

“Borders, Peoples and Issues of Concern”

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Abstract

Border regions continually intrigue the public, given the perceived potential for threatening newcomers, entry or passage of resources including human capital from one country to another, and the opportunity to explore another way of life. For these reasons, among others, border regions have been of interest to anthropologists. Given its coast-to-coast placement in North America the United States provides access via sea routes to peoples from all areas of the world. Land routes provide access along the northern and southern borders. The most publicized is the “southwestern” border region between the United States and Mexico. Issues of concern vary among the four states (west to east: California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas) that form the border zone with northern states of Mexico (Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas). For this editorial I describe events in the U.S. states, Arizona and California, where people have experienced distinctive hardships and challenges worth the attention of anthropologists. For the border region in southern Arizona, the main concerns have focused in one form or another on the southern boundary of Arizona that serves as a “corridor” for people who enter the United States without documentation. The extensive desert has resulted in numerous deaths, which have been investigated and documented [1]. Personal belongings of men and women who make the trek, which are left behind in the desert, have become the objects of analytic interest [2] and interpretation [3]. To honor individuals who cross the border and provide background material for the farm labor that these men and women often perform in the United States, Seth Holmes made the trek across the desert into the state of Arizona with a small group of Triqui men and women from southern Mexico. In the first chapter to his monograph he showcases his experience, describing the hardships of a multi-day trek and being taken into custody by the border patrol [4]. He includes photographs; fortunately his camera was not confiscated. Groups have been

formed within the state of Arizona to protest militarization by the Border Patrol and Homeland Security, and the increased police presence in certain areas of the state that affect a number of peoples and communities. Mostly the issues focus on indigenous rights and sovereignty, and the rights of migrant peoples to pursue reliable livelihoods, including men and women of alternative sexualities. Native Americans living on ancestral lands experience restricted access to sacred sites; opportunities for family visitation on both sides of “the border” are limited [5]; and the potential extension of an asphalt freeway that would interfere with sacred lands and wildlife areas (recently researched by a graduate student for dissertation fieldwork). Migrants are often socio-economically excluded when they arrive in the United States. Environmental issues are added to the situation with reports of wildlife restricted from “movement-and” therefore food and safety-by the presence of a border wall. Public demonstrations have been one means of calling attention to the issues and difficulties faced by people experiencing a militarized border zone across southern Arizona. Various groups have formed around common interests and social relationships, augmented by joining together into solidarity mega-groups. Several protest events have been held [6], organized by indigenous leaders for nations situated on the border, migrant advocacy groups, and individuals of both communities who are living lives of alternative sexualities, among others. Demonstrations are held for strategic purposes in key places, for example, by occupying buildings of border patrol headquarters, building a blockade of tires tarred with broken glass across an interstate highway, blocking vehicle traffic by marchers in a commercial area of the capital city a short distance from a large shopping mall, or banging drums outside a clandestine holding center that houses migrants detained while crossing the desert. When immigrant youth were killed along the border, the mega-groups marched as a sign of solidarity. Apart from the physical act of civil disobedience by people mobilized over common concerns, blogs and handbills and new stories are circulated to gain greater support from the

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general public. For the border region in southern California, one issue of concern is that of increased incidence and prevalence of HIV. The most sustained effort on this issue has been generated through universities in California working in collaboration with community organizations located on both sides of the border. The dimension of significance has been the diffusion of HIV from one risk group to several susceptible groups [7]. Diffusion takes place when public health efforts have been ineffective or non-existent, and socio-economic conditions experience dramatic change within a short period of time. For the urbanized areas of San Diego (United States) and Tijuana (Mexico), these conditions were exacerbated by irregular policing that targeted certain individuals [7], deportation that left people stranded “across the border” rather than returned to home communities [8] which led to their undocumented return to the states [9], changes in drug trafficking routes [10], temporary homelessness [7], risk-taking exacerbated by alcohol [11], confiscation of syringes by police and the reluctance of some pharmacies to provide “free needles” [7], concurrent sexual relationships often exacerbated by the loss of income and/or accommodations [12,13], among other factors.