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In this timely and pathbreaking ethnography, Pablo Vila describes the narrative process of identity formation that influences relations among the various regional, ethnic, and nationality groups residing along the U.S.-Mexico border. Using a dialogical method that draws upon the Freirean tradition of concienciación (see Paulo Freire, Education for Critical Consciousness [New York: Seabury Press]), Vila bases his analysis on a series of 254 focus group interviews conducted in the “twin cities” of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and El Paso, Texas, in the 1990s, in which participants discussed photographs taken of scenes in everyday life in both cities. These groups were composed of men and women of different ages, nationalities, religions, class backgrounds, ethnicities, and migratory experiences. Expecting his informants to organize their identities around the obvious, axial divide between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans on the border, Vila is surprised to find far more complex processes of symbolic differentiation at work. In reviewing the transcripts of these discussions, the author uncovers a number of recurrent identity “plots” incorporating a varied repertoire of social categories and metaphors involving ethnicity, nationality, and Mexican region of birth. Vila’s analysis of these plots is illustrated throughout the book with vivid excerpts of dialog from his informants.

In Juárez, for example, many long-term residents distinguish themselves from newcomers from Southern Mexico, whom they maintain are responsible for many, if not most, of the city’s social ills. Many juarenses also regard themselves as different from—and superior to—Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants living across the border in El Paso, whom they regard as being “addicted” to a U.S. consumer lifestyle and as frequently looking down on or even mistreating “real” Mexicans like themselves. At the same time, Vila identifies another plot, in which some fronterizos (residents of the Mexican border cities) see themselves as being more advanced and successful than other Mexicans by virtue of the positive influence of the U.S. economy and culture on the border. Upon crossing the international boundary into El Paso, however, the distinctions juarenses/fronterizos make between themselves and other Mexicans are lost on Anglos and Mexican Americans for whom they are “simply” Mexicans. Indeed, one of the aspects of the border that makes it an ideal setting for reflecting upon the social construction of identity is that daily life there requires residents to routinely move back and forth between
two societies that feature very different systems of classification of people on the basis of race, ethnicity, nationality, and regional origin.

Similarly, Mexican Americans living in El Paso tell stories about themselves in relation to multiple others, not just Anglos. Of particular interest to sociologists concerned with Latinos in the United States, Vila details how many Mexican Americans in El Paso do not feel much solidarity toward Mexican nationals, whom they associate with the poverty, corruption, and lawlessness that they see as emblematic of contemporary Mexico. Some of these U.S.-born ethnic Mexicans adopt an assimilationist discourse that downplays their Mexican heritage in favor of their “American” virtues. More interesting, other third and fourth generation Mexicans Vila interviews express great pride in their Mexican heritage, but in doing so hearken back nostalgically to a mythical, virtuous past that featured more “authentic” Mexican traditions. Vila’s findings from his focus group interviews were subsequently corroborated by the strong support garnered from Mexican Americans for Operation Blockade, the 1993 crackdown on undocumented border crossers launched by the El Paso sector chief of the Border Patrol, who was himself of Mexican ancestry. As he notes perceptively in his chapter dedicated to the crackdown, “the border patrol was doing physically what . . . many El Pasoans (both Anglo and Mexican American) had been doing symbolically already: separating themselves from Mexican nationals in order to construct a valued narrative identity of people living in the United States” (p. 169). Vila’s arguments in this regard call into question much of the emphasis on hybridization and “border crossing” in the literature on the border region and its ethnic Mexican inhabitants (see, e.g., Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza [Aunt Lute Books, 1987]; Néstor García Canclini, Culturas híbridas [Grijalbo, 1990]; Oscar Martínez, Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands [University of Arizona Press, 1994]; Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis [Beacon Press, 1989]), since many of his informants, rather than embracing a transborder cultural unity among Mexicans, avidly construct symbolic borders that set themselves apart from an “other” who is also Mexican.

Vila’s main orientation is toward the social construction of meaning, an issue of considerable interest to cultural sociologists at the moment (see, e.g., the symposium, Charting Futures for Sociology: Culture and Meaning, Contemporary Sociology [July 2000]), and he exploits the special characteristics of the border to their fullest in this regard. Unfortunately, the book is organized so that his discussion of the broader theoretical implications of this rich ethnography is relegated to an appendix rather than integrated into an otherwise helpful introductory chapter. Readers who are interested in the Gramscian-poststructuralist theory informing Vila’s interpretive stance would do well to read the appendix before approaching the regional particulars addressed in the main body of the book.
At the same time, the appeal of *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders* is not limited to scholars of border studies and the social construction of meaning. Sociologists and anthropologists interested in issues of race and ethnicity, international migration, transnationalism, and qualitative methods will also find much of value to them in this book. Readers who are familiar with the literature in these varied fields will undoubtedly make connections between the findings reported in Vila’s book and the contributions of other authors who are not mentioned in the text. With regard to race and ethnicity, for example, the works of Joanne Nagel (1994) on ethnic construction, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) on racial formation, and David Gutiérrez (1995) on relations between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants all came to mind as I read this border ethnography.

Finally, readers should note that this book is but the first installment of a two-volume set. The second volume, provisionally titled *Border Identities: Narratives of Class, Gender, and Religion on the U.S.-Mexico Border* will be published in 2001. I found this artificial division of the report on a single research project into two books to be frustrating since it obliges Vila to limit his interpretation of some fascinating narratives to their ethnic, national, and regional aspects rather than considering these in conjunction with the other important bases for identity formation signaled in the title of the second book. Notwithstanding this defect, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders* constitutes a substantial contribution to the sociological and anthropological literature on the border in particular and on identity formation more generally.

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In *The Colonies of Law*, Ronen Shamir focuses on the short-lived (and little-known) Hebrew Court of Peace (HCP) to rethink the historic possibilities and processes of Jewish nation-building and the establishment of the Israeli state. The HCP, launched during the period of the British Mandate over Palestine by a group of jurist-nationalists, was an effort to utilize law in the revival of a Hebrew nation. Its advocates combined a quest for “authentic” Jewish secular laws and legal practices with the construction of a modern community-based institution capable of arbitrating contemporary disputes. The HCP was separate from both the colonial (British) state and the rabbinical courts and sought to establish its legitimacy on the very basis of this separation. But, as Shamir explains, the secular Zionist leadership and Jewish religious authorities pursued a