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Estefanía Cruz Lera*

San Antonio From Here and There, the Original and the Reimagined

Rihonor de Castilla and Río de Onor are two different names for the same town on the border between Spain and Portugal. The mountainside boundary that divides the two Iberian countries is perhaps one of the most artificial in the world, giving rise to two communities with much in common, separated by political geography. The slightly over one hundred inhabitants of Rihonor and Río de Onor, whose homes are separated by a sidewalk, have different passports and even different time zones: the Spanish side is one hour later than the Portuguese side. Members of the same family are Portuguese and Spaniards, "Portuñol" is the town's lingua franca, and local inhabitants constantly ignore whether they are on one side of the border or the other.

In the Old Continent, we also find Leding/Leidingen, a town divided between France and Germany. Its 144 inhabitants have changed nationality seven times and their countries have waged war against each other on more than one occasion, but a single street divides their community, a street they cross constantly without noticing. The inhabitants are all European and can go about their daily lives ignoring the border until bureaucratic paperwork that they must do with different postal codes and laws remind them that their town belongs to two distinct nations.

In the early twentieth century, the American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company dug a canal to distribute water that it had diverted from the Rio Grande. The Río Rico community that was on the U.S. side suddenly became part of Tamaulipas state in Mexico. As with other towns on the Mexico/U.S. border during Prohibition, Río Rico became a mini-Las Vegas, with casinos and saloons on the Mexican side frequented by U.S. Americans. Once the Eigh-

* Estefanía is a researcher at CISAN, UNAM; you can contact her at estefania.1616@comuidad.unam.mx.

teenth Amendment was repealed and the local economy depressed because U.S. visitors stopped coming,[1] many families gradually left the area and the collective memory that the town of Río Rico had once belonged to Texas was erased. In the 1960s, a Texas professor discovered on old maps that the town land had belonged once to the United States. Litigation began in U.S. courts in which hundreds of people born in Río Rico claimed U.S. citizenship; with time, they moved to the United States seeking the better opportunities that their new passports offered them. Today Río Rico has about sixty houses and is a modest Mexican community that was once U.S. American.

With their collective binational memories, Rihonor, Leding, and Río Rico remind us that borders are only vague artificial lines. The identity and collective memory of border communities are constructed and recreated transnationally. But the product of these interactions is not only a mixture created by history, but rather original identities that have emerged with a dual historical influence but a new nature of their own. Today, transnational spaces are not only combinations of practices and languages; they are a creation and a reinvention. And in border areas, we encounter many such cases.

In my childhood, the city of San Antonio was a necessary stop on the way to visiting friends and family in Texas. Packed into a pick-up with several cousins, we would cross the Nuevo Laredo border very early. The ritual was always the same: buying a Texan ice cream cone (the one with the little girl walking among cows) at an Interstate 35 gas station to stand the heat and arriving with an eager appetite for lunch at a famous Texas hamburger restaurant in San Antonio. As soon as you opened the restaurant door you felt the blast of cold air conditioning, and you saw the big iron star symbolizing Texas on the wall. The ritual continued with a stroll and a ride along the riverside. In my earliest childhood, despite the fact that since then I became a devotee of Mexican and U.S. American shared history, it was surreal to have gone through immigration and customs and to have see an interstate highway flanked by the Stars and Stripes and the Lone Star flags to top off the day walking along a river that sported giant blown glass goblets of margaritas in restaurants strung with colorful cut-tissue-paper decorations, all accompanied by traditional Mexican music.

When international flights became more affordable, I stopped visiting San Antonio for several years because then I could fly directly to the cities where my friends and family lived. During the Covid-19 pandemic, my niece Emma was born in Dallas, and once non-essential-trip restrictions were lifted, my couple and I decided to go to Texas to meet her. This was his first trip to the United States, and I proposed that, to optimize the journey, we go first to San Antonio for a couple of days because that's my favorite city in Texas, and it was a must to walk around it. Then, we'd make a stop in Austin and finish the journey in Dallas.

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At another stage of my life, now as a CISAN researcher and with the complementary view of someone his first time in Texas, I was able to appreciate a new facet of San Antonio. Even just leaving the airport, curious things began to happen. We ordered a Lyft and were sent an old truck. Yes, a pick-up driven by a blond man with a Texas hat who told us to load the suitcases on the back, which must certainly once have held bales of hay. We did it, begging the driver to drive carefully so the trip would be calm, and we wouldn't have to stop to rescue our baggage on the way. Our destination was a Texas barbeque restaurant in Legacy Park. Opening the door, once again we were hit with the cold air conditioning that contrasts with the outside temperature. There were smiling faces of cashiers and cooks speaking Spanish, a diverse group of University of Texas youths celebrating a basketball win, and desiccated heads of cattle hanging from the roof of the cabin. I immediately recognized that San Antonio atmosphere, but there was something new, something more authentic.

San Antonio's history goes back to the seventeenth century when the town of Béjar was founded with its mission and its jail, bringing settlers little by little, giving rise to the city. Then came Texas's independence and the dual readings of the battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto: one of defeat south of the Rio Grande and the other of hope north of it. The regional history of Mexico's Northeast continued to be linked to that of San Antonio. Many Mexicans fled there when the Mexican Revolution broke

out. The Mexican-origin population continued to be a majority in the city and still is today, making San Antonio one of the epicenters of U.S. Latino politics.

San Antonio is essentially a pioneer city. Isolated in the wild border area, its landscape of mesquite and oak trees offered shelter for travelers, cattlemen, and traders from different places. Later, the railroad came in, bringing with it the infrastructure that ushered the city into its industrial revolution. Industrialization, with its food processing and packing plants, led to population growth, and the city turned into the vibrant urban heart of Southern Texas. Today, it is one of the country's ten most populated cities.

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Despite its long history, San Antonio wants to rewrite a new present expressed in an identity of being "from here and from there," a product of history, but also something of our time and a new world. Today, transnational communities are no longer only a selective mixture of influences; their history is so profound that those influences have combined, reinvented themselves, matured, and reimagined themselves, increasingly producing clearly distinguishable identities of their own. That is, you no longer find items from Mexico and others from the United States on a same street; today, we see a symbiosis in which their components cannot be discerned as separate entities, but clearly distinguishable elements that you associate with an emerging, original culture that recognizes its past but wants to communicate an identity of its own.

Its inhabitants' creativity can be seen in their urban renewal projects, projects like the new Alamo that reflect their capacity to reimagine and reinvent themselves. The recent migration of Mexican investors and entrepreneurs who have fled the drug-trafficking-spawned violence of Mexico's Northeast and settled in the city has contributed to economic revitalization. The "great reverse migration" of young Black professionals from U.S. northern cities has revitalized the service sector and contributed to turning the city into an enclave for innovation.

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Like many other cities, San Antonio does face great challenges regarding efficient resource management and the reduction of social inequality gaps. Suffice it to mention a recent anecdote to illustrate part of those challenges.

Continuing with the story of our journey to San Antonio in summer 2022, we took a bus to Austin. The tiny bus station was jammed, and there were no chalk boards or electronic displays showing information about the real time of arrivals and departures. This could well sound alien or of little importance for most people in a society dependent on private automobiles and unaccustomed to public transportation, as happens in practically all the world's big cities. Together with other passengers, mostly working people, we got on an ancient bus with no air conditioning and whose motor made a strange sound. The two bus drivers were very pleasant: one Mexican-American and one Anglo, who later turned out to be our heroes without capes by solving a problem that the lack of maintenance and the social irresponsibility of the international transportation corporation caused.

Finally, the bus, which wasn't outfitted for a trip through the desert, with no air conditioning and a faulty radiator, overheated and stopped, barely making it to a gas station lost halfway along the highway. We were there for four hours on a day in May, sheltering under some mesquite trees outside a tiny mini-supermarket while we waited for a new bus that had to be sent for to San Antonio or Austin. And the possibility did exist that none would even be available. Incidents and contradictions like this story, which might seem like it could have happened in Mexico, and that have been experienced by this Mexican woman in San Antonio, are the beating heart of the South of one of the richest states in the world's biggest economy. VM

Notes

1 Amendment Eighteen to the U.S. Constitution established Prohibition, which lasted from 1920 to 1933. [Editor's Note.]