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The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Border Crossing. Commuters and Performative Border in the Californias

La presentación de la persona en el cruce cotidiano. *Commuters* y frontera performativa en las Californias

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to describe and explain, from the perspective of Cultural Sociology, how the commuter population in the urban border region of Baja California employs different strategies for presenting themselves at the ports of entry into the United States. This text is based on in-depth interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022 with different active cross-border people who use their temporary visitor visas to work in the United States and reside in Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California. The research shows the importance of cultural elements such as social performance to explain this population's dynamics of cross-bordering in this region.

Keywords: 1. commuters, 2. transborder workers, 3. social performance, 4. Tijuana and Mexicali, 5. United States-Mexico border.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es describir y explicar, desde las propuestas de la sociología cultural, cómo la población *commuter* en la región fronteriza urbana de Baja California articula diversas estrategias de presentación de sí mismos en los cruces hacia Estados Unidos. Este texto se basa en entrevistas a profundidad, que se aplicaron entre 2020 y 2022 a distintas personas transfronterizas activas que utilizan su visa de visitante temporal para trabajar en Estados Unidos y que residen en las ciudades de Tijuana y Mexicali, Baja California. La investigación muestra la importancia de elementos culturales como el performance social para explicar las dinámicas de los cruces transfronterizos de esta población en dicha región.

Palabras clave: 1. *commuters*, 2. trabajadores transfronterizos, 3. performance social, 4. Tijuana y Mexicali, 5. frontera México-Estados Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

Each day, thousands of individuals cross the Mexico-United States border for purposes related to family, commerce, education, tourism, or employment. This mobility is made possible through a range of documents that authorize cross-border transit. A substantial number of these individuals reside in Mexico and engage in regular commutes to workplaces in U.S. cities, whether in the immediate border region or farther inland. This cross-border circulation produces mutual benefits: for the United States, it supplies labor to specialized sectors that rely on this workforce; for northern Mexican cities, it generates economic inflows through the dollars earned by cross-border workers; and for the workers themselves, it provides access to employment opportunities with comparatively higher wages.

Research on the working population in the Mexico-United States border region, particularly within the fields of economics and sociology, has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of labor dynamics and their economic and social implications. However, comparatively little scholarly attention has been given to the cultural processes embedded in these dynamics. Some cross-border workers hold documentation that permits legal employment in the United States, such as lawful permanent residency or U.S. citizenship acquired by Mexican nationals. Others, however, rely on temporary visitor visas to seek employment, thereby violating the intended purpose of those documents. For this latter group, self-presentation before U.S. border agents becomes a critical and strategic act, involving performative practices aimed at gaining entry.

This article aims to describe and analyze how a specific segment of the working population in the urban border region of Baja California experiences and enacts performative strategies of self-presentation at international border crossings into the United States. These crossings may occur by car, on foot, or through airports. While commonly referred to in the literature as commuters or cross-border workers, the individuals discussed here are not examined primarily in relation to their employment under a temporary visitor visa. Rather, the focus is on their actions during encounters with U.S. immigration officers, considered within the broader context of expanding surveillance systems and the mechanisms of control and classification that regulate the transnational movement of people across geopolitical borders.

In cities such as Tijuana, Baja California, and other Mexican localities along the northern border, there is significant cross-border mobility between Mexico and the United States for purposes such as family visits, employment, education, and consumption (Díaz González & González-König, 2016; Fullerton & Walke, 2019; López Estrada, 2020; Velasco Ortiz, 2016). For example, approximately 90 000 individuals cross daily at the San Ysidro port of entry, located in San Diego County adjacent to Tijuana (Castañeda Pérez & Félix, 2020). However, during the first presidential term of Donald Trump (2017 to 2021), several restrictions were implemented at U.S. ports of entry (Kolas & Oztig, 2021). These restrictions were further intensified by additional limitations introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, a constellation of meanings takes shape along the northern border of Mexico as part of the region's lived experience (Velasco Ortiz & Contreras Montellanos, 2014; Velasco Ortiz, 2016). This experience includes viewing individuals who cross daily from south to north as social actors who engage in diverse self-presentation strategies during their interactions with U.S. customs officers. Building on this premise, the article seeks to analyze, from a culturalist perspective, the strategies of self-presentation employed specifically by commuters at international ports of entry in the urban border region spanning Baja California, Mexico, and California, United States. The analysis is grounded in key concepts from cultural theory and symbolic interactionism, particularly the performativity of the self and the theatricality of social life, as well as principles related to geopolitical borders and systems of surveillance.

METHODOLOGY

This article forms part of a research project carried out between 2020 and 2022 and is based on ten in-depth interviews with active cross-border individuals who reside in the cities of Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California, and use temporary visitor visas to work in the United States. The phenomenological in-depth interview method is particularly well suited for exploring the lived experiences through which individuals interpret and give meaning to their social world (Van Manen, 2014).

This research highlights the importance of examining the meaning-making processes of commuters residing in the region, drawing on the theoretical contributions of cultural sociology (Alexander & Smith, 2019). This framework is particularly effective for identifying and analyzing meanings and actions that are historically situated within specific spatial and temporal contexts (Reed, 2011). To capture the significance of these actions, the study employs two complementary methodological approaches: phenomenology, which involves reflecting on the lived experiences of human existence (Van Manen, 2014), and abductive semiotic analysis, which is used to theorize the everyday realities of commuter life (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

This inquiry employed qualitative methods to explore the production of meaning, along with the subjective and embodied experiences of individuals, in this case, commuters. The role of the researcher is to situate these meanings within a broader constellation in order to uncover, interpret, and articulate the event as it appears to the observer. As Weber (2014) emphasized, understanding such connections is essential for explaining the causes behind meaningful action. Individuals subjectively attribute significance to their actions in relation to the structures that shape the social order.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format that combined both closed and open-ended questions, as well as thematic prompts designed to facilitate open conversation. This approach allowed participants to provide concrete responses to specific inquiries while also offering the opportunity to elaborate in greater depth. The analysis of the interviews was conducted manually. Responses were conceptualized and these concepts served as codes, which were subsequently organized into the primary categories for analysis.

This study was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the use of digital videoconferencing platforms such as Google Meet for all participant interactions. While eight of the interviews were fully transcribed, the analytical process incorporated insights drawn from the entire set of ten conversations. To safeguard participant anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and all communications were conducted exclusively through virtual channels.

COMMUTERS AND PERFORMATIVE BORDER

Baja California, Commuters, and Border Security

Quantifying the cross-border working population in the Baja California region presents initial challenges due to the coexistence of both documented and undocumented individuals within this group. Estimates indicate that in the year 2000, commuters comprised approximately 5.7% of Tijuana's economically active population (Escala Rabadán & Vega Briones, 2005). Subsequently, Vega Briones (2016) utilized data from the 2010 Population and Housing Censuses to estimate the size of the active cross-border workforce in northern Mexico. According to this data, 11 706 residents of Mexicali were employed in the United States, while in Tijuana the figure reached 29 303 individuals. In both cities, these numbers represented less than 5% of the economically active population (Vega Briones, 2016).

According to more recent studies (Coubès, 2008; Rocha Romero & Orraca Romano, 2018; Orraca Romano, 2023), commuters from cities such as Tijuana and Mexicali, along with other northern Mexican border cities, typically engage in low-skilled jobs like construction and domestic work. While their wages are lower than those of migrants who have settled permanently in the United States, they remain higher than the incomes of workers residing in these border cities (Orraca Romano, 2015).

Similarly, the city of Tijuana is home to two major border crossings. San Ysidro, located in San Diego County near the city's downtown area, is the busiest port of entry in the world, with approximately 90 000 individuals crossing into the United States each day. Otay Mesa, situated to the east, primarily facilitates commercial transit (Castañeda Pérez & Félix, 2020). Those who traverse these crossings play a crucial role in sustaining cross-border dynamics, which reflect not only a territorial relationship but also a structural asymmetry between Mexico and the United States (Herzog, 1990; Velasco Ortiz & Contreras Montellanos, 2014; Orraca Romano, 2015).

Mexicali features two border crossings: one located in the western downtown area and another on the eastern side of the city. According to data from the United States Bureau of Transportation Statistics, a combined total of 18 021 132 pedestrian and vehicle crossings were recorded at both ports of entry in 2021, with the western crossing experiencing higher traffic volumes (Bureau of Transportation Statistics [BTS], 2021). This corresponds to an average of 49 373 daily crossings by pedestrians and personal vehicles.

In this region, various types of social and economic ties are formed and consolidated between cities on both sides of the border, enabling the conceptualization of the area as a large transborder metropolis (Alegría, 2000; Herzog, 1990). This metropolis is characterized by the flow of goods, tourists, workers, and students (Alegría, 1990; Herzog, 1990; Orraca Romano, 2023). From these exchanges emerge distinctive identities and meanings attributed to the area's inhabitants, including transmigrant workers (Alegría, 1990), cross-border workers (Ruiz Marrujo, 1995; Iglesias Prieto, 2014), and commuters. These individuals typically reside on one side of the border, most often the Mexican side, and work on the other (Alegría, 1990; Orraca Romano, 2023), although some travel beyond the localities immediately adjacent to the border.

This commuter population crosses the international border either regularly or sporadically for employment purposes and generally resides within the urban border region of northern Mexico. Two categories of visitors can be identified in this context: those who possess the necessary documentation to work legally in the United States, such as a U.S. passport, green card, or work permit, and those who cross using a temporary visitor visa or Border Crossing Card (hereinafter BCC).

Possession of a BCC authorizes individuals to cross through ports of entry along the northern Mexican border, including those in cities such as Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California. This document is often regarded as a privilege, as its issuance is at the discretion of the U.S. government. The BCC permits temporary entry into the United States, granting access primarily for consumption activities such as purchasing clothing, groceries, entertainment, and other goods. However, it explicitly prohibits employment within U.S. territory.

Over time, this segment of the population has learned to use the border to their advantage by crossing regularly and thereby establishing a transborder life, particularly through access to the United States labor market. On one hand, some individuals are authorized to work in the country, holding either U.S. citizenship or permanent resident status. On the other hand, others, despite lacking proper documentation, manage to obtain employment and earn income in U.S. dollars.

This study focuses on the latter group, examining the strategies and performances they adopt to cross the border and evade detection by U.S. immigration authorities, especially amid increasingly stringent border control policies. Most of these individuals cross on foot or by car to reach cities in southern California; however, some enter the United States via airport when their place of employment is located farther from the northern Mexican border region.

Studies on the cross-border population in Mexico's northern border region experienced significant growth during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Arámburo Vizcarra, 1987; Acuña González, 1988; Alegría, 1989, 1990, 2000; Herzog, 1990; Escala Rabadán & Vega Briones, 2005). Generally, these studies focused on the impact of commuters' dollar-denominated incomes on the border region's economy, highlighting how this dynamic stimulated labor activity in the southern United States and how these workers invested their earnings in Mexico.

More recent studies, including those by Orraca Romano (2015, 2023), Vega Briones (2016), and Rocha Moreno and Orraca Romano (2018), have continued to examine this population. However, both these and earlier investigations primarily adopt a quantitative perspective, with limited focus on the lived experience of crossing the border or on how individuals articulate various strategies to do so. In this context, the work of Chávez (2016) offers a distinctive contribution by providing a comprehensive qualitative analysis of this population, specifically focusing on the Tijuana-San Diego region.

Chávez's inquiry, which utilized interviews and oral histories, enabled the reconstruction of the various strategies employed by these workers to cross the border and how these strategies evolved over time. This approach allows for recognition of the performative nature of both the cross-border working population and the border itself. Chávez (2016) identifies two central periods in this process: first, the era of open borders prior to Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, and second, the era of closed borders following that operation.

Within the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the northern Mexican border, particularly the Tijuana-San Diego area, experienced increased commercial activity (Heyman, 2009). However, despite the region's economic growth, programs aimed at reducing undocumented crossings were also implemented (Nevins, 2001). One such program was Operation Gatekeeper, initiated during the administration of U.S. President Bill Clinton (1993 to 2001). This operation sought to promote a narrative of crisis by characterizing the undocumented migrant population as "illegal" (Nevins, 2001).

Initially, Chávez (2016) describes how migrants would gather at a location known as "the soccer field" in Tijuana, adjacent to the border, where they awaited the opportune moment to cross or enlisted the services of smugglers (polleros) to facilitate the crossing. These workers employed ingenuity and various tactics to deceive border patrol agents or simply informed the agents that they were going to work under a specific foreman at one of the labor fields in San Diego County, whom the agents recognized, thereby gaining immediate passage.

However, during the second period, the era of closed borders from the mid-1990s onward, the use of BCC became common. When crossing on foot, commuters[3] tried to choose the fastest-moving line but also paid attention to the ethnicity and gender of the inspecting officer. According to commuters interviewed by Chávez (2016), agents of Latino or Asian descent and female officers tended to inspect applicants more thoroughly. On other occasions, commuters adopted roles or personas to cross the border, such as portraying surfers or posing as employees purchasing hamburgers for their coworkers on the Mexican side. One interviewee recounted that some farmers in San Diego County even hosted parties for border patrol agents to encourage them to allow their workers to cross without difficulty (Chávez, 2016).

[3] Hereafter, the terms commuters and cross-border workers will be used interchangeably to refer exclusively to individuals who work on the U.S. side but use their BCC to cross the border and who are employed without the required documentation.

The terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, served as a pivotal catalyst for the implementation of more stringent immigration and security policies in the United States. In the aftermath, new measures were introduced that significantly intensified the control, classification, and surveillance of transborder flows of goods, people, and illicit substances (Salter, 2004).

In 2018, the situation intensified with the arrival of caravans of Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States, particularly in the cities of Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California (Contreras Delgado et al., 2021; París-Pombo & Varela-Huerta, 2022). This development occurred alongside efforts by then-President Donald Trump to implement measures that tightened administrative immigration procedures, thereby restricting asylum seekers' access to protection. Furthermore, during the first quarter of 2020, additional restrictions were introduced under Title 42 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting border crossings to those considered essential, as well as to permanent residents and U.S. citizens (Del Monte Madrigal, 2021).

Meaning, Action, and Culture in Border Crossing

To fully appreciate the cultural dimensions of the daily border crossings undertaken by commuters, it is necessary to revisit key elements of cultural theory. Assuming that culture pertains to the role of meaning in society (Reed & Adams, 2011), its use refers to the shared structures of meaning among social actors within specific temporal and spatial contexts. Accordingly, "meaning [is] a system of signification deployed by actors to understand, describe, explain, evaluate, rationalize, sacralize, or otherwise grasp or map the world around them" (Reed & Adams, 2011, p. 250).

At the same time, the concept of social performance is a useful analytical tool. It is defined as "the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" (Alexander, 2011, p. 28). This definition encompasses several key components: *a)* systems of collective representation, *b)* actors, *c)* observers or audience, *d)* means of symbolic production, *e)* the setting or *mise-en-scène*, and *f)* social power. The effective integration of these elements is referred to as fusion, understood as the process through which the audience is convincingly engaged (Alexander, 2011).

In addition, it is important to consider that collective representations refer to the preconceived images of reality that inform the orientations and justifications of both one's own actions and those of others. Individuals draw upon these representations to convey authenticity to other individuals or groups. However, performance is not limited to verbal expression; it also involves the use of props, scripts, and embodied practices that enable the articulation of authentic meaning within specific social or institutional settings. Still, the interpretation of a performance may be constrained when actors with greater interpretive authority are present, thereby shaping or limiting how that performance is understood.

Goffman (1997) defines social performance as "the total activity of a given participant on a given occasion that serves to influence in some way other participants" (p. 27). This definition emphasizes a utilitarian perspective, in which performance is constructed with the primary aim of shaping how

others perceive the self. Within this framework, Goffman introduces concepts such as the mask, frontstage, and backstage. The mask refers to the adoption of specific roles; the frontstage involves the explicit expression of the act, including what is said and done in the presence of others; and the backstage refers to what is intentionally concealed from the audience. In a related vein, Hochschild (2012) argues that social performances consist of two layers: a surface element, involving the visible actions of the body, and a deeper layer, encompassing the emotional subjectivity present during the performance.

In contrast, Alexander's (2011) conception of performance seeks to establish a framework in which the primary aim is to create an affective and authentic connection with an audience. Despite this distinction, there are points of convergence between both approaches. For Goffman (1997), performance involves standardized equipment, referring to the elements a person uses to exert influence over others. For Alexander (2011), this corresponds to the means of symbolic production, although the intended purpose is oriented more toward achieving fusion and resonance with the audience rather than strategic influence.

In the case of commuters in this border region, both elements are essential, as authenticity is the meaning these individuals strive to convey. Presenting oneself as authentic enables the person crossing the border to influence immigration officers (Customs and Border Protection agents, or CBP) to achieve their objective: entering the United States and maintaining employment there. Increased security measures at these immigration checkpoints have led to significantly longer waiting times for daily crossings, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, cross-border workers have developed various repertoires to perform in specific ways before CBP agents in order to successfully reach their destinations (Chávez, 2011).

This cross-border population interacts with immigration agents in ways that can generate conflicts over the meaning of the act of crossing into the United States. Analytically, the process involves the presentation of documentation and face-to-face interaction, during which the meaning of the action is articulated (Alexander, 2011; Goffman, 1997). Consequently, the interaction between CBP agents and these cross-border workers is interpreted through a binary coding of the border in terms of inclusion and exclusion, that is, it is assessed whether these commuters may be admitted into U.S. society or denied entry. This binary coding also reflects the dualism proposed by Alexander (2006) concerning the sacred and the profane, which manifests through various backstage representations within this interaction.

In this context, commuters shape their actions based on an idealization (Goffman, 1997), which refers to the internalized image they hold of working in the United States. For these individuals, this involves striving to present what Customs and Border Protection agents might perceive as an authentic crossing, thereby producing and reinforcing this idealization. As Goffman (1997, p. 47) explains, "As the individual presents themselves to others, their performance tends to integrate and exemplify the values officially accepted by society, indeed more so than general behavior."

However, the use of this idealization suggests a concealed intention on the part of the commuter, whose documentation permits entry into the United States but does not authorize employment. For instance, in the opening pages of *Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera* (Instructions for Crossing the Border), the Tijuana writer Luis Humberto Crosthwaite (2002) satirically offers recommendations for achieving this objective, such as claiming the intent to cross the border to do laundry in the United States because the water there is cleaner. This example illustrates an underlying structure of meanings and exemplifies the idealization constructed to gain entry into the United States, a phenomenon also documented in Chávez's (2016) research.

According to Alexander (2006), these ideas about the United States can be understood as a collective representation grounded in codes related to the civil sphere. Building on Goffman's (1997) observations, idealizing the United States may serve as a credible strategy, but it must be supported by artifacts or props—in Crosthwaite's example, this would involve bringing a basket of dirty laundry to reinforce the narrative presented by the person crossing the border. In Alexander's (2011) terms, a performance requires means of symbolic production to effectively communicate the meaning of the action. For instance, references to the cleanliness, sacrality, and incorruptibility of the neighboring northern country may be employed to persuade Customs and Border Protection agents.

As part of the resources employed by actors during border crossing interactions, CBP agents utilize their standardized equipment, including uniforms, batons, protective gear, and both lethal and non-lethal weapons. Meanwhile, cross-border workers carry their own means of symbolic production, such as civilian clothing, backpacks containing personal belongings and money, and, most importantly, their BCC alongside other identification documents that certify their status as legitimate visitors.

The Performative Border: Actors and Performative Displays

Based on the foregoing, it can be asserted that the border possesses a performative dimension. To legitimize the presence of a geopolitical border, it must be dramatized through the use of narratives, codes, and props that serve to present the drama as real, natural, and necessary. Within this performative framework, the authentic enactment of the binary distinction between inside and outside is constructed. For these dimensions to be recognized as legitimate, it is first necessary to perform an act that gives meaning to this binary classification.

Alexander (2011) explores the necessity of performance as a theatrical act that legitimizes cultural structures. This perspective is especially useful for the present analysis, as it allows the border crossing to be understood not only through social interaction, as emphasized by Goffman (1997), but also through the underlying structures of meaning identified by Rambo (1999) that shape social action. The goal of this conceptual framework is to create a dialectical connection between the individual and society, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of social behavior.

This concept, drawn from Alexander (2006, 2011), refers to an emergent property of meaning that constitutes the moral order of society. The structure of culture is symbolically linked to action, aligning with the perspective of symbolic interactionism while extending beyond immediate interactions. As Rambo (1999, p. 338) states, "people see the world from within a web of intersecting interest extending far beyond the immediate circumstances of their interaction."

According to Alexander (2011), the elements that constitute a performance are dispersed throughout modern societies. The effectiveness of a performance in communicating meaning depends on its perception as authentic by the audience. Authenticity, therefore, is a quality attributed by the audience, and it is through this perception that fusion between the audience and the performance is achieved. Alexander (2011) explains that the successful and authentic integration of the various components of a performance is termed fusion. However, these elements can also be defused when social powers with greater legitimacy intervene. In the context examined here, fusion is somewhat unstable, as it occurs in a border space where interpretive authority is exercised to impose, compose, or even deconstruct dramatic acts. Fusion is attained by effectively and authentically articulating each element of the performance.

When individuals perform before a specific audience, they adopt a role that contributes to the construction of authentic meaning. When this role is perceived as genuine, it becomes fused with the individual enacting it—a process Alexander (2011) refers to as *catexis*. This phenomenon is evident when commuters attempt to appear credible in the often-intimidating presence of CBP agents during border crossings. When the performance is received as authentic, it confers legitimacy and meaningful significance upon the act of crossing the border.

In this way, the border assumes a *performative* quality, as it is continually enacted and contested in terms of its meaning. Collective representations of the border frequently invoke the prospect of accessing the wealth of the United States,[4] thereby idealizing (Goffman, 1997) the intention to cross. This intention to enter the U.S. corresponds to the motivation behind the act of crossing the border, reflecting a project imagined by the commuter that ultimately guides their actions (Reed, 2011).

However, every performance is met with a counter-performance, in this case by a border agent who exercises interpretive power (Alexander, 2011) granted by the institution they represent. The agent may respond adversely to the commuter's crossing performance and consequently sanction or disqualify it. Emphasizing the performative nature of the border enables an interpretation of the landscape of meaning in this context and the actions of individuals who traverse it, thereby illuminating both the causes and consequences involved in the daily crossings of a highly surveilled zone such as the Mexico-United States border.

[4] Crosthwaite (2002) highlights in his work the necessity of having a specific and credible reason, as previously mentioned, for crossing the border into the United States, such as doing laundry because the water in the United States is cleaner, or wanting to visit "the happiest place on Earth:" Disneyland.

In this way, the performative dimension facilitates the examination of every action and experience involved in crossing the international dividing line between Mexico and the United States. This perspective allows for an understanding of performativity through its microsocial components, such as the front, idealization, and the equipment of signs (Goffman, 1997), as well as its macrosocial components, including the collective representations of social life. Consequently, the complex networks of meaning and the control over symbolic resources become more apparent (Alexander & Smith, 2019; Rambo, 1999).

Presentation Performances in Border Crossing

Presentation performances primarily involve the simulation of significant events or situations, such as maintaining a fictitious romantic relationship or fabricating vacation plans. Successfully executing such performances requires anticipating potential conflict scenarios and devising appropriate resolutions in advance, reflecting the concept of practical-evaluative agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This strategy serves to counteract possible intimidation and functions as a process of emotional management (Hochschild, 2012) that aids in regulating anxiety.

For example, "Mary,"[5] a commuter who crosses into the United States to work in a rural area trimming and harvesting marijuana buds, presents herself as a tourist when preparing to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. She does this once a year, staying for periods of no less than four months. By adopting a tourist persona, she is able to justify her visit as vacation-related, a claim reinforced by the fact that part of her family lives in Anaheim, California. She manages to convey this narrative convincingly, as she herself explains:

> 'Cause I'm going on vacation. So obviously, if you're going on vacation, you're gonna bring your best nails, you feel me?…Well, I usually wear clean clothes and look really good. I pack my suitcase. If they see you crossing with your work boots, they'll be like, "Hey, where you headed?" If you're going on vacation, "Why you wearing boots?" You know what I mean?... Well, I've got my mind set on going on vacation. I mentally prepare myself and decide in my head that I'm going on vacation. (Female commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

"Mentally preparing oneself" for a vacation involves a deliberate effort in emotional regulation that aligns surface behavior with deeper, symbolic actions conveying the meaning of leisure travel. In this context, the Goffmanian concept of the mask plays the role of the visitor and activates a repertoire of signs, such as carrying luggage and articulating a plausible vacation narrative, as part of a simulated presentation performance. The type of agency at work is projective, characterized by the capacity to imagine and pursue future possibilities through situated action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This is also illustrated by «Rodrigo», a commuter residing in Mexicali, whose testimony reflects strategic planning and improvisation:

[5] The names of the individuals whose testimonies are used in this text are pseudonyms.

> Well, obviously I've got friends over there, so imagine, I've got friends here too. If they check my history [the border agents], I've been going since I was like six or seven years old, and I go to Seeley [California] every now and then. I also have friends there from way back. I go with a buddy for a few days, and apparently, no permit is needed. It's just 15 minutes away. There's only one bed [at my friend's place], so I bring a futon. You gotta know the questions and what to say, you know? (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

In this testimony, Rodrigo underscores that referencing longstanding friendships across the border enhances the credibility of his self-presentation when entering the United States. By asserting that he has known someone living in a nearby U.S. city for many years and by carrying items such as a mattress or futon along with a suitcase, he is able to project an appearance of authenticity. This performance is particularly effective because he mobilizes the material and symbolic resources—or standardized equipment—required to convey the intended meaning. As discussed earlier, adopting the mask of the visitor allows him to be perceived as a "desirable" transborder traveler.

For another interviewee, "Fernando", a commuter from Tijuana, the construction of performance is also mediated by technology. Like Mary, he relies on his smartphone to erase any digital traces of his presence in the United States:

> I delete anything sketchy, boom! I erase the pics I took here [in the US] and I also delete posts from my social media. Because they've asked for my phone a bunch of times, yeah, they've checked it. You gotta be ready for the questions they might ask and have your answers straight, that's the process I follow. (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

In these cases, mental preparation involves maintaining composure, a finding consistent with Chávez (2016). Crucially, this composure must align with the narrative being presented. For example, deleting digital traces of one's presence in the United States—except for crossings that were not work-related—helps preserve this composure. The overarching goal is to use performativity as a strategy to make the border crossing appear credible, thereby managing emotions effectively and preventing signs of nervousness from manifesting through facial expressions.

The smartphone functions as part of the symbolic means of production (Alexander, 2011), facilitating a performance that approaches fusion by helping to convince immigration officers of the legitimacy of the reasons for crossing the border. Rodrigo recounts an instance when he fabricated a fictitious relationship with a female friend through carefully crafted messages:

> I stayed in Mexicali for a bit, dude, like, I was there for about two weeks. During those two weeks, there were messages on my phone like, "Hey, what's up Alex?" "Nah, just drinking with the homies." There were messages about partying and stuff, and since it wasn't really a relationship or anything serious, it was always like, "Ah, no big deal dude, what about you?" kind of friendly stuff, you know? But we also sent some romantic messages just to

> keep some kind of romantic proof, just in case. (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

Rodrigo also recalls another occasion, a few months before the pandemic, when he crossed through the Tijuana-San Ysidro border checkpoint. During that time, he consistently sent messages to a young woman he had met in Los Angeles, with whom he had previously constructed a façade of a committed romantic relationship. This strategy helped him avoid suspicion during the border inspection.

> You gotta know you have to plan it anyway, you can't just be like, "ah, dude, no big deal." It worked for me 'cause obviously when I went to get the permit [to enter], and I showed all my paperwork, my paycheck and all that, it gets way easier. "Where are you headed?" "Los Angeles." "For what?" "To see my girlfriend and a friend." "What's your girlfriend's name?" Bam! "What's your friend's name?" Bam! And then you're just chatting with immigration, and I was like, "Oh hell yeah, a little white girl to get me some papers," and then boom, the permit's done. And obviously, man, you feel the relief, you know? Like, phew, you made it. (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

The relief, as Rodrigo says, describes the sensation of relief experienced after shedding the stress of presenting oneself before an immigration officer when applying for an entry permit. Rodrigo employed the previously described façade and developed strategies that enabled him to avoid being identified as an undocumented transborder worker. During interactions with officers, he consciously alludes to this simulation, something not entirely real, alongside the supporting evidence he presents.

In this regard, for these transborder workers, crossing the border entails a plan, and these plans require scripts that help construct a mask allowing them to present themselves as low-risk individuals. Scripts are necessary to develop a performance, as they establish the relationship between authenticity and recognition; therefore, maintaining appropriate scripts enables the successful crossing into the United States without issues. Regarding this, Fernando recounts his experience at the airport upon arrival in the country:

> So basically, just imagine we were always with him [the person traveling with], and we were like chatting, saying, "Ok, if [immigration agents] ask us this, we'll answer like this," kinda practicing similar answers so nobody says anything dumb. Then when we got to immigration at the airport, both of us got sent to secondary screening. After that, they called me over and asked where I was headed. Like, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm on vacation." Then they asked, "When was the last time you crossed?" I answered because I actually remembered the date at that moment, 'cause I had a permit [to enter]. (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

Fernando employed performance strategies he had previously used, such as presenting information that indicated he resides in Mexico by relying on data from a prior entry permit. Similarly, coordinating with his companion on potential responses to U.S. immigration agents was

intended to ensure consistent adherence to a planned script. Both Fernando and Mary used airport crossings as a strategy, as noted earlier, in response to COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the U.S. government on land border crossings. This approach was practical for those seeking to work extended seasonal periods, as it justified the expenditure of time, money, and effort required to enter and work in the United States via air travel.

The above clearly illustrates the projective dimension of agency, as anticipating and premeditating potential questions and answers helps sustain the authenticity of the performance. However, effective emotional management is also essential to prevent nervousness and contradictions, which may arise from anxiety for recognition and, at times, even lead the commuter to reveal their true motives.

Recognition Anxiety at the Border

According to Salter (2006), fear is a tool employed by customs and immigration officials during inspections to induce anxiety in commuters. Similarly, Reed (2020) discusses the concept of *authorship anxiety*, which arises when an individual fear not being properly credited for their actions or being mistaken for the actions of another.

This type of anxiety is particularly evident during a first-time crossing of the Mexico-United States border, given the existing disparities and asymmetries between the two countries and the stringent border controls in place. Mary recalls her initial experience crossing through an airport to work in the United States, during which she was overwhelmed by anxiety that nearly led to her being identified as an undesirable commuter. She explains that she chose Los Angeles airport because land border crossings were closed due to the pandemic, and she later discovered that entry by plane was still possible.

> Well, since the moment I woke up that day, I was anxious because it was my first time arriving at L.A. airport, and I feel like they're stricter there. At the land borders, so many people pass through that they don't pay as much attention like they do at the airport, that's how I feel. So yeah, from the moment I woke up, I was kinda anxious. Obviously, every time I go, there's always that fear that they'll send me back or take away my visa. (Female commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

She also mentions the sensation of being closely monitored at that location, which made her quite uncomfortable and was impossible not to notice. Nevertheless, she crossed the border regularly, around the same dates each year, because her strategy is to cross once a year, stay in the United States for a period, and return upon completing the work she has done.

> Because I usually go around the same dates. So in the records, it shows I go around those dates. I always cross the last week of September or so, and you can see it on my passport. Actually, two years ago, I entered on the exact same day, same date, but one year apart, I entered on the same day. So, I don't know, the more I cross, the more nervous I get about crossing. (Female commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

This contributes to her anxiety for recognition, as she perceives that through border surveillance systems, an immigration officer might develop reasonable suspicion regarding her crossing activity and, consequently, her performance. Although this has not occurred previously, she considers it a plausible scenario in which the more times she crosses in the same manner, the greater the likelihood of being recognized.

This anxiety can be triggered by specific events. For example, Fernando recounts a situation in which he experienced some of the intimidation techniques used by CBP officers, which helped him understand how to act and maintain composure during such interrogations. The following excerpt illustrates some of these techniques, along with the importance of sustaining the required composure:

> The agent asked for my documents, I showed them, and he also asked for my phone. He asked questions that weren't really relevant 'cause the phone wasn't mine, it belonged to my brother. There were a bunch of documents and pics of migration papers on the phone, and when the officer looked, he saw my photos, even expired visas and stuff like that. He didn't believe me at first based on what he saw, but I felt like I was holding it together and didn't look super nervous. Yeah, I was nervous, obviously, but I kept it under control. He finally said "ok" once he got what I was saying, and you could tell because his eyes didn't look away. I kept looking him in the eyes, which worked for me, in my head I was like, "I want him to stop talking, 'cause what I want to say makes sense." After a bit, I think he was convinced. (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

This intimidation exemplifies what Salter (2006) describes as the use of anxiety to pressure crossers into confessing illegal activities. This encounter helped Fernando better understand what he can and cannot do when questioned by a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agent. He also recognizes that his performance must remain consistent throughout the interrogation. Another interviewee, «Mario», recalls an occasion when he experienced what he describes as a panic attack:

> The day before [crossing], I was driving and I had, like, a panic attack or something. I'm not sure if it was really a panic attack, but that's how I'd describe it. It lasted all day. After that, I stood in line [at the border] for a long time, and I was super anxious the whole time, really anxious. But since the first time, I've had a technique. I had a good technique for crossing; I dressed sharp, gave dumb excuses, and was super friendly, always smiling at the CBP guy. That was my strategy the first time, and I try it every time, and it actually works. But that time, yeah, it really scared me. (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

In this way, anxiety, which is an inevitable aspect of crossing the border, can either be minimized to the point of near invisibility or consciously recognized and managed to maintain composure. This skill, developed by commuters, becomes essential to successful impression management (Goffman, 1997). It also constitutes a form of emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), enabling them to present themselves effectively before U.S. customs agents.

Performative Border

On the other hand, the performances that take place at the macrosocial level are fundamental to the construction of the border itself. A performative border, in this context, functions as a form of staging (Alexander, 2011) and as expressive material (Reed, 2020), made visible through official documents, speech patterns, and attitudes. It also serves as a means of making the distinction between two nations tangible. In this sense, what sustains a geopolitical border is the ongoing enactment of its embodied meaning by those who cross it.

In a certain way, presentational actions such as those carried out by the individuals previously mentioned arise from the performativity of the border. However, this is not the only factor at play. Motivations, personal experiences, and exposure to or comparison with the neighboring country to the north also contribute to the creation of collective representations. Similarly, the U.S. government employs props and other forms of symbolic representation, such as surveillance devices, which, along with the presence of its agents, help convey the meaning embedded in the border's performance.

Within the triad of actors proposed by Reed (2020) in a chain of power composed of the rector, actor, and alter, the alter is understood as the figure positioned on the other side of a border, whether geopolitical, social, or symbolic, and is therefore perceived as a potential threat to the national security of a given country. The rector represents the overarching authority, capable of enlisting other subjects into their project. The actor, in turn, becomes the rector's specific agent of action. This figure joins the rector's endeavor by agreeing to carry it out, embodying the vision or fantasy the rector holds as their ideal version of the present and future world, such as a nation's migration and security policy. In this framework, the task of identifying alterities in the line at the United States border falls to the actor, that is, the customs officer.

Within the context of his cross-border activities, Mario, who worked in the sale of decorative ironwork, recalls an occasion when his car was searched while crossing through Tijuana. This memory arose during the interview when he was asked about any differences he had noticed before and after Donald Trump's first election. For Mario, there was a clear shift characterized by increased surveillance and deterrence measures implemented by Customs and Border Protection following the 2018 caravan of Central American migrants.

> I used to cross in like 30, 40 minutes. But after Trump came around, it started taking me an hour and a half. Every time I crossed, they asked me more questions. It wasn't like the old days of "Hey, good morning, give me your visa, where are you going?, anything to declare?," that is over. They started asking more questions or repeating the same questions I'd already answered, or just staying quiet, using that tactic where they stay silent to make you keep talking and maybe slip up. So yeah, they really stepped it up. Plus, I noticed they rotated the officer's way more often […]. And yeah, they got tougher. There were way more dogs in the line, and it became super common to see border agents, I think it's called CBP, right?, way more common to see them armed. Sometimes you'd be sitting in your car waiting in line, and they'd just show up, no permission asked, no warning, real arrogant. They'd tap on your

> car to hear how it sounded. You'd just hear the tap and suddenly you're surrounded by everyone, and you couldn't do anything. That felt super invasive to me. (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

Complying with U.S. customs agents involves an emotional effort. Mario recalls that on that occasion he remained calm by listening to music, confident that he was not carrying anything illegal in his car. However, what caused him discomfort was being subjected to such an inspection. His nervousness stemmed from the awareness that he was engaging in an unauthorized activity—working in the United States on a temporary visitor visa. This discomfort places Mario within a dispute over meaning (Reed, 2020) between a rector, represented by the CBP agents as holders of sovereign power on behalf of the U.S. government, and an alter, represented by undocumented commuters.

As noted earlier, like Mario, thousands of commuters reside in cities across Baja California and work in various cities in California. The conflict arises from the use of the BCC for purposes not permitted by its terms, which positions the commuter as an *alter*, that is, a foreigner who violates the rules, while border agents are tasked with identifying such infractions. Within this interaction, and following Reed's (2020) framework, the sitting U.S. president serves as the *rector*, the CBP agent as the *actor* responsible for executing assigned directives, and individuals like Mario as *alters* to be detected and removed.

An example of confronting a rector, when an individual is nearly identified as an undocumented commuter, is the situation Fernando experienced. He was subjected to an interrogation by five CBP agents:

> I remember there were five immigration officers. One was a woman and four were men. I remember it was in the office where they issue the permits […], and I felt pressured 'cause there were a bunch of people watching me there with five officers, asking me all kinds of questions. Then they asked for my documents, and actually they asked where I worked. I told them at Telvista [the call center]. "How long have you worked there?" "Five years." They said, "No, you don't work at that call center, because here [on the computer] it shows you've been working here." I said, "No, I work at Telvista." They asked, "Do you have a cell number we can call?" I said, "Yeah, the documents are right there." [...] Later, it got kinda interesting 'cause they changed shifts and another officer showed up, but this one seemed chill, and he started asking, "Alright, what's going on?" (Male commuter, personal comunication, March 2022)

Fernando maintained composure, gathered his documents, made them appear legitimate, and recalled a phone number from his previous job. By organizing these symbolic means of production, he was able to sustain the continuity of his performance. When accompanied by scripts like Fernando's, these documents helped him remain composed while presenting himself as an authentic, though suspicious, commuter. Each party involved in this interaction has the ability to either believe or discredit the other's narrative. During the interview, Fernando mentioned that to face questioning by CBP agents, he knew he could state the type of business he was working in,

despite being aware that this was a false claim. Nevertheless, he added that he was already familiar with this type of procedure, having experienced similar situations before, which helped him maintain his emotional control.

These testimonies reveal the performative nature of the border between Mexico and the United States, which functions as an artifact employing institutional apparatuses—including interrogation, control, and domination by the border protection agency—to create the illusion of a secure space. This space is dramatized as a simulacrum designed to deter and apprehend undocumented commuters by interpreting their performances as inauthentic. Meanwhile, commuters navigate this environment by momentarily adapting to the rules and immigration authorities, aiming to present themselves as authentic subjects who recognize and comply with the laws and dominant culture of the United States.

CONCLUSIONS

This article offers a culturalist analysis of a key dynamic at the Mexico-United States border: the performative strategies undocumented commuters use to cross into the United States and work there. The research focuses on transborder workers living in the cities of Tijuana and Mexicali, drawing on interviews and a review of literature concerning both the border and cultural theory. This theoretical approach is crucial for understanding the complexity of these dynamics and for preventing the reduction of these workers' strategies to purely economic explanations tied to asymmetric labor markets.

Similarly, this study examines the performative nature of the border, which, in the context of the California border and the commuters who live and work in the region, requires individuals seeking entry into the United States to mobilize a range of symbolic and material objects that confer authenticity to their actions and enable them to achieve their goal of crossing. It is also important to recognize that the meaning of social action encompasses both utilitarian and affective dimensions, as its purpose is to influence others—an aspect clearly illustrated by the commuters residing in this border area.

As noted in the introduction, the presentation performances analyzed in this study are grounded in multiple theoretical frameworks: the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, principles related to the theatricality of social life, and a focus on emotions and the performativity of the individual. Concurrently, the concept of the performative border integrates theoretical perspectives on power, culture, and performativity, alongside foundational ideas about geopolitical borders and their associated surveillance mechanisms.

The geopolitical border between Mexico and the United States can be understood as a staged performance reinforced by symbolic force exerted by the U.S. state. To achieve this, the state employs laws, surveillance technologies, immigration agents, weapons, biometric chips, and drug-sniffing dogs, all of which serve to legitimize border security as a fundamental imperative. These elements function as means of symbolic production that enact the security crisis narrative promoted by the U.S. government along the northern border. For the commuters examined in this

study, this narrative situates them within a crisis framework defined by a binary classification that distinguishes "desirable" or "authentic" cross-border individuals from those labeled "undesirable." Their performative strategies seek to present themselves as members of the former group, individuals who comply with migration regulations, even though they are fully aware they are not part of U.S. society.

As previously noted, the presentational actions of the commuter population under study are shaped by the complex system employed by CBP agents to detect individuals violating their visa conditions. For undocumented commuters, crossing into the United States to work is a high-stakes moment marked by tension. Their strategies oscillate between evading detection and employing emotional management to control anxiety. Despite relying on constructed scripts and simulations about their motives, they maintain an idealized view of the United States.

The motivation for this type of mobility stems from a project that resides within the projective capacity of agency. Economic factors drive commuters to work in the United States as a means of advancing subjectively constructed plans, typically aimed at improving the quality of life for themselves and their families. Each project is grounded in a motivating fantasy such as better housing or enhanced education for children that sustains the continuity of their actions.

Lastly, anxiety arises only when these individuals face a situation that challenges them. This anxiety appears as uncertainty about their project and their lives in response to the exercise of power by CBP agents. In summary, this text seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the processes involved in how commuters present themselves at Mexico-United States border checkpoints and the consequences of these interactions.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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