

Research Article

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**FRONTERAS QUE REVUELVEN**  
**Fronteras que revuelven: A Filmic Study of “La Línea” in Tijuana**

**Mael Vizcarra**

Email: [mael.vizcarra@emory.edu](mailto:mael.vizcarra@emory.edu)



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# ABSTRACT

This article rethinks the concept of border through a spatial and phenomenological filmic ethnography of la Línea (the Line) in the city of Tijuana. La Línea is a term used by residents to refer to the San Ysidro border checkpoint between Mexico and the United States, the most transited border in the world. This is a site composed of varied and contradictory lines and movements, with commuters waiting in line to cross the border and vendors walking around to sell their products to stationary cars. For crossers, the checkpoint represents a liminal space of waiting as they stand in long lines to enter the United States. For vendors, the site is a destination where many have worked for generations. While crossers are mobile in the sense of daily movement across borders, they remain relatively immobile in this site as they wait in line. Vendors do not generally cross the border and are perceived to be permanent fixtures yet are hyper mobile compared to crossers in the context of this space. By using the method of walking with a camera to follow vendors as they work along various paths or lines, we learn how people perceive and understand their place in the world along the border. I propose the act of revolver (to mix, to stir) as an essential force that expands the concept of border, as well as reflexivity in ethnographic filmmaking.

*Keywords:* Borders, Mobility, Lines, Place, Visual Anthropology.

**Video:** <https://vimeo.com/139190482>

“¿Cuánto dinero me diste que revolví tus cosas con las mías?” (How much money did you give me because I mixed up my things with yours?) Manuel asks Fernando before they begin discussing money and purchased goods at length in my film footage. Re-watching this interaction, I wondered if Manuel had intentionally mixed up the money in case Fernando could not remember, and he could keep a little extra. But Fernando revealed his accounting prowess as he detailed exact amounts of both pesos and dollars given. Limits are reestablished. There is a Mexican saying that alludes to this, “Cuentas claras, amistades largas,” that means something along the lines of clear dealings make for long friendships. I have always read tension in this instance of Manuel and Fernando sorting out their finances; a reaffirmation of employee and employer roles, a making sure nobody is taking advantage of the other in order to maintain a functional relationship. This is indeed the case, but I later realized that this moment also makes a broader statement about selfhood, relationships, and their limits. *Revolví tus cosas con las mías* (I mixed up my things with yours). Where do you end and I begin? Help me figure out how to untangle our things so I can redefine myself, our relationship. As a filmmaker, a lone person holding a camera in front of them, this mixing or mix up is also present in the filmmaking process. How do these exchanges and relations come together in the film and in real life? Moreover, what does walking or remaining still with a camera while I follow subjects in this site—in effect, my film materials and methodology—reveal about border life and how borders operate more broadly?

In this article, I will rethink the concept of the border through a spatial and phenomenological filmic study of *la Línea*. *La Línea*, as residents call it, refers to the two border checkpoints in Tijuana that separate the U.S. and Mexico. Here I will focus on the larger of the two, the San Ysidro Port of Entry. One in ten people entering the U.S. via air, sea, or land enter through this checkpoint. Over 90,000 people cross into the U.S. in vehicles and on foot daily with average waiting times of two to four hours, making San Ysidro the most transited land border in the world (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2015). Most border crossers are local international commuters traveling to San Diego for work, school, or shopping. More than 1,000 licensed vendors make a living selling a variety of goods and services to those waiting to cross the border in Mexico. For border crossers, the checkpoint represents a liminal space of waiting as they stand in long lines to cross the border. For vendors, the site is a destination where many have worked for generations. While crossers are mobile in the sense of their daily movement across borders, they remain relatively immobile in this site as they wait in line. Vendors do not generally cross the border and are perceived to be permanent fixtures, yet they are hyper mobile when compared to crossers in the unique context of this space. Thus examining border crossers’ and vendors’ contrasting experiences of movement in the space of the geopolitical *línea* forces us to question our understanding of the relationship between privilege and mobility.

The aforementioned exchange between border vendors Manuel and Fernando took place exactly on the political boundary between Mexico and the U.S., right on the line,

reminding us that borders simultaneously divide and unite. They bring together, they separate; they create confusion, ambiguity, and often conflict. *Revuelven*, pues. *Revolver* means “to mix, to toss, to stir,” but it also connotes trouble. *Se me revolvió el estomago* (I’m sick to my stomach); *El pueblo se revuelve* (the people stir, they rise in revolt). Mixing means fussing with boundaries and produces great unease because it disturbs an established order and creates ambiguity. Thus, *re-volver* turns things over in a defiant rebellion, but it also involves a forced *revolve*, a re-turn. It is turning things over in your head, retracing mental paths, thoughts; it is reconsidering as a way of understanding something better. One returns to the previous starting point to reflect on the mixture, assess what the damage may be, and see what new thing was created from the initial boundary mix-up. Yet this reflexive return is explanatory in nature, a conceptual re-ordering of what has been disordered. And so any act of *revolver* involves a combination of opposing forces and insists upon what can be referred to as cyclical reflexivity: it requires a return to your previous starting point so you may be able to sort out the mess created, place another limit, a new border that will inevitably become “mixed up” in the future.

I propose that this action, or force of *revolver*, is behind the paradoxical dynamics of mobility and rest that characterize the San Ysidro checkpoint; a tension between movement—and lack thereof—that becomes evident and practiced through the act of filmmaking. Walking with vendors with a camera reveals how categories of rest and movement fuse and bleed onto one another, *se revuelven*, at the same time that they remain distinct and clearly demarcated experiences of this place. This mix-up, in turn, results in other mix-ups across other borders. In the case of this film excerpt, the boundaries between language communication and national culture also stretch. Beyond this act of film as representation, the process of filmmaking itself carries the force of *revolver*, an enactment of cyclical reflexivity.

Film reflects in the sense that it has this ability to “mirror” reality through a live action capture of the slippery boundaries between subjects’ movement and rest. But beyond these actions, film manifests both “meaning and being,” offering reflective and pre-reflective perspectives on its representations of reality simultaneously (MacDougall, 2006). Additionally, my film work is also a kind of meditation on and in these life moments, a reflection that occurs in the filmmaking process itself through the encounter with subjects, as we walk together or as I follow them. Repetition here is revelatory because following a subject with a camera, or *volver a andar lo andado* (to walk what has been already walked) of a subject’s everyday life,<sup>1</sup> can reveal something of what it means to “make place,” or how people encounter and give meaning to places (Feld & Basso, 1996).

## A Conceptual Taxonomy of “Border”

The concept of border in cultural studies and anthropology has been exhaustively

discussed, but rarely thoroughly defined and often employed as metaphor. The U.S.-Mexico border region in particular has been the subject of much research, as a site where various concepts such as culture and identity have been refined over the years, contributing to this space's iconic status in border studies (Alvarez, 1995, 2012). Rather than trace a chronology of or highlight major debates in the literature as has been done before, I will discuss how the concept of border has been variously defined and described, and the characteristics and functions that have been attributed to it. In his proposal of *transfronteras* (transborders), Valenzuela Arce (2014) articulates a similar approach to thinking about borders, proposing a set of theoretical parameters based on previous studies on cultural processes along borders.<sup>2</sup> My framework is broader and more elemental, focusing on the functions of borders in various conceptions in order to understand them beyond their geopolitical and cultural notions. Borders are already systems of classifications; as such, these categorizations are somewhat arbitrary, and so certain authors and terms often incorporate more than one of the elements described below. Despite this level of arbitrariness, I find highlighting various distinctions is an important exercise to clarify this concept that is at once ambiguous and highly prescriptive.

### **The Border as Division**

This version underscores the real or metaphorical line used to separate one thing from another, or the distinction between places, ideas, objects, and subjects. The main facet of this category is difference. Difference is often what we think about when we consider geopolitical boundaries between nation-states, whether it involves cultural/ethnic, economic, linguistic, or religious differences. The border as division may also involve asymmetry and inequality, but not necessarily.

### **The Border as Boundary**

Closely related to the border "as division," this definition is predicated on exclusion and relates to police state functions such as border entry/exit surveillance and the militarization of national borders. State surveillance and control in relation to neoliberal economic policies and post-9/11 national security practices is a growing area of border studies (Donnan & Wilson, 2010; Pallitro & Heyman, 2008). This category contextualizes cross-border exchange and connection in broader transnational socioeconomic asymmetries and inequality (Alegria, 2009; Lugo, 2008). For some, however, this emphasis on surveillance demonstrates an almost exclusive shift to the material dimensions of the border, which reproduces a limited understanding of the border as solely a mechanism of state control without regard to other aspects of border residents' lived experience (Alvarez, 2012).

### **The Border as Contact**

This presents another key function of boundaries: while they divide, lines imply contact by the fact of their adjacency. This category of border implies connection through movement, usually of people, as in the case of migration, though also of ideas and goods.

Analyses of colonialism often discuss borders as spaces defined by conflict, domination, and clashes of cultures, as is seen in Anzaldúa's (1987) famous "borderlands," as well as Pratt's (1992) "contact zones." Postcolonial studies theorize bordered contact as racial/ethnic and cultural mixing through the concepts of *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa, 1987), *creolization* (Glissant, 2008), and *hybridity* (Bhabha, 1990a, 1990b, 1994; Young, 1995). García Canclini (1990) introduced a more harmonious version of cultural contact in his proposal of cultural hybridity, an exultation of a kind of modern multiculturalism devoid of analyses of power.

The border as place for/of contact was essential to the emergence of border studies, as it challenged conceptions of the analytic categories of culture and cultural difference (self-here/other-there) and pushed scholars to rethink cultural difference through connectivity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Rosaldo, 1989). This surge in thought on dynamic and contradictory cultures and identities with relation to the border, combined with the sociopolitical changes brought about by globalization and transnational migration (Appadurai, 1996; Harvey, 1989; Kearney, 1995), provided an entry point for discussing the fiction of discrete nation-states with unitary national cultures (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

The border, as site of contradictory and conflictive contact, evolved to become conceptual shorthand used to challenge oppressive systems and structures of power such as the nation-state, capitalism, and patriarchy. However, while abstractions of the border were often attempts to disrupt the hegemony of the nation-state, the effect, scholars argued, was quite the opposite. The metaphorical emphasis on celebratory post/weak-state border fluidity and porosity mimic a neoliberal discourse of globalization that promotes a dichotomized view of the nation-state and global processes, aimed at limiting state intervention of the private sector (Sadowski-Smith, 2002). Additionally, a non-site specific, delocalized conception of the border runs the risk of portraying a uniform kind of globalization that doesn't account for the socioeconomic inequalities inherent in neoliberal policies, which plague many international borders, including the U.S.-Mexico border (Fox, 1999).

### **The Border as Edge/Limit**

The border as edge or limit is closely associated to the definition of "frontier." It is a space of the unknown and of possibility. As a kind of horizon, and because of its mysterious qualities, it evokes freedom and desire. As peripheral and marginal, it implies a center. It is thus often linked to colonial and imperialist enterprises, such as Manifest Destiny, or Turner's (1893/2010) triumphalist "Frontier Thesis," which narrate the importance of westward expansion to ideals of liberalism and democracy in the U.S. Of note are the ways postcolonial and subaltern scholars have used this conception of border precisely to undermine this colonial element (Bhabha, 1990b, 1994). Other scholars have also found the ever-evolving and never-quite-there nature of horizons as a useful analytical tool for describing transformative moments or states. For example, Turner's (1986) "liminality," Crapanzano's (2004) "imaginative horizon," Saldívar's (2011) "trans-americanity," and

Valenzuela Arce's (2014) "transfrontera" all demonstrate the space of movement and openness possible along what are perceived to be edges.

The border as site of edge and limit is particularly compelling due to its paradoxical quality: elements of edge—openness and possibility—coexist with notions of limit—end and fixity—in this framework. The coexistence of contradictory elements contains slippages. And it is this endless back and forth and ongoing process of transformation that allows for analyses that resemble a more indeterminate and ambiguous understanding of life.

### **The Border as In-Between**

This quality is closely tied to the border as edge/limit because it describes a paradoxical process of slippage. This characteristic implies ambivalence through the simultaneous unity and division of border. Like the border as contact, it implies movement through connection. But like the border as division, it also implies separation and difference. Its elements and properties are not only described as different, but rather as completely opposite and paradoxical. The instability and imbalance of the paradox created by the coexistence of opposite qualities is often associated with generative possibilities because for a paradox to exist these contradictory elements need to be unified at some point, or in certain moments. Thus, the dance between balance and imbalance is ongoing, dynamic, and kinetic.

Many scholars, including many previously cited, discuss the border or border processes as in-between. The "power of the between" (Stoller, 2008) lies in the creative and generative potential of ambivalence and ambiguity. Anzaldúa's groundbreaking *Borderlands* (1987) explains the Náhuatl word *nepantla* as the land in-between, an unstable, liminal place. Her call for a mestiza consciousness—a liberatory transformation in perception and understanding of the world born out of dwelling in *nepantla*—was predicated on the power of tolerance for ambiguity. She states:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity [...] Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else [...] That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide [...] In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm (1987, 102).

Borders are compelling and endlessly fascinating because they are understood to harness certain powers. Here, Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness is a bordered expression grounded in human existence; for her, the border is the self. Living with uncertainty

and contradiction, in essence living in conflict, necessitates rebalancing to maintain a kind of homeostasis of the self. The moments of balance, or synthesis, are moment of understanding, of a new consciousness. This moment, however, cannot be maintained in a border-self, eventually giving way to the previous process of ambivalence where things collide. The power of the border then lies in its ability to endlessly disrupt paradigms, an essential quality in the process of knowledge production.

### **The Border que revuelve**

My understanding of border draws from previous conceptual articulations, but differs in that it emphasizes border as action: the movement arising from being on the verge, a movement that results from an ongoing or cyclical reflexivity that in the end returns to ambiguity. It is rooted in the physical space of the border—this process is visible at the U.S.-Mexican border, for example—but is observable in places, moments, situations beyond geopolitical boundaries because borders are a fact of life and exist all around us. The force of revolver foregrounds the destructive and generative nature of in-betweenness: mixing two and often opposing elements involves breaking down these elements in order to generate new knowledge.

As the term suggests, re-volver involves constant reflection; without reflexivity, there is no border. By nature, "border" refuses a clear explanation because it is a process that exceeds its own definition. Border is self-referential, which creates slippages, as the term holds various meanings and contradictory connotations. Again, and paradoxically, these same ambivalences are what we attempt to contain by using borders. The most basic function of a border is to delineate, divide, and separate in order to define and explain. Yet it is impossible to attach any single meaning to this concept; it remains ambiguous. Border thus opens and limits its own meaning.

## **Methods**

The observations and descriptions in this article are based on fourteen months of ethnographic study of the social and economic life of border vendors in the largest international border checkpoint between Mexico and the U.S. located in the city of Tijuana, from January 2014 to March 2015. The border checkpoint is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and there is commercial and social activity for the entirety of the day. Though there are no set hours, vendors' workday is roughly divided into two shifts: morning (3:00am-12:00pm) and afternoon/evening (12:00pm-12:00am). I was on location during all hours of both shifts, but I spent most research time between 8 am to 10 pm for safety reasons. During this period, I conducted oral history interviews and engaged in participant observation, gaining biographical data and everyday details while recording my observations in written field notes and photographs. Additionally, and most relevant to this article, I conducted "go-along" interviews (Kusenbach, 2003) with a video camera four months after beginning research. Thus, it was only after establishing

a relationship with subjects and learning the ebbs and flows of the site that I presented myself with a camera. I filmed by myself, carrying a camera with an attached microphone to be able to move with relative ease.

Go-along interviews involve shadowing subjects as they go about their day-to-day activities, asking questions about their tasks or environment when appropriate. According to Kusenbach (2003), go along interviews bypass the contrived nature of formal sit-down interviews that take subjects out of their natural environments. They also provide an opportunity for informants to comment or reflect on their own activities as they happen. This form of walking-along-with allows a more in-depth observation of people's experience of their everyday social and physical environments and highlights how informants move through the world.

The proposition of self-consciously shadowing individuals as they go about their business is very useful in my particular research context. As I have mentioned, movement is not only an important facet of my conceptual framework (the movements of revolver), but also of—and as a result of—border vendors' everyday lives. Their work involves hours of being on their feet, walking, running, or standing. Yet, their movement is not limited simply to work because the site is not a conventional workplace. Subject's movements include leisure activities such as hanging out or playing chess. Walking with informants in this context is an especially relevant tool for understanding vendors' world-views.

### **Walking (With a Camera)**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) phenomenological concept of embodiment focuses on the body in space. The body is the locus by and through which we engage the world. Bodies have the ability to incorporate cultural memory and history, so cultural memory itself can be embodied (Stoller, 1997). The quotidian—the small everyday occurrences and practices that are the cornerstone of ethnographic work—, in turn, also have the potential to deeply transform urban spaces, especially through walking (de Certeau, 1980/2011). The body here is not reduced to an object, a repository of cultural symbols and meanings, but rather is understood as an active producer and interpreter of phenomena. Body and place are interwoven in a kind of “meshwork” because we understand and make places through practice, by doing through the world (Ingold, 2000). This perception of place, Edward Casey (1996) explains, is simultaneously constituted, “by cultural and social structures seeded in the deepest level of perception,” and constitutive, which means we are able to influence and shape places even if we submit to them. Perception then, is always as embodied as it is emplaced. For these theorists, “we are not only in places but of them” (Casey 1996).

If we accept the phenomenological perspective that we not only perceive but also know through our bodies and senses, then walking is fundamental to our understanding of the world. Specifically, walking is crucial because we engage and understand our environment through our feet (Ingold 2004; Ingold & Verngunst, 2008). Walking is also

an essentially social activity; a person's movements respond to other people in the environment and to the environment itself. This sociality comes about by walking with others (Ingold & Verngunst, 2008). The routes people take as they move in the world and not simply their destinations are important activities to examine in order to understand how people as people make meaning of, with, and through their environments (Feld & Basso 1996; Casey, 1996). Walking is thus a vital place-making practice.<sup>3</sup>

Sarah Pink (2007) makes the case for “walking with video” as a method for generating and communicating an embodied and emplaced representation of people's lives as the camera records subjects' movements. While Pink's examples center on video tours, my walking with a camera does not involve planned expository excursions. Nevertheless, Pink's explanation of the process of walking with a camera is relevant as it “...is itself a place-making process, and at the same time creates a filmic representation of place as made through film” (2007, 248). Walking with a camera, the act of filming, not only represents subject's embodied practices in the world, but is itself an embodied ‘doing’ in the world, “a form of thinking through the body” (MacDougall, 1998; 49) that actively shapes experience. Hence, as a filmmaker I too am “making place” through the filmic encounter with subjects.

### **A Participatory Filmmaking**

My filmmaking practice is thus a relational and participatory endeavor between the filmmaker and the film subjects and between the filmmaker and the filmic space (the filmmaker's doing in the world). As MacDougall explains, “the camera [...] records the filmmaker's movements and those of the film's subjects in parallel. The image is affected as much by the body behind the camera as those before it” (2006, 27). My film study of the border “*Todo lo que uno hace*” begins with a question I pose to Chaky, “What would happen [here]?”<sup>4</sup> Before I turned on the camera, Chaky had begun lamenting how boring things were at the border, that day in particular, but also the past few weeks. Customs and Border Protection were remodeling the checkpoint, which had streamlined traffic and shortened car cues significantly, making it increasingly difficult to sell goods to people waiting in cars. I turn on the camera and frame him in a conventional interview frame. He begins recounting exciting past occurrences, situations he considers truly worthy of film. His descriptions sound like they are coming from Hollywood action movies or cop reality TV shows. I ask him follow up questions and keep the frame tight on him. The camera is on him, prompting him to keep responding. Eventually his list ends, so I move back to open the frame and capture how there is no line anymore. That camera move makes Chaky start walking. Since he is no longer in the spotlight, he can resume his usual activities.

From the beginning, my presence behind the camera is articulated through the sound of my voice. Commercial film relies on the invisibility of the camera; the viewer should not be made aware of the camera, lest they are taken out of the story. The intention here is the opposite, as the story is made through the encounter between filmmaker

and film subject in space. I ask Chaky questions, he responds, and I in turn respond to his answers by moving the camera. Chaky then responds to the camera's movements. This is a dialogue with words, but also between bodies in space, precipitated by the presence of a camera.

While the previous scene with Chaky appears to be driven by the filmmaker, the following scene with Roberto seems to be directed by him. In the film, we follow him as he makes his half-improvised sales pitch. When he makes the sell, I stay in place as he makes his way around the car to deliver his item. At that moment I intended to focus on the driver as he received his new purchase, but Roberto motions me to follow him, as if saying, this is where the action is. I follow his direction and struggle to keep up with the moving car. At the end of the transaction he announces, "This is what we call a good deal," explaining to his audience what we have witnessed. Roberto's phrase seems playfully ambiguous, is it a good deal for him or for his customer? He goes on to recount a few details of what has just taken place to analyze and catalog the transaction (it was a quick sale), and to highlight its specific qualities (the customer was charismatic). This happens very quickly as Roberto then repeats his sales pitch, albeit tailored to his new potential customer.

Roberto is openly performing for the camera, showing off, and demonstrating his professional sales skills. Senior vendors like Roberto often complained about newcomers' lack of sales know-how, how they were often too pushy because they could not discern from the onset whether a sale was going to be successful or not. In this scene, he demonstrates how it should be done. He runs, he cajoles, he engages drivers, —this is how he moves through this space and how I follow. Roberto performs his sales practice for and with the camera.

It is difficult to be fully aware of one's surroundings as a single person behind the camera. Most of the attention is focused on the image being recorded and anticipating the movements taking place in front of the camera. As a result, many subjects took as their job to warn me of potential hazards. In other footage, I am warned about moving cars, potholes, uneven ground, steps, etc. At times there is no warning, however, because either side of the camera is engaged in our respective practices, as when the motorhome hit Chaky's umbrella cart. The inherent danger of pedestrians and cars sharing the same space creates another level of complicity between film subject and filmmaker in this site, as we are both aware of and caring for each other's bodies in space.

MacDougall describes how often during the filmmaking process "the pleasure of filming erodes the boundaries between filmmaker and subject, between the bodies filmmakers see and the images they make" (2006, 27). This is what Jean Rouch (2003) experienced as *ciné-trance*, or a level of synchrony between his mind-body-camera and the movements of his (often possessed) subjects that dissolved the border between the two. The point here is to highlight the ways the subject and filmmaker become entangled

during the filmmaking process. Later, when viewing the film, the audience also becomes interconnected as they participate in the exchange that is taking place before their eyes. But as we have seen, these relations are also enmeshed in space. According to Grimshaw and Ravetz, "the co-presence of filmmaker and subjects, the creation of shared time and space between them (coevalness), serves as the basis for creating a world for the viewer that has its own spatial and temporal coherence" (2009, 135). As we walk and film with a camera, we make the space of the film, while simultaneously making the physical space of the border. The filmmaking process by nature, then, revolve, mixes up the relationships between people, as well as between people and place.

## Discussion

### Lines

To be a place, every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere. Life is lived, I reasoned, along paths, not just in places, and paths are lines of a sort. It is along paths, too, that people grow into knowledge of the world around them, and describe this world in the stories they tell (Ingold, 2007; 2).

La Línea—the Line—refers to the geopolitical boundary between Mexico and the United States, but it also describes the length of the queues leading to the customs inspection booths of the border checkpoint. Yeh (2009) has previously explained these "two meanings [...] run perpendicular to each other: an east-west line signifying prohibition, and a north-south line signifying passage" (465). These meanings reflect an understanding of the border as an imposed, straight horizontal line dividing the U.S. and Mexico and a militarized line maintained through heavy surveillance (as in the term "frontline"). This is the line of the U.S. state, of the Customs and Border Protection agency. This line dictates and controls northbound movement, shaping the other línea, the line of cars, the length of which determines commuting time for border crossers and border vendors' livelihoods.

While these two meanings are rooted in the existence of the geopolitical line, in every day speech *la Línea* in Tijuana refers to the general border checkpoint area, "the area that borders on the border" (Yeh, 2009; 465). This meaning is more ambiguous and demonstrates a more amorphous conception of "border." I believe this conception is tied to the varied and multiple lines that make up the San Ysidro border checkpoint beyond the geopolitical border itself. The lines of cars and people moving north, though organized and restricted by geometrical inspection booths and different categories of entry, are themselves irregular lines as border crossers maneuver the space to find the fastest way through. Drivers cut each other off, sometimes creating *líneas falsas* (false lines)—lanes that do not lead to a booth but rather another car lane. Crossers twist and turn the steering wheel or their bodies to adjust to the topography of the area, which

is anything but even and straight. On their end, vendors create freeform lines as they weave their way between and around lanes of traffic to sell their goods. As fruit vendor Manuel put it, “la línea es vida” (the line is life). The various paths or lines of border crossers and vendors make up the border, giving it life. At the same time, it is through and because of the border checkpoint that people are able to make a living. La línea is thus a “meshwork,” or an “entangle[ment of] lines of life, growth and movement” (Ingold, 2011, 63). It is a “line” composed of many lines. It is by following some of these lines that we may be able to untangle this knot of relationships and find some of their meanings.

### **Mobilities at La Línea**

My film work focuses on the people who work at the border checkpoint: ambulatory vendors, shop owners, and shop managers. Chaky is an ambulatory vendor working from a cart owned by long time border vendor. Roberto and Pedro carry their goods and work more independently. Together with border crossers, vendors are the two main groups who use and live this checkpoint on the Mexican side of the border. Most border crossers are commuters who are in fact U.S. citizens, as the earlier generation of visa holders crossed the border to deliver citizen babies and then return to Mexico. Fewer and fewer crossers are tourists<sup>5</sup>—one of the reasons why vendors are not making as much money as they used to. The three sales presented in the film, for example, were goods and food sold to Mexican-American tourists. Currently, most border crossers are Mexican, holding American passports, resident cards (“green cards”), or border crossing cards for Mexican citizens residing in Mexico.

Here commuters can be seen as quintessential postmodern subjects. They belong and do not belong to two distinct nation-states. Their daily movement across the border challenges our understanding of selfhood, cultures, and nationality. But this is only apparent when viewed from a macro perspective; through a bird’s-eye view of these flows. Border crossers remain relatively immobile in this site as they wait in line, especially when compared to vendors’ movements. The perspective of the border on the ground reveals that boredom and monotony characterize commuters’ border crossing experience.

In their work on the aesthetics and design of American highways, Appleyard, Lynch, and Myer describe the experience of driving:

The modern car interposes a filter between the driver and the world through which he is moving. Sounds, smells, sensations of touch and weather are all diluted in comparison with what the pedestrian experiences. Vision is framed and limited; the driver is relatively inactive (1964, 4).

At the border cars are not moving as they would on a highway, so drivers have an opportunity to take in more of the scenery, including sounds and smells, as well as taste,

as the film demonstrates when crossers purchase clamatos (seafood cocktail) and cocadas (toasted coconut desserts). The car does remain a filter, however, limiting the level of sensory input, as well as the movement and vision of drivers. Years back, large video billboards advertised commercial air time making this point; la Línea offers a large captive audience where potential customers will repeatedly see advertising. In the final scene of the film, I film inside of a car only to find the footage lacks dynamism. My camera-eye looks to the front, observing what takes place in the scene framed by the windshield. I turn to engage in the conversation taking place inside of the car only to lose interest and return to my initial position. It is possible this footage could be made more interesting if the topic of conversation were different or if the passengers involved would be livelier conversationalists. Yet the scene is intrinsically limited due to the subjects’ and the camera’s position, due to the lack of movement. Movement is a powerful element in film, whether the movement comes from the camera, cuts (in the editing), subjects, or nature (such as rain or wind). Without movement, film loses its vitality and *raison d’être*. The slow moving traffic accentuates the sense of entrapment of drivers as they repeatedly press the accelerator and brake only to make little progress. Crossers are in the liminal space of the commute, neither here nor there, enveloped in “dead” time that contrasts with the activity outside. Inside of the crossing car the camera too is bored. You often see windows rolled down, vans’ sliding doors wide open, and passengers out of their cars walking around the sides of the market. Here, drivers seek stimulation and, as is evident in the film, are often eager to engage vendors.

While crossing by car is a more limited sensory experience than that of pedestrian vendors and crossers, in the context of the long wait times of the border, sitting in a car is preferable to standing. The rich sensory experience of the pedestrian eventually begins to tax the body; feet start to hurt and sun or rain becomes unbearable. For vendors this physical labor is part of the work. For pedestrian crossers, this physicality is part of the work of crossing the border. Having a car is a luxury many cannot afford. Walking is thus a kind of mobility understood to belong to the lower classes.

These contrasting mobilities are further complicated by the different modalities of crossing that have been established along American border checkpoints, and specifically by the separation of northbound car and pedestrian traffic into three groups with distinct levels of access. The most elite group of border crossers is the Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI), a Trusted Traveler Program that opened two lanes in San Ysidro in 2000. This program requires extensive background checks, a personal interview with a CBP agent, and costs around \$120 USD per person in a single registered vehicle. Once part of the program, users are able to travel through special lanes with significant speed since they are no longer subjected to the usual questioning. SENTRI car lanes are separated from other lanes by road dividers. These dividers, combined with the fast travel speed of cars, means vendors do not sell their goods to SENTRI users. The second tier of travelers cross through the “Ready Lanes,” established in 2011, which require a Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) card like the SENTRI program. The newest

resident and border crossing cards already come with RFID technology, but American citizens are required to hold a U.S. passport card, and not a regular passport, to use these special lanes. As more people renew their documents, the number of Ready Lane crossers has increased, but these lanes are still notably faster than the third tier of “General Traffic” travelers. Anyone who does not carry a RFID card travels through these slower lanes and is subject to questioning. Though Ready Lane documents are increasingly becoming the norm, Tijuaneños call general traffic lanes carriles normales (normal lanes).

Pallitro & Heyman (2008) have noted how SENTRI and other border surveillance programs produce inequalities of rights, risk classification, and movement, leading to differentiated mobilities across and within state borders. These distinct experiences of mobility (or lack thereof) in turn shape the individual’s experience and understanding of spaces. Frequent border crossers traveling by foot are generally of a lower social class than those who cross the border by car through general traffic or Ready lanes. SENTRI users are of an even higher social class. As expected, speed and ease of movement, as well as level of physical comfort, become markers of privilege and socioeconomic status. The majority of vendors do not have documents to cross the border, and even those who do rarely cross. Their lack of cross-border mobility marks them as lower class. Yet vendors’ freedom of movement within the space of la Línea complicates the notion that movement across the border is a wholly privileged position. Both groups are equally subject to CBP’s rules and regulations. Even those usually associated with faster and easier, or more mobility, can be subjected to less movement and at times to complete immobility. In this liminal space of border crossing, those who move do not move, and those who do not, do.

### ***Fronteras que revuelven***

This mix-up of movement and rest not only affects the kinds of mobilities that are possible in this unique space but, as is evidenced in the film excerpt, it also results in other mix-ups across barriers of language and national (pop) culture.

In the first scene of the film excerpt, as soon as Chaky begins to walk around offering clamatos, Lauryn Hill’s “Doo Wop (That Thing)” fills the air. The music seems to draw him in, and he approaches the car playing the song to ask if the driver wants to purchase a variety of things. Chaky speaks to him in Spanish, while the driver responds in English. They do not appear to understand one another, but the conversation carries on regardless. It is a strange moment. Cross-language conversations often involve repetition of words and gestures to confirm a basic level of understanding. In this instance, both sides are having a different conversation with the other, but because the topic is evident (Chaky is trying to sell the driver something, and the driver doesn’t want to buy anything), comprehension is no longer important. Finally, Chaky asks the driver if he wants a soda and points to another cart in the direction of the inspection booths to which the man exclaims, “It’s going to be a long line, damn!” Their different languages and perceptions of ‘the line’ meet in this moment of exchange without dialogue, *se revuelven*. The

boundary between intelligibility and incomprehensibility is disrupted, seemingly breaking down language barriers to create an ambiguous shared understanding. Yet the driver’s exclamation at the end of their exchange reinstates the distance between them, as his idea of a long line is in fact Chaky’s idea of a non-existent line. “Ya ni fila hay” (there’s not even any line anymore), Chaky declared before their encounter. Distinct mobilities shape their contrasting understandings of the space. Chaky wanders off and finally returns to his cart, to the place where the scene started. The cycle of an attempted sale completes itself only to presumably repeat again.

Roberto displays distinct performances of Mexicanness—the “authentic” Mexican and the Mexican-American—to entice drivers to purchase his goods in the second scene. In the first exchange, Roberto establishes himself as an authority of Mexican culture by answering the driver’s question, “en mi tierra se llaman pupitres” (in my land/where I’m from they’re called desks). Calling it his land evokes an image of rural Mexico, an image that is reinforced by the antiquated term he uses to refer to the school desks. He then quickly creates a cultural-national connection with the driver, telling him he is offering the desks for half the price because the driver is (also) Mexican. The driver corrects Roberto, letting him know he is Chicano. When the driver tells Roberto he cannot spend any more money if he wants to have enough to return home, Roberto informs him he can simply take out more money from the “ATM.” Roberto displays both his knowledge of the English term and the ordinariness of this action in the U.S. In the second exchange, Roberto attempts to persuade a potential buyer by telling the story of a baby whose first desires will be to consume at Walmart. The baby will grow up so quickly that he will soon start asking for money, so why not spend money on him right now? In both exchanges, he uses his understanding of American consumer culture to appeal to Mexican-Americans purchasing goods branded as “Mexican,” albeit with American insignias—the pupitres feature “the newest” Disney characters. La Línea thus offers the possibility of performing and consuming aspects of Mexican and American culture simultaneously.

The border checkpoint exists both as a place of transit and as a destination for commuters and vendors, respectively. The repetitiveness of a commute or the repetitiveness of a job is integral to the revolve, or return, that takes place at the border. Roberto picks up his desks once again and repeats his sales pitch to another driver. Chaky makes clamatos with routine knowledge. Commuters repeat their cross-border journey every day. It is in this repetition that people fashion themselves. Individuals alter patterned responses according to the assessments made from previous interactions, and depending on the particular circumstance at hand. This is the act of space-making, the ongoing and simultaneous process of being and becoming somewhere.

## **Conclusion**

A definition of the word *revolver* is, *volver a andar lo andado*, loosely translated as “to

walk what has been already walked” (Diccionario de la Real Academia Española, 2015). This “going down the same path” can be both metaphorical, as when one ruminates on something, as well as literal. It is by moving from place to place, along the lines in our lives that we gain knowledge of our environment and the world (Ingold, 2000; 227). And so returning to and walking those lines again, by ourselves and with others, means engaging in the kind of cyclical reflexivity involved in the border process and practice of revolver. Walking what has been already walked allows us to assess what has happened, what a place is, and who we are in it. By examining different scales of movement in la Línea, we can better understand how the states of movement and rest become mixed-up, and how different mobilities also result in mix-ups across other borders.

At the same time, film as reflexive practice and as object shares some of the qualities of borders. Ethnographic filmmaking in particular is a participatory practice of representation that blends boundaries as it triangulates the exchange between filmmaker, subject, and viewer (MacDougall, 2006). One of the powers of the filmic image lies in the capacity of images to be highly specific while remaining ambiguous, what MacDougall describes as the “composite” quality of cinema—events and objects happening at the same time within an image (2006, 37). This quality allows for an investigation into how people understand themselves and others in their environment in a way that writing does not permit (ibid., 38). In addition, both the filmic image and real life, like borders, exceed meaning because every image and experience is always more than what we are able to grasp, and so cannot be reduced or fixed to a particular conceptual or theoretical construct. Jackson elaborates:

To fully recognize the eventfulness of being is to discover that what emerges in the course of any human interaction overflows, confounds, and goes beyond the forms that initially frame the interaction as well as the reflections and rationalizations that follows from it (2012, 255).

Filmmaking thus provides a way of addressing “the gap between what can be known and what remains emergent” (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009, xvii). That is to say, the act of filming is a reflexive analysis of the space between what we perceive and what we understand. Filmmaking itself is a border(ed) practice that can attend to other borders, making it an exceptional medium for investigating the workings of liminal spaces.

A negotiator of sorts, the border spurs movement and rest, simultaneously inciting stagnation and potential. People wait in line and wait to make a sale, at times weary in the monotony that is work, that is life. People wait because they hope something better will come. Better stuff, better wages, better education... waiting is a way of being at the border. The border represents an opportunity for a better life. Yet, every day waiting as hope slowly dissipates until the tedium of waiting is all that is left.

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#### Endnotes:

1. This is one of the definitions of the word revolver in the dictionary of the Real Academia Española.
2. Valenzuela Arce puts forward the concepts of "conjunction, disjunction, connectivity, injunction, contact zone, translation, cultural switch, acculturation, transculturation, and cultural hybridity" (2014, 7).
3. Not everyone walks the border, however. In the context of the border, the types of mobility one has, walking or otherwise, are often tied to social class. I will discuss this in more detail in the following section.
4. This film is an adaptation of a longer film that is part of my dissertation research.
5. There are numerous reasons behind this that lie beyond the scope of this article. The Great Recession and increased drug-trafficking related violence in Tijuana are some.