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Together and apart: transnational life in the US–Mexico border region

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**ABSTRACT**

The term ‘transnationalism’ evokes notions of unity and strong bonds cultivated across international borders, and scholars of transnationalism have highlighted the ways in which international migrants’ cross-border ties have reduced the social and emotional distance between home and host communities. Based on data from interviews with 24 mixed-citizenship couples living in Mexican border cities, I find that the experience of transnationalism for these families is, surprisingly, quite the opposite of its outcomes: while transnational actors unify individuals, families, and communities that would otherwise be disconnected, the transnational actors themselves assume that burden of disconnection. Whether or not they regularly cross the border, borderlands transmigrants and their families experience the intrusion of the border on their lives in three specific ways: through the physical and symbolic presence of the border; through the act of crossing the border; and through US immigration laws and their associated punishments embodied by the border. While these families epitomise ‘transnationalism’ as it is described in the literature, their day-to-day experiences do not resonate as life across, beyond, or through borders, but rather an ‘entre-national’ life between borders, one bifurcated by the border and the sovereign powers it represents.

The literature on transnationalism has focused on how migrants who have moved across international borders maintain and evenstrengthen social, political, and cultural ties to their countries and communities of origin while living full-time abroad. These studies have emphasised the power of transnational actors, actions, and organisations in reducing the social and emotional distance between communities despite their physical disconnection. Transnationalism has been described by some as a process of ‘blurring’ or even ‘erasing’ borders (Duany 2011; Sisk 2011; Rumford 2013). Border regions present a unique social and geographic space in which cross-border and transnational activity could further enhance this blurring of borders through more widespread and consistent interconnection (Andreas 1996; Martinez 1997). But in my study of transmigrants in mixed-citizenship families living along the US–Mexico border, I find that, rather than experiencing an erasure of the border as they constantly move back and forth between

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countries, these transmigrants and their family members experience the border as a constant physical and symbolic barrier in their everyday lives. For these everyday transmigrants in the US–Mexico borderlands, the sovereign power of the state transects every physical and social space they inhabit.

Utilising the case of mixed-citizenship families in the US–Mexico border region, I seek to expand our understanding of the transnational experience by studying both ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ transnational families living in this border region (Cardoso et al. 2016). These couples – composed of members with origins on both sides of the border and living in socially, economically, and geographically transnational communities along the border – provide a different and important case to study the micro-level experience of transnational family life (Alvarez 1995; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). Using data from in-depth interviews with 24 mixed-citizenship US-Mexican couples living in Baja California, combined with ethnographic observation, I find that participating in transnational acts – through cross-border work, commerce, social relations, politics, culture, and more – can be both a unifying and dividing process. Transmigrants moving regularly between Baja California and California have broader access to economic, academic, and social opportunities and tend to organise their cross-border lives in a way that maximises their individual and familial advantage. But the border – as both a physical and symbolic divider – reinforces the social, geographic, and economic divisions between the two countries and between members of the same mixed-citizenship families (Alegría 2000; Cunningham and Heyman 2004).

Transnationalism on the border

Since the term ‘transnational’ emerged as a theoretical perspective for understanding migrants’ ongoing relationships between their home and host communities, scholars have provided hundreds of examples of migrants’ efforts linking individuals, communities, and countries together across borders. Transnationalism has come to represent the preservation of relationships – between migrants and the communities they left (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1992; Smith and Guarnizo 1998), between states and the citizens living beyond their borders (Smith 2003; Waldinger and FitzGerald 2004; FitzGerald 2009), and between migrant parents and their non-migrant children (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Salazar Parreñas 2005; Abrego 2014) – and the creation of new relationships – through hometown associations (Orozco and Lapointe 2004; Orozco and Garcia-Zanello 2009), overseas voting (FitzGerald 2012), economic transactions (de la Garza and Lowell 2002), and new and extended social networks (Moya 2005). As a result, transnationalism is inextricably linked with processes that unify, connect, preserve, and strengthen relationships that stretch across borders.

Border regions house a unique brand of transnational life because their geographically linked bi-national communities facilitate an even more constant and concentrated exchange of people, ideas, commerce, and culture than other, more geographically distant communities linked by transnational actors. This geographic proximity makes transnational living more accessible to more individuals living on both sides of the border (Fussell 2004). But, because of this increased proximity and accessibility, transnational social life in border communities looks very different from that discussed in most traditional transnational research. Most work on transnationalism has studied the
behaviour of groups of transmigrants who have all emigrated from the same, small community in the home country and who have all settled in the same, relatively small geographic region of the host country (e.g. Rouse 1991, 1992; Smith 2005; Mouw et al. 2014). With these transmigrant populations, transnational actors have overlapping social ties in both locales, and transnationalism often becomes a communal experience. But the experience of transnationalism in the borderlands is often more dispersed and discrete, as transmigrants inhabiting these spaces do not necessarily have a unified interest in or history with either the home or host community.

Along the border, transnationalism is simultaneously a more universal and more individualised experience. On the Mexican side of the US–Mexico border region, all residents’ ‘lives are marked by the region’s border condition’, whether they have direct interactions across the border or not (Velasco and Contreras 2014, 45). This ‘border condition’ expresses itself in increased economic and social opportunities, but it simultaneously engenders ‘fragmentation and difference’ between and among border-crossing and non-crossing residents (Cunningham and Heyman 2004, 291; Martínez 1990). The inequalities in access to opportunity that result from the ‘one-way control of mobility in the border area translate into an overlapping of social hierarchies’ (Velasco and Contreras 2014, 38) that produce ‘unequal passages’ (Cunningham and Heyman 2004, 300) and disparate experiences for both border crossers and non-crossers living in the region (Martínez 1990). The border impacts individuals and families living in these communities both literally and symbolically, shaping their experience and opportunities in everyday life while simultaneously altering personal and shared identities (Alvarez 1995).

In the US–Mexico borderlands, the geographic and social proximity of transnationalism is most intimately experienced in the family. The movement of individuals across borders and borders across communities has resulted in centuries of strong ties between the United States and Mexico, ties that reach beyond the economy into families and society at large (Gutiérrez 1995; Martínez 1997; Almaguer 2009; Jiménez 2010). Historically and currently, citizens of the US and Mexico have met and married – both in the US and Mexico – forming mixed-citizenship families with rights and responsibilities tied to both countries. While mixed-citizenship US–Mexican families live throughout the US and Mexico (and beyond), a disproportionate number of these families are concentrated along the US–Mexico border, due in large part to the vast and ongoing cross-border exchange of goods, culture, and ideas in the region (Martínez 1997). As Martínez (1997, 298) notes, ‘the convergence of groups [including families] at the border is in concert with the natural order of human relationships’ (emphasis in original); thus, the increased presence of mixed-citizenship families in border communities should be seen as a natural byproduct of geographic and social proximity. But the unnatural presence of the border itself marks these transnational families as different and pushes the ‘structural discontinuities’ produced by the border into the intimate spaces of the family (Alegría 2000).

Within the broad literature on international migration, scholars have chronicled and analysed the international, transnational, and bi-national intimate relationships of thousands of couples (e.g. Ortiz 1996; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Hirsch 2003; Salazar Parreñas 2005; Smith 2005; Dreby 2006; Boehm 2012; Abrego 2014; Choi 2016). Borders play an important role in these studies as dividers of families, cultures, genders, and economies; sometimes borders are blurred as a result of migration while
in other cases they are reinforced. These studies have been extremely productive in informing our understanding of family dynamics across borders and the reach of the state into intimate relationships, as well as the ways in which gender norms are challenged through the absence (and reappearance) of spouses, the geographic relocation and reunification of families across borders, and expanded access to work opportunities outside of the home. These works highlight how the transnationalisation of intimate relationships can alter the shape and substance of intimate family relationships. While illuminating, these studies focus on families whose members’ locations on either side of a border and their movement across borders (from south to north, at least initially) are both held relatively constant. For many transnational families living along the US–Mexico border, though, their position along the border and within and between countries is constantly in flux. How does the border – and the opportunities and constraints it represents – shape the daily experiences of ‘everyday transnational families’ whose movement across and between nations is constant?

I find that the border interferes with and weakens transnational processes in three ways: first, through its power to physically separate people and places; second, through the disciplining process of crossing the border and proving worthiness; and third, through the punishments imposed upon those deemed unworthy of entry. Because of these intrusions by the border into borderlands transmigrants’ lives, their regular movement across borders leaves them with a sense of isolation from the individuals and communities they move between. While they daily participate in the act of creating and inhabiting transnational spaces, the physical, emotional, social, political, and economic shifts they experience as they move between these spaces reinforces the barriers between communities and family members, rather than their transnational connectedness. Furthermore, the disciplining and punishing effects of the border and border-crossing processes ‘reproduce political subordination’ and reinforce the ultimate authority and overwhelming power of the state in shaping transnational life (Auyero 2012, 2).

**Methodology**

Between 2016 and 2017, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 24 mixed-citizenship couples (48 total participants) living in Mexican communities adjacent to the US–Mexico border between California and Baja California, including couples living in and near Tijuana, Tecate, and Mexicali. Couples who, at the time of marriage, had distinct citizenships (one spouse with US citizenship and one spouse with Mexican citizenship) qualified for the study. I interviewed couples with all types of US immigration statuses. Participating couples include those with no US immigration status (i.e. have never lived in the US and do not currently possess any immigrant or non-immigrant visa; 7 couples), those with authorised status (possessing a current immigrant or non-immigrant visa; 10 couples), and those with a history of deportation or voluntary removal (7 couples). Some couples met in the border region and had lived there for all of their married life (and, in some cases, for almost all of both partners’ lives), while other couples had only recently relocated to this region. Twelve families had lived in a Mexican border town since their marriage – at least 10 years, on average. Six of the remaining families had lived in the region for at least five years; the other six families had lived in the region for at least six months but less than five years. To the extent possible, I sought to ensure participant
variation along other important individual and familial characteristics, including gender, class, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and parental status (see Dreby 2006, 2015; Jiménez 2010; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Salcido and Menjívar 2012; Abrego 2014; Vasquez 2015). Table 1 provides a summary of some demographic characteristics of interviewees.

Since 2009, I have lived in and travelled regularly between California and Baja California – from 2009 to 2012, I lived in San Diego, CA, USA; from 2012 to the present, I have lived in Tecate, BC, Mexico. During my time living in both of these communities, I met mixed-citizenship couples through work, school, church, neighbourhood meetings and parties, and at their places of employment. Of the 24 couples participating in this study, I was acquainted with one or both partners of 11 couples prior to the interview. I was linked with the other 13 couples through interviewees’ recommendations, suggestions from individuals in my personal and professional networks, and responses to a request for participants posted in Facebook groups whose membership included residents of these border communities.

I recorded all interviews, which generally lasted between one-and-a-half and two hours. I conducted all interviews in person in the couples’ respective homes (with the exception of three interviews, which I held in my home). In all but one case, spouses were interviewed together. Each couple received $10 for participating in the interview. I also conducted extended, multi-day observation of two couples as they went through their regular routines. Observation activities included following each spouse through a

### Table 1. Summary of interviewee demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male (23)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US citizen spouse</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican citizen spouse</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US citizen spouse</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican citizen spouse</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US citizen education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
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<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
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<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than HS</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican citizen education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than HS</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic status of couple</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
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<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed working/middle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed middle/upper</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper class</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity of US citizen</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Latinx white</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of marriage (at time of interview)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–5 years&lt;br&gt;</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–10 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples with children</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes one engaged couple.*
regular day, from shortly after they awoke until shortly before they went to bed. I went with them to work, shopped for groceries, prepared meals, ran errands, watched TV, and spent time together as a family. I use this ethnographic data to provide additional detail and context to the interview data.

Following the work of migration scholars such as Dreby (2015), Gonzales (2015), and Menjívar and Abrego (2012), I employed an inductive analytical strategy to look for trends and recurrent themes across interviews. I used the online qualitative data management programme, Dedoose, to manage my data analysis. After the interviews were transcribed, I read through each interview individually and coded each for themes. Once I coded all interviews separately, I compared similarly coded portions of the interview across the study population to identify common trends, which I discuss below.

Transnationalism in the shadow of the border

All study participants raised issues of separation, waiting, and/or disconnection when discussing their personal and family lives in the border region, regardless of their immigration status and ability (individually and as a family) to travel within and between both countries. Through their stories, it became clear that the border itself plays an essential role in imposing and enforcing the alienation and separation that these transmigrants and their families experience daily. Whether or not they regularly cross the border, transmigrants living in Baja California along the US-Mexico border experience the intrusion of the border on their lives in three specific ways: through the physical and symbolic presence of the border; through the disciplining act of crossing the border; and through US immigration laws and their associated punishments imposed at and embodied by the border.

The physical power of the border

For those living along the Mexican side of the US–Mexico border, the border is a physical structure imposing itself upon the landscape, la línea cutting its way across the top of every border city. It is also a social structure that enables the mobility of some and restricts that of others, an arbiter of opportunity discerning eligibility of passage on an individual basis, often separating members of the same family. When asked what the border means to them, many respondents first recalled the long lines and the time they spend on a daily basis physically waiting to cross. But, upon further contemplation, most also cited its symbolic significance in their lives as a ‘barrier’ and an ‘excluder’. Genoveva, whose husband is a US citizen but who has yet to qualify for legal entry to the US, feels excluded and judged. The border, which her husband crosses daily to remodel kitchens, is there ‘to differentiate [between people]. “You are this, and we are that. You are this way, and we have these things.”’ Genoveva has not yet qualified for inclusion in the selective world of the United States, despite her eligibility as the spouse of a US citizen; the income thresholds for legal permanent residence imposed by the US government are beyond her young family’s current means. The border taunts her, ‘You are not rich enough to belong here.’

For Mateo, who lives in Tijuana with his wife and children while waiting out a 10-year bar before he is eligible to apply for permanent residency, the border physically and emotionally prevents him from being fully present in the lives and memories of his children:
Like it or not, [...] we live from our memories. All of our children, my children, are growing up, but there’s a part of their lives in which I am not present. I am not a part of those memories, which is half of their life, their life in the United States. I am not there. [...] Daddy is here [in Mexico]. It is half of their lives, and I am present in their memories here, but there? Erased. [...] You want to be with your children and you want to do so many things with your children, and the fact that you cannot be part of something in their lives hurts. It hurts a lot.

The border not only shapes the landscape in which Mateo and his family live, but it also embeds itself in their minds, ‘erasing’ Mateo from all US-based family activities and the memories those activities generate. In these ways, the border physically and emotionally penetrates the intimate lives of mixed-citizenship families, providing at least some family members with easy access to both countries, but at the cost of the exclusion of others – not only from present activities, but from memories that are carried into the future. Mateo’s wife and children adjust accordingly, restricting their trips to the US in order to limit the amount of time their husband and father is absent in their lives. But necessity – doctor’s appointments, grocery shopping, work – often requires their separation. As Mateo’s wife, Yuliana, stated, the border represents ‘two dreams’, and only some families are allowed to pursue both. The border transects the lives of transnational families, an ever-present reminder of the invisible hierarchy based on citizenship and legal immigration status to which these families are subject, isolating those who stay behind from those who cross.

Esther and Chuy have also struggled to adapt to their new normal now that Chuy, who was deported two years ago, cannot inhabit all of the spaces in which the rest of his family moves.

**Esther:** He gets really, ‘Why you always in San Diego,’ but he doesn’t understand I have to be in San Diego for the kids. I have to go my doctors appointments and can’t leave them alone a lot. In Oregon, we were always together. If I had something, he would take me. We were always more united over there than we are here, because here I have to cross over. I have to leave him here alone.

**Chuy:** I would take the kids to school. I would take them to the doctors. I would take care of anything that had to do with the kids.

**Esther:** And now it’s me, me, me, and he feels like we have taken him out of that part, but it’s like, I wish I could take you with me. I wish could tell you, ‘Go with me here,’ but we can’t.

While Chuy will sometimes ride in the car with his family as they wait in the border line, they all know that he will not be able to travel with them to their destination and take care of them like he used to. His deportation stripped him of the duties he most proudly fulfilled as a husband and father. As Chuy knows too well, the power of the border to exclude cuts across identities and relationships as clearly and definitively as it cuts across the landscape.

This ability of the border to transect identities and relationships reaches beyond those who have been deemed unworthy of admission into the US; its physical and symbolic power also shape how US citizen transmigrants understand both sides of their cross-border lives. For many of these transmigrants, their ‘north of the border’ and ‘south of the border’ lives feel like two separate worlds. Sabrina works with local law enforcement just 30 minutes north of the border, and her coworkers hear about her husband all the
time. But in her ten years on the job, she has only told three of her coworkers that her husband lives in Mexico and cannot cross the border.

No one at my work knows that my husband can’t travel to the US. No, because I know cops […] I think like a cop, and I know it’s taboo to them. So it’s been hard … I’ve been at my job for ten years and they don’t know that my husband […] cannot cross the border. They don’t know. I don’t keep him a secret. Like, they know I’m married and I have pictures of him at my desk, but they don’t know that he doesn’t cross. Because I don’t want them to ever insult him or ever say something and then me get pissed and end up losing my job.

Because of these concerns, Sabrina actively evades questions about her personal life and talks her way out of invitations to weekend barbecues and after-work happy hours. Many other participants also noted their efforts to avoid all commitments outside of their essential work functions, feeling an urgency to return to their families waiting at home for them. Sonia, whose husband, Sebastian, was recently deported and faces a permanent bar from legal immigration status in the US, feels like her life has been reduced to the basics in order to ensure that she and her daughter can spend some time each day with Sebastian:

I just feel like most of my time is sucked in to working and my commute – that is why I had to stop my, for example, going to the gym, kickboxing, just walking at the mall without feeling that pressure that I have to go back home.’

The transmigrant children of these families who study in the US also refrain from most after-school (and before-school) activities and opportunities to socialize, unable to accommodate late afternoon and evening activities with their long commutes home. Their lives and relationships at home are completely disconnected from those they develop at work and school. As Esther put it,

We’re just lonely here. They [our children] are getting tired of it. They want family members; they want friends and stuff. Right now you hear [our daughter] laughing. She’s on her phone with either one of her cousins or one of her friends. […] And that’s what they miss already.

Even couples in which both partners can travel across the border often feel this disconnection. Joel and Joanna both feel the strain of their daily separation while Joanna is at work in the US. Joel, who works in a Mexican bank and has a tourist visa allowing him to travel to the US, spends most evenings at home alone, waiting for Joanna to make the long commute back. Joanna feels pressure to rush back home, though even on the best days she is usually gone for more than twelve hours. Although Joel’s work day lasts an hour and a half longer than Joanna’s, he usually has an extra two to four hours alone while Joanna travels to and from work. Joel waits about a half hour after Joanna leaves for work in the morning before he goes to the bank,

and then I work all day. I leave work at 6pm and then I just wait for her. And, like she said, every day is different. […] Sometimes I go visit friends while I wait for her or I’ll go and see my sisters and visit with them while [Joanna] is on her way home.

While Joel tries to make the most of his time alone, he readily admits that he would much rather spend that time with Joanna, rather than waiting for her. Daniel and Pachita readily acknowledge that the border directly impacts their relationship and the time they are able to spend together:
Pachita: If the border didn’t exist, he could be here [after work] in less than an hour and leave at least an hour later in the morning. But now he leaves so early and gets home at seven or eight at night, just to eat, shower, and sleep. […]

Daniel: More than anything, it’s the time that I lose – nearly two hours in the morning and an hour and a half at night. That’s almost four hours a day – three to four hours driving – and that’s time I lose out on being with my family. […] And the fact that I’m not at home as much does put stress on our marriage.

The common theme in all of these families’ experiences is their experience of waiting, particularly those partners who do not or cannot engage in regular travel across the border. This constant experience of ‘powerless waiting’ imposed by the border is a significant component of the transnational experience, both for those who cross and for those who stay behind (Auyero 2011, 26).

The disciplining power of the border

The actual process of ‘crossing’ the border centres on powerless waiting and challenges the notion of borders as sites of globalisation, cosmopolitanism, and the fluid movement of people and goods. The (often prolonged) act of waiting, the unpredictability of both the wait time to inspection and the duration of the inspection, and the moment of inspection when border agents assess and (dis)approve individuals for entry into the US all serve to reinforce the political and social divisions between the two countries (Vila 2000, 9). The process of crossing borders creates ‘moments in which differences can be powerfully reinforced and opportunities for transnationality systematically denied’ (Cunningham 2004, 329). For members of mixed-citizenship families, the state-defined differences between individual family members reassert themselves each time one or multiple family members cross through a border checkpoint. When Hector explains to his children that he cannot go with them to visit family, run errands, or spend the day together in the US because he does not have ‘papers’, his five-year-old looks around the house and brings him scraps of paper in an attempt to resolve the problem:

My children ask me why I don’t go with them; the older ones understand why I can’t but the little ones: ‘It’s because I don’t have papers’, and they shout back, ‘Here are some papers! Now you have papers.’ Yeah, it’s hard.

But Hector’s older children understand what having no papers really means – that he is not welcome in the US – and that distinction between themselves and their father is reinforced each time they cross the border without him.

The act of crossing the border is also rife with indignities that underscore the power of the state (and its agents) and the impotence of those crossing, even those with permission to enter. The unpredictability of the wait before and during inspection can cause extreme frustration (among other emotions, all of which you must suppress unless you want to spend even more time waiting). Vicente told me of a time when the car in front of him (accidentally?) screeched its tires while pulling into the gate to speak with the border agent after a very long wait in line. The agent sent the car to secondary revision, where cars and their occupants undergo a lengthy and detailed inspection. As Vicente drove up to the gate, he heard the border agent talking on the phone to the agents in secondary
and telling them what had happened, instructing them to ‘make the driver wait an hour to teach him a lesson’. Sonia also recalled the three times she has been sent to secondary as particularly frustrating events that threw off her plans for the rest of the day. After expressing her frustration, one agent told her, ‘This is what you need to expect. It could happen to you again. And you are making the choice of crossing the border, so expect it.’ Of course, Sonia’s interpretation of her situation differs, as she feels forced into crossing the border every day – rather than choosing to cross – because it is the only way she and her daughter can live as a family with Sebastian.

Even for families in which non-US citizen family members have legal access to the US through a tourist visa or legal permanent residency, the process of crossing the border reinforces the precarity of that status, as entry to the US ‘is always conditional and dependent on the discretion of the customs agent who decides whether or not a person can cross’ (Sarabia 2015, 236). Regardless of citizenship status, all individuals wishing to cross into the US must respond to questions about what they plan to do in the US and why they were in Mexico. Sometimes the border agent simply asks if you are bringing anything back from Mexico and then waives you through. But other times agents question you extensively, sometimes about matters that have little to do with the act of crossing the border itself. Enrique and Carolina, both from upper-class political families in Baja California, recounted the vulnerability they feel when they cross the border, even though both of them are now US citizens:

**Enrique:** I hate crossing the border because you’re at the mercy of the guy that’s there. You’re at the mercy of that guy and that guy. He’s in a bad mood that day, he can screw your life.

**Carolina:** Remember that lady who hated you in Calexico?

**Enrique:** Yeah.

**Carolina:** She would always ask him the same questions.

**Enrique:** She would go like, ‘So why are you driving a US car if you live in Mexico?’ I go, ‘Because I’m a US citizen.’ ‘Yeah, but if you live in Mexico, you have to drive a Mexican car.’ ‘But then I cannot cross into the US with a Mexican car.’ ‘You know? […]’ During the inspection, that person [the border agent] can do whatever she wants.

**Carolina:** Then if you get mad, they get worse. […] They get super crazy. I’m always very calm and very quiet and I only answer the questions and I don’t say anything. I have my bag closed because if they can see something, they can ask you for it. I tell the kids to be very aware of what they’re asking them and put all the windows down. I take off my sunglasses. I’m very proper. I always get hit on. My kids, Juan Angel, he gets like, ‘What is that man doing?’ Once this guy was singing to me, like a song. I was just looking at him like, ‘I could report you for this [but] I’m not going to do anything about it because I don’t want to have any problems until I cross the border. Just give me my passport.’

While Enrique and Carolina generally do not face such treatment in their daily lives, they have learned to respond to perceived mistreatment at the border with submission rather than express their true feelings. The risks associated with reacting – even to blatantly inappropriate behaviour – far outweigh the potential satisfaction they might feel in pushing back. Chuck and Melodia discussed similar frustrations they feel and cost–benefit analyses they conduct when enduring the unpredictable process of waiting and undergoing inspection at the border. For Chuck, especially, the long wait and the
probing questions contribute toward a challenge to what he feels is his entitlement as a US citizen: the right of return to his country.

**Chuck:** It should be okay to have to wait to get across, and I’m very intolerant with the border guys, too. You know, I get this attitude of, ‘Who are you to tell me I can’t come back into my country?’ […] It’s a lack of tolerance, but I recognise it for what it is, you know? I’ve learned to calm myself down, though, about that – not say anything, because then I get in trouble.

**Melodia:** Because they can make your life miserable if they want to.

Due to the extreme imbalance in power between border agents and border crossers, those who cross must meekly submit to the will of the border agent in order to avoid problems and cross the border as quickly as possible. Even though all US citizens have a right of return, they must still submit to an evaluation of their ‘good citizenship’ each time they cross the border. In these exchanges, both US citizens and non-citizens encounter the unpredictable disciplining power of the border (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2014). Interviewees who can cross the border echoed the ‘constant fear of arbitrariness’ when crossing described by Muriá and Chávez (2011, 365) ‘because it is hard to predict when an inspector decides who poses a risk’. And, as other scholars have noted, these decisions are based not only on one’s official legal or citizenship status, but a number of factors, including gender, age, ethnicity, and phenotype, as ‘border policing and US immigration law enforcement is […] based on a larger project of policing Mexicans as potentially “illegal” migrants’ (Sarabia 2015, 239).

This process of categorisation and re-categorisation, surveillance and (dis)approval creates an ‘extended regime of spatial and social segregation based on class and race differences, a scenario where selected peoples and areas keep their global connections […] while others remain disconnected’, even within a single family unit (Muriá and Chávez 2011, 359). Border agents serve as semi-autonomous judges whose approval must be sought each time citizen and non-citizen family members seek to participate in transnational activities across the border. The distinctions these agents employ to demarcate those who qualify for entry from those who do not inscribe themselves, over time, onto different family members, marking them as separate and other rather than one and the same (Dreby 2015). And the required wait for inspection at the border serves as a ‘temporal process in and through which political subordination is reproduced’ (Auyero 2012, 2).

**The punishing power of the border**

The border exercises power through forcing some mixed-citizenship families to wait on a third dimension. In addition to waiting to cross the border and waiting for family members to return from their cross-border travel, some families are also forced to wait years, even decades, for the possibility to inhabit their transnational spaces together (Auyero 2012). Punishments meted out upon US immigration law violators are often arbitrary, harsh, immediate, and long-lasting. Sabrina and Joaquin, who met at a party in their border town eleven years ago and fell in love almost immediately, have lived with the border dividing their lives ever since. Joaquin, who moved to Baja California from Jalisco when he was fourteen, has never lived in the US and would appear to be a prime candidate for a family reunification visa. But, when Sabrina’s family came down
for a visit ten years ago, they convinced Joaquin that he should go back with them across the border. Sabrina and Joaquin protested, but they insisted. At the border, the driver claimed all the passengers in the car were US citizens. When Joaquin could not produce evidence of his citizenship, they were sent to a secondary review station to be processed. Though Joaquin never personally claimed to be a US citizen, the immigration officers interpreted others’ claims that he was a citizen as sufficient evidence to mark his record as having posed as a US citizen. This accusation permanently disqualifies Joaquin from gaining any kind of legal status in the US. For the past 10 years, Sabrina commuted daily to her job in local government in a city about 45 minutes away from the border. When their son, who recently started commuting with Sabrina in order to attend kindergarten, asked why he had to leave his house in the dark and come home in the dark every day, Sabrina and Joaquin decided that something had to change. Sabrina bought a home near her job; now she and their son live in the US during the week and do their best to visit Joaquin in Mexico on the weekends. Joaquin noted the blessing and the curse of their current arrangement: ‘They are only forty-five minutes away. We are lucky we can be so close to each other. But we still cannot be together as a family.’

Vicente and Herlinda Serrano, who moved to Mexico fourteen years ago following Herlinda’s deportation, know this separation all too well. After waiting out Herlinda’s 10-year bar to legal reentry to the US, the Serranos are now in the process of applying for her legal permanent residency. Her application has moved extremely slowly through the system, delayed for more than a year in internal review before US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) even granted her an interview. At her interview, she was told she would have to submit a *carta de perdon* – a letter of forgiveness – explaining what she had done and why she was sorry she did it. While everything else in her application appears to be in order, a final determination on whether or not she will receive a green card depends upon that letter and if the immigration agent finds it to be satisfactory (though what qualifies as satisfactory remains unclear). When I spoke to Vicente about this new twist in their story, he told me about the letter he wrote, which he will submit along with Herlinda’s letter. In it, he acknowledges his own mistakes and takes responsibility for Herlinda ever having undocumented status (she entered the US without inspection after they were married). He has accepted the punishment that accompanied their error, harsh though it may seem, and explains the extent to which they have striven to be law-abiding citizens every day of their 14-year long ordeal. As Vicente put it, ‘We have served our time.’ They broke a law and faced the consequences associated with the violation of that law. And now they have satisfied those consequences. And yet, that still might not have been enough. The Serrano family’s fate remains in the subjective hands of an as-yet-unknown USCIS agent in Ciudad Juarez, whose willingness to be persuaded of Herlinda’s regret will determine whether or not Herlinda can see her younger children graduate from high school; finally visit Vicente’s classroom; meet his coworkers; be a part of her family’s *whole* life – an opportunity that will transform Vicente’s and the kids’ lives as much as her own.

The indefiniteness of US immigration law, the unpredictability of its enforcement, the exaggerated punishments associated with violation of civil immigration law, and the uncertainty of if and when those punishments will ever end – these are the conditions that introduce isolation, frustration, and loneliness into the lives of mixed-citizenship families, regardless of status, especially those transmigrant families who encounter the
border and its restrictive power on a regular basis. For many of these families, even families who aren’t directly subject to the harsh penalties of deportation, the border intrudes into the most intimate spaces of their lives, dividing them from their spouses and children every day.

A number of respondents discussed the routines they put in place to minimise the effects of separation. To fight the loneliness that Joaquin felt most starkly when sleeping alone, he changed jobs to work on the night shift. Now he sleeps from pure exhaustion and no longer spends nights awake and alone missing his wife and son. Salvador works with his wife every day, and his daughters come to visit him most afternoons before going back across the border to sleep before they attend school in the US the next day. Even though he sees his family constantly, he has struggled at nights when he is left alone again.

I have a TV routine now. There’s a channel that plays The Simpsons all day long, so I just watch that [...] and I set the TV to go to sleep at midnight and it turns off and that’s how the day ends.

For Sebastian, who is home with his family at night and on the weekends, he has had to implement strategies to fend off loneliness during the day, especially in the hours after he and his wife trade cars at the border:

She arrives [to the border line] at about 6:30am. We change cars. They head to the US and I stay here in Mexico. I go to the gym, back home, I clean the house, make breakfast – everything a stay-at-home mom has to do, but I do it. Wash clothes, wash the dishes, make the beds, clean everything in the house. When I have free time, I colour to keep my mind occupied. Because during all of this time I am thinking about the US.

Inherent in these families’ extended subjugation and punishment by the state through powerless waiting is the implication that the state has ultimate control over transnational activity and shapes transnational life as much as, if not more than, the individuals and families living everyday transnational lives.

**Discussion**

Thousands of mixed-citizenship families live along the US–Mexico border and navigate the complex physical and social geographies of the borderlands, as well as the limitations placed upon their family members’ free movement across these material and abstract planes. Rather than experiencing ‘the best of both worlds’ or ‘liv[ing] as if there are no borders’, these families negotiate the opportunities and restrictions of border life with the border as a central, unyielding presence shaping their movement on a daily basis (Marquez and Romo 2008, 2; Waldinger 2015). For these families, the border is a looming physical presence, placing significant demands on commuters’ and their families’ time and physical and emotional health. The border is ‘the ultimate structural constraint on opportunity, choice, and social action’, separating these families and then allowing for their reunification on a daily basis (Chávez 2016, 3).

Some scholars have noted a normalisation or even erasure of the border as a divider of people and territories in the minds of regular border crossers, claiming that ‘familiarity and constant border crossings render the wall null in their eyes’, allowing them to “forget” that a wall even exists’ (Sarabia 2015, 233; Malagamba-Ansótegui 2008; Duany...
2011). The concept of transnational social space also suggests an erasure of the physical and legal boundaries separating the communities linked by transmigrants (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1992; Faist 1998; Pries 2001). But the surveillance and sorting performed at the border reinforces its physical presence and symbolic power to shape opportunities and outcomes, so much so that it also ‘reshapes the geographical and social landscape’ of surrounding border communities (Muriá and Chávez 2011, 355).

Much of this reshaping stems from the multi-dimensional systems of powerless waiting imposed by the border. The physical landscape in every Mexican border town has been designed (and redesigned) to accommodate the long lines of cars and pedestrians waiting for inspection by US border agents. Social relationships, especially those between mixed-citizenship family members, have also adapted to incorporate the waiting each family member endures as a ‘side-effect’ of their family’s transnationalism. And families subject to lengthy bars to legal reentry must wait for years until they can (potentially) regain the power of self-determination to choose when and where to live as a family. Together, these complex systems of waiting serve as ‘temporal processes in and through which political subordination is reproduced’ (Auyero 2012, 2; Auyero 2011). And while all transmigrants are subject to these waits, those with fewer resources and less evidence of ‘good citizenship’ experience longer waits on more dimensions (Guerrero 2016). Through these obligatory systems of waiting, the US immigration system slows transmigrants’ movement and their efficacy as boundary-blurring actors.

The experience of these families’ transnationality is, surprisingly, quite the opposite of its outcomes. Transnational actors maintain and strengthen relationships with and between individuals living in distinct worlds, unifying individuals, families, and communities who would otherwise be disconnected. But I find that transnational actors often assume that burden of disconnection. These transmigrants’ experiences represent yet another ‘paradox’ of the border (Papadakis 2018). While these families – and particularly the family members who move back and forth across the border regularly – embody ‘transnationalism’ as it is described in the literature, their day-to-day experiences do not resonate as life across, beyond, or through borders, but rather a life between borders, one bifurcated by the border and the sovereign powers it represents. As Mahler (1998, 76) argues, ‘mobility’ – specifically the ‘movement of bodies across space’ – ‘constitutes a centrepiece of transnationalism’. And the restrictions the border places upon these mixed-citizenship couples’ mobility – even on the mobility of those purportedly allowed to move ‘freely’ across space – are superimposed upon every experience transmigrants and their families have on both sides of the border. Rather than cosmopolitan, international, transnational families, these mixed-citizenship families are ‘entre-national families’, trapped between two nations without fully inhabiting either one. The sovereign power of the state transects all physical and social space for borderlands transmigrants (Waldinger and FitzGerald 2004).

While the open and closed nature of the border enables mixed-citizenship families to ‘creatively and strategically gain access to a binational livelihood’, such cross-border living comes at a cost (Chávez 2016, 154). These transmigrants’ daily trajectories may appear to be composed of ‘unbounded, discontinuous, and interpenetrating subspaces’, but not all subspaces are equally penetrable by all family members, nor can they be inhabited simultaneously (Marquez and Romo 2008, 16). The experiences of the couples studied here reinforce the notion that, no matter how hard you try, you cannot be in two places at once. These couples undergo the border-imposed ‘processes of fragmentation, dislocation,
translation, and cultural negotiations’ in ongoing and intimate ways (Malagamba-Ansótegui 2008, 236). While familial separation may be short-term – just a few hours or days at a time – these families are still ‘entre-national’ immigrant families: stratified across borders, living, breathing, learning, and working in different worlds. They are in one place and in two worlds at the same time, sharing a home and a dinner table, carrying on with the mundane intimacies of family life, but always with a border among them. Rather than living as if there are no borders, these families live with the border as a constant presence in their personal lives and intimate relationships. It is a line that has allowed them to be together – to become a family – and yet it simultaneously inserts itself between them, keeping them both together and apart.

Notes

1. I refer to these families as ‘mixed-citizenship’ rather than ‘mixed-status’. Emphasizing the mixed citizenship of these couples not only helps to clarify the types of couples studied here, but also highlights the fact that both partners in each couple possess a citizenship, even if not from the United States. In fact, it is the non-US citizen’s possession of citizenship in another country that enables their deportation and other punishments that often force mixed-citizenship couples out of the United States. I interview couples spanning the spectrum of immigration statuses (both with regard to US immigration law and Mexican immigration law) and recognize that some statuses subject families to greater precarity and punishment than others.

2. Couples in which one or both spouses naturalised following marriage were included in the study.

3. Unmarried cohabiting couples do not qualify for family reunification purposes and thus were not included in this study. Married mixed-citizenship couples and engaged couples applying for a fiancé(e) visa were included in the project.

4. Enrique inherited US citizenship from his mother, who was born in Los Angeles.

5. Sabrina and Joaquin have consulted immigration attorneys in the hopes of challenging his permanent bar to legal entry to the US, but non-citizens accused of illegally posing as a US citizen have practically no hope for relief under current law (Taylor 2009).

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