

The U.S.-Mexico Border and Children's Social Imaginary: An Analysis of *Wacha el Border* and *Beyond the Border*

by Norma Iglesias-Prieto

Norma Iglesias-Prieto's article is based on the films *Wacha el border*, created by twelve children from Tijuana, and *Beyond the Border*, created by ten children from San Diego. It aims at understanding the extent to which the U.S.-Mexico border is significant in children's social representations of themselves and others. Focusing on the Tijuana/San Diego transboundary urbanized region, Iglesias-Prieto questions traditional representations and perceptions of the border.

As W. I. and D. S. Thomas once suggested, "if [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (571–72). This proposition is supported by the notion that the interpretation of a situation may result in an act or an action, affected by subjective perceptions of situations and spaces. That is, perception, representations, and the social imaginary of a particular space impact it, as do political and ideological implications for that space (Lefebvre; Ospina; Soja; Taylor; Wallerstein). This is even more so for places that have been over-represented or stereotyped such as the U.S.-Mexico border.

The United States-Mexico border has always featured in the cinematographic imaginary of Mexican and North American film. Motion pictures from *The Pony Express* (1907) through *Touch of Evil* (1958), to *Traffic* (2000) have forged an image of the border as a savage but appealing place, with few rules and much disorder; a generic place for outlaw narratives. Border towns and cities became spaces *par excellence* where one would flee justice. [...] [In Mexican and U.S.-American] films the border was represented as a free, lawless place, open to all. Border cinema has played a significant role in creating and reinforcing such border stereotypes. (Iglesias-Prieto, "Border Representations" 186–87)

In a space like this, perceptions and social representations of the "other side" get complicated depending on which side of the border the viewer resides in and what has been the experience and condition of border people. We know that social representations are interpretations of reality, ways of viewing the world, which function as symbolic structures that help to give meaning to social reality. Because social representations function as powerful interpretations of reality and guide actions (Berger and Luckmann; Ibañez; Moscovici), it is important to understand the extent to which the U.S.-Mexico border is significant in children's social representations of themselves and others. This is especially the case given the diversity of lived experiences and spaces of the Tijuana-San Diego *transboundary* urbanized region (Aitken et al.).

Well known among the world's borders, the boundary between the U.S. and Mexico, particularly the area separating Tijuana from San Diego, is one of great disparity, but also one of considerable interaction, integration, and economic interdependence. This interaction is expressed in the many exchanges and flows between the two cities. Unfortunately, the high level of exchange and economic interdependence does not necessarily translate into greater awareness, understanding, acceptance, and social investment towards the neighboring city and its inhabitants, nor in a more complex representation of that space (Iglesias-Prieto, *Emergencias*). In this border zone, I would suggest, levels of interaction are determined by what I refer to as degrees of *transborderism*. This refers to the frequency, intensity, directionality, scale of crossing, type of material and symbolic exchange, and the social and cultural meanings attached to such transactions (Iglesias-Prieto, *Emergencias*). A higher level of *transborderism* would be associated with greater cultural capacity and richness, complexity in the ways people perceive and represent the border, and richer concepts of self-identity. With this in mind and in attempting to better understand the relation between *transborderism* and the complexity of social representation utilized by children of the Tijuana-San Diego border region, Yvon Guillon, from the University of Rennes 2, France, and I developed in 2008 the project *The Other Side of the Line: Tijuana-San Diego Crossed Gazes*. The project consisted of four phases: the first included the production of two short animated films by children from Tijuana and San Diego based on the theme "the other side of the line." The second phase comprises of a training workshop for young

visual artists as well as graduate and undergraduate students from San Diego and Tijuana on model animation and the pedagogy of teaching these techniques to children. The third phase encompassed the production of two documentary films about the project and border life (Beyer; Da Silva); and the fourth a research project addressing notions of “otherness” through children’s respective imagery of their “other side” of the Tijuana-San Diego border.

In this essay I will discuss how twenty-two children (ages eleven to thirteen) from Tijuana and San Diego, with different life experiences and levels of transborderism, represent “the other side.” The analysis is based on the films *Wacha el border* (2008), created by twelve children from Tijuana, and *Beyond the Border* (2008), created by ten children from San Diego. These two animation films were produced in two of the project’s workshops offered by the French animation film experts Sébastien Water and Gilles Coirier from the independent film company L’Espace du Mouton à Plumes, Rennes, with the support of Roland Michon (University of Rennes 2), Zoe Randall (High Tech Middle Media Arts, San Diego), and Adriana Trujillo (YonkeArt, Tijuana). During the workshops the children discussed what they thought about the other side and their portrayal of it. Subsequently, the children came to a consensus regarding the story, characters, situation, context, sets, etc. They also wrote the script, built the sets, and crafted the animated characters out of paper and fabric, shot the entire sequence of scenes, recorded the soundtrack, and edited their respective film productions. The twenty-two children who participated in the project were both male and female and possessed a variety of experiences of “the other side.” These experiences ranged from those who had never crossed the border (usually because their parents had never wanted to, in the case of San Diegans or because they lacked a United States visa, in the case of *Tijuanenses*); those who crossed regularly for reasons of family or school; and those who once had lived on the other side/*el otro lado*.¹

Wacha el border (2008)

Wacha el border, the animation created by Tijuana’s children, is the story of Cynthia, a Tijuana girl, who crosses the border with her mother to go to the San Diego Zoo. Her cat, Chester, also crosses the border but does so “illegally” by crossing the fence on the hill. Once at the zoo, Cynthia meets Max, and both notice that Chester is trying to rescue the unhappy, caged panther, Paulina. Max and Cynthia help Chester free Paulina and are consequently pursued by the police throughout San Diego. They decide to run away to Tijuana using an immense bubble to transport them across the border fence. The children also discover that they are siblings. In the end, Cynthia and Max are seated at Friendship Park recalling their adventures in front of a border monument indicating there once was a wall that separated Tijuana and San Diego and that it was taken down in the year 2019.

Beyond the Border (2008)

Beyond the Border, the animation created by San Diego’s children, is the story of a young U.S.-American woman reporter who travels to Tijuana and—assisted by a Mexican mosquito—discovers the illegal activities of a U.S. businessman who is making money by disposing industrial and urban waste on the Mexican side of the border. Thanks to her reportage, the cities of San Diego and Tijuana decide to work together and to keep the region clean.

Both films are very different and clearly contrast the children’s experiences and representation of the U.S.-Mexico border. For example, the plot of *Wacha el border* involves ordinary daily activities such as preparing to cross the border, looking for passports, leaving on time, waiting in the long lines of the chaotic international border while interacting with street vendors and curt immigration officers, driving around on the busy freeways, etc. It also incorporates unusual events such as the rescue of a panther at the San Diego Zoo, flying over the border in a bubble, and the destruction of the U.S.-Mexico border fence. The incorporation of ordinary activities in the plot allows the viewer to see that the children in Tijuana have practical knowledge of the border-crossing experience and of border life in general. The explicit reference to common events and situations involved in the border-crossing and transborder life demonstrates that from a Tijuana point of view the construction of daily life and notions of local space tend to incorporate and reference the presence of San Diego. In other words, the local dimension of Tijuana includes a transborder contextualization of daily life that generally is absent in the San Diego perspective. San Diegans tend to think that the border is only the Mexican side and Tijuana is not perceived as

part of local San Diego. Also, the plot of *Wacha el border* shows some of the aspirations and desires of the children, such as the will to bring down the wall and policies that separate families and friends, something that directly or indirectly affects the life of Mexican border residents, including, of course, the children of this workshop.

Beyond the Border refers to criminal activities that depict cross-border conflicts instead of transborder positive opportunities. The young U.S.-American reporter crosses the border looking for a dramatic story for her newspaper as a mechanism to keep her job; it is neither a pleasant activity nor something she decided to do for her own enjoyment. The act of crossing the border and its relation to “the other side” is not framed as an ordinary activity but as an extraordinary one. In other words, the protagonist does not cross the border frequently as a transborder reporter that covers both sides of the line, but instead does so forced by the need to find an “exciting story.” The reporter’s reason for crossing the border is different from that of Cynthia and her mother, who cross it to have fun (go to the zoo). When the reporter enters Tijuana she becomes an eyewitness to a crime, is kidnapped and almost killed. This may suggest that kids in San Diego perceive Tijuana as a dangerous and scary place. In the animation of the San Diego children, the themes of garbage and violence (including crime, abduction, and robbery) are discussed. Allusion is made to corruption, to complicity along the border, and to the underworld of organized crime, which is associated with *cholo* graffiti and slang.² *Beyond the Border* also touches on the difficulties of finding work and on powerful figures such as the boss who threatens to fire the protagonist. The film makes a concession by identifying the “kidnappers” and their boss as U.S.-Americans, thus conceding that “we are part of the problem” and avoiding the perception that borderland difficulties are attributable solely to Mexico. The San Diego children make no reference to everyday life or to common relationships between equal human beings on “the other side,” although the film ends by suggesting that the two cities should cooperate. The crime story appears on television (the great generator of reality for the children), but only on the U.S. channel, not the Mexican one.

Wacha el border shows some border tension, too, first in a more mundane way when Cynthia and her mother have to prove their identity and show their documents to the immigration officer, and later with the police after liberating the panther. In San Diego, the protagonists frequently experience or witness harassment: first, the panther is mistreated by some children at the zoo; later all are pursued by law enforcement officers, a link with the children’s perception of social oppression in the United States. Police are framed as scary people who chase children, reflecting the perception of Tijuana children as innocent people that are criminalized in the U.S. when they break rules in pursuit of a better life. This perception is linked to the experience and popular narratives related to undocumented immigration (Herrera-Sobek and Maciel; Iglesias-Prieto, *Entre yerba, polvo y plomo*; Valenzuela).

Something similar occurs when the characters of the two films are analyzed. Both dramatic films focused on the development of border life but pay different attention to characters that ultimately constitute the border experience. In *Wacha el border* the characters are children. This is likely a result of the children in Tijuana attempting to highlight their perception of the other side as their own—seen through their own eyes. In *Beyond the Border*, the characters are adults, which is likely due to San Diego’s children understanding Tijuana from what is told to them by media, school, family, and friends, rather than from having an opinion based on their own experience. The film is framed from the perspective of a newspaper reporter that emphasizes the importance of the role of media in the construction of social representation (Iglesias-Prieto, *Entre yerba, polvo y plomo* and “Border Representations”). Also, it is important to notice the differences in terms of the culture and nationality of the main characters. In *Wacha el Border* there are four main protagonists: two humans (Cynthia, from Tijuana; and Max, from San Diego) and two animals (Chester, the cat from Tijuana; and Paulina, the panther from San Diego). It is interesting to see the balance this film presents in terms of culture and nationality as well as in terms of humans and animals. The inclusion of animal characters allows the children to denaturalize the border and indirectly support the statement that borders and boundaries are human constructions. Giving similar roles to Mexican and U.S.-American characters emphasizes the Tijuana children’s recognition of border cultural diversity as well as the constant negotiation that characterizes life in the transborder region.

This level of negotiation is also evident when *Wacha el Border*’s characters speak English and Spanish and, despite different language use, the children manage to communicate with each other without the necessity of translation. The elaboration of dialogue in English and Spanish represents not just a more complex perspective on the part of the Tijuana children, but also much more work in the production process for the kids. Also, this shows a

more positive attitude by incorporating the “other” perspective and by trying to understand the problematic from the “other” point of view. In addition, the title of the Tijuana children’s animation, *Wacha el border*, alludes as much to the geopolitical frontier, to the hybrid nature of the transborder culture, as to the border’s most colloquial form of cultural expression: Spanglish (which is very familiar to transborderized people). The title of the San Diego children’s animation, *Beyond the Border*, refers to the “other side of the line,” but it emphasizes the condition of the border as a limit rather than as an integrated space, and this perspective in the end does not question the existence of borders.

The characters in *Wacha el border* are much more developed than are those in *Beyond the Border*. As an audience we know the names of the former and a little of their background. *Wacha el border* gives more importance to the condition of the people, showing a more human border and generating a balance among the characters and the story or the situation they experience. In *Beyond the Border* there is no explicit reference to any of the names of the characters or their personal backgrounds. San Diego’s children pay more attention to the events and actions that characterize this particular space presenting a more dehumanized border. This also seems to be related to the fact that most of the San Diego children’s social representations of the border come from media that tend to stigmatize the border and not from their own experience. This generated the sensationalism of border life and the idea that “the other side” is a problem rather than an opportunity. It is also noteworthy that in *Beyond the Border* all human characters tend to be U.S.-Americans. There are two characters, whose (national) identity is not quite clear; these two help the corrupt boss. They speak English and some Spanish but most of the time *cholo* slang. The only evident Mexican character is the mosquito. It is a central figure in the plot, as it is the one who helps the reporter, first by directing her attention to crime being committed and later by chloroforming the reporter’s capturers. Although the mosquito embodies Mexican social agency in terms of representing the capacity to resolve a problem, the fact of being a small animal minimizes its importance and naturalizes the role of the U.S.-American reporter as the sole heroine. All human characters are adults, with the reporter serving as main protagonist. The great majority of the film is in English with some Spanish and *cholo* slang. It is a film of ecological drama mixed with police action footage. This is indicative of some of the main concerns and awareness of this generation as well as the agenda of contemporary United States popular culture. *Beyond the Border* also incorporates a series of Hollywood movie conventions, including a U.S.-American hero who saves the day (Fregoso; Noriega). The San Diego children’s film emphasizes cooperation among unequal neighbors (even though differences are accentuated more than similarities), but lacks a vision of an emerging integrated transborder metropolis.

Another important contrasting aspect of both films is genre and style. Although *Wacha el border* is engaged more in the daily lived experience of the participating children, it also has a great sense of fantasy such as crossing the border in a huge bubble made by a clown or animals that talk and collaborate with humans to reduce control at the zoo and the border. The film follows some of the melodramatic conventions of *telenovelas* (soap operas) that are a popular genre in Mexico. One of the most evident *telenovela* conventions is revealed at the end of the film when the children discover they are siblings (Uribe). This animation film does not make use of good vs. bad people or the hero vs. anti-hero formula used in *Beyond the Border*, which is more oriented toward the action film formula. It is interesting to see that *Beyond the Border* uses less of the children’s direct lived experience of the border, and as such is crafted as more objective and empirical, although a talking mosquito evokes the fantastic.

The identification of place in *Wacha el border*, namely the San Diego Zoo, is telling of what is emblematic and significant for Tijuana’s children. For many years, children from Tijuana (with or without a United States visa or a Mexican passport) were allowed to cross the border once a year to visit the zoo with their teachers and classmates. Subsequently, for many of Tijuana’s children the San Diego Zoo is the only U.S. locality they have ever experienced. This institution represents a dream place and a higher standard of living associated with the “American way of life.” It is represented as a place of enjoyment and entertainment, associated with and surrounded by green areas, huge buildings and facilities, popular stores and restaurants, and comfortable and spacious homes. Paradoxically, besides being represented as a rich space and a place of opportunity where one can get access to activities and products that one does not have in Tijuana, the United States locality is also represented as a place of captivity, sadness, and tension. As mentioned earlier, the melancholic panther represents the lack of freedom for some members of a society (caged society), especially for those who may not be legal residents. The two kids, one from each side of the border (that in the end encompass the same transborder family), work together to free Paulina from her cage in order to make her happy. The significance of

liberating the captive panther can be understood as symbolic of so many Mexicans trapped in the United States as undocumented immigrants, who face considerable difficulties in keeping their dreams of freedom and the promise of a better life. The conflict in this film involves helping animals and a broken family and finally advocates the destruction of borders and cages that impede freedom in the region or interfere in the free flow of people, ideas, and cultures.

The disruption of the border is also suggested in the Tijuana children's narrative at the beginning of the film when Chester, the cat, crosses the border on the hill without heeding any of the necessary administrative procedures or legal ports of entry. The Tijuana children—throughout the workshop—consistently took the position that the border was a human construction that impedes the natural flow of people, animals, and natural resources. For this reason, while in the process of producing their film they often made comments questioning and resisting the very existence of the international border fence and of borders in general by expressing “animals don't know that there are borders” or “cats don't use passports.” The other spaces represented in *Wacha el border* are Cynthia's Tijuana home, streets in Tijuana near the border-crossing, streets in San Diego, and a butcher shop where Cynthia and Max buy meat for the panther. The variety of public and private spaces on both sides of the border reflects a complex knowledge of the different dimensions of life in this transborder space. This corresponds to a complexity of transborder relations evocative of deeply emotional relationships and profoundly personal ties on both sides of the border (being part of the same transborder family, for example) as well as considerable exposure to bilingualism and biculturalism.

The places that San Diego's children choose for their *Beyond the Border* story are very different: a newspaper office in San Diego and an isolated dump and old storage in Tijuana. By selecting these sites as the privileged spaces for their story, San Diego's children represent Tijuana as a dirty and dangerous city. There is no reference to family or ordinary life; Tijuana is represented only as a geographic site and not as a society. With the exception of the mosquito, there are no explicit Mexican characters in the film. It also appears that the two males in Tijuana who collaborate with the corrupt U.S.-American boss, are signified as Mexican Americans. Their mix of Mexican and United States culture—manifest in their blending English, Spanish, and *cholo* slang—underlines their somewhat unclear identity. Perhaps this can be attributed to a lack of experience and knowledge of Mexican and Mexican American culture as well as the reproduction of mainstream cinematic ethnic and national conventions (Noriega; Berg). Moreover, *Beyond the Border* depicts the U.S. international bridge and the traffic jams of the San Diego-Tijuana border with images of poor Tijuana neighborhoods as part of the background. The film lacks reference to private or intimate spaces such as those of friendship or familial ties suggesting a vision of impersonal and superficial transborder relations that coincides with low levels of transborderism resulting from sporadic or no border-crossing experiences.

It is also significant that both films emphasize the act of crossing the border as key to their stories, indicating the importance of this practice as part of border life. However, the perspectives offered suggest a contrasting point of view: The Tijuana children's narrative presents the border-crossing experience from south to north (and back) in a very graphic and detailed way, depicting the great number of cars crossing as well as the difficulties and inefficiency of crossing the border from Tijuana to San Diego. The film notes the three hours it takes to cross into the United States and the power and imposing demeanor of the U.S. immigration and custom officers. *Wacha el border* also allows the viewer to witness the economic activities that Tijuana's people engage in during border-crossing hours to generate an income. The characters explicitly refer to *Tijuanenses* selling fast food, crafts, and other products to tourists waiting to cross the border into the United States. This perspective presents a balanced view of the dynamics of border life in terms of its problems and opportunities. In contrast, *Beyond the Border* crosses the border in the opposite direction, from north to south, which does not require any complex administrative procedures; people simply walk across an international bridge without presenting any documents or paperwork. Thus, the reporter's border-crossing does not include any tension. *Beyond the Border* also references the numerical intensity of the crossing by showing a freeway traffic jam in the direction of the border, but it is significant that the film depicts neither the crossing back into San Diego nor any other activities or dynamics that characterize border-crossing into the United States.

With regard to the ending and the lessons of the two films, differences in the representation and conceptualization of the border are made clear. The ending of each film serves to convey how each group of children not only represents, but also feels about the U.S.-Mexico border. In *Wacha el border* there are three main actions that

prove significant. First, the liberation of the panther from its cage emphasizes the importance of freedom; second, the discovery of kinship ties between the protagonists from different sides of the border suggests that borders are comprised of transborder families; and third, the memorial commemorating the date of the fall of the border fence underscores the belief that borders are unnecessary barriers between families, societies, and countries. The latter also reveals the desire for the destruction of the U.S.-Mexico border fence, which obstructs the free flow of people, ideas, and cultures from one side to the other, and in turn impedes the creation of a transborder single urban space. In contrast, *Beyond the Border* stresses the importance of cooperation in “cleaning up” border problems such as trash from each country, crime, and negative externalities each country may create for one another. The children use the issue of garbage in their movie, but it could be replaced with other illegal activities such as drugs and the trafficking of human beings. The film suggests that cooperation and mutual effort on the part of each country is needed to better control the different flows of exchange at the border. There is no calling for the elimination of the border fence; on the contrary, the film’s message suggests the need to control border exchanges, especially the illegal flow of trash. By the end of *Beyond the Border* the police take over the underground trash network in the United States, as reported by the main character in a local newspaper and television program. This suggests that crime does not pay even when it involves harming the earth and that the good efforts of individuals are rewarded. The film ends by suggesting the maintenance of each culture and territory and criticizing illegal activities.

Understandably, the children of Tijuana and San Diego told stories in their films that reflect points of view intimately tied to the young filmmakers’ level of exposure to transborderism and to the point of view they represent in U.S.-Mexico asymmetrical border relations. In comparison with the San Diegans, the Tijuana children emphasize the statement that borders are human constructions, and made a greater effort to integrate “the other” as part of their reality by involving main characters from each country, using Spanish and English, and incorporating perspectives from both sides. For the San Diego children, the border was something natural and unquestioned because it was “necessary.” During the workshop, the children seemed convinced that the border “should exist” because “it protects us.” Although one girl in San Diego (the only one with greater transborder exposure) suggested that the border be demolished, the rest of the children would not agree, arguing that “it isn’t realistic.” The girl responded: “But is a talking mosquito realistic?” Yet, ultimately, her argument did not prevail and the San Diego film remained resolutely separated from Mexico, even though in reality the borderline is only minutes away.

Generally, the dynamic of the workshops, the exercise of expressing and debating different perspectives and life experiences along the border, and the process of negotiation to produce films about “the other” generated positive attitudes about the border. Furthermore, the French presence in the workshop was useful by bringing a third culture and language to the project. French participants functioned as a neutral element that facilitated in-depth discussions of differences and similarities between Mexico and the United States. The children were better able to explain to “outside” collaborators not only how they see and represent others, but also how they see and represent themselves. The debates helped to humanize those on “the other side” because the participants realized that aside from material differences they share many things with those on “the other side” such as aspirations and dreams.

Much remains to be done in terms of the awareness and level of investment along the U.S.-Mexico border. Through filmmaking, the children of Tijuana and San Diego revealed strikingly different attitudes and conceptions of each other’s cities. But their collaborations also suggest that taking an early interest in and working through children’s imagery of the borderlands it is possible to generate more positive commitments to a collective future in an increasingly integrated and diverse world. The two animation films and the project, *The Other Side of the Line*, confirm that subjects with greater border and transborder exposure develop greater skills with which to understand border dynamics and challenges as well as develop more complex social representations of this space. The results of the project also indicate that a greater degree of transborderism generates a higher level of commitment to and investment in the border’s social and physical environment. This suggests that the potential of a transborder metropolis and the possibilities of a better future of this region depend on our ability to develop transborder subjects and programs.

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Notes

1 In addition to the two short animated films produced by the children, a "Making-Off" of the project can be viewed on the following blog: *Del otro lado de la línea*. 24 Oct. 2011
<<http://delotroladodelalinea.wordpress.com>>. 2 *Cholo* refers to a youth movement and culture of Mexican-Americans in the Southwest of the U.S. that began in 1970s. This culture derives from the *pachuco* tradition of the 1940s. The term most of the times is associated with Hispanic gang culture in popular media and is used as a derogatory term ignoring the symbolic original pride of their members.

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