

Border, edge, limit, margin, fringe, beginning or end, line that divides and bridges two worlds: the American Dream next to Latin America's magical realism. It seems almost an imaginary projection of a linguistic difference that isn't quite so: on the one side the winners, on the other the losers. There are then the ones trapped in the middle. And there is also the tragicomical belief that you can become what you aren't just by crossing the line; or that you can remain the same even on the other side.

It seems so simple on the one hand: people go North because they think it will be better over there. Some literally cross the border looking for gold- and discover perhaps a "new world." Others go South in order to spend that gold. Some go shopping in either direction as if the border did not exist. How can you explain the beginning of one world and the end of another?

On the other hand, the Tijuana-San Diego border claims to be the busiest border in the world. Over 100,000 people cross it daily. About half the total of Latin American immigrants enter the U.S. there. Sixty percent of the total of Spanish-speaking immigrants settle in California.

Each year 35 million gringos go south of the border looking for relaxation and cheap entertainment, spending roughly a billion dollars. Most of this money is spent on Tijuana's Avenida Revolución-the Reve (pronounced rebay), as it is popularly called, short for reventón, which means to get stoned out of your mind, to get wild.

Some time ago, of course, things were different. Perhaps the very concept of a border was different when Christopher Columbus arrived in the New World (with no papers, as the Mexican performance artist Guillermo Gómez Peña likes to joke) or later, when Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, as well as parts of Wyoming, Colorado and Oklahoma, belonged to Mexico. The past, indeed, is a foreign country. The present sometimes seems just as foreign, especially when you are classified as an illegal alien.

Today's border stretches for 2,000 miles between two worlds that seem to collide rather than meet, for the South is even more abysmally poor than it was 30 years ago. In the last decade alone, the number of people living below the poverty line in Latin America has more than doubled, from 71 million to 183 million-41 percent of the total population. Economic stagnation and hyperinflation have pushed to the brink of collapse the three largest countries in South America: Argentina, (whose 1990 inflation rate was 1,300 percent), Brazil (1,800 percent), and Peru (7,650 percent-a rate surpassed only by post-civil war Nicaragua.)

Aside from the material costs, the toll of Nicaragua's war has included 50,000 dead. The estimate for El Salvador is 70,000 dead. Another 25,000 have died in the last ten years of repression and violence in Columbia. Peru's unofficial civil war is responsible for 30,000 deaths.

Perhaps the future will be better, but the reality is, and has been, crude.

For many, the odyssey North is long and perilous, with many borders to cross, the first big one being the Mexican frontera.

In the most classical sense the border between Guatemala and Mexico is defined by the Juchiate River. Tecún Umán is the Tijuana (little Tijuana) of the Guatemalan border. It's as though geography were playing symmetrical games with history. But in Tijuana national identities are clear. In Tecún Umán, by contrast,

faces might mingle in an amalgam of pre-Columbian ambiguity. This is halfway anyway-there are still 4,000 kilometers to go before the last border.

In Tecún Umán, for 1,000 pesos (35 cents) or one quetzal, a camarero (boat man) will take you in his raft, made of trunks and old tractor tires, across to Mexico. No big deal. You just wait for the right moment, usually at night. The problems start once you are on the other side. Hey, are you going across? A hundred pesos to Tapachula, 200 dollars for Tijuana. What do you say? If something happens I'll take you again and again until you get there, ah.

Tecún Umán, Tijuana, no man's land, domain of polleros (they promise to take you wherever you want to go for the right amount of money), matronas (they supply the innocent young girls for only 20 quetzals) and bandidos (no translation necessary.) It's hard to call it a town-more like a hamlet busy bus station made of cardboard.

In 1990 the Mexican government deported to Tecún Umán 126,440 undocumented immigrants, of whom 30 percent had been deported more than twice. Of the total, 46.5 percent were Guatemalan, 36 percent Salvadoran, 11.8 percent Honduran, 2.4 percent Nicaraguan. The high rate of murder, assault and extortion both here and at the U.S. border recently prompted Mexico to create a special police unit called the Beta force.

Finally, if you are lucky, come Tijuana, where the American Dream is so close. The Tijuana poet José Javier Villarreal writes:

This city like a thorn in our throats,
Like the man walking with fear engraved on his face.
It pains us like love and its armies.
Like irredeemable lost angels. . .
This city stands over the sweat and dreams of our parents,
Over the rapped body of a girl
And the ever ready hand of the assassin.
It grows like hatred, like dust and wrath,
Like an angry ocean that fizzles through your hands.

Tijuana plays a key role in the success story of the north of Mexico. By the most recently available data, its four percent annual growth makes it one of the country's fastest-growing cities. True, cardboard houses with broken American cars at the door are part of the Tijuana landscape- some would say part of its essence-but there is also a new, booming financial district, an image conscious tourist section, and above all the maquiladoras, factories that have formed an industrial belt throughout the northern Mexican border.

Currently about 430,000 Tijuana families depend on these industries, which are backed by American and Japanese capital. The average wage is \$1.25 an hour-this in a city where the rate of inflation exceeds that in Mexico City. Four-fifths of Tijuana's workers are women whose husbands, in most cases, work on the other side of the border and do not send back enough money. Sixty-five percent are non-native.

Between 1964 and 1987 the average Tijuana household increased from 4 to 6.58 persons. Only half the population has electricity and running water; as in most border cities, the latter, crucial for sanitation and hygiene

and a barrier to malnutrition and disease, is the most urgent problem.

As you walk along el Bordo on the Mexican side, the 10-foot-high fence seems like a joke. Even though it is repaired every day, the fence is full of holes. Many holes harbor their own micro-economics: burrito stands, shoe stands, kiosks where you can buy almost anything you need to get to San Diego.

To become an illegal alien, all you have to do is step through one of those holes. Or you can do something a bit more surrealistic: you can stay in the middle, one part of your body legal, the other illicit.

But always, as the song says, night time is the right time. Walking along el Bordo at night, you see may see 30 people going through a single hole. Once on the other side, they wait, backs against the fence. In a matter of minutes a helicopter flies over them. Soon, almost too soon, the Border Patrol gets there.

Some of the people resting against the fence (known as the tortilla curtain) light up cigarettes. They do not seem to mind the presence of the nearby police. The policemen get out of their cars, and as if imitating the illegals, also light up. Nobody moves. The smell of meat and beans from burrito stands permeates the air. The impression is that of participants in a millenarian ritual, mere actors condemned to repeat their roles over and over-mainly at night, of course, always the night.

Half an hour later, eight or ten of them (the ones that are sacrificed-some rituals require sacrifice) run in one direction into U.S. territory. The Border Patrol pursues them. The rest, taking advantage of the situation, run in the other direction. Some of them will make it to San Diego. Some won't.

With no English, no money and no network or family, it is virtually impossible to survive as an undocumented worker. Thus, for generations family networks have been established: south and north of the border a big family, an endless alternate current in constant flux.

In 1848, right after the U.S.-Mexico War, 100,000 Mexicans became U.S. subjects. It was not until the First World War that one could speak of a border as such. The first massive deportation of undocumented Mexican workers did not occur until the Great Depression struck in 1929. Many of them settled in Tijuana, in the Zona del Rio (river zone), now known as Cartolandia (Cardboardland.)

As Carey McWilliams argues very convincingly in his book *North from Mexico*, the history of the Southwest cannot be explained without taking into account the Mexican factor. Jorge A. Bustamante, director of the Institute of Border Studies in Tijuana, points out that undocumented workers have historically been used as a cushion in an ever changing economy. When the economy tumbles, they are the first to go and be blamed. The current debate in the U.S. over the North American Free Trade Agreement-which has become a political footfall during this presidential season-is just the latest manifestation of this phenomenon.

Between 1900 and 1930 about a million Mexicans settled in the U.S. During this period, California's tradition of hiring Mexicans as cheap and disposable labor became institutionalized. (Though the proportion of women has doubled over recent years, the overwhelming majority-85 percent-remain male.) today California could not survive the expulsion of all undocumented workers; no longer limited to the ranches or the agricultural fields (where the Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that only seven percent of the workers are illegal), they vital contributors to the textile industry and the service sector.

“Todos dicen que en el norte, se gana rehearta plata,” goes the song by Rudy Fierro-“Everyone says in the North you can make lots of money.” What the Old West represents for many Americans, the North represents for many Mexicans-a mythical land where Fierro sings, “I’m gonna buy you the sky, I’m gonna buy you the moon.” With such a perspective, perhaps, the term illegal alien will finally be seen for the unnecessarily strident and pejorative characterization that it is.

The Oakland Museum’s exhibition “Between Two Worlds” is an effort to challenge that unfortunate image. Don Barletti’s photographs of documented and undocumented workers, children, Border Patrol guards, farm owners, activist priests, entrepreneurs, thieves, and opportunists contain their fair share of villains and victims, but also adventurers and dreamers of ingenuity, courage and family solidarity-those irreplaceable elements without which history has no human face and no real drama.