

Indigenous Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Border

CHRISTINA LEZA

INTRODUCTION

When the existing U.S.-Mexico border was established, the homelands of numerous indigenous peoples were split, dividing the populations of once-whole indigenous communities. The creation of the political border has resulted in physical and ideological barriers dividing traditionally united peoples on the U.S.-Mexico border, impacting notions of local indigenous identity within their communities. For indigenous peoples on the U.S.-Mexico border, the border impacts perceptions of self and “Other” as shifting beliefs and attitudes regarding the border shape identity construction among indigenous border residents. This essay addresses the complexity of identity construction and representation for U.S.-Mexico border indigenous peoples, with a focus on U.S. indigenous community members. I argue that indigenous individuals with U.S. citizenship and belonging to indigenous nations with cultural ties to Mexico experience a complex process of identity construction that may involve shifting perceptions of self in relationship to nationality, ethnicity, and politics. While U.S. members of border indigenous nations primarily identify by community or tribal affiliation, border peoples may also identify as “Native American,” “Native,” “Indigenous,” “Indígena,” “Indian,” “American Indian,” “American,” or “Mexican” depending on social context and personal life experience. As Tohono O’odham Nation member Ramon Valenzuela states, “I am O’odham first, and American or Mexican second or third” (Archibold 2006). I further argue that confluences of race and nationality among border indigenous

CHRISTINA LEZA is associate professor and chair in the Department of Anthropology, Colorado College.

community members result in indigenous intra-community racism, while indigenous languages and other traditional community practices represent “family” ties across the U.S.-Mexico border divide.

Indigenous peoples on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border construct their identities through nationalistic narratives about what constitutes an indigenous person as well a citizen of both a particular indigenous and settler nation. While indigenous peoples may hold distinct notions of themselves as citizens of their own Native nations, different in many ways from the larger nation-state citizenship, widespread narratives about what constitutes a “Native American” or “Indígena” in nationalistic terms significantly impact the individual identity narratives of U.S.-Mexico border indigenous persons. Discourse about what constitutes a Yaqui (Yoeme), an O’odham, or any indigenous person intertwines with daily social practices important to identity performance. These practices are necessarily different on either side of the border due to different economic and material conditions, influence of the dominant national cultures, differences in dominant educational systems, and various other factors. Due to these differences in daily practice and the way such practices intersect with indigenous identity discourses, U.S.-Mexico border indigenous persons may experience difficulty in conceptualizing cultural relatives across the international divide in terms of community self rather than “Other.” Despite shared traditional practices that continue to unite indigenous peoples across the physical border, border enforcement has created both physical and ideological barriers to unity.

Many aspects of an indigenous person’s intersectional identity (racial and tribal ancestry, local community history, class, gender, age, education, social network, religious affiliation, etc.) ultimately shape their perceptions of cultural relatives across the international border as well as their representations of self. Among the U.S.-Mexico border indigenous community members included in this study, several factors stand out as significant to indigenous identity formation and representation in relationship to “Mexican” culture within the border region. One factor is the significant historical presence of the Chicano movement. Another factor is an ethnic flexibility that seems possible, particularly for mixed-heritage youth, in border communities largely populated by Latinos. The particular history of an indigenous people’s presence and movement across the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is of critical importance as is an individual community member’s particular politics and set of social relationships.

Research for this essay was conducted in close collaboration with the Alianza Indígena Sin Fronteras / Indigenous Alliance Without Borders (AISF), a collaboration that began in February 2006. Based in Tucson, Arizona, this organization advocates for rights of mobility across the U.S.-Mexico border for indigenous peoples who have traditionally inhabited and crossed the border region for social, ceremonial, and cultural purposes. Its members are also advocates of indigenous rights more broadly, including the right of indigenous peoples to define the membership of their own communities. Their banner slogan is “*Somos una familia. No tenemos fronteras.*” / “We are one family. We have no borders.” Members and supporters of the AISF include grassroots members of indigenous communities currently divided by the U.S.-Mexico international boundary including the Yaqui (traditionally known as Yoeme) of southern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, the Tohono O’odham of southern Arizona and Sonora, the Akimel O’odham (Gila River Indian Community) in southern Arizona, the Cocopah of Arizona related to the Cucapa of northern Mexico, the Kickapoo of Texas, and the Lipan Apache community of southern Texas.¹ This organization also works in partnership with other grassroots activist organizations in the U.S. and Mexico advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain their ties with community members across international borders. The AISF has also worked on tribal cross-border cultural revitalization projects with the Yavapai Nation of Arizona and the Kumeyaay Nation of California, Yuman Native nations in the U.S. that also strive to maintain ties with community relatives in Mexico.

In the Tucson area where fieldwork for this project has been conducted, the indigenous communities directly impacted by border protection policies are the O’odham and Yaqui communities. The recognized tribal nations in the U.S. that represent these communities include the Tohono O’odham Nation, the Gila River Indian Community, and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. Interviews for this study were conducted with grassroots activists who are members of these nations, as well as other members of the AISF and Native activists in affiliated organizations. Contact with these activists was established through their affiliation with the AISF or through their membership in the broader indigenous activist community. Interview data are complemented by public statements delivered by Native activists and other concerned Native community members addressing indigenous border issues. Public statements used in this study were gathered from a variety of media sources including local newspapers,

indigenous publications, indigenous radio programming, and indigenous blog sites. Data also include AISF organizational documents. Data for this study were also collected through participation in a variety of local, national, and international indigenous rights events in which the AISF participated to discuss and promote indigenous border rights.

REINFORCING BORDERS

In a review of anthropological research on the U.S.-Mexico border, Robert R. Alvarez Jr. (1995) argues that much of border studies literature has been influenced by an early anthropological perspective on political borders as boundaries separating cultures. This perspective has resulted in the avoidance of issues related to the U.S.-Mexico border as a political boundary when describing cultures existing along or overlapping the border. The unique political and cultural struggles faced by U.S.-Mexico border indigenous peoples in relationship to the political border have not been adequately addressed in border studies or by indigenous and anthropological scholarship. Nor has the impact of the border on the formation and negotiation of indigenous identities been adequately addressed.

Pablo Vila (2000) offers a promising approach in analyzing the multiplicity of identities on the border in his study of ethnic identity in the El Paso, Texas–Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua border region. Vila’s study recruits interviewees of varied ethnic and class backgrounds, including those who identify as Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, African-American, Jewish-American, and Anglo/White. Vila’s goal is not only to explore the unique character of ethnic identities generally absent in mainstream border studies, but also to explore how various border residents construct their identities in reference to the political border. Vila elicits statements on perceptions of Mexican and American life by asking interviewees to identify various locations in the U.S. and Mexico sides of the El Paso–Ciudad Juárez border in photographs, followed by an in-depth interview. In his analysis of interviewee statements, Vila identifies several key themes in the narratives with which residents construct their identities in reference to the ever-present and highly visible border. On the U.S. side, Vila points to a theme of *Mexican poverty* and a general *First World vs. Third World* trope that is shared among interviewees across ethnic boundaries. Vila views such themes as organizing “nodes” for constructing identities in reference to the U.S.-

Mexico political border with apparently strong economic significations for U.S. residents. In contrast to much of mainstream research, Vila's analysis reveals the strong presence of "border reinforcers," those border residents who construct narratives that reinforce imagined borders between themselves and those of a similar ethnic identity on the other side of the international line. This analysis is also influenced by Dorinne Kondo's conceptualization of "contextually constructed, relationally defined selves" (1990: 26) and Joseph Gone's model (2006) for conceptualizing Native identities as dynamic, rhetorical constructions.

Vila's study reveals the multiple and multilayered identities of border residents, particularly Mexican-American border residents who must struggle with multiple and conflicting themes of ethnic and national origin that circulate in public discourse. The analysis presented in the present essay is influenced by Vila's narrative discourse approach. It is also influenced by Claudia Strauss's work on Americans' discursive organization of conflicting themes in U.S. public opinion about immigration and poverty (Strauss 1992, 1997, 2012) and cognitive linguistic work addressing the metaphorical framing of ideas in public discourse (Lakoff 2002, 2009, 2014; Santa Ana 1999, 2002). This analysis, therefore, builds on existing discourse-centered approaches to cultural analysis (Farnell and Graham 1996; Silverstein and Urban 1996).

The conceptualization of identity in terms of multiple, shifting selves is critical in the study of indigenous identities on the U.S.-Mexico border, where changing policies and plural political perspectives about the border impact a Native resident's sense of self. Since much previous ethnography on Native Americans has focused on communal identities with an emphasis on traditional community practices or belief systems within a traditionally defined cultural community, there has been a tendency in anthropology and border studies to generalize about the varied, changing, and sometimes conflicting notions of self that are present within Native communities. Circe Sturm's ethnographic study (2002) of identity politics within the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and Justin B. Richland's field-based analysis (2008) of Hopi courtroom discourses on Hopi identity and tradition are exceptional in exploring the diversity of indigenous experiences within contemporary indigenous communities. The following analysis of U.S.-Mexico border indigenous identity discourse contributes to this increasingly nuanced understanding of Native identities.

**BORDER INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AS MEXICAN
AND AMERICAN**

The Spanish language commonly serves as an index for Latino identities. Within certain U.S. southern border indigenous communities, Spanish also serves as a salient marker for indigenous identity. While the traditional indigenous language of each border indigenous community is of primary importance as an aspect of indigenous identity, Spanish speaking is often seen as a marker distinguishing U.S. indigenous peoples with historical ties to Mexico from the rest of the U.S. majority Anglo, English-speaking population. This is certainly the case within border indigenous communities with relatively recent histories of migration from Mexico into the United States.

Speaking on the importance of language in ceremonial education for Yaqui youth, Yaqui ceremonial leader José Matus states:

If you speak to them [Yaqui youth] in Yaqui, they, you know, “What is he saying?” So I have to translate, but I never translate in English. I always translate in Spanish. They still don’t understand what I’m saying [laughing]. And before it was all Yaqui or Spanish, but now it’s hard for me to talk to them in the ceremonies in English just to have them understand what I’m saying. But at the same time, it’s very difficult to translate from Yaqui to English, because there are some words in English that don’t fit the Yaqui, or words in Yaqui there’s no way you can say in English. So, it’s hard. It’s hard. It’s hard. And I keep telling them, [begins to tap pen on table to emphasize each syllable] *learn at least Spanish*. Learn Yaqui. You need to learn Yaqui.... And I tell the parents to teach the kids to speak Spanish. If you speak Yaqui, that’s even better.

While it is clear that José views knowledge of the Yaqui language as vital to acquiring Yaqui ceremonial knowledge, Spanish is seen as preferable to English if ceremonial knowledge must be passed on in a language other than Yaqui.

Spanish may be seen as a more suitable language for translating Yaqui ceremonial knowledge due to the particular synchronistic nature of traditional Yaqui ceremony with Spanish Jesuit Catholicism. For this reason alone, Spanish language may be seen as a possible secondary marker of Yaqui identity, as it marks important aspects of Yaqui ceremonial

history and belief, as does certain terminology in Latin. The Spanish language, however, is also an everyday and common language among Yaqui in both Mexico and the United States. In many of the interactions observed during AISF meetings, organizational activities, or casual settings, Spanish was often the language of choice for communication among Yaqui community members. While Yaqui language may have been used for blessings when beginning meetings or in introductions, Spanish was often the common language spoken between Yaqui in Arizona and Yaqui in Mexico at AISF events. For Arizona Yaqui, the ability to communicate in Spanish is clearly perceived as a marker for an indigenous heritage rooted in Mexico. For some Yaqui, Spanish speaking also marks membership in Yaqui barrio communities in Arizona with a mixed Yaqui and Mexican-American population. In this sense as well, Spanish is seen as an important although secondary marker of Yaqui identity in the United States.

While Spanish language may have positive associations with Yaqui heritage for members of the Yaqui community, serving as “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1991) at the local community level, an indigenous group’s affiliation with Spanish can also result in discrimination against that group as “Mexican.” Margo Tamez observes this type of discrimination against Lipan Apache, a form of discrimination that results in a dual oppression for Lipan Apaches at the U.S. southern border (2008: 118119):

Being *both* indigenous *and* associated with Mexico over their long colonial histories as colonized peoples since the sixteenth century, Lipan Apaches have been shackled with dual racisms. By virtue of being indigenous and intrinsically bound up in relations with Mexico and Spain—empires that the United States both races and classes in its past and present construction of the villainous, dark-skinned, non-English-speaking individual/nation as both “foreign” and “enemy”—Lipan Apaches experience multiple oppressions....

At the Mexico-United States international boundary region, “Indian” as a social, economic, and political marker is saturated with persistent colonialistic antagonism, often used to mean “inferior” and “savage” when marking indigenous people, and to evoke “inferior” and “savage” in association with everything and everyone associated with what is stereotypically “Mexico,” “Mexican,” and of “Spanish”-language influence.

What Tamez observes for the Lipan Apache at the southern border is also the case for indigenous groups like the Yaqui and Kickapoo with more recent histories of migration between the U.S. and Mexico.

THE MEXICAN RELATIVE AS OTHER

For indigenous communities with a less recent history of migration movement between the United States and Mexico, Spanish language may not be a significant marker of indigenous community identity. For the O'odham peoples of the United States, for example, the English and O'odham languages are primary. While some O'odham may learn Spanish as a second or third language, particularly those who travel to Mexico to visit family and friends in Sonora O'odham communities, Spanish is not a language typically learned in U.S. O'odham homes. The same appears to be the case for Kumeyaay in the United States in regards to the Spanish language. In such communities, affiliation with Spanish-speaking peoples is not common, and othering of Spanish-speaking peoples more likely. In addition, despite affiliation with Spanish-speaking peoples in the United States, othering of Mexican indigenous relatives among U.S. Yaqui community members is also observed.

According to U.S. indigenous activists participating in this study, many members of their reservation or tribal communities in the United States view Mexican indigenous relatives as significantly different from themselves. Interviewees report that Mexican indigenous peoples are often described as “those people” or “those Mexicans” in their reservation communities. Mexican indigenous peoples or “those people” are described as simply “different” in the most malign descriptions. In the most derisive stereotyped portrayals of Mexican indigenous peoples, they may be described as “dirty” or “wetbacks,” as some members of U.S. border indigenous communities associate stereotypes of Mexican nationals with their Mexican indigenous relatives.

Take, for example, Akimel O'odham (Pima) tribal member Marshall Sunna's description of fellow Akimel O'odham community members' reactions to 11 Mexican Pima visiting their reservation in the U.S.:

Of course, they—a lot of them [O'odham from the reservation] were calling—“They're wetbacks.” That's what they were saying.... And of course, our people, like I mentioned before, they're, I guess personally they're real greedy [about] who they are. Not

as far as money, but just being greedy [about] who they are, and listen to what they hear. And they listen to what they hear on TV. So when these guys came, that was the thing that when they saw them and they didn't speak English, right away they assumed that they were—that they're "wetbacks." That they're Mexicans. And, of course, they're Mexicans, because they come from Mexico, you know, but they're *Pimas OF* Mexico. And that's the other part that I see that when they write 'em down they say they're Mexican Pimas. They're not Mexican Pimas. They're Pimas from Mexico.

Outside of the above cited interview, Marshall does not use the term "wetback" to describe Mexican nationals. After frequent visits to Mexico, Marshall describes feeling an affinity with Mexican mestizos as people of color appearing to have indigenous ancestry. As Marshall says, "Every time I go there I feel like I'm at home because you just blend in with everybody." Yet, Marshall is also careful to distinguish Pimas (O'odham) from Mexico as different from "Mexicans." He differentiates Mexican Pimas from Mexican nationals by proposing that the identity label "Pimas from Mexico" is more appropriate than "Mexican Pimas." While "Mexican" indexes a nationality shared by non-O'odham peoples in Mexico and the mestizo identity of the dominant population, "Pimas from Mexico" emphasizes Pima (O'odham) identity with reference to country of inhabitation.

Another Akimel O'odham community member, Lori Riddle, expresses concern in describing the visit of Mexican Pima to the Gila River Indian Community in 2006. At an AISF meeting in 2007, she stated, "They [Akimel O'odham on the reservation] would say things like, 'Are those people still here, those Mexicans?' And these are our RELATIVES. But all they saw was people from Mexico." Like Marshall, Lori believes that more contact between O'odham in the U.S. and Mexico is necessary to build a stronger sense of O'odham community across the international divide. She is concerned, however, about misconceptions about Mexico O'odham among U.S. Akimel O'odham and that there are limited efforts to reconnect O'odham across the border. She states, "I remember a while back when some of our community members even had the gall to say, 'Oh, they just want to see if they can get money out of us, because we have casinos.... There's no kind of setup or even a plan for a setup to unite the communities, and no talk, I mean, if there is there's very little and, you know, that's sad. We're turning our backs on our own family."

Discrimination against indigenous peoples of Mexico exists as well

within U.S. southern border indigenous communities with a more recent history of migration between the U.S. and Mexico, such as the Pascua Yaqui community. José Matus believes that a perception of Yaqui in Mexico as Other is stronger among those U.S. Yaqui who do not have a strong sense of Yaqui tradition and custom. As José states, “With the non-traditional Yaquis, it’s ‘I’m an American. They’re Mexicans.’ ” According to José such attitudes are particularly prevalent among “progressive”-minded Yaqui who are invested in U.S. nationalism as a part of their pursuit of the “American Dream.” He refers to such Yaqui as “the educated ones,” by which he means those who have invested in the mainstream U.S. educational system as the ideal means for success:

It [division caused by the U.S.-Mexico border] doesn’t matter to them [non-traditional, progressive Yaqui]. They don’t see that as a big deal. “If the United States wants to fence up the entire southern border, let them do it. It’s not important to me.” You know?

Yaqui in Mexico also have their own stereotypes of Yaqui in the United States. José observes that there are some Yaqui in Mexico who do not necessarily believe that those in the United States are real Yaqui. While José is now well known among ceremonial people and families in Río Yaqui, Sonora, he recalls that gaining broad trust and acknowledgment as a ceremonial leader in Río Yaqui took a number of years. He remembers being initially referred to as the “gringo” (foreigner or Anglo) Yaqui and *Americano* (American) among many Sonora Yaqui for a long time before being recognized simply as José. Marshall also observes the conflation of race and nationality among Pima in Mexico: “You know, people who could speak Pima, they were dialecting back and forth with each other.... And the funny thing about it is that they [Pimas in Sonora] were calling us, uh, “white-man Pimas.”...And we were calling them “Mexican Pimas.”

Notions of U.S. Native peoples as *gringo* or “White” do not necessarily interfere with Mexico indigenous people’s recognition of U.S. Native community members as cultural relatives. As Thomasina Garcia, a member of the Yoeme Commission on Human Rights (YCHR), states in describing the generosity of Yoeme in Mexico during YCHR visits, “They treat us like family,” then laughing, “They call us the gringos.” Marshall comments, however, that Pima in Mexico hold similar suspicions about the authenticity of U.S. Akimel O’odham that he observes among some in his reservation community who question whether Mexico Pima are

really O'odham. He recalls that once after showing some Pima in Mexico pictures of Akimel O'odham in the U.S., some of the Pima commented that the brown-skinned O'odham in the pictures might be "U.S. Mexicans wanting to be Pima." Marshall states, "It's the same here as over there, just vice versa." For U.S.-Mexico indigenous peoples, ability to speak an indigenous language can serve as the most salient evidence of shared ancestry.

THE SALIENCE OF TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE AS "FAMILY" TIE

U.S. southern border indigenous activists often talk about their community membership in terms of family, regarding members of their traditional communities in Mexico as "relatives." The perception of Mexican indigenous community members as being linked by shared descent is particularly salient in reference to a community's traditional language. For Lori, an Akimel O'odham community activist, the O'odham language served as a critical marker of O'odham identity that allowed for her initial connection to O'odham in Mexico. Lori first visited with Mexico O'odham in 2004. She describes this experience as the most significant experience in her life, second only to the birth of her child. Lori was part of a cross-cultural exchange group that brought together U.S. and Mexico O'odham at an indigenous gathering in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. In visiting the O'odham in Mexico, Lori was curious but did not know what to expect. While she had heard about O'odham living in Mexico, she had never traveled through Mexico before and had no direct links to family in the Sonora O'odham communities.

As Lori experienced the new environment of northern Mexico, she began to doubt that the people introduced to her as Mexican O'odham were really O'odham. It was difficult for her to conceptualize her people in a foreign environment and language barriers posed an additional problem. The U.S. Akimel O'odham and Mexico O'odham members initially communicated through a Spanish-English language interpreter. Then a young girl about her daughter's age greeted Lori in the O'odham language. She states, "I heard that as clear as day, like my grandparents were saying that to me. I was shocked. I mean, I always remember my grandmother saying, when I was twelve years old, 'Don't forget you have relatives in Mexico.' I just shook my head and agreed, and one day I finally asked her about it. I said, 'What do you mean we have relatives?' and she said, 'Well, that imaginary line that separates us from Mexico,

that separated our people. There are people that got stuck on the other side.’ ” Lori describes that first interaction in the O’odham language with that young person as an emotional moment. “[H]earing this young woman standing in front of me speaking my language; that brought a reality booming, crashing down on me. I actually was meeting long-lost relatives.... I had my doubts in the beginning, but when I heard that young lady speak to me in my language, I said, there’s no more doubt anymore, these are my family.”

Marshall believes that videotaping Pima (O’odham) speech in the Mexican O’odham communities he visits is an important aspect of his cross-cultural exchange work:

I would think that that’s one of the key things that I need to do is to interview the Pimas down there that actually talk Pima, to interview them, then bring it down here and show it to the people, to show that they do speak the Pima language.... Just to educate them that they are Pima.

He is currently working on having the videotapes he has already collected transferred onto DVDs so that he can share this video footage of O’odham language and practice in Mexico with community members on his reservation. He is also working with community members in the Sierra Madre to collect new video footage of fluent Pima elder speakers. Marshall states that “the significance of our [Pima/Akimel O’odham] cultural and traditional exchanges is based on our language.”

Marshall also believes that it is important “to make them [Akimel O’odham] understand that they [Mexico O’odham] don’t want to be tribal members, or not wanting to be enrolled with us. It’s their home over there and they want to stay there. They don’t want to move here. You know, that’s their life over there.” Understanding that some O’odham in Arizona may be suspicious that Mexico Pima are actually mestizo Mexican nationals claiming O’odham identity to benefit from tribal resources, Marshall also believes it is important to clarify that Pima in Mexico do not seek any financial assistance from the Gila River Indian Community. Fears about Mexican indigenous claims on tribal resources are, perhaps, not surprising given economic concerns for tribal nations on the U.S.-Mexico border. Suspicions of Mexican indigenous claims to indigenous and tribal identities are also shaped by U.S. discourses about Native identity in terms of blood quantum and tribal citizenship, as well as U.S. discourses on immigration.

“DIFFERENT THAN MEXICAN”

In the song “Get Up,” emcee and Tohono O’odham activist Liaizon (Alex Soto) declares:

Young gifted and red, us Indians ain’t dead
 Meet a modern day warrior with some street cred
 A tomahawk to the head? I use a mic instead
 Defending my people with the rhymes I’ve said/
 Born and bred to be on point, like an arrowhead/
 My sharpened delivery brings much dread
 Similar, though what you’ve read, I go savage with the lead/
 Slaughtering emcees, cops and fucking feds/
 For being who I am/
 Yo, I’m different from Mexican/
 Brown and proud, say it loud. Boogie down/
 Native American, my rap’s genuine/
 I keep it real like Indigenous medicine/
 To make rap look cool again/

Liaizon is one part of the hip hop duo Shining Soul. Liaizon’s partner, Bronze Candidate (Franco Habre), identifies as Chicano, and the duo has been practicing hip hop activism in the Phoenix and Tucson areas since 2004. Shining Soul’s slogan is “Hip Hop Is Resistance,” and they have toured nationally, internationally, and within the Southwest region to speak/rap out against militarized and racialized enforcement of the U.S.-Mexico border. Together, the two emcees express the common forms of discrimination faced by “brown,” indigenous, and Latinx people in the border region. However, Liaizon also uses Shining Soul’s music as a platform to speak specifically to the “red” struggles of the Tohono O’odham Nation and O’odham people. As he states, “The reason we have music and lyrics catering to the subject matter is because of my experiences.... As long as I can remember, I can always hear my grandpa saying that this is what it is, we’re O’odham. We’re from both sides. We’re not Americans. We’re not Mexicans.” Liaizon’s statement about being “different from Mexican” in “Get Up” is not a statement against a Mexican-descent identity but rather an affirmation of an O’odham identity that transcends the international border. Liaizon’s statement also addresses a common concern for southern border indigenous individuals who are often assumed to be “Mexican” by non-indigenous

people in the border region; those who tend to lump together all Latinos into the category of “Mexican” and who do not recognize the presence of contemporary indigenous peoples in the region.

Indigenous peoples on the southern border may also find themselves contending with the notion of Aztlán and Mexica/Chicano indigeneity within the region. Aztlán refers to the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, or Mexica. While not all Chicanos identify with Aztlán and Mexica indigeneity, Aztlán has developed into a significant political and spiritual symbol for many Chicanos since the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Navarro 2005; Muñoz 2007; De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2013). In terms of physical location, much of the Greater Southwest is claimed as Aztlán territory. The claim to physical territories in the Southwest has been an issue for many Native people. As early as 1969, Enriqueta Vasquez observed that Native Americans she engaged with during the occupation at Alcatraz Island “had a hard time grasping” and felt threatened by the notion of Aztlán (Oropeza 2006: xxxix).

While Liaison recognizes that Aztlán provides an important “mind frame” for the empowerment of Chicano people, he does take issue with political discourse about Aztlán as a territory. He states, “I’m not aware of that area [Aztlán] in my [O’odham] story. This is Tohono O’odham land, Akimel O’odham land, up north, the Hopi....” Understanding Native American concerns about Aztlán, Bronze Candidate similarly states that some Chicanos “get defensive and say, ‘It’s not land-based. It’s all a mental thing,’ but I think for the most part, the narrative is, the Southwest is Aztlán. It’s about reconquering a place of origin. But that’s totally false. There are indigenous peoples all across this so-called Southwest.... It just continues to invisibilize people, First Nations individuals.”

Tensions have certainly arisen between border rights groups with Chicano leadership and Native rights groups over differing ideas about indigeneity and homeland. Native border activists have sometimes found their particular nation’s concerns marginalized within the border rights movement when Chicano activists make statements to the effect of “We [Chicanos and all Native people] are all indigenous and, therefore, have similar rights in regards to border crossing.” Such perspectives were certainly of concern to the AISF and appear to have contributed to AISF’s break from its original partner organization, the *Coalición de Derechos Humanos* (Human Rights Coalition). Such tensions have also limited the broader indigenous rights movement within the region, as

certain Native American activists refuse to form collaborations with Mexica-identified community leaders, or even participate in events in which Mexica groups will be present. A running joke among some of the indigenous activists I work with involves one activist comically shouting to another, “There is no Aztlán!,” recalling an indigenous gathering event in which a locally well-known Tohono O’odham activist shouted this at an equally well-known Mexica activist.

While critiquing the use of Aztlán in Chicano political discourse, both Liaizon and Bronze Candidate acknowledge the need to recognize Chicano indigenous identity claims. Describing his own journey in exploring his cultural roots, Bronze Candidate recalls the Mexica or Aztlán movement as “the popular thing” among socially conscious Chicanos. He began learning about the Aztec or Nahuatl culture and studied the Nahuatl language. He struggled with disenfranchisement from various identity groups, including Mexica groups, for not knowing enough, being too urban, or for not being “from the hood” (i.e., not urban enough). While he is critical of Mexica activists who do not critically reflect on the ways in which their own claims marginalize indigenous peoples and their homelands, he understands that many individuals are struggling to achieve “reclamation” under an oppressive system that hurts all people of color. And while Liaizon is wary about the appropriation of his own and other Native cultures by individuals searching for an indigenous identity, he recognizes that Chicanos have been historically “robbed” of their indigenous connections through colonialism. As he states, “It is very complex. I guess I’m in a more privileged place. I can say, ‘This is who I am, where I’m from.’ I know where my relatives are buried, you know, where my roots are at, compared to on the other side, which is being robbed, or mostly robbed.... It’s a very sensitive issue.”

For some border indigenous people, mixed biological heritage is critical in determining the extent to which and how one might identify as indigenous. Chadwick Allen states, “Whether addressed directly or hidden in elaborate metaphors, blood quantum stands as a metonym for the ‘problem’ of defining contemporary American Indian personal and communal identities. ‘Mixed’ blood can mean denigrated status in both Indian and White communities, a sense of belonging nowhere and to no one” (2002: 177). In a group interview with the Yoeme Commission on Human Rights (YCHR), some members highlighted mixed heritage as a factor in explaining why many Yoeme (Yaqui) in the U.S. do not seem to care about Yoeme in Mexico. Applying the metonym of blood

quantum for Yoeme identity, one YCHR member states, “There’s a lot of mixed—a lot of Yaquis that are mixed with other bl, with other ethnics I guess you could say.... They’re not full-blooded anymore.” The sentiment expressed was that one would not care about Yoeme in Mexico or anywhere else if one did not see themselves as Yoeme. As twenty-four-year-old Steve Jaimez states, “I think if you really knew you were Yaqui, where your people come from and all that, then you would, I think, care a little bit more.... Me, knowing that I’m a full-blooded Yaqui, then I want to do the best that I can to help...there’s like half Mexican half Yaqui, or half this and half Yaqui, or a little bit of not even Yaqui. They’re just here....” Steve does not mean to imply that one’s identity is fixed by biology. As he concludes, “It’s not how much blood you have.... You’re born into it.” Instead, concern about the “mixed” status of many Yaqui youth points to their ability to pick and choose racial/ethnic identities because of biological notions about cultural identity. So, despite being born and raised in Yoeme communities, Yaqui youth with Chicano or other ancestry may choose to identify as other-than-Yaqui. Thomasina and twenty-seven-year-old Mark Jaimez believe that a Yaqui identity is less attractive to youth who see other racial/ethnic group identities more prominently and attractively represented in popular culture. Mark states, “I think a lot of the youth, they’re brainwashed with, like, TV, the Internet.... I guess they want to be other cultures, like how they see on TV.... I think that has a lot to do with, I guess, not wanting to be Yaqui.” Thomasina states, laughing, “It’s not cool to be [us].”

Some mixed-heritage indigenous people with mestizo heritage, however, may choose to identify as Chicano or Mexica because of notions about blood quantum related to indigeneity, the ways in which they find themselves positioned within a tribal community, or as a means of acknowledging their mixed indigenous roots. At the March 2016 Indigenous Knowledge Gathering hosted by the AISF in Tucson, Mexica activist Jesus Chucho Ruiz spoke in the gathering’s opening roundtable: “How do we relate to one another as diverse indigenous peoples?” When Chucho first arrived at the event, a Yaqui event organizer greeted him warmly and joked, “Today, you’re Yaqui. Okay?” When introducing himself in the roundtable, Chucho noted his Yoeme heritage but he did so in the Nahuatl language and primarily identified with his Mexica calpulli,² Calpulli Teoxicalli. The Calpulli Teoxicalli is an indigenous community and ceremonial group critically involved in the indigenous rights and ethnic rights movements in Tucson. Despite clear familial ties

to indigenous nations such as the Yaqui and O'odham nations, indigenous individuals on the border may choose to identify as Mexica to acknowledge their mixed heritage. These individuals may also shift in their representation of selves by identifying themselves with particular tribal nations in some contexts and Mexica in other contexts. For others, tribal nation identity takes precedence despite mixed heritage because of one's specific upbringing within the nation. Liaizon identifies his mother as Tohono O'odham and his father as "Mexican." He states, "I identify as Tohono O'odham, not because I'm picking that one. It's just I was only raised that way.... My mom raised me and that's my O'odham side."

CONCLUSION

Joseph Gone (2006) observes that the focus on racial criteria for defining tribal citizenship in the United States has significantly shaped perceptions about indigenous identity and has undercut the sovereignty of indigenous peoples as nations. Racial definitions of Native identity have critically impacted how Native persons define themselves and others in terms of indigeneity. As Gone argues, "One consequence of this legacy is that instead of carefully considered and creatively selected citizenship criteria (which themselves are constructed through Western discourses of sovereignty, nationhood, and international law), most tribes continue to endorse a variant of the standard colonial theme: blood quantum or racial purity.... It is this school of thought—born essentially of American capitalist concerns with the property status of African slaves and 'reserved' Indian lands held in 'trust' on behalf of tribal communities by the U.S. government—that gave rise to the influence of blood quantum as the most salient metonym of Indian identity" (2006: 60). Sturm similarly observes that the "conflation of blood with race, culture, and kinship is common among American Indians because blood—the stuff of life and death—is a rich part of our human imaginary, but also because blood has been enshrined as a measure of Indian identity for well over a century" (2010: 7). This racial legacy of conflating blood heritage with culture and nationality has contributed to conflict and division between members of traditional indigenous peoplehoods (Holm, Pearson, and Chavis 2003) on the U.S.-Mexico border. As indigenous community members on one side of the border attempt to define those on the other side of the border according to available racial classifications offered by the discourses of

their nation-state, they struggle to accept “those people” on the other side as “real Indians” (Garrouette 2003) and members of their own peoplehood. This legacy has also negatively affected the solidarity of the U.S. indigenous rights movement, as when U.S. Native groups refuse to support the indigenous identity claims and goals of Spanish-speaking indigenous peoples, or when U.S. indigenous activists question the legitimacy of indigenous communities that are not federally recognized. For example, the Lipan Apache Women Defense faced challenges in gaining support from other grassroots indigenous social movement groups when first organizing in 2007 as some indigenous activists questioned the Lipan Apache’s lack of federal recognition and whether Lipan Apache ranchería communities in south Texas could be considered indigenous lands. Impacts of this legacy on indigenous solidarity are also illustrated by opposition from some U.S. Native groups to the federal recognition of the Arizona Yaqui as a U.S. tribe in the 1970s (Miller 2004).

This essay has examined the relevance of state-based nationality and U.S. tribal affiliation to indigenous identity, and the potential for othering within indigenous cultural communities divided by international borders. It has also considered the potential for alignment with a “Mexican” identity for Native Americans in the U.S. with cultural ties to Mexico, and the importance of indigenous languages as evidence of “family” ties for indigenous peoples divided by the international line. A U.S. southern border indigenous person’s affinity with Mexican indigenous relatives and Mexican national ancestry depends on the history of their individual communities as well as individual life history. Direct connections, or lack of connections, to indigenous relatives on the other side of the international border will impact the extent to which an individual indigenous border community member will view and talk about cultural relatives on the other side of the border as Other. On the U.S. side of the border, a community member’s positioning in terms of “traditional” versus “progressive” attitudes is also of significance.

Of course, the reality of a “traditional” versus “non-traditional” identity in Native American communities is much more complex than is suggested by the traditional/non-traditional dichotomy found in Native activist discourses. In addition, some indigenous activists, despite a concern for and a dedication to their traditional cultures, do not use the label “traditionalist” to describe their activist work and some traditionalists do not use the word “activism” to describe their political action. Alex Soto (Liaizon) states, “This is more cultural work to me.

It's not like protest or activism. I mean, it comes off that way, but it comes from a place of 'I'm Tohono O'odham first'...but...this is going down in my community. We need to talk about these things." On the other hand, members of the Yoeme Commission on Human Rights see their work as human rights action rather than "cultural" action. While Native activists often form solidarities with non-Native activists, with traditional community notions of identity in mind, Native activism should be understood as different in many regards from both "White" activism and activism by other people of color. For those who associate "activist" with Western, non-indigenous forms of social movement, the terms "community advocate" and "community organizer"—or variants on those terms to describe those who protect their community—may be used to represent one's sense of self as an indigenous person shaped by the values of, and acting on behalf of, their specific community. Yet, in contexts in which "activism" is not challenged as "Western," with implications for one's indigenous identity, the term "activist" may be less problematic and a useful label to better connect to a variety of individuals working for shared causes.

Use of terms such as "Indian," "Native," and "indigenous" to describe one's indigenous identity outside of their traditional community identity may also be negotiated from one social context to the next. As Tamez (2008) observes, historical forces of state formation have shaped indigenous and "Indian" identities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Negative conceptualizations of indigenous peoples as "inferior" have certainly been linked to the term "Indian." Yet, for some indigenous people, particularly those who engaged in community advocacy during the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, "Indian" remains an appropriate and meaningful pan-Native term. Since Spanish language is common in some southern border indigenous communities, the term *indígena* (indigenous) may be a comfortable and often appropriate identity label. But identification as a *persona indígena* (indigenous person) may not feel right to a southern border indigenous person who does not speak Spanish, nor would it always necessarily feel like an appropriate self-identifier for a Spanish-speaking indigenous person. A U.S. southern border indigenous activist's identification with the terms *Indian*, *indígena*, *indigenous*, or *Indigenous* (with the capital "I") varies among individuals and shifts from one context to another, along with other aspects of their identity.

U.S.-Mexico border Native activists articulate (Hall 1988) their identities as they shift back and forth in a dynamic model of Native self, where issues of nationality as well as other aspects of social status shape ongoing articulations. Policy impacts of immigration and of U.S. southern border enforcement on U.S.-Mexico border indigenous peoples create a daily, lived experience of the border that plays a critical role in a U.S.-Mexico border indigenous person's active construction of self, as do popular discourses about immigrants, Mexican nationals, and "Indians." The representation of Native self, therefore, involves varied representations of beliefs and attitudes regarding the border, as well as varied representations of one's relationship to those on the other side of the border. This essay prompts further exploration of the complex, discursive process involved in the articulation of traditional, national, and ethnic identities by members of indigenous peoples divided by the U.S.-Mexico border. ❖

NOTES

1. Members of this organization do not consider themselves, or claim to be, representatives of their respective tribal governments in their role as AISF members, but rather concerned members of the grassroots within their respective communities.

2. *Calpulli* means "big house" in Nahuatl. A *calpulli* was a tightly knit neighborhood and a critical level of social and political organization within pre-Columbian Aztec city-states.

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