

Bad Fences Make Bad Neighbors: Challenging the Citizenship Regime in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands

T. Mark Montoya*

Abstract

This article is theoretical in focus, contrasting a legalized citizenship of membership (the citizenship regime) with an alternative-citizenship of belonging (“borderdom”). The article will discuss the broader issues of cultural politics, which I argue transcend both the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the citizenship regime. As such, we should confront and cross borders, as we seek to deconstruct them through the creative means that seek to redefine place and space against oppressive contexts, as a new discourse – a “borderdom” – is itself a utilized and evolving new culture. Beyond the citizenship regime, the article will examine cultural politics in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the people who challenge established notions of citizenship in their everyday activities. The goal is to show how attitudes, cultures, and identities, while diverse and varied, may exhibit an alternative-citizenship. I utilize cultural citizenship and cultural politics theories and approaches to illustrate, accept, and celebrate difference, instead of assimilation. The cultural approaches may also help us find alternative methods for political empowerment.

Introduction

There have been countless stories about the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. There are stories about migrants, stories about *maquilas*,¹ and even stories about margaritas. Politically, two contemporary international events brought renewed popular attention and interest to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands: the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the attacks of September 11, 2001. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cold War fears effectively ended, prompting President George H.W. Bush (41st U.S. President) to call for a “New World Order.” Going into effect on January 1, 1994, the immediate goal of NAFTA was to eliminate tariff barriers between Canada, the United States, and Mexico. As part of this New World Order, NAFTA would be the foundation whereby regional economic interactions would propel global-capital interactions, as the United States would propel itself globally. The calculation was simple; we would soon be living in a peaceful and interconnected, albeit fortified, world where Cold War divisions and international trade boundaries would continue to dissipate. The United States would take the lead, and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands would be the testing ground. This did not happen. A rebellion occurred immediately in Southern

* T. Mark Montoya is Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies at Northern Arizona University. He can be contacted at: T.Montoya@nau.edu

¹ A *maquila* or *maquiladora* is a factory that imports duty- and tariff-free materials for “cheap” assembly or manufacturing and then exports the assembled product generally back to the importing country. Many Mexican women are employed in *maquiladoras* along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Mexico² and the United States continued to secure its southern border. Moreover, September 11th gravely challenged hopes for any type of perceived “order.” President George W. Bush (43rd U.S. President) announced a new agenda for the United States and declared a “war on terrorism.” Consequently, global divisions were exacerbated and old fears intensified in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and beyond, as this *new* “New World Order” created more fears and built even more fences.

We do not need to fear the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, however, particularly if we place the borderlands in a proper and understandable context. In this article, I offer a context for studying the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The article provides a broad yet theoretical understanding of citizenship in the borderlands as it pertains to (re)-conceptualizing, challenging, confronting, and changing traditional/legal notions of citizenship – the citizenship regime. The article also discusses the broader issues of cultural politics, which I argue transcend both the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the citizenship regime. The following, however, is only a beginning sketch of myriad perceptions and meanings of citizenship and of the borderlands, as we seek to deconstruct them through the creative means that seek to redefine place and space against oppressive contexts. Here, a new discourse – “borderdom” – is itself a utilized and evolving new culture.³ I conceptualize “borderdom” as the realm of jurisdiction at or near a border(land) and as the condition of being bordered. As such, “borderdom” contributes to confronting, challenging, and changing what it means to be a citizen. Indeed, there is cultural and political importance about what it means to belong and to live within a “borderdom,” and for most people belonging is expressed through the complexities of everyday experiences.

At issue are the meanings and criteria of citizenship, given the new claims and debates about nation-states and their borders. Thus, I elaborate on the various definitions of citizenship that are both legal and non-legal. This latter type of non-legal citizenship is often elaborated through conceptual notions of cultural citizenship,⁴ border citizenship,⁵ third space,⁶ third culture,⁷ global citizenship,⁸

² Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

³ T. Mark Montoya, “‘But It’s a Dry Hate’: Illegal Americans, Other Americans, and the Citizenship Regime,” in *White Washing American Education: The New Culture Wars in Ethnic Studies, Volume 2: Higher Education*, ed. Denise M. Sandoval, Anthony J. Ratcliff, Tracy Lachica Buenavista, and James R. Marin, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2016), 23–24.

⁴ Renato Rosaldo, “Assimilation Revisited,” *Working Paper Series, No. 9*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Chicano Research, 1985).

⁵ Eric Meeks, *Border Citizens: The Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Arizona* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

⁶ David G. Gutiérrez, “Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the ‘Third Space’: The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in Greater Mexico,” *The Journal of American History*, 86: 2 (Rethinking History and the Nation-State: Mexico and the United States as a Case Study: A Special Issue, Sep. 1999): 481–517.

⁷ Mike Featherstone, “Global Culture: An Introduction,” in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed. Mike Featherstone (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991).

⁸ Sakia Sassen, “Citizenship Destabilized,” *Liberal Education* (Spring 2003): 14–21.

and scapes.⁹ And while there is the potential of confusion and inaccuracy in using the term “citizenship” to challenge citizenship, it is necessary – inaccurate yet necessary because the term remains analogous to group membership, belonging, and identity.¹⁰ Finally, I will provide answers to the following question by examining U.S.-Mexico borderlands discourse: What are the places/spaces where border people are actively redefining the citizenship regime? Civil rights, immigrant, and women’s rights movements, and so on are all indicative of alternative forms of citizenship, because “borderdom” involves respect, well-being, dignity, empowerment, democracy, and the acknowledgement of the existence of the many folks who remain outside the citizenship regime. Helping to conceptualize “borderdom,” provides a testing ground for social and political involvement of people across borders, making for better neighbors as we incessantly dismantle the many oppressive fences that separate us.

The Complexities of Citizenship

The Citizenship Regime

Citizenship is not a neutral concept. We often overlook the very formation of citizenship and more importantly we often overlook who gets to form citizenship. Citizenship is about power; and linking power to citizenship, we see that race, class, and gender all factor into the formation of citizenship, particularly in terms of who is a full citizen and who is not. As such, the citizenship regime is rigid and remains exclusive. The citizenship regime is generally based on four broad criteria: 1) the membership rules of a nation-state, 2) rights and entitlements from a nation-state, 3) social expectations and responsibilities toward a nation-state, and 4) geographical borders.¹¹ Citizenship, thus, is a system, and the citizenship regime uses an assortment of methods, policies, laws, and regulations to contain and control citizens within the nation-state and its borders. As Raymond Rocco writes:

From this perspective, citizenship is not solely nor even primarily a legal status, but rather a political mechanism for the control and containment of access to institutions of power and the distribution of rights, benefits, privileges, entitlements, and resources to different sectors of the population who reside within the territorial, sovereign boundaries of the nation-state.¹²

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture*, 2:2 (1990): 1–23.

¹⁰ See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

¹¹ Jane Jenson and Martin Papillon, “Challenging the Citizenship Regime: The James Ba Cree and Transnational Action,” *Politics and Society*. 28:2 (2000): 246.

¹² Raymond Rocco, “Transforming Citizenship: Membership, Strategies of Containment, and the Public Sphere in Latino Communities,” *Latino Studies* 2:1 (2004): 16.

Also, as James Holston and Arjun Appadurai contend, citizenship not only defines membership in a nation-state, but also signifies an identity, which manages and subjugates all other identities, whether they are racial, class-based, or gendered.¹³ Citizenship is an idiosyncratic experience, and for people living in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands citizenship is, at its very best, ambiguous, and at its very worst, undemocratic.

Liberalism forms the basis of what we, in the United States, view as citizenship. For the most part, liberal theories of citizenship suggest that there exists a specific set of universal rights, called natural rights, bestowed upon individuals by some higher entity. Another tenet of liberalism holds that citizens act rationally to advance their individual interests, and that the role of the nation-state is to protect citizen interests.¹⁴ The assumption is that individual citizens choose to exercise their rights and that they have the necessary resources and opportunities.¹⁵ The rights given to citizens by nation-states are largely “political rights,” meaning that citizenship is inherently linked to political participation such as voting within a representative democracy.

Liberal citizenship has had a rich and extended history, but has also had its critics. An internal critic, T.H. Marshall, reformulated liberal citizenship to include social rights.¹⁶ Marshall argued that the nation-state should also protect its citizens from social and economic insecurities by implementing such provisions as welfare. This would lead to a greater sense of community and of social cohesion, and would improve the chance that citizens would have the opportunities and resources to exercise their civil rights. At the same time, communitarian theories of citizenship moved from Marshall’s critiques to suggest that people form their individual identities through relationships with others in the community to which the individual belongs.¹⁷ Communitarians hold that citizenship and community belonging is linked, and assumes that the notion of “civic virtue” (the “common good”) is necessary to promote citizenship. Finally, civic republicanism attempts to add the liberal notion of self-interest to the communitarian notion of community belonging. For civic republicans, citizenship is linked to one’s individual obligations to participate in communal affairs.¹⁸ This is known as collective deliberation. Civic republicans also understand citizenship as a common civic identity shaped by a common public culture, and assume that citizens will form interest groups and will press for their interests, but also within the context of toleration and obligation to others.¹⁹

¹³ James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Cities and Citizenship,” in *Cities and Citizenship*, ed. James Holston (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 1–20.

¹⁴ Adrian Oldfield, *Citizenship and Community: Civic Republicanism and the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁵ Emma Jones and John Gaventa, *Concepts of Citizenship: A Review* (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2002), 3. See also, Engin F. Isin and Patricia K. Wood, *Citizenship and Identity* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 7.

¹⁶ T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

¹⁷ Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Social Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Oldfield, *Citizenship and Community*.

¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, “The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship,” *Public Culture* 10:2 (1998): 397–416.

Differentiated and Cultural Citizenship in the Borderlands

While citizenship means different things to different people, at least three facets comprise the modern citizenship regime: membership in a nation-state; entitlements from that nation-state; and social expectations from other members of the nation-state.²⁰ Citizenship based on nation-state-centric notions has been challenged by a differentiated conception of citizenship, one that goes beyond the traditional conceptions of participation, rights, and obligations. A central concern for “differentiated” citizenship scholars is to take from the various aspects of the liberal, communitarian, and civic republican traditions and to expose their respective weaknesses. The overall objective for these scholars is to connect individual rights (liberalism), community (communitarianism), and collective deliberation (civic republicanism). The specific objective is to conceptualize citizenship as both a situation (condition of being a citizen), including the various forms of rights and obligations, and as an active practice (commitment to being a citizen).²¹

For instance, one’s civil rights and obligations are fulfilled only when that individual can exert their social rights. This is citizenship as agency. Critical scholars, particularly feminists, offer significant examples of such agency.²² A first example of agency and its effects on citizenship suggests that if everyone is an agent then there can be no grounds for some individuals to have more rights than others do. However, as most feminists concur, agency is much more complicated. Agency seen in a second example suggests that people need to exercise agency to gain citizenship and assumes that some people have the choice or availability of agency, while others do not. This example stresses the creation of an enabling environment, so that all citizens can participate (act as citizens), if they so choose.²³ Here, Mexican migrants in the United States make an interesting case study as to how belonging as citizenship is enacted. Just by being migrants, they create a transnational citizenship, via citizenship practices within the receiving country. This type of citizenship can be viewed as a political strategy whereby citizenship is emphasized as negotiations with borders, not as confined by borders. Thus, citizenship is itself a political struggle that seeks not only the right to equality but also the right to difference. The political identity best suited for promoting radical democratic aims – as the best route towards progressive social change – is citizenship. In this case, we should not view citizens as the passive recipients of rights. To do so, would discount the many people who actively seek rights and are usually denied based on race, class, and gender.

In the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, for example, the Tohono O’odham, the Yaqui, and ethnic Mexicans have exemplified localized movements for citizenship in their varied confrontations with suppressive yet legalized actions against them.²⁴ The primary case is Arizona’s continual racial subordination of indigenous and ethnic Mexicans in and beyond Arizona’s borderlands. As Arizona

²⁰ Ricard Sigurdson, “Crossing Borders: Immigration, Citizenship and the Challenge to Nationality,” in *Borderlands Under Stress*, ed. M. Pratt and J.A. Brown (London: Kluwer Law International, 2000), 146–147.

²¹ Jones and Gaventa, *Concepts of Citizenship*, 5.

²² Carol C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²³ Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

²⁴ Meeks, *Border Citizens*.

moved rapidly toward capitalist development and statehood in the late 1800s and early 1900s, citizenship was obscured by strict racial categorization privileging Whiteness above all other racialized categories. Hence, the citizenship rights of non-white Arizonans suffered greatly. Non-whites were often relegated to a second-class citizenship status or even regarded as non-citizens. Even if they were born in the United States, racism and nativist sentiment ruled, and arguably continues to rule, the state. “Groups such as the Yaquis, Tohono O’odham, and ethnic Mexicans,” writes Meeks, “became ‘border citizens’ – people whose rights of belonging were in question, leaving them on the margins of the national territory and of the American society.” He continues, “They were ‘border citizens’ both because of restrictions imposed on them and because they were redefining with it meant to belong to the U.S. ...”²⁵ Implicit in this example, is that citizenship should not only include the right to equality, but also the right to difference.²⁶ Furthermore, Isin and Wood suggest that group rights necessitate not only the legitimacy of individual rights but also the extent to which group identity or, better yet, group solidarity is central to the groups’ sense of unity, agency, and value.²⁷

Cultural citizenship is relevant here, particularly as an amorphous cultural and social notion of belonging. For instance, in Raymond Rocco’s study of transforming citizenship, Latina/o communities create regional forms of citizenship and thus illustrate a strategy for promoting a more inclusive and democratic sense of belonging to a political community.²⁸ One of the most important social mechanisms of Latina/o survival is relations and networks based on social trust that “accommodate, resist, circumvent, and engage the restrictive barriers that continue to affect them.”²⁹ Citizenship’s focus, then, must move beyond membership in a nation-state to include the qualitative nature of associational practices such as belonging. Thus, the citizenship regime is contested by particular Diasporas in the United States, because citizenship fails to be inclusive and hence fails to be democratic. As previously mentioned, but important for the discussion here, Renato Rosaldo suggests that citizenship is about the right to be different and the right to belong. Rosaldo’s definition of citizenship suggests participatory democracy within the nation-state, creating cultural citizenship.³⁰ Cultural citizenship addresses the lack of an actual meaningful citizenship, because nation-states fail to apply their own principles of citizenship to all people. In short, citizenship is not only about rules, but is also about taking action and claiming a cultural space – it is about being visible, being heard, and belonging.³¹

The argument is that this cultural citizenship is fluid and continual, and that the complexities

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

²⁶ See Evelina Dagnino, “Culture, Citizenship, and Democracy: Changing Discourses and Practices of the Latin American Left,” in *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*, ed. Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 50–55.

²⁷ Isin and Wood, *Citizenship and Identity*, 32.

²⁸ Rocco, “Transforming Citizenship,” 4–25.

²⁹ Ibid., 12.

³⁰ Renato Rosaldo, ed., *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and Belonging in the Hinterlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

³¹ Alejandra Castañeda, “Roads to Citizenship: Mexican Migrants in the United States,” *Latino Studies* 2:1 (2004): 72–73.

of the non-white folks' experiences in the United States are at the same time racial, cultural, gendered, and linguistic. More importantly, conquest and colonization are often overlooked when considering that the American continent is also indigenous "homeland." Yet, indigenous, "other," and hyphenated Americans pose a threat to the economic, political, and cultural character of the United States, primarily because they are often deemed as dismantling U.S. culture (read Whiteness), and contributing to a mutation of the American Dream. In other words, they are "different," and hence are not "real" citizens. In terms of the cultural citizenship approach, however, difference is a resource, not a threat. Citizenship, itself, is a very complex matter given that indigenous folks and Mexicans were and are treated as second-class or non-citizens even when they are born in the United States.

"Borderdom"

Spaces and Places of Citizenship

The citizenship regime stands in the way of a fully democratic society because those with power are citizens, while People of Color, the poor, and women remain as non-citizens, as second-class citizens, or as both. As such, the concept "borderdom" as illustrated by an alternative-citizenship of belonging contributes to challenging what it means to be a citizen. Indeed, there is something significant about what it means to politically, culturally, and socially be a citizen, and for most people everyday resistance is citizenship. For instance, intergovernmental institutions, transnational social movements, international migrations, and ethnic identities have helped create citizenships that cross nation-state boundaries, where spaces serve to broaden the definition of citizenship by including non-state and trans-state actions, like cross-border community activism, as legitimate expressions of citizenship.

For years there have been organized and entrenched humanitarian groups in the U.S. Mexico borderlands. At issue, however, was that despite the grand efforts of the many groups, thousands of migrants crossing from Mexico into the United States were dying. As the southern Arizona desert was becoming the main crossing area for migrants, many were unprepared for its harsh conditions. Focusing on giving direct aid, participating in observation and action, building awareness and alliances, and promoting a humane immigration policy, No More Deaths/*No Más Muertes* emerged in 2004.³² The goal for the group was simple: no more deaths of migrants on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Despite the rules and assumptions that surround the legality and processes of citizenship, people practice everyday citizenship even while they themselves may not be full citizens. This is because citizenship is and has been a fluid and changeable concept. However, it is also important to note that citizenship is "made real" because of social, political, and economic conflicts created by the citizenship regime. Taking an active humanitarian approach, No More Deaths is a well-organized non-organization, of sorts. Rather than acting as a sole organization, No More Deaths is a loose

³² "History of No More Deaths." Accessed November 1, 2008: http://www.nomoredeaths.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=12

coalition of border, immigrant/immigration, citizenship, human rights, and religious groups, “whose mission is to end death and suffering on the U.S./Mexico border through civil initiative: the conviction that people of conscience must work openly and in community to uphold fundamental human rights.”³³

What has evolved in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is a social system of cultural interaction and conflict. Its most visible by-products are the transnational communities that have grown along the border. These communities represent a cross-border interdependence that goes beyond culture and economics to include the less tangible ideas of place and space. At the core of examining ‘spaces and places’ of citizenship are normative arguments that suggest that we need to move beyond traditional forms of citizenship action, such as voting, and must move towards expanding citizenship processes by making possible more active and inclusive forms of participation, such as community organizing.

The approach proposes that participation, especially in political processes, requires the right to participate effectively with the nation-state. The problem, however, is that participation is not enough for “borderdom,” as it is the nation-state that gives and legitimizes rights. Thus, more radical groups shift the arguments away from participation with the nation-state to actions separate from the nation-state,³⁴ and even against the nation-state.³⁵ The arguments imply that because nation-states will inevitably assimilate or co-opt citizen participation, citizenship is most effective when it takes place outside the influence of the nation-state.³⁶ This has important implications for borders, because crossing them assumes a challenge to the formal aspects of citizenship. As such, No More Deaths has developed a strategy of a peaceful, humanitarian and continuous presence in the Arizona desert, by providing water, food, and medical assistance to migrants; monitoring U.S. Border Patrol and paramilitary operations on the border; and bringing attention to the public the plight of migrants who were literally dying to get into the United States, all the while saving migrants’ lives.³⁷

Everyday Resistance

Borderlands theories have contributed to a growing body of scholarship that is examining the complexities of citizenship through the recognition of different cultures and identities. Among their various conclusions is that the citizenship regime tends to focus solely on a formalized membership within a political community. There is a critique of the notion that citizenship begins and ends with official institutions – the same institutions that create and maintain the definition(s) of citizenship. The many challenges to the citizenship regime are changing the scope of these various fields to focus on everyday experiences; so much that these studies are no longer exclusively viewed

³³ “History of No More Deaths.”

³⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

³⁵ John S. Dryzek, “Political Inclusion and the Dynamics of Democratization,” *American Political Science Review*, 90:3 (1996): 475–487.

³⁶ Jones and Gaventa, *Concepts of Citizenship*, 24.

³⁷ “History of No More Deaths.”

as white, male, hetero-normative, and so on. Moreover, the intersection between the local and the global, coupled with other intersections of race, class, and gender have changed the dynamics of political movements and cultural identities. For example, undocumented queer immigrants in the United States maintain multifaceted relations that link both the host country and the country of origin to other shifting issues of identity(s) and oppression(s), via resistance through existence. At the same time, and perhaps more significant, these immigrants have contributed to the creation of borderlands that go well beyond the actual line of demarcation between the United States and Mexico. Also, as shown with *No More Deaths*, challenges to immigration policy are being engaged in both humanitarian and political confrontation. Thus, the success and importance of *No More Deaths* can be seen in how it works to open the confines of a previously exclusive citizenship, effectively identifying alternative forms of citizenship and nuanced forms of resistance. Consequently, citizenship based solely on the citizenship regime neglects the growing recognition of different cultures and identities that are found on and around borders, that are both geographical and identity-formed.

One of the primary arguments is that with large concentrations of immigrant, ethnic, and “other minority” populations, the nation-state’s hold on citizenship, through its official institutions and its territorial boundaries, is continuously challenged – helping to create a space for an alternative citizenship. In other words, these “minority” groups exemplify “borderdom.” Civil rights, immigrant rights, and women’s rights, are all indicative of an alternative-citizenship – having been denied resources and recognition, but more importantly seeking to challenge and change the exclusiveness and rigidity of the citizenship regime. Additionally, these disparate groups illustrate the importance of challenging the citizenship regime, primarily because citizenship has subordinated people based on their race, class, and gender. “Borderdom,” thus involves respect, wellbeing, and dignity; and is about empowerment across borderlands.

Everyday resistance also happens in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands by people who work together and identify with each other in spite of being separated by the border. Still, the U.S.-Mexico border is at the same time peripheral to the centers of power in Washington DC and in Mexico City and the site where the United States and Mexico interact at their highest levels. Indeed, the borderlands are burgeoning demographically, socially, and economically, but are framed within the so-called post-9/11 world of security, the illegal drug trade, and undocumented immigration, all of which pose serious threats to U.S.-Mexican relations and have become the primary reasons for attempting to close the U.S. side of the border. Interestingly, Mexicans often see illegal drugs as a problem of U.S. demand, whereas Americans often blame Mexico as the supplier. Moreover, Mexicans view immigration as a matter of labor flow subject to bilateral negotiations, whereas Americans see it as a matter of law.³⁸ “[I]n a paradoxical way,” as Manuel Peña points out, “the ‘love-hate’ relationship between Anglos and Mexican Americans results in a kind of Hegelian dialectic, wherein each can attain self-realization only at the expense of, or in contrastive interaction

³⁸ Jamie E. Rodriguez and Kathryn Vincent, “It Takes Two to Tango,” in *Myths, Misdeeds, and Misunderstandings: The Roots of Conflict in U.S.-Mexican Relations*, ed. J. E. Rodriguez and K. Vincent, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1997), 12.

with, the other.”³⁹ Peña continues that U.S.-Mexican relations have gone through three dialectical and overlapping stages – open hostility, veiled hostility, and hostile intimacy; and that the historical encounter of these two cultures has not only been complex, but disputive.⁴⁰

Disputes happen where dissimilar goals, values and assumptions intersect, and conflict is confronted where the outcome may be a resolution, a short-term delay, or an enduring conflict. Of the many disputes around and about the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, immigration is perhaps the most pressing. The immigration debate is heated, ranging from granting amnesty and a path to U.S. citizenship to “undocumented” migrants to deporting “illegals” and building a wall to halt further “illegal” immigration. Generally, anti-immigration groups spend their time characterizing immigration as a “problem.” The problem is twofold. First, illegal immigrants are just that, “illegal,” they are breaking the law. Second, immigrants pose a threat, by stealing jobs, taking advantage of the welfare system, and committing other crimes. Additionally, a separate and unofficial discourse often suggests that immigrants are undesirable because they are poor and they are ethnically different from the core culture. Exclusion is based solely on “othering.” As Anzaldúa exclaims, “the only ‘legitimate’ inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus.”⁴¹ The virus is the citizenship regime.

Citizenship beyond the Nation-State

Scholarship on and about the borderlands is interdisciplinary – coming from many distinct and overlapping studies. Perhaps the most influential and critical study about the U.S.-Mexico borderlands came out of a book of poetry and autobiographical short essays. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* inspired a new way of thinking about borders, as a narrow dividing strip, and borderlands, as vague and undetermined places.⁴² Anzaldúa argues that in our daily lives we are confronted with all kinds of borders, and that we all dwell in borderlands by experiencing/confronting multiple and hybrid identities. Anzaldúa’s groundbreaking ideas continue to influence writings in feminist, ethnic, cultural, and borderlands studies. Anzaldúa and others⁴³ were influential in suggesting that ‘hybrids’ and border people were part of a larger process of *mestizaje* (a cross-cultural cross-breeding of sorts) that signaled a new post-border era. For these scholars, the borderlands become important locations to examine identities that are not always site-specific.⁴⁴ As Claire Fox suggests, the border is invoked as a marker of hybrid subjectivities, “such as those that would be experienced by persons who negotiate among multiple cultural, linguistic, racial, or sexual systems

³⁹ Manuel Peña, “Musica fronteriza / Border Music,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. 21:1-2 (1996): 194.

⁴⁰ Peña, “Musica fronteriza,” 194–195.

⁴¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987), 3–4.

⁴² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 4.

⁴³ Nestor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1990).

⁴⁴ Claire F. Fox, *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 119.

throughout their lives.”⁴⁵

Feminist, critical, and cultural studies scholars often trace the foundations of critical borderlands studies back to the writings of Anzaldúa on the U.S. side and García Canclini on the Mexican side. Additionally, following Benedict Anderson’s classic thesis on the nation as an “imagined community,” many critical borderlands scholars argue that borders are socially constructed – that borders, while visible sites marked with barbed wire, concrete or other human-made constructions, do not really exist outside the collective imagination of nation-states. Because of the constructed nature of borders, critical borderlands scholars often work to uncover the hidden-meanings in the creation of borders, by emphasizing “the metaphorical,” or what one may refer to as the symbolic nature of borders.

Adding a distinctly feminist critique, Norma Alarcón et al. write, “the nation-state sharpens the defining lines of citizenship for women, racialized ethnicities, and sexualities in the construction of a socially stratified society.”⁴⁶ The citizenship regime creates both a denial and consolidation of sexual and racial differences. In the same vein, Laura Elisa Pérez continues:

Chicana/o cultural practices have operated in disordering, profoundly disturbing ways with respect to dominant social and cultural, spatial and ideological topographies of the “proper” in the United States. Cultural practices that code themselves as “Chicana/o” function as paradoxes within the ordering logic of dominant U.S. discourse, for they bear the identifying graffiti of a tenacious, socially and economically overdetermined biculturality, so do they operate bidiscursively, articulated both within and without the oppressive ideological territories of “Occupied America.”⁴⁷

The process of challenging the citizenship regime thus creates a new political identity – a borderlands identity – to challenge both the racism of Anglo American feminism and the sexism of ethnic nationalist movements. Indeed, a borderlands identity should not assume just one singular identity, but instead assumes multiple and fluid identities.

Echoing these arguments, Arturo J. Aldama and Naomi H. Quiñonez write, “The U.S.-Mexico border zone is a site that is lived and expressed by those who reside in the physical/discursive margins generated by the edge of two nation states.”⁴⁸ They argue that for more than 500 years, the Americas have attempted to deal with colonial and neocolonial subjugation, and for more than 150 years, Chicanas/os have dealt with a continued subjugation. One way subjugation is dealt with is

⁴⁵ Fox, *The Fence*, 119.

⁴⁶ Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan, and Mino Moallem, “Introduction: Between Woman and Nation,” in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, ed. C. Kaplan, N. Alarcon, and M. Moallem (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

⁴⁷ Laura Elisa Pérez, “El desorden, Nationalism, and Chicana/o Aesthetics,” in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, ed. C. Kaplan, N. Alarcon, and M. Moallem, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 19.

⁴⁸ Arturo J. Aldama and Naomi H. Quiñonez, “¡Peligro! Subversive Subjects: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century,” in *Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*, ed. A.J. Aldama and N.H. Quiñonez (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 1.

through cultural productions that have created a discursive space (through art, media, music, and other forms of popular cultural production) to articulate various forms of resistance to physical barriers. As the authors point out, it is “a resistance to the multiplicity of oppression across race, class, gender, and sexuality.”⁴⁹ Arturo J. Aldama continues, “Chicana/o border studies, devoted to understanding the complex dialectics of racialized, subaltern, feminist, and diasporic identities and the aesthetic politics of hybrid mestiza/o cultural production, is at the vanguard of historical, anthropological, literary, cultural, artistic, and theoretical inquiry.”⁵⁰ Critical Chicana/o borderlands studies thus are “an invitation to situate the diverse practices of critical U.S.-Mexican borderland inquiry... We hang at the precipice of the next millennium with all of the promises and anxieties that it produces.”⁵¹ These promises and anxieties affect growing numbers of vulnerable individuals and groups, including immigrants, refugees, workers, women, and indigenous peoples. Consequently, the citizenship regime is not only fostering growth in the number of people denied citizenship rights, but also fostering more limitations to what it means to be a citizen.

The citizenship regime links to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands precisely because any discussion of citizenship overlaps changes in the economy, which affect migration patterns and hence challenge citizenship rules. As such, citizenship calls attention to the international relations of nation-states, as they attempt to rethink who the citizens are and who the “aliens” are. The once clear distinction between citizen and alien is breaking down due to the growth in the number of transnational citizens, including “illegal” immigrants. This is especially true in borderlands, with large numbers of “non-citizens” who nonetheless join in political “citizen-type” activity, such as No More Deaths. Furthermore, Saskia Sassen suggests that international business elites, at one end, and poor immigrants, at the other end, are shaping a new type of citizenship that is no longer tied to a nation-state.⁵² Sassen argues that while the rules of citizenship have not changed dramatically, the legalities of who is a citizen have always been ambiguous, and that citizenship rules are being redefined without the need to physically rewrite them.

“It won’t be Long, ‘til we Belong”

Beezley and Curcio-Nagy write, “Marginal peoples – the poor, the enslaved, women – historically have manipulated cultural forms to their own benefit...”⁵³ Even while the political importance and political impact of cultural studies have been subject to scrutiny, it has endured as an edifying, social, and political practice. Studying the citizenship regime, thus, leads to the conclusion

⁴⁹ Aldama and Quiñonez, “¡Peligro!,” 3.

⁵⁰ Arturo J. Aldama, “Millennial Anxieties: Borders, Violence, and the Struggle for Chicana and Chicano Subjectivity,” in *Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*, ed. A.J. Aldama and N.H. Quiñonez, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵² Saskia Sassen, *Denationalization: Economy and Polity in a Global Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁵³ William H. Beezley and Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, ed., *Latin American Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2000), xii.

that everyday people, so often silenced and dismissed, can help redefine citizenship and hence confront, challenge, and change elite and privileged discourse. Both cultural citizenship and cultural politics have emphasized the importance of theory as a basis for understanding the contexts of power. Moreover, theorists from both fields have argued for the primacy of the political by placing emphasis on the various struggles that seek to open public spaces, regardless of how “trivial” they may be. This is an instance by which popular and everyday resistance is studied as a justifiable form of politics. Beneath the surface, one can find a struggle against oppression that is often expressed through multiple dimensions of culture. Such expressions seek to deconstruct borders of all sorts through creative means that seek to define places and spaces in suppressive contexts.⁵⁴

In the case of constructing and challenging citizenship, cultural citizenship at the borderlands is no different than citizenship(s) elsewhere. The problem with seriously analyzing (popular) culture is that it encompasses pleasure in everyday life. Moreover, popular culture often crosses into being crude, having sexual overtones, using profanity, and relying on insults. Still, popular culture goes beyond restrictive social, cultural, religious, and political categories. This challenge to categorization finds popular expression as a form of transgression. Beezley and Curcio-Nagy suggest that this transgression makes popular culture a daring and risky amusement to break the rules and put one over on authority.⁵⁵ Popular culture thus can serve as means to create and exhibit identity. Cultural citizenship can be displayed and used as a weapon for empowerment. Each instance that the U.S. border moved further south was a continuing struggle of survival and empowerment for Mexican Americans. These struggles have been linked to the search for cultural space and place, and have influenced the everyday forms of political action.

Pat Mora’s “Immigrants,” for instance, conveys many aspects of what immigrants experience in the United States – assimilation and assurance that their children have a better life than the parents, as “Immigrants / wrap their babies in the American flag...”⁵⁶ Dealing particularly with Americanization, Mora also suggests that the immigrants will often seek to retain their cultural identity privately, while turning their children into Americans publicly – feeding them American foods, giving them American names, and buying them American products. In another example, Mora continues that as the immigrants speak to their children in “thick English,” they “whisper in Spanish or Polish / when the babies sleep.”⁵⁷ Finally, Mora discusses whether the immigrants’ children will be accepted as U.S. citizens. The third theme has to do with the anxiety immigrants often feel over whether or not their children will be recognized as “american” (lower-case “a”) citizens. She writes, “Will they like / our boy, our girl, our fine american / boy, our fine american girl?”⁵⁸ Even today, many forms of political action exist, ranging from formal or institutional politics, such as electoral

⁵⁴ Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez, *Border Visions: Mexican Cultures of the Southwest United States* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996), 269–270.

⁵⁵ Beezley and Curcio-Nagy, *Latin American Popular*, xi-xii.

⁵⁶ Pat Mora, “Immigrants,” in *Hispanic American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*, ed. N. Kanellos, (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1986 [1995]), 215.

⁵⁷ Mora, “Immigrants,” 215.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

politics, to various forms of rebellion, mobilization and organization, protest, and struggle.⁵⁹ Yet, there are other forms of political struggles that often revolve around cultural place, space, and processes that are not often understood. They are often filled with contradictions and internal opposition, and sometimes are never actually realized as a social movement.

How people identify themselves as citizens, how they interpret citizenship, and how they take citizenship action, is likely to have a complex relationship with their sense of belonging to a particular nation-state. Some may consider themselves citizens by virtue of their beliefs that citizenship is natural and they can choose to take particular actions. Others may promote citizenship action for change when they become conscious of the exclusions produced by their nation-state citizenship. Whatever the case may be, we can derive that citizenship beyond the nation-state is an important factor in people's lives, as more people and their ideas, products, institutions, and cultures are crossing borders, challenging the belief that borders can actually contain them.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Borders, citizenship, and the people who live in borderlands are complex and multi-dimensional. More complex and more multi-dimensional is the conception of an alternative-citizenship. In my study, however, we can generally discern four important and interrelated topical conclusions about an alternative-citizenship of "borderdom." First, the study of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands often focuses on cultural identity(s), generally conceptualized as citizenship, and on how these identities are made either representing the essence of the nation-state (the citizenship regime) or as a reaction to the nation-state ("borderdom"). Second, "borderdom" is often developed as a reaction to and sometimes against the nation-state, helping to uncover sites of resistance to conventional themes of nation-state power and particularly helping to demystify the citizenship regime. Third, "borderdom" shows how individuals negotiate physical barriers as well as confront the symbolic meanings of borders. Finally, border identities are often a hybrid of two or more identities precisely because nation-states frequently find it difficult to exert their political power at their extremities. Instead, a local force of culture and politics give way to multiple alternative-citizenships, which nonetheless are themselves subject to continual redefinition and change.

In rethinking citizenship identity away from the binary opposition between "us" and "them" this study allows us to rethink citizenship by examining questions of difference, power, and location. For example, following the likes of Chandra Mohanty and Gloria Anzaldúa, Poonam Pillai suggests that "positionality" is not given, but is instead a site of cultural resistance and struggle.⁶¹ Both the

⁵⁹ Vélez-Ibáñez, *Border Visions*, 92–93.

⁶⁰ David Thelen, "'Rethinking History' and the Nation-State: Mexico and the United States," *The Journal of American History*, 86:2 (Sep. 1999, Rethinking History and the Nation-State: Mexico and the United States as a Case Study: A Special Issue), 439.

⁶¹ Poonam Pillai, "Notes on Centers and Margins," in *Mainstream(S) and Margins: Cultural Politics in the 90s*, ed. M. Morgan and S. Leggett, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), 6.

“politics of location”⁶² and the notion of “borderlands”⁶³ provide a framework for political self-definition and for political hybridity, and both are illustrative of the complex and deep relationship of everyday resistance. Moreover, within the literature are clear examples of the numerous works focusing on borderlands discourse and border metaphors, as well as the need to rethink the meanings of borders and of citizenship. Because borderlands studies generally defy disciplinary categorization, however, studies of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands are often relegated to something “other” – a sub-field connected to larger disciplines. Nonetheless, the study allows us to examine and understand the people that have lived on or near the borderlands for centuries, those who have crossed the border, and those who have been crossed by the border. Consequently, the citizenship regime is shown to be arbitrary and subjective.

In contrast, “borderdom” is enmeshed with the discussion of issues such as identity, cultures, and belonging. As such, we find the borderlands anywhere and everywhere. The borderlands have now entered the centers – Washington DC and Mexico City – yet the centers seem to disassociate with the borderlands. This point is exemplified in Gomez-Peña’s performance of *Border Brujo*⁶⁴ when he says, “How ironic, mister, I represent you, yet you don’t represent me.”⁶⁵ In this case, “borderdom” becomes a site of everyday resistance to its various (mis)representations whereby the border is continually crossed not to emphasize sameness, as the citizenship regime would do, but to celebrate cultural difference.⁶⁶ Finally, the study suggests a rethinking of the relationships generated around national boundaries. In the U.S.-Mexico borderlands there is a need to understand the diverse forms of citizenship as well as the history of conflict and cooperation that has characterized the area because of globalization. In light of globalization, the discourse of citizenship has multiple meanings, making borderlands complex places. The complexities rest with the fact that citizenship is quite conflictual. The citizenship regime is a “bad fence,” if you will. Thus, “borderdom” as a challenge to the citizenship regime should be continual.

⁶² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience,” in *Destabilising Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, ed. M. Barrett and A. Phillips, (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1992), 74–92.

⁶³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*.

⁶⁴ A *brujo* is a wizard or a sorcerer.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Fox, *The Fence*, 125.

⁶⁶ Fox, *The Fence*, 125.