

# Cultural Identities on the Mexico–United States Border

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*Translated by Héctor Antonio Corporán*

*La frontera es la vitrina que exhibe un escenario donde confluyen dos actores de una misma obra: capitalismo avanzado y dependencia, internacionalización del proceso productivo y utilización intensiva de fuerza de trabajo barata y vulnerable; internacionalidad del mercado de trabajo y disminución de derechos laborales, identidades emergentes y profundas, y resistencia cultural. En este espacio se acerca la desigualdad, se evidencia la “desnacionalización”, se transparenta la identidad.*



**A Mexican *chola* dressed in dark, severely styled clothes and a masculine hat. Her self-created persona embodies a defiant attitude towards authoritarianism, subordination, sub-estimation, and poverty. Mexican cholos tend to be more dominated by their patriarchal families than their counterparts across the border. Photo by José Manuel Valenzuela Arce**

The indigenous communities of the Mexico–United States border region succumbed to violence, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, and the catechism. From the era of the K'miais, Cucapas, Yumas, Apaches, and Yaquis, to the present, there have been a multitude of engagements and misencounters, fusions and ruptures, innovations and oblivions. Cultures in this region continually give shape to themselves through their interactions and relations and their social organizations, contradictions, and conflicts.

Much has been discussed about the dangerous possibility of *entreguismo* or “surrendering to foreign influence,” by the border population in Mexico. But on the contrary, along that very border we find important sociocultural resistance movements which articulate their goals with verbal symbols, visual images, and reinterpretations of regional history that assert a cultural identity formed in opposition to the United States.

In the intense interactions on the Mexico–United States border one can see important processes of transculturation. These cultural processes are inevitable and should not automatically be understood as the loss of national identity. To the contrary, because these processes that occur in northern Mexico and southern United States involve relationships between neighbors across a border, their significance assumes an international dimension — even when they might seem to be local in nature. This point has been amply explained by Jorge A. Bustamante.

The border is a shopwindow that contains a staged encounter between two actors in the same play: advanced capitalism and dependency; the internationalization of production processes and the intensive utilization of cheap, vulnerable manpower; a global labor market and a decreased recognition of workers' rights and of indigenous and emerging identities. But in that scene in the border shopwindow there is also cul-



A group, or *clica*, of *cholos* pose in their neighborhood in front of a mural that depicts, among other elements, the Virgin of Guadalupe and an idealized cholo and chola. A defensible power space, the neighborhood is at once a nexus of solidarity and an immediate source of conflict. Photo by José Manuel Valenzuela Arce

tural fusion, re-creation, and resistance. In this space suffused by inequality, society becomes “dis-nationalized” and the sources of cultural identity become transparent.

Beyond faddish styles fashioned on American models particularly for consumption by the younger population, cross-border popular culture in our country is prominently expressed in *corridos*, *música norteña*, language, symbols, and youth movements. Among the most recent of these movements to become popular after the mid-1970s is *el cholismo* — the most massive youth phenomenon that emerged among the poor population in the northern part of the country. Cholos represent a major cultural paradox, for they import their national symbols from the Chicano and Mexican barrios in the United States. Many of these symbols had given voice to cultural resistance in the Chicano movement and among Mexican-born youths throughout the United States; they were redefined and integrated into the speech, graphic arts, and symbolism of cholos in Mexico.

On the other side, important sectors of the Mexican-born population in the United States resist emotional and cultural isolation by consuming cultural products made in our country. Unfortunately, the majority of these products offered through film and especially television are of deplorable quality. Mexicans in the United States are also culturally strengthened by further immigration of Mexicans to that country and by relationships formed with populations on the border. In these cultural interactions, as in the consumption of Mexican cultural products, and in the immigrants’ implication in social and political processes in Mexico or in transnational processes such as undocumented migration, relationships between the Mexican and the Chicano

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This mural, an expression of La Raza movement of the 1960s and 1970s, depicts a 1940s *pachuco* wearing characteristic baggy pants, tattooed with the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe, and positioned in front of a lowrider car and crossed Mexican and American flags. Confronted with social stigma, pachucos and their cultural heirs value boldness, valor, the aesthetic of “cool,” and stoicism in confronting racism. Their symbolism reflects the international origins of their culture. Photo by José Manuel Valenzuela Arce

populations in the United States are shaped by what happens south of the border.

In the crucible of the border, culture is subjected to a process of purification that refines and redefines the dominant traits of Mexican national culture and combines them with other popular forms, regional expressions, and emerging identities. But the various collective identities (cholos, Mixtecos, Zapotecos) find themselves penetrated and influenced by proximity of the United States: an indispensable reference in the cultural analysis of our country's northern border. The presence of the United States takes various forms, and its cultural products are also redefined by the life experience of the social groups who use them.

People construct cultural identities with a wide range of expressions that associate them with some groups and differentiate them from others. The various collective identities on the border are linked by a common bond of differentiation from the United States and of construction from sources not bounded by the international line. They construct their identities in

everyday interactions with the Mexican population in the United States, in characteristic usages of the terms “them” and “us,” and in their cultural borrowings or reaffirmations of tradition that are the resources of their resistance. Cultural identity on the border often reinforces collective action closely linked to the class situation, as was the case with the Chicano Movement in the '60s; or in a fundamental way, identity can define popular youth expressions, as exemplified by *pachuquismo* and *cholisimo*.

#### Further Readings

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