quantitative sources available for my study, resulting in interdisciplinary research that will appeal to historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists. I delved into the census database at the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), population data at the Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), and consulted the Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME). These offices/databases supplied a wealth of information to jumpstart my research. The three weeks in Guadalajara were not sufficient enough to filter through all of the available information but my time in the city gave me a solid foundation and the necessary direction for future research trips. Additionally, the networking opportunities I received through de la O Martínez allowed me to connect with scholars in Guadalajara, Mexico City, Matamoros, Tijuana and Dallas-Fort Worth. These scholars, including Ofelia Woo Morales, Leticia Chelius Calderón, Magdalena Barros, Elaine Levine Leiter and Agustín Escobar Latapí, are exceptional in their disciplines and have paved the way for subsequent innovative research such as my own.

I will complete one-third of the research for my dissertation project before beginning my tenure as an SSRC scholar. This summer I focused on the first and fourth chapters of my
dissertation. The first chapter, “Old Border – New Border,” introduces Tamaulipas and Baja California and stresses the diversity of their politics, economics, social and cultural histories. I examine the migration policies and statistics of both states and provide an overview of women’s position in politics, society, and the labor market. The fourth chapter, “The Feminization of Migration,” addresses the impetuses and incentives for women’s independent migration and the types of labor they desired. This history provides a glimpse into the lived experience of women who have created, or participated in, networks that facilitated transnational living. The research for these two chapters will take place at Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología (CIESAS)- Occidente in Guadalajara, Jalisco.

**Research Proposal:** As an SSRC Fellow I will conduct research for the remaining four chapters of my dissertation. Chapter 2 breaks down the regional differences between the two twin-city pairs. Identifying these differences is imperative because it offers one explanation for the ways gender norms diverge based on location. These differences illustrate that twin-cities’, and the borderlands region in general, are not culturally homogenous and neither are the experiences of the migrants who choose to move to one northern Mexican state over another. Assessing local circumstances ultimately proves that the migration and assimilation experience are heavily contingent upon where and when migrants are completing their journeys.

The third chapter of my dissertation examines U.S. and Mexican migration policies at the beginning of the Bracero Program. I consider the movement of married women both internally and internationally as a direct response to bracero laborers. Was there a rise of female internal migration to northern Mexico while men were migrating internationally? My hypothesis is that internal migration increased for married women who were attempting to move closer to their husbands but remained neutral for single women who did not yet have the incentives to relocate
to the border. This chapter also looks ahead to the Border Industrialization Project (BIP) and the incentives that eventually moved single women to the border.

The fifth chapter questions the gendered nature of popular migrant occupations such as domestic work, farming, carpentry, and maquiladoras. Migrant men and women are drawn to jobs that are strongly conditioned by gender and rarely stray from these occupations. My chapter will examine the exceptions to this norm and will nuance the ways that Mexican machismo culture affect the men who chose to work in fields dubbed “feminine” professions. It highlights the experience of migrant men in “feminine” jobs who are forced to defend their masculinity on a daily basis. Moreover, this chapter contributes to scholarship on the interplay between gender and sexuality in the labor force. Considering these issues in the context of twin-cities is essential because border people must grapple with the cultural expectations of both Mexico and the United States when they participate in the transnational labor market, which makes their experiences distinct from the large majority of laborers in Mexico and the United States.

The sixth and final chapter of my dissertation draws conclusions on the evidence presented about transnationalism and the gendered migration experience in Tijuana-San Diego and Matamoros-Brownsville during the twentieth century. I demonstrate that gender norms changed at a faster rate in the borderlands than in the political center of Mexico. The borderlands challenge machismo culture since it is not as widely accepted in the United States—which is not to say that similar strands of patriarchy are non-existent in the U.S. but more so that patriarchy takes different forms and transformed at different rates in each country. This chapter will evaluate the most recent trends in gendered migration to predict future borderland migration patterns. I will consider the testimony of those who migrated in from 1942-2000 alongside demographics to track changes in the migration experience.
Methodology: The SSRC International Dissertation Research Fellowship allows me to immerse myself into each twin-city community and build relationships with local business owners, educators, and religious leaders who can connect me with migrants. I will require more time in the field in Tijuana-San Diego to build connections with migrants like those I have in Matamoros-Brownsville.\(^7\) I intend to spend two months in Mexico City (July – August 2017), four months in Tijuana (September – December 2017) and three months in Brownsville-Matamoros (January – March 2018). In Tijuana I will rely, in part, on the contacts established through Martín ez and López-Alonso to introduce myself to the community and will recruit participants by networking with local businesses, organizations, schools, and churches. Working with Ricardo Griswold del Castillo at Border Angels, an organization committed to migrant outreach, immigration consulting and raising community awareness, will provide me with access to those on the frontlines of borderland advocacy as well as with connections to undocumented migrants. This organization will allow me to be an active member of the Tijuana-San Diego community, network with migrants, and ultimately share the stories and experiences of immigrants who are often stereotyped, misjudged, or discriminated against.

Research for this dissertation will be interdisciplinary—interweaving history, anthropology, iconography, and sociology for a cohesive project. My dissertation requires travel into Mexico first and foremost because of the oral history component of my project. My research derives from the lived experience of migrants, making interviews essential. In order to gather the necessary data I need ample time in Tijuana and Matamoros to build relationships in the community and conduct interviews. These various connections offer a snowball sampling, or chain-referral sampling, a non-probability sampling where enrolled subjects assist in

\(^7\) In Matamoros-Brownsville, I will rely on my personal connection to the community as well as my family connections to the business community, which will offer me access to Matamoros maquiladoras and education institutions. Moreover, I will reconnect with my former migrant students and their families for interviews.
recommending friends or family members to participate in the study. Interviews will inquire about migrants’ lives in Mexico, process of migrating, experiences in the immediate aftermath of migration, kin networks in Mexico and the U.S., work in the borderlands, and gender roles in the workplace and at home, economic decision-making, family dynamics and transitions to life in a new country. The interviewees will cover a wide demographic range that accounts for age, marital status, social class, gender, and family position.

My project relies on visits to museum archives to view and catalogue iconography that provides the visual evidence of gender roles as well as an inside look into the lives of migrants. Iconography is an extremely powerful tool in understanding and interpreting the past; it sheds light on a point in time that cannot otherwise be recreated and gives researchers a visual tool to decipher history. This visual evidence adds a layer of depth to the personal histories of migrants and can both support or contradict their recollections. I will visit The Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City between July and August 2017. This archive is home to “La Colección de los Hermanos Mayo” which contains images of the hiring of braceros in Mexico City between 1943-1945. Moreover, I will visit the Archivo Casasola for a week between August 14 – 18, 2017, which includes images of bracero hiring in the 1940s as well as images of people crossing the Rio Grande, or Río Bravo del Norte, illegally in the 1960s; and finally, I will go to the Archivo General del Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato for a week between August 21 – 25, 2017, a museum that possesses passports, letters of safe passage, letters of recommendation, credentials of people who were interested in migrating to the United States.

**Language Skills:** I am bilingual with my own strong, personal ties to Mexico and the Mexican-U.S. border, having grown up in Brownsville, TX. I was a Spanish and History double major at Southwestern University, in Georgetown, Texas; as a graduate student, I passed Rice
University’s fluency language exams in Spanish and Portuguese. Although it is unlikely that I will conduct research in Portuguese, I am proficient in reading Portuguese, if necessary.

**Dissemination Plan:** I intend to disseminate my research through three primary avenues: publications, conference presentations, and an online oral history database. I will submit a salient chapter of my research to either the *Journal of Latin American Studies* or *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* for publication, and I plan to publish the project in its entirety as a book manuscript. I will present the chapters of “Between Borders” at the Latin American Studies Association, Rocky Mountain Council for Latin American Studies, and the Conference on Latin American History where I will use feedback from my colleagues to fine-tune my dissertation before my formal defense. Finally, all oral history interviews will be archived at the University of Kentucky’s Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History and the Bracero History Archive. The Nunn Center will preserve all interviews in their public access online database. The Bracero History Archive will only be used for interviews conducted with wives of braceros or migrants of the bracero period.

**Conclusion:** My research advances the scholarship of migration, transnationalism, and gender studies. It speaks to a range of disciplines and addresses issues that have been historically understudied. Homogenizing the female experience is arguably as problematic as treating women as secondary agents. As a SSRC Fellow I would conduct the first comparative study of female borderland migrants and break down deeply embedded Mexican gendered stereotypes, undoubtedly benefitting the academic community at large.