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The Border, Performed in Films: Produced in both Mexico and the US to “Bring Out the Worst in a Country”

Kathleen Staudt*

Abstract

Border scholars have long understood borders as social constructions around territories and identities. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, my objective is to analyze the cultural production and “othering” processes of the multiple US–Mexico borderlands via good-quality films emanating from both Mexico City and the US, particularly Hollywood, in two periods: historical background on the 1930s–1980s and the contemporary period of the last two decades. I compare differences across multiple border sites along the near 2,000 mile line—west coast Pacific, central El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, and east coast Gulf of Mexico—as well as those sites inbetween. My overarching argument is that the film industry itself brings out the worst of countries in the US–Mexico borderlands. By “worst,” I mean lawlessness, sexual violence, deaths, and drugs, with “othering” processes alive and well on both sides of the border. As such, in both historical and contemporary films, everyday lives in the borderlands are not well represented.

Introduction

Border scholars have long understood borders as social constructions around territories and identities. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, my objective is to analyze the cultural production of the multiple US–Mexico borderlands via good-quality films emanating from both Mexico City and the US, particularly Hollywood, in two periods: historical background on the 1930s–1980s and the contemporary period of the last two decades. I compare differences across multiple border sites along the near 2,000 mile line—west, central, and east—as well as those sites in between. In the multiple US–Mexico borderlands, (see map in the introductory article), the west and center spaces of Tijuana–San Diego and Ciudad Juárez–El Paso offer densely settled urban manufacturing sites, while the eastern border reflects agricultural spaces and small cities and towns where, historically, legal and illegal trade occurred in both directions. In the subtitle of this article, the paraphrased famous quote comes from Miguel (“Mike”) Vargas, played by Charlton Heston in *Touch of Evil* (1958). My overarching argument is that the film industry itself brings out the worst of countries in the US–Mexico borderlands. By “worst,” I mean lawlessness, sexual violence, deaths, and drugs. Filmmakers—both US and Mexican—do not represent the border well in historic and contemporary times.

Films represent and perform multiple borders in literal and figurative ways for audiences who live in the borderlands and for distant mainstream audiences whose only knowledge of borderlands may be through films. The perennial question among those who analyze media, popular culture and production asks: To what degree do artistic, documentary, and commercial film renditions construct the border in realistic or accurate ways? The question might be answered in both literal and figurative ways. Films offer *literal* cultural productions to which audiences of millions are potentially exposed, over and over, not only through screenings at movie theaters, but increasingly in mass coverage through television, instant Internet streaming, piracy, and relatively cheap DVD sales and convenient mail-order delivery from commercial sources like Amazon and Netflix to people’s homes and computers. In *figurative* ways, films also narrate themes and images of diverse border people and the multiple borderlands to mainstream audiences. As such, the films may reproduce (or undermine) dominant hegemonic narratives of the borderlands which have long been portrayed as wild, chaotic, sexualized, and violent places with actors

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who perform those themes. Films may reproduce (or undermine) stereotypes about border people, Mexicans and “Americans,”¹ native born and immigrants, from first-generation to beyond; Spanish- or English-speakers (or bilingual code-switchers); Anglos (the term for Whites or European Americans in the Southwestern US), Mexican Americans, and African Americans; and Norteños, the northern Mexicans who are sometimes accused of losing their national souls as US-style Americanisms seep into their behavior, language, and values. In films, such stereotypes may be either positive or negative or even reversed for educational and dramatic value. The drama can include graphic violence, evoking emotional reactions that disgust and distance mainstream viewers from border people and places.

Literature and Theory: Border Spaces, National Identities, and Hybridity

Both governments drew the southwestern US–Mexican borderlines with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the 1853 Gadsden Purchase that took half of Mexico’s territory (Martínez 2006; Payan, 2006), but it was perhaps this turn-of-the-20th-century era of photography and nascent filmmaking that permitted the cultural and visual production of the “other:” Mexicans as fundamentally different than Americans. Yet ironically, the nearly 2,000-mile border, with 14 million people living in the borderlands,² contains human beings of similar characteristics, despite their different nationalities: bilingual and bicultural people who cross the borders in large volume to work, shop, and visit relatives (Staudt and Coronado 2002, Ch 1). Gloria Anzaldúa referred to the border as an open wound and a “scar,” but also celebrated the multiculturalism within borderlands (1987).

Border scholars know well that “imagined communities” become constructed through the production of maps, censuses, and museums (Anderson 1983), but also through nationalism defined as territorial ideology, complete with “nationalized ideological apparatus” (Paasi 2012, 14, 21) conveyed through multiple means, especially in schools and their nationalized histories in social studies and civic education (Rippberger and Staudt 2003). Films may be one such tool, to imagine community, whether in the US–Mexico, European, or other borderlands. Jopi Nyman criticizes the mammoth Ashgate Companion to Border Studies for its omission “of work on border representations and various cinematic, literary, and media border texts, since these popular and narrative representations are particularly powerful in carving out general conceptions on borders, border crossers, and territorial identities” (Nyman 2011, 374). This article addresses that omission.

During various eras, nationalist ideologies have been conveyed through both public-private collaborations and subsidized films, such as US propaganda-laden war films and official Mexican intrusion into film production and funding via the Banco Cinematográfico (Mora 2005; Maciel 1990, Ch 2; Maciel 1999). Ann Doremus analyzed the ways that Mexican filmmakers cultivated intense nationalism and identity—“Mexicanness” (*Mexicanidad*)—from the consolidation of the revolution in 1929 through the 1950s, aimed to articulate a national identity and contain social tensions “glorifying the lower classes as the most virtuous and authentic Mexicans” (Doremus 2001, 1), embodied through male archetypical characters (Doremus 2001, 7; also see Vélez-Ibáñez 1997 on *Mexicanidad* at the border).

Nationalisms territorialize identity and create “others” who occupy different space and exhibit different cultures, with positive or negative portrayals of people and places. In the context of unequal and asymmetrical borderlands, concepts about stereotyping offer insight, especially to what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls “The Other Question”. In analyses like these, the word “other” is used as noun, verb, and adjective. Film analyst Juan Alonzo went beyond the portrayal of negative and positive stereotypes of Mexicans in film to analyze “ambivalence” in othering processes. He used Bhabha’s insightful quote as a springboard for this analysis: “If the object of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction [quoted from Bhabha, 70], then the stereotype is a key apparatus of dominance utilized by the colonial administration” (Alonzo 2009, 5).

In Spanish, the referent often used for destinations after crossing the border is “*el otro lado*.” Indeed one film focused on three migrant children, one from Mexico, going “to the *other side*” (my emphasis) and is even titled as such: *Al Otro Lado* (2004).

While Mexico and the United States are sovereign nations, and the US never overtly colonized Mexico (as did Spain), scholars have long alluded not only to Mexico’s loss of nearly half its land, as noted earlier, but also to the neocolonial, asymmetrical economic relationship that exists between both countries in what Martínez (1994) calls “interdependent” borderlands (as opposed to his other three categories, “alienated, co-existent, or integrated” borderlands, the last referring to most European border regions). Five US southwestern states now comprise that lost land, in which there is a high percentage of residents—citizen and noncitizen—with Mexican heritage. Although the 2010 US census classifies only 16% of residents as Hispanic, New Mexico is home to 46% Hispanics, Texas and California to 38%, Arizona to 30%, and Nevada to 27% Hispanics (www.census.gov).

In border spaces, sovereign nations attempt to shape their economies and politics. Inequalities exist, side by side, in nations with minimum wages and per capita incomes that reflect five- to ten-fold differences in, for example, US earnings and wealth.³ National policies control the movement of people and goods across borders, loosened somewhat in freer trade but tightened in militarized national security policies and practices (see contradictions analyzed in Payan 2006; Brunet-Jailly 2012).

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1976) analyzed public photography and advertisements in displays of gender ranking as the “ritualization of subordination” which parallels what filmmakers did and do generally with men and women and what Hollywood filmmakers did and do with images of Mexicans at the border. In so doing, they “other” and reinforce a polarized image of cultures at the border, as Pablo Vila (2000, 2005) so vividly analyzes in the central border space of the Paso del Norte (El Paso–Ciudad Juárez) region. However, border space is what Bhabha (1994) classically called “in-between space” or what both Gloria Anzaldúa (1995) and Néstor García-Canclini (1987) have called “hybridized” space (also see Nericcio 2007, 43 on borders as fractured spaces, but with bridges, hyphens and other features). Hybridized spaces at the margins of two national territorial lines mix languages and cultures, creating a third space in which people resist and/or reinterpret the national in their everyday lived realities. In border space, Hollywood and Mexico City filmmakers have produced and performed images that “other,” hybridize, or render border people and border spaces “ambivalent” (the latter, drawing on Alonzo’s 2009 focus).

The hybridity emerges not only with the growing sophistication and transnational collaboration of film producers, stars, and directors, but also with the globalization of production (see Miller et al. 2008 on the political economy of cultural industries) and the relative ease of subtitling films in Spanish and English for high-volume North American (and global) audiences. According to O’Brien and Williams, globalization is “an uneven process whereby the barriers of time and space are reduced, new social relations between distant people are fostered and new centers of authority are created” (in Hobden 2011, 72). The global film industry is a prime example of the compression of space and time, given global markets, yet the uneven availability of capital for film production. As the global economy expanded its reach, its impact on the border was enormous, especially in the way it fostered wage inequalities, drug and gun smuggling.

From these theoretical concepts, I pose several questions threaded through the analysis below including these: Do films reflect cultural hybridity, polarized, or nationalist sentiments in the multiple US–Mexico borderlands? How has globalization figured into representation? Does “othering” work in both directions?

Methodology: Film Selection

Few studies focus broadly on films on or about the border produced in both countries (but see Maciel 1990 and Nericcio 2007, 29 on US films that use racist imaginaries of “Latin-esque

hallucinations ... across various media”). Related studies offer insights: Norma Iglesias (1999) surveyed audience attitudes about Mexican-produced border films in Tijuana/San Diego theaters; Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba (2011) analyzes three US films about *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez (reviewed later); and Rogelio Atrasánchez (2006) wrote a vivid narrative and pictorial panorama of Mexican films shown largely to Spanish-language Mexican American audiences in several US cities during the era of public segregation. However, film studies like these proved crucial for how I searched for and selected quality films to analyze, particularly the historical, and to highlight films previously unknown to me.

This analysis examines films produced in Mexico and the US in both Spanish and English in different eras and at multiple US–Mexico border sites. Besides identifying appropriate quality films, I decided to limit my selection to accessible and available films. Rather than analyze films no longer in circulation, my objective was to select films available for continuous viewing in popular culture. For example, Kaplan (1997, 101) provided insightful analysis of the Charlie Chaplin 1923 silent film *The Pilgrim* for the way it portrays identity crossings as a convict “boards a train to the ‘no-man’s-land’ of Devil’s Gulch in the vicinity of the Texas-Mexico border in order to get as far away as he can from the law,” but the film is not readily available through Netflix, Amazon, or video stores; and few viewers watch silent films in the contemporary era.

On film selection strategies, I began with several classic films shown in my border courses, graduate and undergraduate. Moreover, my selection criteria limit those analyzed to quality films of enduring value, quality also validated in Mexican film studies reviewed herein that enabled my search. It would be impossible to cover all the films that deal with the border, beginning with the genre of “Westerns,” based on 19th century pulp fiction, then turned into scores of thousands of US films, both silent and sound, many of them low-budget pulp films. Iglesias (1999, 245) said that Mexico produced 275 border films, but that the “genre in general is distinguished by being a cinema of poor technical and narrative quality” (Iglesias 1999, 235). Thus, the universe of border films is hardly worth analyzing through some sort of random selection process, and I cannot say what percentage of all (quality and pulp) films my study covers. As such, the methodology is qualitative, bordering the humanities and social science.

The size of the audience for the films I chose is difficult or impossible to calculate, especially for historical films through the 1970s, cable TV viewers, and Mexican films. A website, www.the-numbers.com, focuses on box office figures, theater views, costs and total gross earnings for mostly US, not Mexican films, but no data exist on home views measured by DVD purchases or rentals. Most border films do not become Blockbusters like *Star Wars*, *Avatar*, and *Titanic*. Moreover, only several films analyzed later in this article, *Traffic*, *Lone Star*, *Touch of Evil*, and *Sleep Dealer*, even entered the huge database in the website.

To identify Mexico’s historic films, I consulted books on Mexican film to peruse all titles with locations or words that related to the border, such as *la frontera*. Thankfully, low-cost distributors like Netflix and Amazon, both rental and online streaming, offer popular and classic Mexican films praised and covered fully in film books like the particularly valuable one by Mora (2005). The historical section below covers representative films with which analysis begins.

Earlier Period: 1930s–1980s

The early period, replete with films made in both countries, reflect nationalist themes. Characters are stereotyped, and the borderlands appear to be places of vice and lawlessness. Films characterize women as sexualized, whether constructed as their essence or as victimized through sexual assault. While the US films focus on national space, with “other” outsiders, (such as Mexicans), key films produced in Mexico contain a transnational focus, emphasizing loss of national identity, language, and soul.

Westerns, Hollywood and Mexico City Style

Generations of Americans have grown up watching films about the US frontier west in theaters, on television, and even special TV cable channels devoted to “Westerns.” These films—popularized in the 1930s and onwards—glorified masculine individualism and the settlement of territory west of the Mississippi River to the Pacific Coast. Tall men, astride horses, evinced courage and strength, with famous actors like John Wayne and Gary Cooper playing the emblematic heroes in scores of Westerns. Alonzo (2009, 68) called Western heroes White, a “symbol of American identity,” yet “the real cowboy of the Western range” consisted of Hispanics (one tenth) and Blacks (a fifth). If Mexico figures into the US films, it is usually a place for outlaws to escape to the “other” side where US law enforcement, weak or nonexistent as it was in the 19th century, had no reach according to filmmakers.

In the typical caricature, virtuous Anglo settlers fought “Indians,” bandits, and the natural elements with the goal of civilizing and taming the frontier. In western lands, bandits consisted of both Anglos and Mexicans. Villainous Mexican men, cast and scripted as evil and untrustworthy, generally had minor roles. Mexican women, with even more minor roles, were highly sexualized, especially if partnered with Anglo men. Mexico produced its own versions of low-quality cowboy-bandit films, with “good and bad guys” at multiple borders (Tabuenca Córdova 2011, 79) in the 1960s with the set a “small and dirty town that served as a haven for thieves on the run from justice” such as *El Terror de la Frontera* (1962) and *Pistoleros de la Frontera* (1964) (Iglesias 1999, 233).

Nationalism Informs Criticism of the “Other”

Several classic films offer nationalist portrayals of the neighbor government and/or its leaders. The films range from those offering demeaning and insulting portrayals to those that are more subtle, with sometimes implausible warnings of what migrants face on the “other” side.

In some US films, Anglo actors played Mexicans in “brown face” equivalent to the “black face” of White actors cast in Black parts, from a century past. One noteworthy film for its offensiveness to Mexican sensibilities and history is *Viva Villa* (1934) in which Wallace Beery plays northern Mexican revolutionary hero Francisco Villa who crossed the border into the US at Columbus, New Mexico. The film turned Villa into a fat, hardly masculine buffoon with the heavily made-up Beery. Alonzo took a whole chapter to analyze “The Western’s Ambivalence and the Mexican Badman” (Alonzo 2009, Ch 3). He reviewed two versions of the film, *The Bad Man*, one produced in 1930 and the other in 1941, with two Anglo actors playing the part of Pancho López: Walter Huston and Wallace Beery respectively. Alonzo cited reviewers who captured the ambivalence of American audiences, containing noteworthy descriptors of masculinity: virility, frank barbarity, and a “terrible Robin Hood ... his teeth flash under cocky black mustachios ... beneath beetling brows his eyes fairly stab you with their brilliancy” (Alonzo 2009, 78, on the review of the 1930 version, with picture, 79).

From the US side, the era exemplified the nationalism of US filmmaking and the “othering” of Mexicans and presumably Mexican Americans in the US southwest. Anglo men performed diverse roles, but they singularly personified super-masculine heroism in the civilizing conquest of the frontier and border.

In the historic era of the 1930s through 1950s especially, Mexican films celebrated national identity and warned of dangers north of the border. Some low-budget but mass-marketed films included characters like Tin-Tan, played by Germán Valdez, who played a *pachuco* tragic-comic figure influenced by proximity to Northern American culture during his years of residence in Juárez, as well as by the entire milieu of Mexico’s border areas. Tin-Tan appeared in the typical *pachuco* costume, or as it was known in the United States, the “zoot-suit—wide-brimmed hat with a tremendous feather stuck in the brim, baggy pants, and the single-buttoned long jacket” (Mora 2005, 83). Tin-Tan used English phrases, or what linguists call *caló*, the code-switching between Spanish and English languages. Mexico City audiences might condescendingly call these speakers *pochos* (Americanized Mexicans) (Mora 2005, 83). In his hybridized

personhood, that is a mocked man, the film ultimately reinforces a polarized view of nationalism at the border.

Another mass-marketed film used the character Santo, the physically masculine (albeit pudgy) yet sensitive wrestler superman hero dressed in silver mask and cape who appeared in over 50 films with one title advertising the dangers lurking at and around borders: *Santo en la Frontera del Terror* (1979) (Santo in the Borderlands of Terror). What makes this Spanish-language Santo border film interesting is its location in the usually “forgotten” border of the flat, semi-tropical landscape of Tamaulipas-South Texas. In this film, Santo saves Mexican workers recruited to work at a ranch where they are turned into slaves, but more horrifying in a weird and surreal way,⁴ into prey for a Mexican doctor, Dr Sombra (the surname means shadow in Spanish) who harvests their eyes and organs. The villains include the Mexican overseer, Mexican American guards, and Dr Sombra with his high-profit, evil schemes. Although the Anglo ranch owner is portrayed as greedy and unlawful in his labor recruitment strategies, he is mostly an absentee owner and surprised when Dr Sombra is finally undone, by Santo of course. The border is hybridized to the point of confusion: the “bad guys” are Mexicans on the US side.

A high-quality film with nationalist elements, *Espaldas Mojadas*, (Wetbacks, i.e. undocumented crossers of the Río Bravo/Rio Grande border) (1955) is a compelling film in Spanish that warns migrants of dangerous illegal crossings without documents. Physically strong and tall (5 feet, 10 inches, viewers hear) central character and dashing handsome Rafael arrived at the central border Ciudad Juárez, specifically to a *cantina*, complete with sleazy women and “Spanglish” spoken, where two villainous men arrange labor contracts: an unscrupulous American labor contractor who worked with the *coyote* (guide) Frank Mendoza to bring a group of workers across the river for railroad work. At the bar, famous *ranchera* singer Lola Beltrán sang powerful nationalist-evoking music, signaling the rich cultural heritage that Rafael is about to leave. As the group swam in the dark, US border agents in a tower sounded a siren alarm and started shooting to kill. The film has its implausible moments, such as migrants swimming toward the tower, in an era with a lengthy unpatrolled near-2,000-mile border zone. Nearly enslaved at a desert railroad work site, Rafael worked with other lonely migrants, suffered racial epithets (called a “greaser”), and was cheated on pay with deductions made as if he were a legal *bracero*, under the 1942–1964 joint labor recruitment program of both governments. Workers sang and listened to music reminding them of home. The contractor procured a group of sex workers for whom men lined up and paid for services from nationality-unspecified women, a starkly uncensored theme that few American films exposed in that era. Rafael escapes the railroad site, but while hounded by the contractor and officials, he meets and falls in love with a Mexican American woman Mary Consuelo who introduces herself “*soy pocha*” (the negative term for someone who has deserted Mexico) until he crosses the river back to Juárez only to be stopped by Mexican border agents who ask for his papers and free him after he cries that he is a *paisano* (countryman) who left for hunger, but desires dignity. Consuelo crosses and joins Rafael, both of them relieved to be in their own country, but when Rafael sees the corrupt American contractor, he nearly beats him to death in the *cantina* and then gets justice after forcing him to swim across the river, to be shot and killed by US guards in the tower. The film has a populist, nationalistic, and moralistic tone about US evils in polarized space; signage on a rock near the river contained the English words “God is Watching.”

Aventurera (1951), the Adventurers, is a melodramatic, woman-centered film in which Elena, from Chihuahua City, the state capital, fled the hypocrisy of middle-class life to Ciudad Juárez after her beloved father committed suicide upon learning that her mother was an adulteress. Lucio, Elena’s acquaintance, but actually a procurer, introduced her to Rosaura for a supposed secretarial position, but instead Elena was drugged, raped, and moved into the world of sex work in Rosaura’s cabaret-brothel. Elena sought revenge in a plot with many surprising twists. Mora wrote that “in a vice center like Juárez ... a city that itself lies uncertainly suspended between two antagonistic cultures,” the film links Juárez’s most corrupt underworld activities with Mexico’s most conservative, traditional, moral values” (Mora 2005, 89). This film offers a critique of hypocritical, class-privileged nationalism.

Most historic and western US films hardly addressed the relatively invisible exploited immigrant labor, but the film *The Border Incident* (1950) did so with the Border Patrol guards portraying the “good guys” and the US ranchers the “bad guys,” willing to kill to cover up their slave-like practices. The portrait of US agents as noble reflects the nationalist agenda. Perhaps also, filmmakers would have taken a risk had they portrayed US officials in a less-than-positive light, given the anti-communist Cold War era of impending censorship under Senator Joseph McCarthy and his committee that intimidated, threatened, and ruined the careers of critical filmmakers. In *Salt of the Earth* (1954), with a documentary feel based on an actual strike, Mexican American men workers and previously publicly voiceless wives in a serf-like mining town of southern New Mexico confronted Anglo mine owners with whom the Anglo local sheriffs operated in complicity. Director Herbert Biberman was blacklisted for this film.

Immigrant themes grew as the 1980s approached. In the immigrant-sympathetic 1982 film, *The Border*, Jack Nicholson played a melodramatic corrupt, abrasive, and gruff hypermasculine Border Patrol officer who experienced a change of heart after understanding personal conditions of poverty in the central border region of El Paso–Ciudad Juárez. Transnational migration figured prominently in *El Norte* (1983), a film in which Guatemalan siblings fled violence and civil war to “pass” as Mexicans and Mexican-Spanish speakers during their treacherous journey northward until they crawled through rat-infested underground tunnels in the western border of Tijuana/San Diego, making it to Los Angeles and eventually to life-and-death decisions about the value of family. The film warns how the lure of US economic opportunities can undermine more important values.

Drawing on film noir technique, with black and white shadowy atmospheric dread, *Touch of Evil* (1958) reverses stereotypes and induces ambivalence a la Juan Alonzo (2009).⁵ In the small town “in between” the east and central border, probably Eagle Pass, a tall and distinguished gentleman-Mexican police officer, a would-be “Drug Czar” equivalent if set in current times (played by the heavily made-up Charlton Heston on his “mixed-couple” honeymoon with his Pennsylvania-born blond wife Susie), confronted evil in the form of a morbidly obese, long-time corrupt Texas sheriff (played by Welles) who said he doesn’t know “how to speak Mexican.” Welles epitomizes masculinity gone bad. In the startling opening scene, a planted bomb in a car, probably in Piedras Negras, subsequently explodes on the US side, with obvious binational implications yet jurisdictional complexities. Vargas, the Mexican officer, symbolizes the “rule of law” with scrupulous attention to due process and evidence. After Vargas confronted the villainous US sheriff for trying to frame a suspect, the sheriff’s criminal associates kidnapped, drugged, and framed Susie for murder and drug use, preceded by a simulated gang rape scene. Miguel/Mike tells Susie the words I chose for the subtitle to this article: “All border towns bring out the worst in a country.”

While corrupt Texas sheriffs figure in various US border films, such as *Lone Star* (1996), (discussed in the next section), polarization rather than an uneasy hybridity is illustrated in the early period for both Hollywood and Mexico City border films. Mexico City films offer nationalistic warnings about the border and crossings, while US films usually evoke common, hegemonic Anglo stereotypes about Mexican-heritage people, except for *Touch of Evil*. However, in reversing the stereotypes, with the “other” US side of the border as corrupt, Welles perpetuates border polarization in his unique film.

The Later 1990s+ Period: Enduring Themes or Hybridity?

The central borderlands became the iconic place around which many filmmakers constructed their narratives. Ciudad Juárez symbolized the “city of vice,” an ongoing theme that one finds in the academic literature on Ciudad Juárez (Vila 2000, 2005; Martínez 1978). By the 1960s, globalized manufacturing (*maquiladora*) industries, with their low-paid assembly-line workers,⁶ grew throughout the multiple border regions, with Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, as its largest centerpiece and Tijuana, Baja California, as a secondary place, each with hundreds of foreign-owned factories and up to a fifth of a million assembly line workers in each locale at the industry’s peak (Lugo 2008). Moreover, the borderlands became the gateway for transnational criminal organizations in gun and drug trafficking, ongoing immigration, and the

violence associated therewith. Violence against women, particularly both the *feminicidio* (femicide) sexualized killings and domestic violence murders that numbered in the hundreds, began to be counted in the 1990s and resisted with spectacular social movements in courageous activism in Mexico and in transnational solidarity (Staudt 2008; Staudt and Méndez 2015), thus entering the national and hybridized consciousness of both countries and the borderlands.

A refreshing US film, transitioning from the earlier to later periods, *Lone Star* (1996) focused on the US side of the border, probably set Eagle Pass or Del Rio, Texas, across the river from Piedras Negras or Ciudad Acuña respectively, and both homes to US military bases that are so common along the border, militarized to protect the national space and economy. Like *Touch of Evil*, *Lone Star* offers reminders of historically tainted Texas county law enforcement. The film begins with the discovery of a skull and badge in the desert near the city and moves on to narrate and solve the murder mystery by threading together complex, diverse border people whose relationships cross the borders of cultural identity: Mexican American and Anglo, immigrant and native born, White and African American, and law-abiding and law-breaking residents in a border place far from state law enforcement. The film mixes the iconic good and bad people in a bundle of ethnic and gender identities that defy the usual stereotypes. Here again, small-town Texas covers the in-between central-east area rather than the eastern border, the forgotten border, and its cities like McAllen and Brownsville. Film viewers see multiple displays of varied masculinities: sensitive and rigid, aggressor and victim.

The spectacular film *Traffic* (2000), set mostly at the western Pacific border, weaves multiple stories together on the seemingly unwinnable drug war, yet the serious problems of addiction—whether to hard drugs or alcohol. Among all the films analyzed in this article, it was the most costly to make and the most profitable, with probably the largest viewing audience of all the films herein (as noted in www.in-numbers.com). *Traffic* takes place primarily in San Diego, but also the lush La Jolla, California, and Tijuana, Baja California (with scenes shot inside the real El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) and at one of the El Paso–Juárez Ports of Entry). Like *Lone Star*, viewers cannot draw on stereotypes for the iconic good and bad people involved in drug war enforcement and drug trafficking. *Traffic* begins with the petty, everyday trafficking of drugs as two honest US agents, Mexican American and African American, set up a small businessman, one of many conduits for the trade that serves the young wealthy businessman-drug lord in a luxurious La Jolla mansion who is married to an enterprising European woman who, because of her addiction to a life of privilege, eventually succumbs to trafficking as well.

The film moves back and forth to drug war enforcement on the Mexico side, with two honest Mexican police officers operating in a corrupt system where the military general turned Drug Czar-equivalent actually works for the Juárez cartel (loosely based on an actual famous case). Meanwhile, the new US Drug Czar, often pictured drinking alcohol and father to a drug-addicted teen daughter, gradually realizes the futility and complexity of drug wars amid narrowly focused US interdiction policies. However, “othering” continues, for when viewers see torture, it is administered on the Mexico side of the border in medieval horrendous fashion. Yet equally horrifying bombs and shootings on the US side maim and kill people, though seemingly clean and quick and somehow, for the less critical, more “civilized.” Despite the illusion of hybridity and similarity, the emotion-evoking torture and death scenes reinforce stereotypes.

Moving back toward the central border, a series of Hollywood films emerged about the sexualized killings of women (femicide) in Ciudad Juárez. The Hollywood productions emerged well after the release of Lourdes Portillo’s excellent documentary of the murders and disappearances of young women, *Señorita Extraviada* (2001), narrated in both English and Spanish versions and shown to social movement audiences in both countries with respectful treatment of the victims and their families. US filmmakers produced two Hollywood versions of the city and its femicide: *The Virgin of Juárez* (2005) and *Bordertown* (2006), a misnomer in title, given the size of the city as Mexico’s fifth largest, with approximately two million people at that time period (see the brief film analysis in Staudt 2008, Ch 4 Appendix, with their common motif of a cold-turned-warm US woman journalist as the key protagonist who “discovers” the problems).

Tabuenca Córdoba deftly analyzes these femicide films, including their flaws and the complexities of border economies about which US mainstream audiences may be unaware. The *Virgin of Juárez*, she said, uses activist voices who critique the globalized economy at the border—the mainly US-owned *maquiladoras* as responsible for lawlessness of the city and its low wages as well as industry public relations representatives who say the factories provide jobs for migrants from the interior (Tabuenca Córdoba 2011, 82). In *Bordertown*, Tabuenca Córdoba noted that viewers also gained insights about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), global factory exploitation, and the way transnational elites at the highest levels of decision-making cover up the crimes (Tabuenca Córdoba 2011, 85). Both films, she concluded, however, contain “problems of representation,” in following “one genre and one story detective/thriller/drama” (Tabuenca Córdoba 2011, 88). Though the economies are interdependent and hybridized, polarization is evident in wages and lifestyles.

Film attention to femicide continued in the 2009 Mexican-made film, with English subtitles, *Traspatio* (Backyard). It covers the 1990s period in Ciudad Juárez, focused on an honest female protagonist Blanca Guerra (her surname means war in Spanish) investigator working in a corrupt, misogynist police department. Filmed in Ciudad Juárez with its stark desert periphery into which bodies had been dumped, the film portrays murderers in multiple forms and variations of masculine psychopathology: one type is the wealthy US sexual predator with businesses on both sides of the border who snatches girls and stores their bodies in nightmarish locations, and another type is a heartsick young migrant from southern Mexico whose bully friends gang rape and murder his former girlfriend. Here we see seemingly normal but evil men, one crossing the borders of territory and class privilege in hybridized space.

The immigrant film genre expanded in the contemporary era in both upbeat and terrifying fashion. *Under the Same Moon* (2007) paints the picture of family separation and mother-child bonds as a boy migrates northward, amazingly and perhaps implausibly unscathed and occasionally protected by sensitive men and women that he meets as he travels across multiple borderlands on his journey to find his mother in Los Angeles. *Sin Nombre* (2009) has the feel of a documentary as a young man flees the hyper-masculine gang life of the Mara Salvatrucha at the Guatemala–Mexico border and mounts the top of eastern-corridor trains moving north with other migrants to encounter threats not only from the gangs, but also from organized crime and corrupt police, including Mexican border guards. The film is one of the rare to close at the forgotten border of the river dividing South Texas and Tamaulipas. Also containing train scenes, the short 33-minute documentary *Dying to Live: A Migrant's Journey* (2005) by Executive Producer and theology professor Daniel Groody, is a heart-wrenching film containing the realism of horrendous journeys. Perhaps the most compellingly honest of the non-documentary films is the Mexican-made *7 Soles* (suns in Spanish) (2009) focused on a group of migrants who pass through the Nogales, Sonora, border with Arizona to take a treacherous lengthy journey through the desert with a *coyote*. When he guides them around the border fence to slip underneath a barbed-wire fence, he announces “*es el otro lado*,” it’s the other side, yet they see the same dry desert brush in this hybridized space. Of the 15 who begin, only 7 survive after dehydration, conflict, and medical crises, but the hyper-masculine rapist-coyote follows through, perhaps redeeming himself, as he delivers the surviving boy to his father in Chicago to presumably the good life with a decent employer. In *La Tragedia de Macario* (2006), a Mexican film with English subtitles, the central character Macario encounters fatal tragedy after job loss on a Nuevo León ranch, negotiation to go to “the other side” with a *coyote* who locked 19 people in a railroad car from the outside and prevented from opening it in the desert heat by corrupt Mexican police, and final discovery in Victoria, Texas. Post-script scenes show the actual news coverage of this real mass suffocation death in 2003. The militarized border control is implicitly critiqued in the new migrant genre; both sides of the border display evil.

Filmmakers expanded drug trafficking themes with both US and Mexican-made films at the western Pacific borderlands. In a hybridized vision of mutual law-breaking and corrupt officials on both sides of the border, the Mexico production, *Miss Bala* (2011), (the surname means bullet in Spanish) with English-language subtitles, focuses on a young woman in Tijuana who enters a beauty contest but gets

caught up in conflict among drug gangs, only to find that cartels rig the contests and trap her into serving as a “mule” to cross drugs and return with guns with assistance from corrupt US agents. Little is glamorous or masculine about drug bosses and business. Their guns and control become artificial props for some supposedly inherent masculine characteristics. Although she tries to escape, she has little choice but to comply, including compliance with sexual assaults, twice sodomized. At the close, she serves as a scapegoat in a shootout between authorities and criminals, but is quickly released after the press conference about her capture, reminiscent of real law enforcement practices involving (temporarily) captured drug traffickers. Viewers see no nationalism in this film.

One wonders, where is the normal everyday life in the borderlands? Besides the US-made *Lone Star*, despite its incredulous climax, viewers can find the Mexican-made *El Jardín del Edén* (2006) set mostly in Tijuana with scenes of Garden of Eden hotels, same name in two languages, with one hotel in Los Angeles. The film weaves together the lives of multiple characters—Anglo, Mexican, and Mexican American—dealing with gender-bending behavior and identity issues in a perfectly hybrid place: the borderlands. In these films, one sees stable border life in peace, rather than the chaos and violence of most other films.

The latest of the seemingly hybridized drug war films is famous director Oliver Stone’s *Savages* (2012), involving a cartel in Baja California run by Elena *La Reina*, with a US base of operations on sovereign Native American land in San Diego County, seeking to partner with a *ménage à trois* household—a girlfriend and two US traffickers, one an ex-Marine and the other a sensitive long-curly-haired scientist who invented a potent form of nationally “home-grown” marijuana in a high-profit business facilitated by a corrupt US drug enforcement agent. The US drug dealers, after being approached with a partnership arrangement by *La Reina*’s agents but reluctant to agree, discover that their love is kidnapped. Overt savagery begins as the US growers use technology that wreaks havoc to counter the brutalizing havoc of the Mexican cartel. On each side of the border, by each group of drug dealers, the perception exists of the “others” as savages. Amid the sunshine of the Pacific coastal beaches, luxury homes, and sailboats, filmmakers use excessive blood and violence that ultimately portray Mexicans as more violent, yet the violence was unleashed by seemingly clean, high-tech Internet hacking technology that framed the loyal lawyer to the cartel queen. Again, US savagery seems more “civilized.” At the close, however, the mutual savagery is evident from mutual displays of high-power assault weapons and military training in explosives, no matter the nationality of those who pull the triggers. Ultimately, the film polarizes the border, but with more sophisticated guise. The film *Savages* maintains the pattern whereby contemporary US films otherize Mexico while recent Mexican films tend to offer critiques of both nations.

My film analysis comes to a close with a polarized vision of the future, based in the western Pacific borderlands, with Alex Rivera’s 2008 film, *Sleep Dealer*. The film offers a stark take on the potentially futurist expansion of privatized, transnational corporate control of water, the absolute closure and militarization of the border, and the ruthless exploitation of bodies with robotic technology in globalized Tijuana *maquiladoras*. The film’s classic line refers to how the technology allows those in the US to “enjoy low-cost Mexican labor without migrants on US soil”. Memo, a young man in southern Mexico, whose family’s lives and farm prospects shrink due to expensive privatized water controlled by global transnational firms and guarded with unmanned drones, hacks into a computer and unintentionally induces a drone “hit” that kills his father, mistakenly targeted as an “aqua terrorist.” Memo moves northward to work in plants where workers’ bodies are fitted with electrical nodes for robotic technology to “work” transnationally. The nodes not only occasionally short and kill workers, but also gradually diminish eyesight, leaving blind ex-workers surviving at Tijuana’s periphery. Memo meets a woman to whom he tells all and she sells his story online, purchased in chapters by any buyers. The unmanned drone operator, surfing story webs, gradually realizes that he wrongly caused the father’s death. He decides to travel to Mexico, passing through a border checkpoint “manned” through a female India-accented voice, an outsourced border worker halfway around the globalized world. Like Orwell’s *1984*, the film leaves an indelible impression of the possible future of the US–Mexico border, given the near-unchecked global

economic exploitation, labor demands, xenophobia, and border closures, yet the beginnings of binational, hybridized solidarity.

In the box office in-numbers website discussed earlier, *Sleep Dealer* was the only border independent film listed with an \$80,137 budget (no gross totals provided) compared to *Traffic* which cost \$48 million to make and generated a total gross of \$124 million (www.in-numbers.com). If capital on that scale were available for prescient, creative border films like *Sleep Dealer*, rather than the border-exploitation types, polarized under the guise of hybridity, mainstream viewers might develop different frames of the borderlands. Commercial money apparently is primarily available for border films about drugs, sex, immigration deaths, and violence. Hollywood films, presumably independent of government, reinforce US nationalism, unlike recent Mexican-made films analyzed herein.

Concluding Reflections

In this article, I examined a balanced Mexican and US group of good-quality films.⁷ And about the subtitle-turned question: does the border bring out the worst in countries?, I conclude that it is films about the border, not the border itself, that bring out the worst in the borderlands of countries, at least in the multiple borders of the US–Mexico border region. With the viewership of available contemporary films expanding exponentially in theaters and homes, film representations and misrepresentations thus likely influence people’s image of the borderlands.

Historically, US films once positively portrayed Anglo/White settlers as civilizers of the frontier and negatively portrayed Mexicans and Mexican Americans, with few exceptions. Mexican films, once nationalistic with negative portrayals of borders as zones where dangers lurk, have also begun to diversify and trans-nationalize their themes, albeit with continuing focus on border zone dangers. In historic and contemporary Mexican and US films about the border, images shout warnings about drugs, sexual violence, and the exploitation of working people, including immigrants who face deadly dangers in crossing to the “other side” of the United States. In recent years, both U.S. and Mexican films portray borders as hybrid places where savagery lurks on the “other” side, using different means. Yet the US films generally reinforced a nationalist polarization, while Mexican films reinforced a critique of polarization toward hybridity. From both countries, masculinity performances became more diverse over time.

After decades in which filmmakers created and reproduced dominant hegemonic stereotypes, this article reveals that films from Mexico and the US have become more nuanced and complex, portraying Mexicans and Americans with diverse identities, heroes and villains alike. As for geographic coverage, films from both countries concentrated on the Pacific borderlands of Tijuana–San Diego or on the central borderlands of Ciudad Juárez–El Paso, with drug and sex themes respectively, if film location is specified at all. Immigration themes transcend multiple border sites, but filmmakers render invisible the “forgotten” eastern borderlands of northeastern Mexican states of Tamaulipas and Coahuila–South Texas. Common themes emerge at each of the multiple border sites. At the western borderlands, filmmakers stress drug trafficking in the stereotyped hedonism of the Pacific coast. In the central borderlands, sexualized violence is a predominant theme. At the eastern site, the borderlands hardly exist.

Through commercial films on the border, mainstream and border people see “imagined communities,” imagined in Hollywood and Mexico City. Whether historical or contemporary, many films narrate and graphically convey borderlands as places where drug trafficking, sexual violence, and migrant death are rampant. While themes like these reflect partial reality, to be sure, the absence of multiple stories about the diversity of lives at the border conveys to mainstreamers that borders are places of depravity rather than the mixed picture of lived realities for the 14 million people that reside in, rather than pass through the borderlands. As such, many border films perpetuate the idea that border people are somehow less than mainstream “others,” unfit to make decisions about their destinies. A few exceptions exist: *Lone Star* and *El Jardín del Edén*.

In Mexico's classic film *Espaldas Mojadas*, the United States is a place of savagery—a strong term, but one that resonates with the theme of US films analyzed in the later contemporary section of this paper, such as *Traffic* (2000), with its line from the Mexican general-turned-Drug Czar, but on the Juárez cartel payroll, who says “we are not savages,” and the recent film, *Savages* (2012) which suggestively asks which side of the border savagery emanates from. By the 1950s, US film focus shifts, not surprisingly under the direction of premier filmmaker Orson Welles, in *Touch of Evil*, (1958), where he reversed the stereotyping of the “other” showing evil lurking on the US side, specifically in a place “in between” the central and eastern border that resembles Eagle Pass, Texas, across the Rio Grande/Río Bravo from Piedras Negras, Coahuila.

Films perform the border in literal and figurative ways. Literally, the border films tend to stress the lawlessness, violence, and chaos of the border. People put themselves at risk whether crossing or even getting near the border. While such dangers exist, the films hardly convey the ordinary lives of border people who live in stability and cope with similar problems as non-border people (such as *El Jardín del Edén*), who cross at Ports of Entry in the millions annually and often live in cities with extremely low crime rates, compared to the rest of US cities, such as El Paso and San Diego. Figuratively, the border represents danger, drugs, and sexualized violence. To be sure, borderlands have become gateway regions for drug suppliers to reach US consumer demand (see Payan, Staudt, and Kruszewski 2013), with problematic law enforcement on both sides. And borders, with multiple law enforcement systems, may become magnets for sexualized violence that operates with impunity (Ruiz 2009). Women, sexualized or victimized by sex, though are occasionally portrayed as strong protagonists in some films, such as the investigator in *Transpatio*. Masculinities, once performed in villainous or virtuous ways, depending on ethnicity and nationality, have become more diverse and ambivalent. Nationalism, once prominent, has become more muted, but “savagery” predictably still comes from one side of the border predominantly, the southern side. Transnational solidarity occasionally emerges in the North American reality.

While the films offer realism that is accurate at one level, the absence of multi-layered portrayals (with few exceptions) projects the image of the border as “other” whichever side of the border is the focus and whichever nation from which the cultural production emanates. The “othering” process is alive and well in historic and contemporary films. However, it emanates from both sides of the border, but for critical viewers, more and more it offers mirror-like images. On the question of the borderlands as a hybrid or polarized place, the historical section reveals fairly consistent polarization. However, the contemporary era contains a mix of hybridity and polarization. Perhaps border theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) should get more social science than poetic license in her characterization of simultaneous, multiple realities in the multiple US–Mexico border sites.

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Endnotes

¹ The United States usurped the term “American” for its citizens, despite the fact that the Western Hemisphere contains Americans from North, Central, and South America. I use this version, despite such usurpation.

² Drawing on the 1983 Paz Agreement, the borderlands exist 100 kilometers north and south of the borderline.

³ There are different ways to determine income inequalities, such as per capita income, a measure of central tendency, but one affected by the valuation or overvaluation of the peso to the dollar (See Staudt

1998, Ch 3). I prefer to contrast legal minimum wages. The legal minimum in the US is \$7.25 per hour or \$58 per day, while the Mexican legal minimum, a slight premium for the northern border, hovers at 50 pesos per day, or approximately \$4, depending on the peso-dollar exchange rate which changes constantly. Thus, an approximate 10:1 ratio exists.

⁴ Thanks to Tony Payan for pointing out the strangeness in these films, tapped by and shown in French film schools as emblematic surrealism.

⁵ I have watched this film many times, and thank Netflix for making the latest edited version of the 1990s edition available. Welles was so unhappy with the 1958 edited version that he wrote a lengthy memo on desired changes, left Hollywood, and vowed never to do another film there.

⁶ See note 3.

⁷ On a four-star scale (****), typical of cable TV movies and media reviews, criteria for which I have absorbed, given many viewings over the years, most of these films would be rated three stars or better except, perhaps, for *The Border and Savages*, despite high-profile stars and directors, respectively. My criteria include quality and enduring value of the script, images, and dramatic performances. Reviewers' scales are ultimately subjective, unless based on (selective) users' comments, such as the online ratings for film websites, like the ten-point scales of the Internet Movie Data base (IMDb.com) and Rotten Tomatoes (rottentomatoes.com) showing images for a fresh or rotten tomato for each published critic and the average score of viewers plus the percent who "liked" the film. Of course, one must note the total number of viewers, some of which display intensity biases. Like political meetings, users can "pack" and sway the ultimate (rating) outcomes.

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