



Seeing Double

Celeste Ponce

A Journey
along the
Rio Bravo

Stopping at
Twenty-Eight
Border
Crossings
in Texas

Much of the frontier is river,
and rivers are meant to
bring men together, not keep
them apart.

— J.B. Jackson¹

In J.B. Jackson's first issue of *Landscape* magazine, Jackson describes human geography by quoting French geographer Maurice Le Lannou: "We have before us a picture, constantly being retouched, that is vigorously composed of spots of light and zones of shadow, of remarkable convergences of lines of forces at certain points, of road networks sometimes loose, sometimes extremely closely knit, and testifying all of them to the heterogeneous and complex organization of the world."² Today, conversations about the Texas–Mexico border are about fears projected onto a wall. I'm interested in a different picture, one made through life overcoming misconceptions and prejudice. Is it possible to turn the transgression that the closed border represents for many into an open dialogue about reciprocity? Can we convert this topographic aggression into a more appropriate demarcation and inspiration for people on both sides of the river?

To find out, I visited all twenty-eight border crossings, beginning in Brownsville and proceeding upstream to El Paso. I took photographs as I went. These images, numbered in order on the following spreads, were taken on the north side of the Rio Grande. The framed distance captures the cultural clashes, adaptations, tolerances, and acceptances within these vast cultural landscapes. Through my detached lens, the landscapes can be read for their juxtapositions of ordinary and extraordinary conditions that occur when living with an intrusive wall, fence, or checkpoint. I also met people who reside in these places. Their stories are accompanied by a narrative map and photographs of their daily routines.

Four Mexican states touch Texas: Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. The Texas–Mexico border spans 1,254 miles, or 64 percent of the overall US–Mexico border. There are twenty-eight border crossings, accessed by twenty-four bridges, two dams, one hand-drawn ferry, and one rowboat. Most—88.4 percent—of the region's population is Hispanic, and a third of all residents live below poverty level. Thirty-two percent struggle to speak English, and 33 percent do not graduate from high school. According to the US Department of State, the US and Mexico's goods and services trade totaled approximately \$577.3 billion in 2020, and hundreds of thousands of pedestrian crossings occurred each day in 2019.

The Healthy Border 2020: A Prevention and Health Promotion Initiative concluded that nearly 50 percent of adults living on the border do not have health insurance, compared to 28.3 percent of nonborder residents in Texas. The study also reveals that the number of diabetic deaths increased by 47 percent along the border region from 2000 to 2010, while the mortality rate of diabetics in the US dropped by 17 percent, with the highest decrease in Texas.³ Border residents often feel overlooked. It is critical to protect and recognize the systems that link our two countries in order to value the culture that sustains this 67,557-square-mile region, roughly the size of Florida. The disproportionate health care gap that continues to grow between the border region and the rest of Texas is one of the many examples that showcase how borderland residents continue to be underserved by their state.

In "Chihuahua as We Might Have Been," Jackson describes the American Southwest not as "nature" but as a legible and historical "force" made up of values worth discovering, like pages in a book. Today, the border that Jackson found so abstract, even elusive, is increasingly concrete. The thickened, fenced, and walled edge is a barrier between the communities. Once seen as simply the course of a river—on one side Rio Bravo, on the other Rio Grande—left open to plain sight and everyday commerce, the dividing line has now taken on an intrusive and threatening presence. The hardening of the border, now intensified by nationalistic fantasies about a border wall, further separates its two sides, both physically and culturally.

A series of Google Earth satellite images illustrates how the border's edge has thickened over a short period of time. The passage of time demonstrates the transformation of what used to be considered one landscape on both sides of the river into different places. As Jackson wrote, "An abstraction, a Euclidean line drawn across the

desert, has created two distinct human landscapes where there was only one before."⁴

For border residents, crossing can be a daily ritual. A sophisticated network of decisions bifurcates almost every area of their lives. Each day is made up of a schedule that accommodates and negotiates between opportunities that make the most of their binationality. Choices such as prescription medicine, food, entertainment, church, and family make up a thoughtful and often complex system of negotiation.

Throughout my journey, residents shared their network built from a symbiotic relationship between their city and their *cuate*, or twin city. Mappings made from their routines explore how vital these networks and border crossings are for the free-flowing movement of goods, services, relationships, and culture. By shifting the dialogue from outdated stereotypes to one of appreciation for a binational exchange, these maps begin to illustrate how these flows are lifelines for both residents and the national economy. Both sides greatly depend on the fluidity of these networks.

Along the border, the two parallel stories of the US and Mexico should be told as a single narrative—that of a valley shaped by a river. History not only demonstrates the volatile nature of the region, but it also establishes a tension that remains true today. How cities respond to this tension is fundamental in shaping the lives of their residents and their built environment. As Tatiana Bilbao recommends in *Two Sides of the Border*, it's useful to think "territorially in big movements." Bilbao explains that instead of "focusing on the individual projects and the potential for garnering acclaim for changing neighborhoods," architects should focus their attention on "how that territory changes people and therefore create a new architecture."⁵ An understanding of the lived experience of families with limited means on both sides of the river is essential to building the empathy required to make meaningful changes to this situation.

Having grown up in Eagle Pass, the border city between Laredo and Del Rio, I cannot help but reflect that the identities of the US and Mexico are not separate but instead are completely intertwined here. The blending is indistinguishable. You aren't Mexican, and you don't feel American; you exist somewhere between cultures.

This sentiment is where my journal begins: a hardened landscape where cultural collisions survive in an increasingly unsympathetic environment. The following visual record illustrates the nuances of the implied edge based on observations, memory, fear, and adaptation. Photographs, diagrams, and mappings are reinforced with stories from those who make daily crossings, demonstrating how communities in two nations can function as one city. The cultural implications of the militarized line—through checkpoints, walls, or fences—shapes the way the people interact, how they satisfy their everyday needs, and, most powerfully, how they use and care for a land that is not entirely theirs to claim.



The author with her grandmother swimming in the Sabinas River, a tributary of the Rio Salado, which runs into the Rio Grande. The river is flanked on either side with Sabino trees, which are considered sacred by Native peoples in Mexico.



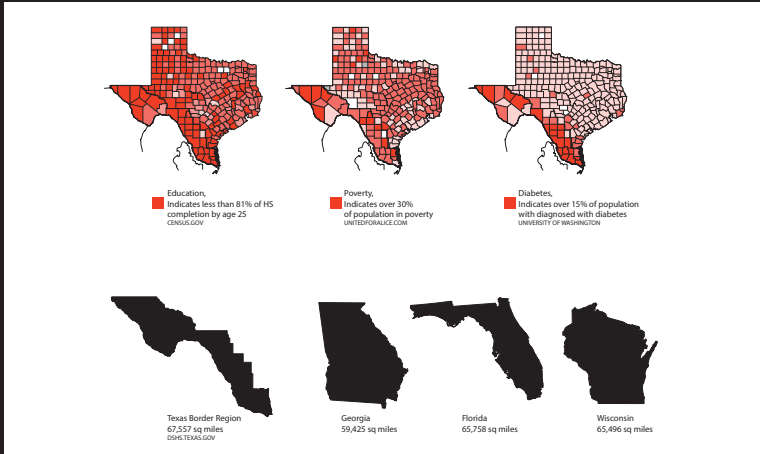
Rio Grande Valley between Los Indios and Brownsville.



Fenced border segments, 2006.



Fenced border segments, 2018.

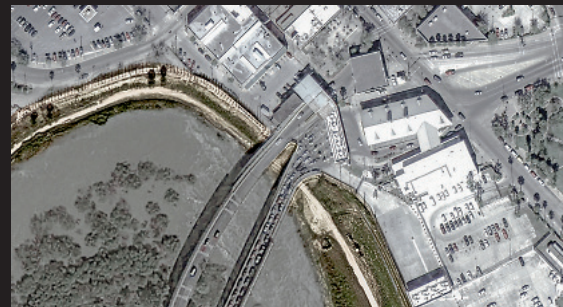
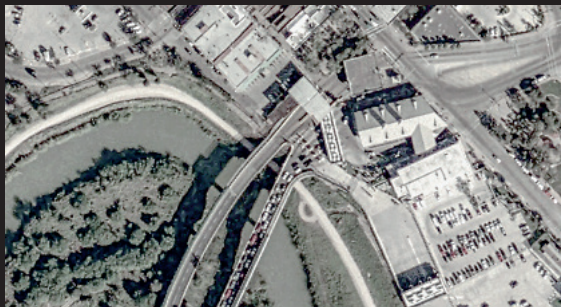


Education, poverty, and diabetes density (above), and size comparisons (below).

Keith Bowden, a professor from Laredo who traveled most of the Texas border by rowboat, stated that the perspective from the river gives you the sense that the river is what connects “island cities”—or an “island culture.” He often questioned how cities so far from one another geographically share so much in common. He concluded it was due to sharing vast space “between two worlds.” He believes an island culture has developed partially due to how far the border cities are from their nearest neighboring city within the US.

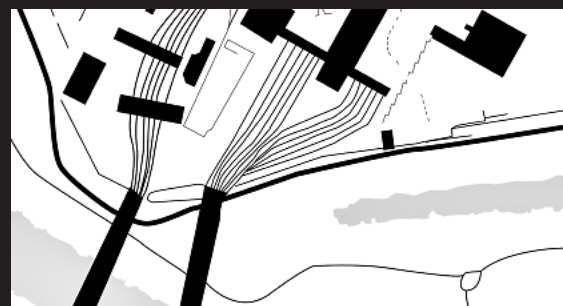
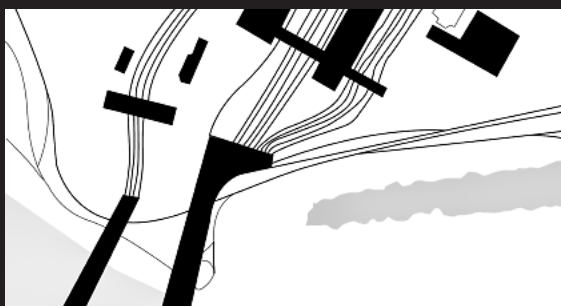
Gateway International Port of Entry, Brownsville

2006, 2011, 2014, 2017



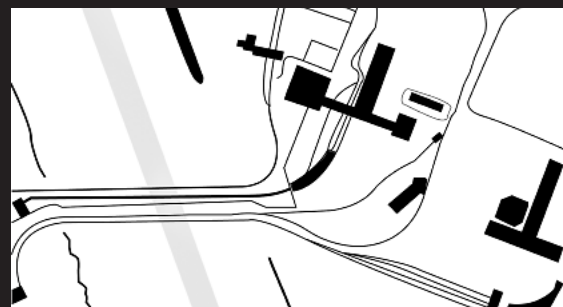
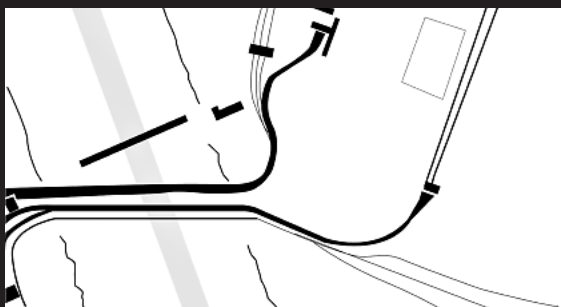
McAllen-Hidalgo-Reynosa International Port of Entry

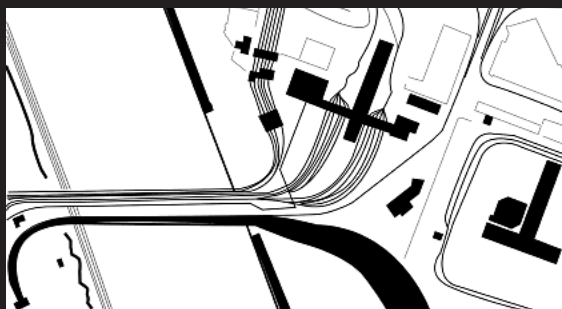
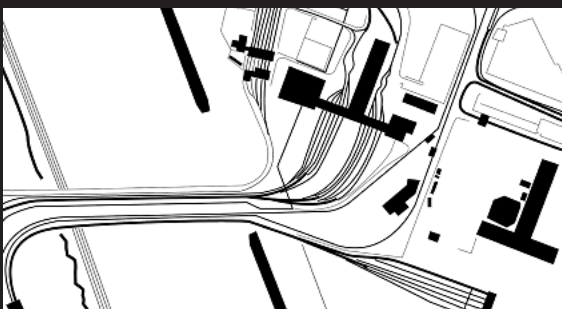
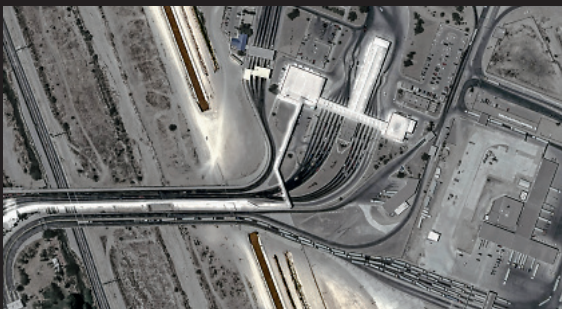
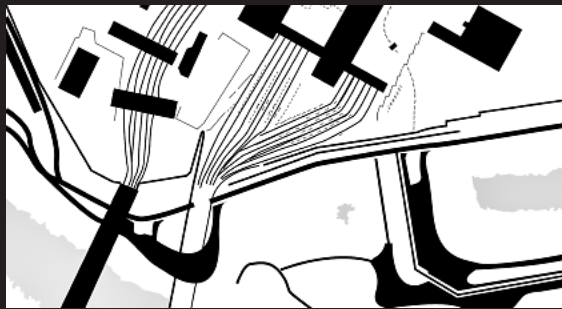
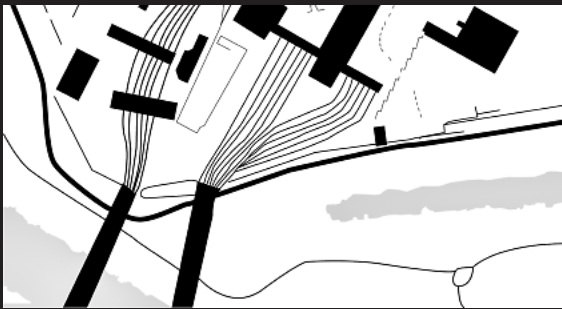
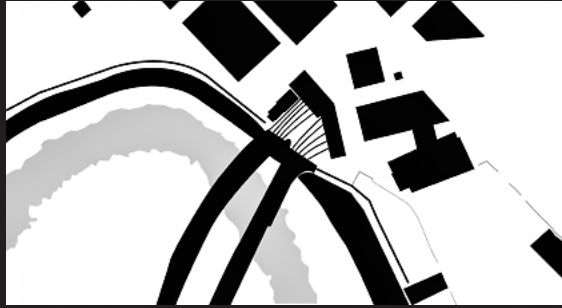
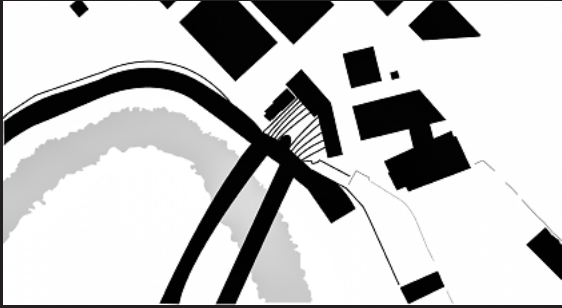
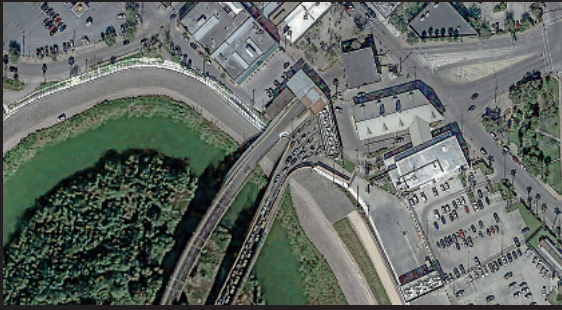
1995, 2007, 2010, 2017



Ysleta Zaragoza International Bridge, El Paso

1991, 1996, 2007, 2018







Wall behind flea market, Hidalgo.



1



Brownsville-Veterans Port of Entry



Brownsville

3



Brownsville-B&M Port of Entry



Backyard wall between Los Indios and Brownsville

5



Progreso Texas Port of Entry



Gavilon Grain Division near commercial vehicle checkpoint, Progreso



Brownsville Gateway Point of Entry



Brownsville

The police once found a stray bullet fired in Matamoros that struck a University of Texas Rio Grande campus wall. The pristine grounds sit in front of the International Border Crossing on Elizabeth Street. The 18-foot-high wall is most prevalent in this region.



Los Indios Port of Entry



Rio Grande Valley between Los Indios and Brownsville



Donna Texas Port of Entry



Tower Wall between Los Indios and Progreso, Rio Grande Valley

The southern tip of Texas, often referred to as the "Valley," is not a valley but a flood plain or a collection of resacas originally formed by a wide crescent-shaped channel that meanders off the Rio Grande. Violence has intensified here over the years due to the ongoing power struggle between the Zetas and Gulf Cartel. "La maña" or "the way things are" is a term used to describe the familiar violence that locals have grown accustomed to.



Pharr Texas International Port of Entry



Surveillance checkpoint, Hidalgo



Anzalduas Port of Entry, Mission



Mission near the McAllen-Hidalgo-Reynosa International Bridge



Rio Grande Port of Entry



Los Ebanos



Hidalgo Texas International Port of Entry



Surveillance checkpoint, Hidalgo



Los Ebanos Port of Entry



Los Ebanos

The border crossing at Los Ebanos is not a bridge but a hand-operated cable ferry. The crossing is situated behind a series of narrow streets lined with Ebano trees and gabled sheds. The homes near the checkpoint appear empty with no residents in sight. Life reemerges as you approach what locals refer to as *El Chalán* (horse keeper/helper). "Hand over hand," a team of five pulls the ferry across the river in about five minutes Keith Bowden wrote in *The Tecate Journals: Seventy Days on the Rio Grande*. As Ed Stoddard observed in a 2008 article for Reuters, it's the "last of its kind."



Roma Port of Entry



View of Ciudad Miguel Alemán in Tamaulipas, Roma



Falcon Dam Port of Entry



Checkpoint, Falcon Heights



Laredo Convent Avenue Port of Entry (Bridge I or Old Bridge)



View from Lincoln International Port of Entry, Laredo

People on the Mexican side of the river engage the river's edge. The adjacent grounds near the river are often used as a public recreational zone. Here you see people grilling meat, and I frequently saw people fishing and picnicking. This is something you never see on the US side; I didn't see anyone spending recreational time near the river. At times you will see a park near the river on the American side, but they are rarely used. I didn't see anyone officially patrolling the river on the Mexican side. I was a little surprised when I saw firemen launching a boat near the river. I asked someone familiar with the area, and they said that normally firemen don't spend time near the river unless they're retrieving a body.



Eagle Pass Camino Real Port of Entry (Eagle Pass II)



Fort Duncan, Eagle Pass



Laredo Juárez – Lincoln Port of Entry (Bridge II)



Falcon Heights (International Boundary and Water Commission sign)



Laredo Colombia Solidarity Port of Entry (Bridge III)



Laredo Colombia Solidarity Port of Entry

Colombia Solidarity International Bridge is one of four bridges in Laredo, but the only one with access to Nuevo León. It's a forty-minute drive from downtown Laredo. Colombia, Nuevo León, the border city on the Mexican side of the border, is a planned community designed to develop and compete with the international ports of the bordering states of Coahuila and Tamaulipas. Since its completion in 1991, there has been little change on either side. Instead, you find oversized complexes linking "nowhere with nowhere," Keith Bowden writes, in one of the most remote areas in the region. During one visit, a Homeland Security Officer approached me and pointed to a large non-descript white flat building running perpendicular to the multiple, over-scaled curved red metal roofs above the border crossing and stated, "You are being watched." He said, "I have received about a dozen calls about you. Why are you taking pictures?" He said that it was his job to verify suspicious behavior.



Eagle Pass Port of Entry



Eagle Pass Golf Course near the Eagle Pass–Piedras Negras International Bridge



Del Rio Port of Entry



Amistad Reservoir



Boquillas Crossing Port of Entry



Boquillas Port of Entry

Rio Grande Village, known locally by its *cuate*, Boquillas, , sits equidistant between the confluences of the Rio Conchos upstream and the Pecos River downstream. At the adobe port of entry, you are greeted by park rangers who help scan passports at a kiosk as the US side crossing is located within Big Bend National Park. The scanned information is then transmitted to the immigration office in El Paso. The steady flow of people, anxious to visit the tourist destination and dine at Jose Falcon, casually descend a tree-lined path toward the river. The clear water continues to be fed by the Rio Conchos, or, as those familiar with the river's struggle call it, "the mother stream of the Rio Grande," according to Paul Horgan. A \$5.00 boat ride takes you across the unmanned port of entry. Once you arrive in Mexico, you're greeted with an enthusiastic welcome and the offer of a \$8.00 donkey or horse ride into town.



Amistad Dam Port of Entry



Amistad Dam

The Amistad Dam marks the intersection of the Rio Grande, Pecos, and Devil's Rivers. Here the border is delineated by a set of twenty-eight illuminated buoys that stretch across the Amistad Reservoir. The fishermen utilize the buoys to visually connect the dots, creating an intangible line between borders. While fishing, the indefinable border remains in flux. The border is permitted to stretch and meander until the boat touches Mexican soil. Once docked, the boat must return through the US Customs Port of Entry. "You have to enter the same way you left," said the border patrolman.



Presidio Port of Entry



Wall between Presidio and Ojinaga, Chihuahua



Fort Hancock Port of Entry



Fort Hancock

On February 2, 1848, when the signed treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was presented to the government, President Polk considered demanding "more territory" and "perhaps making Sierra Madre the line," Paul Horgan wrote in *Great River*. However, the President concluded that additional territory would require a "renewed war," and the "nation was done with war for the time."



El Paso Ysleta Port of Entry



Checkpoint at El Paso Ysleta Port of Entry



El Paso Stanton Port of Entry



View of the Monument to the Mexican People, Ciudad Juárez



Marcelino Serna Port of Entry



Tornillo



El Paso Bridge of the Americas (BOTA) Port of Entry



Bridge of the Americas, also known as Puente Libre or Free Bridge, El Paso



El Paso PDN (Paso del Norte) Port of Entry (Santa Fe Bridge)

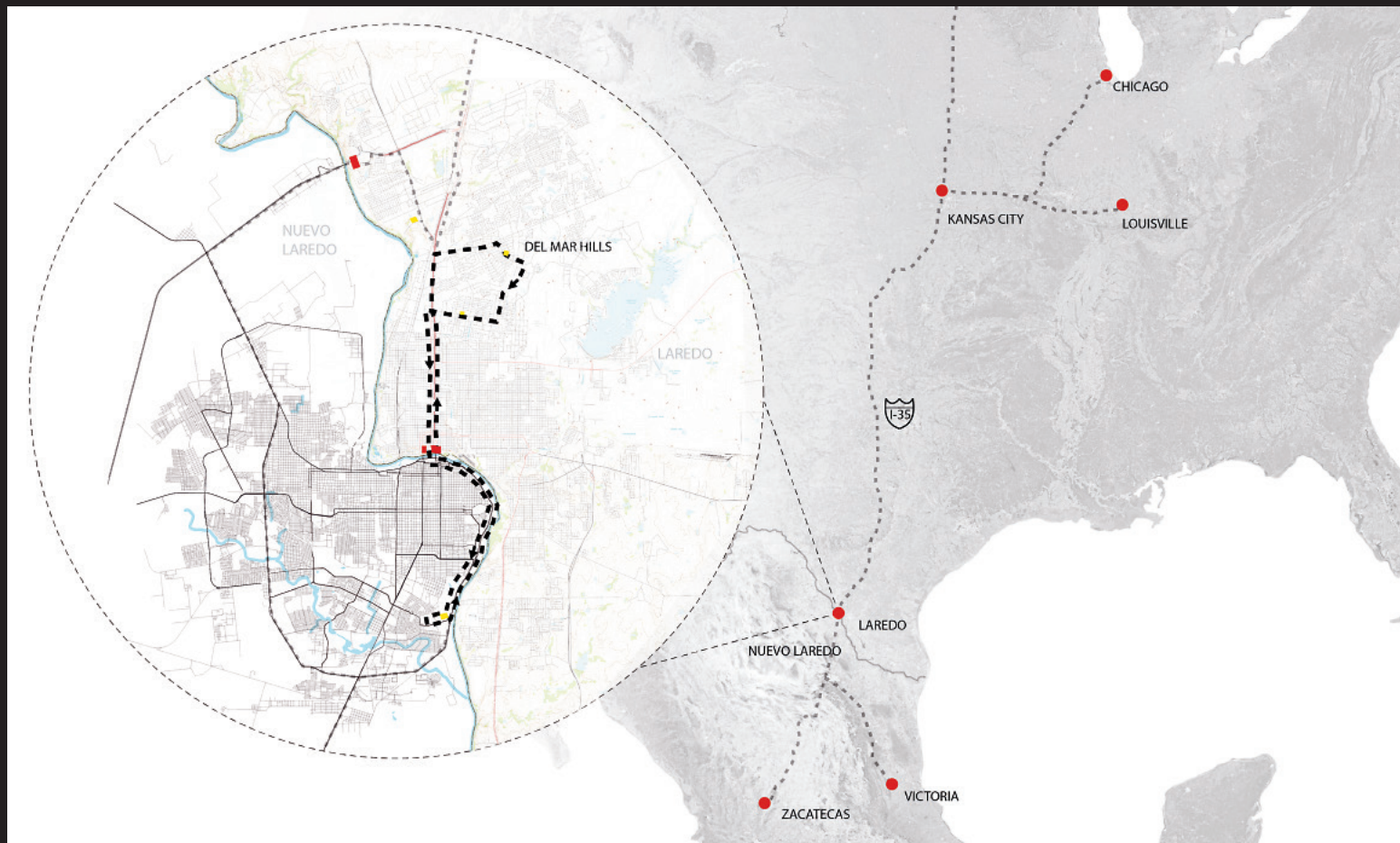


Wall near PDN Port of Entry



Border wall near Brownsville Matamoros Port of Entry/B&M International Bridge.





Jose Angel Garza

Founded in 1755, Laredo was named for a small Spanish town on the Bay of Biscay, just west of Bilbao. Here, the ocean views are substituted by a sparse “terrain covered with huisache, catclaw, mesquite, prickly pear, chaparral, and cactus,” according to *The Handbook of Texas*. Laredo was briefly the capital of an abortive attempt to establish a breakaway Republic of Northern Mexico in 1840. The provisional capitol, built in adobe, now houses the Republic of the Rio Grande Museum, located between Interstate 35 and the Juárez–Lincoln International Bridge, one of four international bridges spanning the river—five if counting the Texas Mexican Railway International Bridge.

Laredo is 200 miles upriver from the Gulf of Mexico and has a population of 255,205. Nuevo Laredo is nearly twice the size, with an estimated population of 453,366. Interstate 35 links Laredo’s border crossings to those in Duluth, Minnesota, which continue into Canada. Along its north–south route it connects San Antonio, Austin, Dallas–Ft. Worth, Oklahoma City, Kansas City, Des Moines, and Minneapolis.

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2019 nearly 30 percent of Laredo’s population lived in poverty, compared to 11 percent nationally. Nearly 30% of the population twenty-five and older doesn’t have a high school degree, compared to 10 percent nationally and 16 percent in Texas. Close to 20 percent of the Laredo population twenty-five and older has a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 42 percent nationally and 30 percent in Texas.

Laredo’s port of entry continues to rank among the nation’s leaders in trade value, even exceeding Los Angeles in 2019. Today the port ranks third in trade value behind Los Angeles and Chicago. In the last three years, export values in Laredo were above \$40 billion, with automotive parts being the port’s most important import/export product. Laredo’s port was close behind JFK International Airport in New York.⁶

Economists Thomas H. Klier and James Rubenstein attribute the US–Mexico “market integration” to the founding of the *maquiladoras*: manufacturing complexes that assemble imported parts into products that are exported back to the country of origin.⁷ They note that prior to the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, automobiles were both produced and consumed in Mexico, while today most vehicles manufactured in Mexico are exported and sold elsewhere. Despite the tremendous increase in production volume after NAFTA, most vehicles purchased in Mexico are imported from other countries. According to an Economic Information Bank in Mexico (BIE) study, Laredo has thirty-five maquiladoras that employed 29,878 workers in 2019.⁸ The study also showed the average wage for maquiladora workers in Mexico’s border cities was 176 pesos to 212 pesos a day (\$9.00–\$10.90 USD). Klier and Rubenstein maintain that by now it is commonly accepted the automotive industry exchange represents an open economy that is “well-integrated into the North American space.”⁹

The following interview is with Jose Angel Garza, an American resident from Monterey, Mexico, who lives in Laredo but commutes into Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, every day for work. A mechanical engineer, he has managed a maquiladora for Packard Electric since 1993. The Packard Electric Company was founded in Ohio in 1890. An offshoot became the Packard Motor Car Company, which was later moved to Detroit. After a century of operation, Packard Electric became Delphi Packard Electric Systems.¹⁰ Their products are now manufactured in Nuevo Laredo, where Garza oversees the assembly of electrical circuits.

CP Where are your parents from?

JAG Sabinas Hidalgo, Nuevo León, in northeastern Mexico. My wife’s family is from Laredo.

CP Where were you born?

JAG I was born in Monterrey, the industrial capital of Nuevo León. The city is located at the base of the Sierra Madre Orien-



View of the Juárez-Lincoln International Bridge (Bridge 2).

tal mountain range. When I was one, we moved to Detroit. I attended elementary school there. Although I was educated in English, we continued to speak Spanish at home. We moved back to Sabinas, Mexico, when I was twelve. My middle school education was in Sabinas. I returned to the US during my high school years.

CP Where did you go to college?

JAG I graduated from Texas A&M University. I majored in mechanical engineering. During college, I interned with Packard Electric. Upon graduation in 1993, I was offered a job to manage the engineering department in the company's maquiladora in Nuevo Laredo. I was hired in the US, and I am paid in US dollars.

CP Where do you live?

JAG I live in Laredo in an area named Del Mar Hills. My neighborhood is between the city's Bridge 1 and Bridge 2.

CP Can you describe your commute?

JAG I have a roughly thirty-minute commute each morning. I go to the gym every morning in Laredo. After my workout, I get dressed and take my kids to school. I use Interstate 35 to enter Mexico and cross on the Juárez-Lincoln International Bridge or Bridge 2. It's the most convenient route. It's not uncommon to wait several hours at the border crossing, especially during busy times of the year. I pay \$122.50 every five years to use a designated lane that provides commuters quick processing at US Customs and Border Protection (CBP).¹¹

CP Where do you work?

JAG I run the Engineering Department at Alambrados Automotrices. The assembly plant is in front of Parque Industrial Longoria (Longoria Industrial Park). The office is made up of about thirty people, including a team of engineers educated in Mexico. We also have an AutoCAD technician. We spend our mornings in meetings and eat lunch at the cafeteria provided on the assembly grounds.

CP What do you oversee?

JAG I manage the assembly and operation of automotive wiring harness production. We lay out the harness components that transmit the power and information to a vehicle's single system. The harness supplies power and information concerning a vehicle's sensor signals or mode of operation. It's also used to transmit sending and receiving signals. Our assembled electric circuits are used in vehicles made by General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. My job also entails traveling to the customer assembly plant events in Zacatecas, Victoria, and Monterrey.

CP Where are the parts delivered?

JAG Some parts are sent to another assembly plant in Zacatecas, and other parts are sent to the US. Most of the parts are sent in trucks to a logistics company. The warehouse is in Laredo. We import the raw material, but everything must return assembled to the logistics company.

CP What is a logistics company?

JAG A logistics company manages the transportation of goods. They're responsible for transporting the assembled product to the end user. It's more than just transporting goods. The logistics company also assists with procuring raw material, material management, shipping, and delivery from warehouse to wholesaler and finally to consumer. We also have customers who pick up the assembled parts directly.

CP Can you describe your other binational networks?

JAG I practice soccer in Nuevo Laredo on the weekends. We shop at H-E-B in Nuevo Laredo due to the discounted produce. Although we attend services in Spanish at the Divine Mercy Church in Laredo, we prefer the carne asada for lunch at restaurants in Nuevo Laredo after church. The biggest advantage is the money we save with health care, especially when the children are sick. Every other weekend we travel to see my parents in Sabinas.



Juan and Maria Cristina Enriquez

Eagle Pass is a border city 125 miles north of Laredo and fifty miles south of Del Rio. Originally referred to as the California Camp by adventurers heading west searching for gold during the California Gold Rush, the river post was used to prevent contraband exchanges during the Mexican-American War.

The garrison, later named Fort Duncan, was intended to protect the border from Indian raids. In *Great River*, Paul Horgan described the remoteness of the small number of garrisons patrolling a vast, “immense river empire”: “A flag by day, lamplight in a window by night signaled from these posts often hundreds of miles apart [...] to guard a fifteen-hundred-mile frontier containing fifty thousand Indians—of whom over twenty thousand were actively hostile.”¹² Seven of the fort’s buildings still survive, including a storehouse, magazine, officers’ quarters, and a stone hospital. In 1938, barracks were converted into a country club that was later used as an officers’ club during World War II. The country club burned in 1980; today its walls remain preserved as a “nonoperating” relic. The neglected stone hospital stands abandoned with its National Register of Historic Places plaque behind a mound of dirt.

Today, Fort Duncan Park, operated by the City of Eagle Pass, serves as a gateway for the Moncada Baseball Park and the Eagle Pass Golf Course. Between the two bridges to Mexico, the golf course is sparsely occupied, dotted by a few golf carts and high school students practicing with a view of the river. One of the city’s managers said the fort’s original magazine is used for storing Christmas decorations for downtown’s Main Street.

Sweltering is a word used to describe the summer months in Eagle Pass. In high school, the heat from the hot asphalt would penetrate my shoes, burning the soles of my feet if I stood idle for too long during athletics.

The US Census Bureau shows that 27 percent of Eagle Pass residents live in poverty. Nearly 20 percent of the population has diabetes, double the national average. According to *U.S. News & World Report*, Eagle Pass High School has a 99 percent minority student enrollment and 73 percent of these students are considered “economically disadvantaged.” Nearly 30 percent of the city’s population twenty-five

and older has less than a high school degree, compared to 10 percent nationally and 16 percent for Texas. 16 percent of the city’s population twenty-five and older have obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 45 percent nationally and 30 percent for Texas.

In the interview below, Juan, a mechanic, and Maria Cristina, a diabetic who suffers from severe asthma, describe their daily struggles with the insecurities of power, health care, and retirement.

CP When did you lose power during last year’s winter storm?

JE We didn’t lose power. We received power from my pickup truck using a 110-volt to 12-volt DC power supply converter charger.

CP How much power did that provide?

JE Two lights.

CP How did you keep warm?

JE We didn’t lose gas, so we turned on the stovetop and gathered in the kitchen until it was time to go to bed. We turned off the gas burner at night. We went four nights without electricity.

CP At what point did you realize that you were going to have to resort to extreme measures to supply power to your oxygen tank? Did you contact the local hospital about your condition?

MCE We never worried about it. We do this all the time! We lost electricity for five days about a year ago. We lose electricity often enough that it comes naturally to us to connect power this way, especially at night. We typically prepare to connect the converter charger during thunderstorms. Juan has supplied power from his car to his home in Allende, Mexico, since he was about thirteen or fourteen. Juan was raised with one light source in his home. They only turned it on at night.

We didn’t have much of a choice. Juan also uses a respirator to breathe at night. He suffers from sleep apnea. Our neighbors knocked on our door and asked us why we had electricity and they did not.

CP So you both need to sleep with portable oxygen tanks?

MCE Yes.

CP Do you have to leave the car running while it supplies the power?

JE No.



CP What sort of power did you supply to your home from the car?

JE We didn't use it for cooking. It only provided the power for the respirator and illuminating the home at night.

CP How did you learn how to do this at such a young age?

JE I had two uncles who were electrical mechanics. Diagnosing electrical issues in cars take some specialization. I was intrigued and began to watch them at an early age. It wasn't long before they allowed me to help work beside them. I learned my trade entirely through hands-on training. I never had any formal training.

MCE Juan is one of two mechanics in Eagle Pass who can diagnose and fix auto electric issues.

CP Do you still enjoy working and investigating electrical problems in cars?

JE I do. I love my job, but my health is rapidly declining. Not too long ago, I had eye surgery in Mexico for a condition in one eye that makes it turn outward. Coming out of the surgery, the eye looked normal, but about a month later the eye began to turn away from the nose again. The doctors in Eagle Pass refused to help me, stating that the surgery was too risky.

CP Are you considering other options? There are other doctors that could possibly help in larger cities.

JE I am no longer interested in trying to resolve my issues with another surgery. I am sixty years old. I am ready to retire. I need two healthy eyes to do this type of work.

CP Sixty years old is still young.

JE *No ya no.* I am not interested in undergoing more surgeries.

CP What do the town's officials say about the power loss?

JE No one says anything. There is not a real explanation. They blamed the people who overextended the powerlines.

CP Were people upset about the power loss?

JE Yes of course, but what can you do?

CP Do you know anyone who died due to the extreme temperature?

MCE Yes, but there weren't very many in Eagle Pass. There were more reported deaths in Piedras Negras. People were not prepared and did not have equipment or access to blankets and food. We were fortunate—our power returned after four days. The neighborhood I

used to live in near here lost electricity for fifteen days.

I think the elderly suffer the most here. They primarily worked temporary jobs or jobs that paid cash. They didn't report any income throughout their lives, so they are not receiving Social Security benefits. The seniors in Eagle Pass live off \$200 per month for food.

CP How did people survive without power for fifteen days?

MCE My niece cooked all her meals outside on the outdoor grill. Whatever was left from lunch they would eat cold at dinner.

CP How do you explain the town's survival instincts?

JE *Necesidad.* Necessity. You must find a way to keep going. You can't give up.

CP Did you continue to work during the freeze?

JE Yes. There was only one day that was impossible to work. It was too cold. I stayed inside, but on the other days I managed to make several house calls. My business did well during the freeze.

CP How did you arrive to the US?

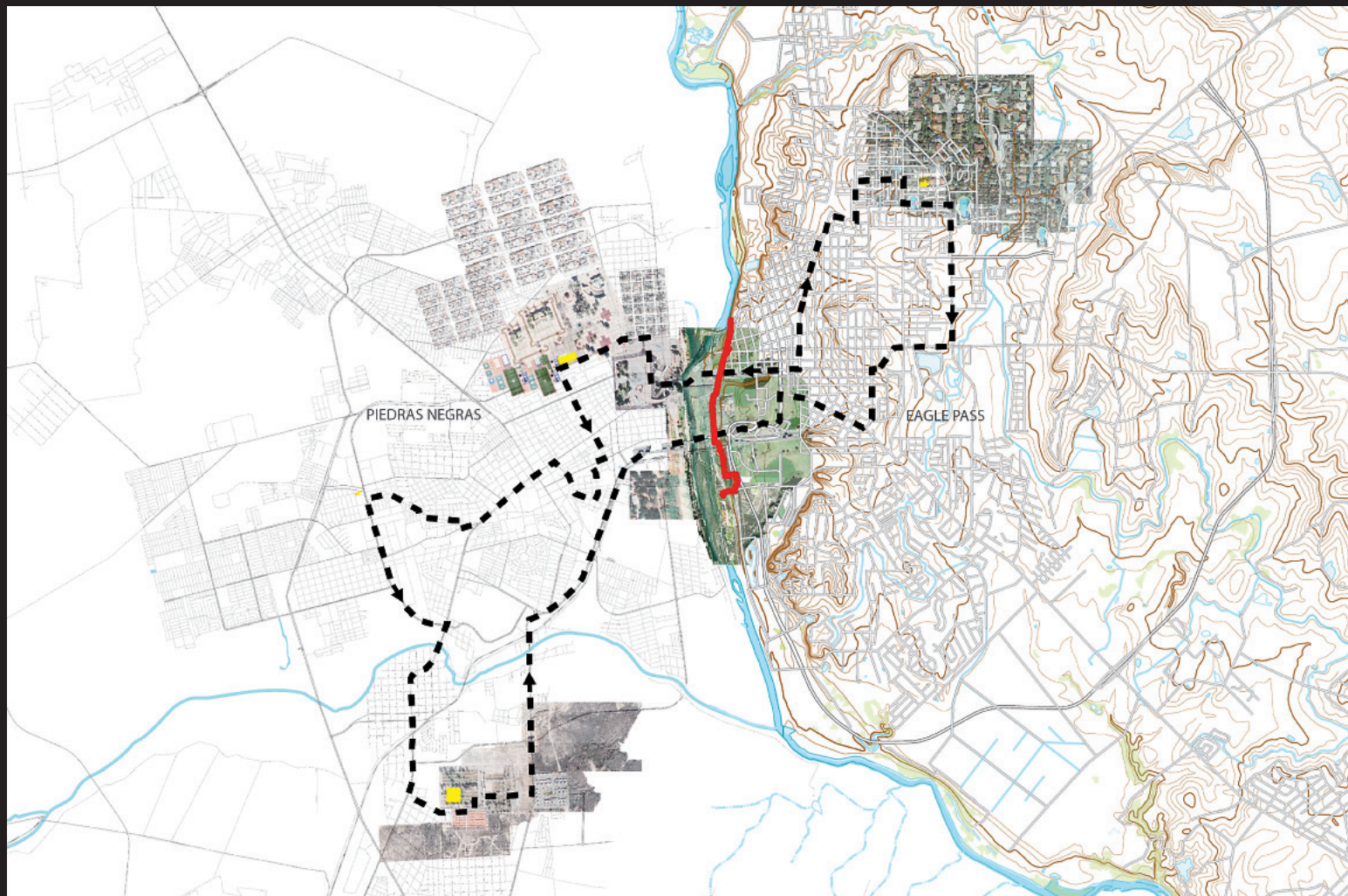
JE I arrived illegally for the first time in 1983. I swam across the river. Six months later, I saved money and swam back across the river and returned home. I managed to save enough money to return legally with my working permit.

CP Were you afraid?

JE No, I was familiar with the river's currents and the areas to avoid. I spent many years fishing on the Rio Grande as a kid.

CP Did any of your health care providers contact you after the storm?

MCE No. I have diabetes and asthma, but I can manage my health care. I inject my insulin shots every day. I feel fortunate to be able to afford my medications. I think one of the reasons many living on the border suffer from diabetes is a lack of money and education. I know many families experience symptoms of high glucose levels, but they go untreated due to the cost of health care. Their diets are filled with processed foods and carbs. There are many forms of injustices in our town. We feel very far away sometimes. We feel forgotten.



Oralia Parra

After the Mexican–American War, the forts along the Rio Grande were established “to protect the peaceable inhabitants,” and “preserve our own neutrality in all revolutionary movements in Mexico for years to come.”¹³ Indian raids were frequent and rampant. Travelling as far as three miles away from Fort Bliss in El Paso was considered unsafe. Comanche attacks along the road to El Paso from San Antonio were regularly reported.¹⁴ Relief from the “garrison life” was sought on the other side of the Rio Grande. Soldiers relied on their Mexican “counterpart” forts for refuge and entertainment. The dangers surrounding the forts were temporarily lifted while the Mexican band entertained the ladies with “such expression” that “all sentiments they indicated were aroused.”¹⁵ Horgan described the exchange in Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras:

Courtesies and entertainments were exchanged by officers and their families. At Piedras Negras, opposite Eagle Pass, American officers and ladies went to eat Mexican food, and see bullfights and hear the music of the Mexican Army band “—so sweet and thrilling—”, and watch the “superb drilling of Mexican soldiers, who marched and countermarched for at least an hour without a single order being spoken, they responded merely to a tap of the drum as each new movement was initiated.”¹⁶

This exchange provides a familiar backdrop showcasing the ongoing “relief” families make use of while living on the border today.

A century and half later my family, along with other border residents, sought financial relief by utilizing more affordable resources and entertainment in Piedras Negras. Growing up in Eagle Pass, my family relied on both sides of the border to afford health care, dental care, childcare, food, and entertainment.

In the following interview, Oralia Trevino Parra describes how her family carefully orchestrates their daily schedule around the most advantageous choices. These choices collectively make up a series of binational selections. The daily, weekly, and monthly crossings illustrate a sophisticated network used to stitch the binational exchange of the Parra family into a single fabric.

CP Can you describe the steps that led to your job in the US?

OP The first step in fully transitioning into living in the US involved the many trips to San Antonio while I was pregnant with triplets. Due to the complications associated with the pregnancy, I was sent to a specialist in San Antonio. My children are US citizens. I wanted them to have an American education. It was my primary concern when determining where I wanted to work and live. After working in Mexico for twenty-four years, I was offered an opportunity to work in the US. I accepted a job as an accountant at Ruiz & Associates P.C. in Eagle Pass so that my children can have an American education.



Oralia Parra in front of Ruiz & Associates, P.C, in Eagle Pass.

CP Where do you live?

OP I live on the US side with my children. My husband resides and works on the Mexican side during the week and returns to the US on the weekends. My husband picks me up after work on Friday. We return to Mexico and have dinner at our favorite restaurants and participate in *lugares atractivos* (entertainment) at more affordable prices. We return to the US after dinner to sleep.

CP Do you spend most of the weekend in Mexico?

OP Yes, we typically return to Piedras Negras on Saturday mornings for attractions such as festivals, sporting events, and traditional holiday celebrations. We also stop to visit my father's grave on Saturday afternoons. We attend church and my mother's weekly family reunions on Sunday after church. My husband stays in Mexico and the children and I return to the US on Sunday night.

CP How often do you cross the border during the week?

OP I shop at the Soriana in Mexico on Tuesdays and Thursdays because the produce is delivered and discounted at the supermarket. On Wednesdays, I attend a Bible study in Mexico. I shop for discounts at H-E-Bs on both sides of the border. I also return monthly for family doctor appointments, dentist appointments, haircuts, and optometrist visits. Most medical specialists are located near the bridge. Their offices primarily serve patients like me who cross the border often for affordable health care and prescription medicine.



Keith Bowden

Langtry, Texas, population twelve, is situated below the Southern Pacific Railroad and US Highway 90, which run east–west parallel to the border. The town is sixty-five miles northwest from Del Rio and overlooks Mexico to the south. Justice of the Peace Judge Roy Bean placed Langtry on the map in the late 1800s when, after the completion of the railroad by Chinese immigrants fleeing poverty and overpopulation in China's Canton Province, he built a saloon. The town was named for George Langtry, the engineer who led the railroad grading camp. The population began to decline during the early 1900s when the highway was relocated, thus bypassing the town. Today the saloon is now the Judge Roy Bean Visitor Center and hosts a trickle of visitors.

Keith Bowden, a retired English professor from Laredo, resides in Langtry just west of Eagle Nest Canyon, also known as Mile Canyon. A short walk from his front door leads you to a view of the canyon's dry rock shelters, burned rock middens, and prehistoric caves. The Rio Grande laps at the foot of the canyon walls. The well-preserved pictograms, fossils, and other artifacts in the rock shelters have made the lower limestone canyonlands into an archaeological site.

Near Langtry, a narrow box canyon marks the site of the earliest depiction of a bison jump in North America, dating to about 9,700 BC. Archaic hunters would hunt bison by chasing them off the cliff. Their carcasses, left to decay, combusted from the heat and gases. Here, archaeologists found dart points and stone tools buried within the thick sediment of ashes left behind by the bison hunters.

Langtry also marks the end of the Rio Grande's big bend or "lost world," as described in General Robert Hill's account of his 1899 voyage of the uncharted stretch between Presidio and the Pecos River. Horgan wrote that after rowing ten hours a day for over a month, Hill's crew was greeted by Judge Roy Bean. They had mapped 350 miles of a remote portion of the river and returned to a "modern world of technology in power and communication" after "weeks in a lost world of incalculable time."¹⁷

Langtry is vulnerable to the environmental impact of droughts and rising temperatures. Bowden is trying to slow the process through his plantings. In this conversation he describes his excursions to collect plants from both sides of the river.

CP Is there an intention of keeping certain memories alive while you consider the location of the transplanted gardens that you make?

KB The meaning of the project starts from a very practical sense. If I didn't do it, there's a major fire risk. Recently there was a midsize fire, and the current population isn't conscientious of fire safety. Many lots are abandoned, and on top of that there's no fire station. The land was covered by highly flammable non-native grasses, so I try to replant with native plants. Buying them isn't an option. The replanted native plants require little maintenance, and they don't need to be watered. I can't think of a better use of my time than to help the whole town look better. A sustainable landscape that is less prone to fires is a great way to transform Langtry through plants.

Although there is no sister town to Langtry, my plant collections are made up of plants from both sides of the river. It's unfortunate that no one is really paying attention to the sister communities. There is a lot to be learned from what the border is showing us every day. It shows us what a shrinking world looks like: English and Spanish, first and third world, and binational networks and trades.

CP What are a few examples of invasive flammable plants in the region?

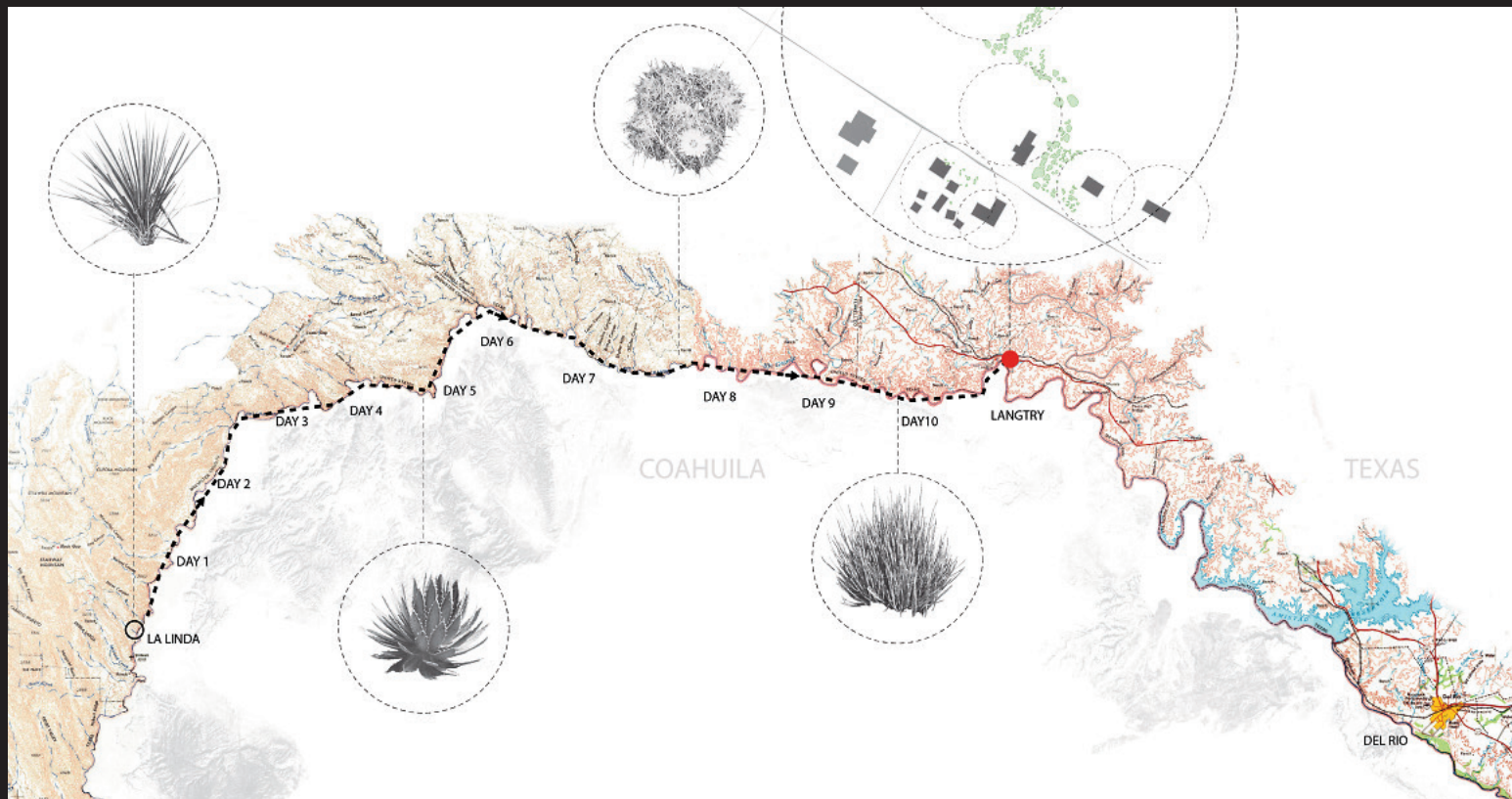
KB Buffelgrass growth is thick and overwhelms native plants. It's highly flammable. One of the disadvantages of burning it is that it's easily reseeded in disturbed soil. Yuccas can survive dry climates because of their ability to store water in their absorbent roots, preventing any neighboring plant from surviving. I transplant dozens of yuccas and agaves each year.

CP Where are most of these plants retrieved?

KB I drive out to my friend's ranch in La Linda. Then I row 137 miles down the river until I reach Langtry.¹⁸ During the first two-thirds of the trip I rarely collect plants, because of Big Bend National Park; park rangers patrol the area. However, during the final third I begin filling the boat. Waiting to fill my boat until the end of the trip also helps maintain the plants' resiliency—it's easier to keep them alive for a couple days rather than for close to two weeks.

CP How do you decide what plants to use?

KB Ideally, I prefer to use candlelilla. It's native and drought



resistant. I also like to collect dahlia. It spreads easily as ground cover, and it keeps buffelgrass from seeding. Unfortunately, Winter Storm Uri damaged or killed the majority of my many candelilla plants. Agave and yucca don't need a boat trip, as they grow in abundance around Langtry. Around La Linda there are fewer agave and yucca, and there are fewer candelilla around Langtry due to overgrazing, so they get exchanged. I try to be careful since tons of people sell wild plants. I try to keep a balance by only using the periphery of the candelilla. This way I don't impact the original plant. They grow so slowly that if you take out the original plant, it could be many years before another one is reseeded in its place. I want the transplanting to be a balancing of sorts.

Candelilla likes northern and western slopes. On the Mexico side, I collect from Soldado Canyon, ten miles upriver. I also collect near the Agua Verde's abandoned settlement fifty-four miles upriver from Langtry. Ranchers upriver sometimes allow me to remove candelilla from their land by truck.

There are significant imprints from human activity. There's scarring on the landscape from livestock overgrazing. Langtry is basically a huge trash dump. I can go up the most obscure little canyon and find hundreds of rusted tin cans that lead to some cave with an old bed and tools. Whatever folks brought is still there. Trash is what gets left behind.

CP What does that mean for Langtry? What's going to happen?

KB I make gardens around the trash, I have nowhere to take it. In a sense, my gardens are monuments to trash. They encircle decades of human detritus.

CP Has this project highlighted your sensitivity to climate change, pollution, and the need for sustainability?

KB Definitely. Everything we do has environmental repercussions. It doesn't make sense to focus on one thing; it's the whole system that's unsustainable. Langtry is a living museum of what a small population does to land over 140 years.

CP How do you decide what/where to clear? What is your design approach?

KB I don't have a preconceived notion regarding design intent. Instead, I clear out the lots that pose the biggest fire hazards. After the clearing is complete, I create a network of stone trails

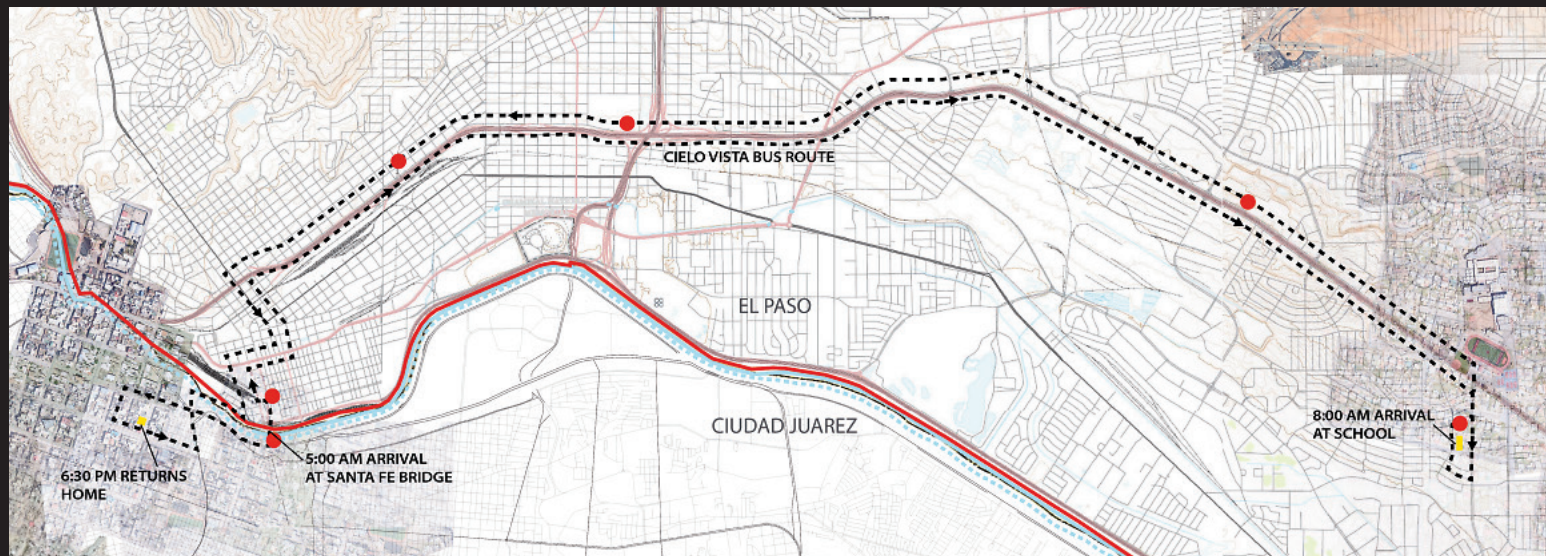
around the trash piles outside of town, in town, and around the houses. All the rock is local, collected in buckets, so it's a slow process. I use cardboard or old clothes or newspaper as a weed barrier then lay the stone. With a crew it would have been done years ago. Only one section is left now. My neighbor still throws cans into the planted areas, but I'm not going to try to stop the dumping. Instead, I try to beautify the areas to coexist with the trash. We have more than a century's worth of trash lying here, much of it covered in buffelgrass or obscured by enormous prickly pear cactus. My second job after the buffelgrass was to remove all the prickly pear. Or much of it, anyway.

CP Do you prefer to plant in patterns or clusters?

KB I study the area before planting. I remember some things from my time as a landscaper. People typically plant based on what the resident sees from a window or street. I prefer to do a circular thing, with access from all angles. I don't base it on what it looks like now, but instead what it will look like thirty years from now. People want height and color, but those types of plants need water. What looks barren now may be overcrowded in twenty years. Some of the plants don't reseed on flat soil, as they need an incline. Others are susceptible to termite ants or dodder. Some are sensitive to cold. Numerous factors come into play, not just how gardens will look.

CP There is a real poetic nature to your approach and the way you establish a plant exchange. Do you see it that way too?

KB The process is slow. It's for the future, but I'll be dead. The locals think it's a waste of my time. I like to think I am transforming Langtry through plants. It's my place. Some people have private places. Mine happens to be public.



Diego Iniguez

At the end of the 19th century, Mexican President Porfirio Díaz attempted to modernize the country. At the time, a small ruling class determined the fate of Mexico's resources, which resulted in significant disparities between the wealthy ruling class and Mexico's agrarian citizens. While the country suffered through ten years of regional conflicts and violence during the Mexican Revolutionary War, the "Anglo-American technological" culture, as Horgan wrote, "came to power over the old combination of Indian and Latin way of life, and rapidly made a subject class of wage labor out of a population that for centuries had owned both sides of the river."¹⁹ Horgan predicted that racial inequalities existed based on the skin color of the borderland's citizens would remain in place long after the Industrial Revolution.

Today, Chamizal Park is adjacent to the Bridge of the Americas. Its name comes from *chamiso*, a saltbush plant that covered the land near the park known as El Chamizal. The park honors the Chamizal Convention of 1963, which resolved a 100-year dispute about the ownership of approximately 600 acres of land between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez.

With a population of 963,000, El Paso is the largest city on the border. According to the US Census Bureau, 21.5 percent of El Paso's population ages twenty-five and older do not have a high school degree, compared to 10 percent for the national average and 16 percent for Texas. 23.3 percent of El Paso's adults twenty-five or older has a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 42 percent nationally and 30 percent in Texas. Many sources suggest that the real number of American students who reside in Mexico while attending school in the US is unknown. Many transborder students use the address of a family member or friend to qualify as a resident or for resident tuition. In a study conducted by SDSU/CGU joint PhD student Vannessa Falcón, approximately 80 percent of 869 transborder students recently surveyed crossing the border in San Ysidro and El Paso are US citizens.

Diego Iniguez is a US citizen who lived in Ciudad Juárez and attended school in the US. For six years, he traversed both the Paso del Norte International Bridge (the Santa Fe Bridge) and the Bridge of the Americas, colloquially known as the Chamizal Bridge or *Puente Libre* (free bridge) due to the toll-free passage it provides.

Iniguez crossed every weekday at 5 a.m. to a border that is vulnerable to delays and closures, in addition to the anxieties of encountering anti-immigrant discrimination. He was one of many students who made this journey each day.

CP Are you from Ciudad Juárez?

DI No, I was born in El Paso. When I was in 7th grade, we moved back to Juárez.

CP Why did your parents move back to Ciudad Juárez?

DI My father's visa expired. My father travelled to Juárez to care for my sick great-grandmother and apply for his visa renewal, but the renewal was denied. He reapplied the following year and was denied again. At that point my parents decided to stay in Juárez instead of continuing to live apart. It made the most sense economically to maintain one household instead of two, but they wanted my sister and me to continue our education in the US.

CP How did you continue your education in the US while living in Mexico?

DI My aunt lived in El Paso. When I registered for school, I used my aunt's address. The idea was that I lived in El Paso, but I didn't.

CP As a US citizen do you have other options to attend school in the US?

DI The other option was to register as a homeless student.

CP How old were you when you left El Paso?

DI Fourteen. When I turned twelve, my parents lived apart. For two years we would go back and forth on the weekends to visit my dad. The schedules and financial burden put too much of a strain on my parents, so we moved to Juárez. When I turned fourteen, I began to cross the bridge on my own every morning to attend 7th grade in El Paso.

CP Can you describe your route to school?

DI My mother would drop me off at the Santa Fe bridge every morning at 5 a.m., and I would walk across the bridge. I would walk through downtown El Paso to catch a bus that would take me to the other side of town. My school was in an area called the Lower Valley. I would take two buses to get there. The first bus dropped me off at Sun Metro Bus Station on the East Side in the Cielo Vista neighborhood around 6:10 a.m. I waited another hour for the second bus. The second bus picked me up around 7:20 a.m. and dropped me off near my school around 8:00 a.m. School started at 8:30 a.m. My mother would pack me breakfast, and I would sit and eat it while I waited for school to start.

CP The winters are cold in El Paso. How did you handle the extreme temperatures? Were there days that you felt you could not walk to school?

DI I tried not to miss school. There were a few days when it rained on a cold morning and a car would pass me on the sidewalk and I would end up at school completely wet.

CP Was this your schedule all throughout high school?

DI During my junior and senior year in high school, I attended a vocational program for architecture which required me to



Photos by Diego Iniguez.

attend another school and take another bus from the Chamizal Bridge to the Riverside neighborhood in the morning. Although the program was titled with the word *architecture*, the program exposed us to much more. The instructor introduced us to mechanical and civil engineering and land surveying. He also took us on walking tours of downtown. He devoted a large section of the program to the architect Henry Trost. Trost was the architect of many important buildings in El Paso. On one of our walking tours, the instructor pointed out Trost's face decorating the lintel on the Bassett Tower. In the afternoons, the program would bus me back to my high school to attend my regularly scheduled afternoon classes. During my sophomore year I was on the soccer team, so I had to be at the bridge by 4 a.m. to make it to practice on time.

CP Did you ever feel unsafe when you were commuting so early on your own?

DI Yes. There were a few incidents where I felt uncomfortable at the Cielo Vista bus station. I just did my best to trust my instincts and avoid uncomfortable situations. My sister was harassed on the bus.

CP What time did you get home?

DI I would leave around 4 p.m. to be home by 6 p.m. There were days I would stay later to go to a movie or a football game. On those days I was home around midnight.

CP Why do you want to be an architect?

DI My cousin was remodeling his house, and he asked if I wanted to help. I loved the feeling of helping my cousin through building or remodeling. I was maybe nine or ten and realized how important that specific moment felt. I somehow knew I was meant for this. I was meant to use building to help people.

CP Did your cousin have a special trade?

DI No. He was self-taught.

CP Are you parents still in Ciudad Juárez?

DI Yes, but my mother is in the process of applying for a green card. COVID-19 restrictions made things a bit complicated. Until recently, people needed to apply for permission to cross the border.

CP What was your senior year of high school like during the pandemic?

DI In spring 2020, the second semester of my senior year, I received a call from my guidance counselor. She knew my story. She knew I crossed the border every day. She said, "The superintendent notified us that they will likely close the border soon." She asked, "What are you going to do?" It was a difficult conversation because I did not know what to do. Fortunately for me the school decided to go online.

CP Do you think COVID-19 wedged a greater social gap between those who cross the bridge daily into the US and the US perception or fear of those who cross?

DI Prior to 2018, you would occasionally encounter a long wait at the pedestrian bridge crossing. The wait time increased during 2018–19 after thousands of Central American immigrants sought asylum in El Paso. It was heartbreaking to see them living and sleeping on the bridge; it was scary when they would all try to cross over. There were times when I was late for school due to waiting in line. I also missed class on the days Customs and Border Protection officers would temporarily shut down the border due to asylum seekers trying to enter. I think this contributes to the most common perception: fear. The typical perception is that immigrants will arrive and become either dependent on the government or steal peoples' jobs. However, the humanitarian crisis is not addressed. After being denied entrance to the US, some of the Central Americans decided to live their "American Dream" from Juárez instead.

CP What sort of border restrictions were put in place during the first few months of the pandemic?

DI The border closed even for those who had visas during COVID-19. US citizens were allowed to cross the border, but I rarely crossed during quarantine. I confronted a very different experience the few times I crossed the US border during the first few months of the pandemic. The crossing was made up of officials wearing white disposable coveralls. We were required to stand six feet apart. Lines were painted inside the CBP building. When we returned to Juárez, our temperatures were taken and we were required to walk through a disinfectant spray tunnel.²⁰ We were required to sanitize our bodies prior to reentering Mexico from the US.

CP How did you end up in Houston for college?

DI I wanted to major in architecture. I also wanted to be in a big city. In my mind, I had two options: Austin and Houston. I was drawn to Houston after meeting with the college representative from the University of Houston during a college career day.

CP Did you come to Houston before starting school?

DI No. Technically I am a sophomore but this is my first year in the architecture school. I spent my freshman year attending classes online from Ciudad Juárez.

CP What is it from your high school experience that impacts how you approach your academics today?

DI I have high expectations. It is my responsibility to do something with my life.



Storefront near Brownsville Matamoros Port of Entry or the "B&M" Port of Entry.

Research Assistants: Raghad Al Gaoood, Jon Henning, Sharon Lott, Asmaa Olwi

Special thanks to Keith Bowden and Drexel Turner for their mentorship and support.

Notes

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- 11 Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI) is available at dedicated crossings along the border. After an "extensive" background check and in-person interview, the approved "low-risk" status is valid for five years. The applicant's approval also includes a Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) card. The card uses electromagnetic fields to identify the commuter's status at the port of entry and expedite the US CBP processing.
- 12 Paul Horgan, *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954), 806.
- 13 Horgan, 807.
- 14 Horgan, 813.
- 15 Horgan, 817.
- 16 Horgan, 817.
- 17 Horgan, 904.
- 18 La Linda is a town on the US–Mexico border near Big Bend. The town's international bridge, originally built by Dow Chemical in 1964 to transfer fluorspar from mines in Múzquiz, Coahuila, into the US, was closed in 1997 due to suspected smuggling. The closing creates a 400-mile stretch along the border without a legal border crossing. Fluorspar is a rare mineral utilized for products such as refrigerants, blowing agents, and solvents.
- 19 Horgan, 907.
- 20 According to reporting by NPR, inflatable sanitation tunnels were equipped to spray a disinfectant like the chemicals found in sprays used to clean food preparation surfaces. See Kendal Blust, "Cities In Mexico Use 'Sanitation Tunnels' Despite Warnings From Health Professionals," *All Things Considered*, NPR, May 21, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/21/860475339/cities-in-mexico-use-sanitation-tunnels-despite-warnings-from-health-professionals>.