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Visas, Jokes, and Contraband: Citizenship and Sovereignty at the Mexico–U.S. Border

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Growing up in New Mexico in the early 1990s, we had to pass an immigration checkpoint every time we drove to town; my father always had difficulties with these encounters. "Citizenship?" "Us!" he once replied, and was ordered out of the car. (Later he claimed it was a genuine confusion with the usual, "U.S.!"). Another time, the car loaded with friends and amidst general hilarity, someone cried out, "The dog's German!" The officer's face soured, and we were held up with another reprimand. It was in the El Paso airport that we first saw a "No Joking" sign (see Salter 2011). It seemed so improbable that my father had to try: "Don't forget your gun, Jim!" he called to his friend as we approached the security checkpoint. Glumly but tolerantly (they must have been used to this), the guards explained that, yes, the sign was for real. In such a delicate situation, jokes could cause all kinds of mishaps and were, therefore, very seriously prohibited. No joke.

This article explores citizenship and sovereignty as revealed in the checkpoint jokes with which, at the Mexico–U.S. border, people both engage with and fend off their interpellation by the U.S. state. It does not, however, look at immigrants like my father—the uncertainties of his citizenship, crystallized into him by the history of his "naturalization," are no surprise. Instead, I look at Mexican citizens resident in Mexico to show how the United States' racialized socio-legal regime extends beyond this country's territorial boundaries.

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Seen from the border, both Mexican and U.S. citizenship appear as part of an international system. Citizenship is never a matter just between the individual and his or her "own" state, but is mediated by recognitions from afar. The peculiarities of Mexican citizenship at the border, so close in the shadow of the world's current hegemon, highlight this general fact: the stratification of citizenship, from full to marginal, is not organized within the nation only, but is articulated within a much broader system. From this perspective, it is not identity that stands at the heart of citizenship, but its opposite: ambivalence, contradiction, and undecidability. These are the productive mechanisms whereby an international system of differentiated citizenship (Holston 2008) is knit together and from which it gains its basic vigor. Jokes, I argue, provide a window onto this system because of the way they dramatize the capacity to hold contradictions together.

Ethnographically, this article is located in a place radically different from, yet of a piece with, the New Mexico of my childhood.[1] Tijuana, Baja California, is a city of some two million, and the main port of entry that connects it with San Diego, California is regularly cited as the most traversed port in the world.[2] As a state form, the port of entry is a monster checkpoint, and this particular one is gargantuan. A huge percentage of Tijuana's population passes through it, since over half the city's residents possess one or another document permitting legal entry to the United States (Alegría 2009: 86). As it sorts those fit to cross it legally from those unfit, the border feeds into and compounds idioms of social difference common throughout urban Latin America. For true belonging to the city, for full, substantive Mexican citizenship as lived locally, the usual forms for consolidating social status—employment, education, consumption, and so forth—are insufficient. In addition, the U.S. Border Crossing Card (BCC)—which I will also refer to as "the visa," as it is known locally—is virtually a requisite. Through the BCC, the individual establishes a relation with the U.S. state that profoundly undermines the certainties of self and status that people seek U.S. recognition precisely to confirm.

I will begin by laying out what jokes can contribute to discussions of citizenship and sovereignty. Then, I present some checkpoint jokes of drug-traffickers as narrated in *narcocorridos* (popular ballads about drug-trafficking). Seen as performative arguments about the state-citizen relationship, *narcocorridos*' jokes reveal some of the cultural presuppositions that underpin middle-class checkpoint jokes, which I examine next. Finally, I turn to the U.S. consular visa interview in order to understand why otherwise well-disciplined middle-class subjects would tell jokes that frame them as traffickers. Folk

[1] As this contrast suggests, "the border" is a shorthand for a highly complex and sometimes contradictory set of institutions operating in a huge variety of contexts.

[2] Blum (2007) reports 110,000 crossings daily at the time of my main fieldwork in 2006 and 2007.

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theories of how the interview works, I argue, show middle-class subjects' investment in their authentic identity as good citizens. Ultimately, though, this position cannot be clearly distinguished from working-class theories of the interview that thematize duplicity. If the visa ratifies middle-class Mexican citizenship, serving as a lynchpin between two national socio-legal regimes, it also heightens the uncertainty involved in citizenship generally. In this context, jokes are a revealing point at which people begin to articulate the contradictions that constitute them as citizens. The jokes, I argue, throw into relief the productive ambivalence through which the U.S. state twines itself into the subjectivities of a foreign population, weaving national citizenship into an emergent global system.

CITIZENSHIP BY JOKE, CITIZENSHIP AS JOKE

For liberal political theory, the "I" of the citizen has long been fundamental. From Kant's (1970) emphasis on opinion to Arendt's (1958) warning that the "I"s of the public must be kept independent of each other, the citizen's capacity to participate in the polity depends on his or her autonomous selfhood as the basis upon which he or she may speak, represent him- or herself, and take a stand upon matters of common interest. If the autonomous individual of liberal theory is an anxious, paranoid subject (Mazzarella 2010: 703), these affects arise from an overarching imperative to consolidate an identity tautologically grounded in itself, stable beyond and independent of the dialogic flux of social interaction. The incitement to authentic identity helps animate the upstanding citizen not just as an ideal figure, but as a reality that individuals can embody by degrees.

At the same time, for belonging to be operative, for rights to appertain to one subject and not to another, states need to be able to identify these same individuals. Languages of citizenship may be more top-down or more bottom-up (Lazar and Nuitjen 2013), either entrenching inequalities or bolstering new claims for inclusion. For a moment of social emergence (Rancière 1999; Dave 2011) to transform a given regime of citizenship, though, recognition must be, at least to some extent, regularized. The persons who will or will not bear rights must stabilize. In this process, the individual as a site of potential for the embodiment of ideal citizenship converges with the individual as an object of an array of biopolitical techniques of survey and surveillance (Scott 1998; Torpey 2000). The two come together most powerfully, perhaps, in those confessional scenes where the state asks its citizens not just "to reveal what one is by saying it" (Foucault 1997: 81), but also to give performative evidence of their very sense of themselves as self-same.

In such scenes of encounter, the certainties of selfhood on which so much rides—both for ideals of citizenship and for state control—have a tendency to disintegrate. If "[a]nswers at the border are acts of performative citizenship" (Salter 2008: 377), such moments of official interpellation are key sites in

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"the experience of disjunction in the status of citizenship" (Aretxaga 2003: 397). As an affective experience, disjunction arises from a contradiction in the relationship between state and citizen. At the moment of border-crossing, Salter argues, the citizen otherwise invested with rights, whose autonomy is theoretically a basic building block of the state's own legitimacy, is exposed to the state's sovereign power to decide if he or she will be admitted or banned and converted to bare life (Agamben 1998). The citizen's vulnerability to the sovereign ban is perhaps most palpable at an international border, but, I would add, neither is it evident there to most crossers, nor is it absent from other scenes of encounter with the state. My aim here is to tease out one form, jokes, through which subjects begin to make manifest, to articulate and comment upon, this basic undecidability in their relation with the state: are they rights-bearing citizens, or merely opportunities for the exercise of a violent and arbitrary power?

If citizenship is fundamentally contradictory, this is because of the contradictory nature of the state itself as an unstable amalgam of violence and (bureaucratic) reason (Taussig 1993). At first glance, violence and reason may appear to be differentially distributed across zones and populations. On one hand, the fragmentation of sovereignty within national territories (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006) involves the separation of geographic areas where violence and reason can be differentially applied. On the other, undocumented immigrants are a classic example of a population made vulnerable in great part by the violence of border enforcement, where unauthorized crossing institutes in the subject a new status as "illegal alien" (Ngai 2004). Fragmented sovereignty and differentiated citizenship, however, cannot be conceptualized only within the nation-state. Graduated sovereignty (Ong 1999) on a global scale likewise depends on distributions of reason and violence. How is this territorial patchwork held together? How, for example, are U.S. and Mexican regimes of differentiated citizenship interwoven?

The interest of the BCC-holder in Tijuana lies in the fact that, in contrast to holders of dual or multiple citizenship, the visa-holder must be understood in relation to both states at once. Most simply, this is because the visa rests upon and reconfirms a plethora of documents issued or guaranteed by the Mexican state. At a more complex level, one's capacity to embody ideals of citizenship has, in Tijuana, come culturally to require U.S. state recognition. Visa-holders' cosmological projections of the relative status of U.S. and Mexican states (Newell 2012) draw the two together: the perceived insufficiencies of the Mexican state justify the turn to the United States, while U.S. state recognition authorizes performances of proper citizenship within Mexico (Yeh 2009: 257–97). The U.S. state shadows visa-holders as they perform their own quotidian "border inspections" (Lugo 2000), policing boundaries of race and class within Mexico. Hence, I do not focus on Tijuana's marginalized inhabitants, whose access to the forms of citizenship in Mexico is precarious to

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begin with, and who might well cross in unauthorized fashion to become "illegal aliens" in the United States. Instead, I concentrate on the model citizens, the middle-class folks whose efforts to "do things right" (as one woman put it to me) hook them into processes of U.S. state recognition that destabilize and saturate with uncertainty the very identity they seek U.S. recognition to confirm. For them, as Deborah Poole (2004) writes, the state is a source simultaneously of threat and guarantee, and it foments at once attachment and disavowal (Aretxaga 2003: 399).

From this perspective, graduated sovereignty is not simply a matter of the differential distribution of reason and violence. Instead it appears—within countries but also across international borders—as a differential distribution of the *tension* between reason and violence, of the probability that one might morph into the other. The middle-class *tijuanense* visa-holder puts the spotlight on this tension, for in his or her case it is doubled. Facing U.S. officials, the BCC-holder's status within Mexico is also at stake. Because visa-holding is so routine here, there is an undecidability in the visa-holder's relation to the U.S. state that is akin to the undecidability Salter describes regarding citizens' relation to their own state. This undecidability, however, cannot be disentangled from the visa-holder's Mexican citizenship.

As U.S. state recognition heightens the sense of disjuncture amongst subjects that are otherwise fairly privileged within Mexico's social system of differentiated citizenship, it can lead them to act out instabilities of self that are inconsistent with their dominant investment in performing their authentic identity as proper citizens. Jokes, I argue, provide a perfect vehicle for expressing the disjuncture of citizenship at the border. Seen as performative arguments about citizenship, they afford a comparative grasp of the ambivalences with which subjects confront sovereign power in different contexts—how they navigate, through linguistic practice, the sovereign tension between reason and violence. If "answers … are acts of performative citizenship," to answer the state with an irony—a statement that cannot be understood if read at face value (Booth 1974)—performs citizenship as profoundly split. To repeat such ironies in the form of jokes is to make an argument about the state and its sovereignty; it is to represent to one's listeners one's own ambivalence before the state, and to give that ambivalence a particular form.[3]

Joking may not have a consecrated place in the tradition of thought on sovereignty, but laughter more broadly does. In Derrida's (1978) classic reading of Bataille, laughter is the only possible response to the irrational conjunction of reason and violence in Hegel's paradigmatic allegory of sovereignty, the dialectic of lordship and bondage. What I have here been calling sovereignty (that is, state sovereignty) Derrida calls mere lordship, an inferior

[3] To be clear, I mean by jokes short narratives, not the original ironic statements or humorous incidents themselves.

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dialectical play channeled into the consolidation of identities. True sovereignty, Derrida posits, lies in the laughter, born of this play, but which breaks from it irrecoverably. There is an energy here in excess of social hierarchies and established positions. Escaping institutionalization and the dialectic of recognition, sovereign laughter remains ephemeral, though it is also hardy, for it will recur as long as the joke of lordship (the joke of the state, or the state itself as supreme joke) is repeated. Being ephemeral, it therefore poses a problem for ethnographic capture as well.[4]

This article takes a slightly different tack. It looks at how jokes both perform the disjuncture of citizenship and make an argument about it. In rough terms, the jokes' argument is that, just as the state is split, so too is the citizen split, responding reasonably to the state's questions, yet holding in reserve his or her authentic identity, and potential for disruption and even violence. This argument privileges the self that is held in reserve as authentic and devalues as false the self that is presented to the state. Mirroring this structure, checkpoint jokes maintain that the state's rationality is a false exterior appearance, while violence is its hidden truth. From an analytic point of view, the undecidability between attachment and disavowal constitutes the citizen just as the undecidability between reason and violence constitutes the state. Jokes provide an incipient way to articulate this contradiction because their basic logical structure arranges the two elements in tension into a two-tiered hierarchy. As Freud argued (1960), jokes hinge on their ability to hold contradictory elements together. Behind one, overt meaning, a second meaning lies suppressed until it can burst forth in triumph in the punch-line. The suppression, of course, is social; as Mary Douglas insists, "If there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear" (1975: 98). In the present case, the joke in the social structure is the state-citizen relation itself.

Checkpoint jokes performatively posit a self that is rooted in a social space beyond the present reality of engagement by the state, but their pragmatics are thoroughly ambiguous. They perform release from the state, but, I will argue, ultimately help bind subjects to it. It is just as people draw closer into the state's "embrace" (Torpey 2000) that they seem to feel a greater need to posit the jokes' treasured second space. In this sense, joking actually facilitates the increase in legal border-crossing and the expansion of the U.S. surveillance state, because joking makes the contradictions the state involves one in seem less a reflection on oneself and more of an externality. All the same, people use jokes to reserve space for something beyond the state's purview, even if the jokes cannot tell us exactly what that something is. True sovereignty,

[4] For those who try, however, the pursuit is clearly generative (e.g., Taussig 1997; Gandolfo 2009).

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they insist, does not lie with the state, which exercises but lordship, and demands of us but bondage.

Américo Paredes' anthology of jokes collected in the 1960s, mainly in south Texas but also elsewhere in the United States and in Mexico, directly foreshadows the materials I present here. The anthology includes a number of jokes that narrate crossing through a port of entry (1993a: 39, 48, 86, 101–2, 104), and in fact some jokes told today in Tijuana are variants on jokes in Paredes' collection. The jokes I will present, which focus narrowly on checkpoint encounters, thus fit into a broader set of joking practices that deal, as Paredes' entire collection does, with the power differentials in which citizenship is enmeshed at the Mexico–U.S. border.[5]

Paredes looks at jokes, as I do here, in order to explore the ambivalences of subjectivity at the border (albeit on the U.S. side) and of middle-class subjectivity in particular (1966; 1968).[6] For him, the Mexican-American and the middle-class Mexican alike are a "living dilemma" (1966: 124) thanks to their ambivalent relation to the United States, and it is this dilemma that jokes address and keep alive. As Limón (2012: 141–42) observes, when successful middle-class Mexican-Americans take up markedly working-class Spanish to joke about racial inequalities in the United States, they act out the "incongruity" between a past social role and their present one. This observation holds in Tijuana. A former greengrocer, now comfortably retired, told me a joke about a fruit-vendor operating near Tijuana's Otay Mesa port of entry. When he heard about the BCC, he applied. But when, in the interview, the consular officer asked him what he wanted the visa for, he exclaimed, "Isn't it obvious? I'm sick of pushing that fruit-cart around!" The joke is on the rube, who does not understand that visas are granted only to those who successfully perform their lack of interest in working in the United States. Those who laugh can feel themselves a bit superior. But the joke also evokes the disjuncture that haunts their own middle-class citizenship, which can never entirely shed the vulnerability to rejection, expulsion, and even raw violence that the unauthorized border-crosser faces.

As in Rutherford's analysis of sovereignty's subjection to its audiences (2012), checkpoint jokes in Tijuana may well seem a form of political humor eating away at the United States' legitimacy as a world power. But despite the rambunctious contestation that the jokers revel in, these jokes should not

[5] Jokes in Tijuana usually emerge on the fly, in interaction; their pragmatic punch thus strikes even more surely at the specifics of the context in which they are told. In contrast, Paredes gathered much (though not all) of his material in all-male joking sessions. On this cultural practice in Mexican-American Texas, see also Limón (1989). Most work on humor both amongst Mexicans and Mexican-Americans is heavily gendered (but see Chávez 2015); see for instance Limón, where women only appear as the butt of sexual jokes (2012: 92–93), avoiding sexual double entendres (ibid.: 137), or shushing their husbands (ibid.: 138).

[6] Limón (2012: 93) points out that almost all Paredes' south Texan informants are middle class.

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be understood as simply contestatory. Anthropological work on political satire at the level of public culture vacillates, on a case to case basis, as to whether humor ultimately undermines or supports the sovereign power it pokes fun at (Mbembe 2001; Sánchez 2006; Boyer and Yurchak 2010), and the larger literature on humor, too, is famously split as to whether jokes maintain order or are truly liberatory.[7] Jokes are, Douglas says, "frivolous," for they produce "no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom" (1975: 96). But this frivolity is perhaps the point. That is, jokes in themselves neither affirm nor subvert the social system, but instead hold both possibilities together at once, just as they hold together suppressed and accepted thoughts, and subtly split the commitments and hence the very identity of those who tell them. They let you have your cake and eat it too, and this is why they express so well the undecidability at the heart of citizenship as a relation not just to one state but to a global hierarchy mediated by the slippage and suspicion inherent in sovereign recognition. As Salter notes, no one in this system is entirely safe, and even the best of citizens would be well-advised to anticipate, as visa-holders in Tijuana do, the moment in which they might be re-interpellated as criminals.

TRICKSTER-TRAFFICKERS

The *corrido* is a popular musical genre that, with a certain regularity, explores how avowed criminals might handle checkpoint interpellations. Paredes (1993b) argues that this ballad form was born in the mid- to late nineteenth century in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Like the jokes he studied, *corridos* deal centrally with cross-cultural power differentials in this region. Since the 1970s, though, the topic of drug-trafficking has dominated the genre (Herrera-Sobek 1979), the other major topic being migration to the United States. With their glorification of organized crime, *narcocorridos* are antithetical to Tijuana's middle-class investment in normatively liberal ideals of citizenship. Like the earlier *corridos* Paredes studied, though, they are fertile with strategies for confronting the challenges posed by citizenship in the highly hierarchical and treacherous context of the border.[8] As we will see, they are crucial to understanding middle-class checkpoint jokes in Tijuana.

Fifty years ago, Paredes (1966: 117) noted *corridos*' occasional satire of U.S. officers and their broken Spanish. Likewise, the *corridos* I know that include embedded jokes all involve encounters with state officers. Though I have come across but a handful of them, these jokes provide striking flashes

[7] Reflecting this split, Paz' (1962) description of a sinister, nihilistic laughter as part of the Mexican national character inaugurated a long (mostly literary) tradition in which joking maintains the status quo (but see Cardeña 2003). This tradition contrasts sharply with Paredes' and Limón's work, which foregrounds conflict and power.

[8] On *narcocorridos*, see Herrera-Sobek 1979; Wald 2001; Valenzuela Arce 2003; and Ramírez-Pimienta 2011. Ethnographic treatments are spottier: see Simonett 2001; Edberg 2004; Muehlmann 2014; and Yeh 2015.

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of insight into *narcocorridos*' broader concern with officer-trafficker encounters. The abrupt violence of these jokes' punchlines provides a summary argument for a theme running throughout *narcocorridos*' representations of encounters between traffickers and officers: either trafficker or officer, or both, are never what they seem. In "Morir matando," a trafficker turns the tables on the lieutenant about to arrest him by asking, "Why did you burn my crops, after promising protection?" In "El Diablo," a pompous highway patrol officer likewise gets his comeuppance when the trafficker says he knows the real reason he's been stopped: the officer wants to steal his girlfriend. In "El Águila Blanca," the initially aggressive checkpoint officers scrape and bow when they finally find out who the traffickers they have hassled work for. And in "Jefe de Nuevo Laredo," the officer turns out to be an ex-trafficker himself, once the bosom friend and accomplice of the man he is arresting. In each of these scenes, the trafficker reveals an uncomfortable truth about the identity of those involved. The result, most often, is violence.

All these examples involve Mexican officers, and the uncomfortable truth the traffickers reveal is the officers' intimacy with the social world of drug-trafficking. In contrast, only one of the three jokes I have found focuses on the Mexican state; the other two involve U.S. officers. In each case, though, the split identity at stake is the trafficker's, and the joke is itself the vehicle by which his or her second self can come into play. Thus the jokes highlight to best advantage the figure of the trickster-trafficker as a cultural trope. Tricksters, Lewis Hyde writes, are boundary-crossers, "the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox" (2010: 6–7). "It is at well-guarded barriers," Hyde adds, "that these figures are especially *tricksters*, for here they must be masters of deceit if they are to proceed" (ibid.: 6). I draw on the trope of the trickster to underline how the trafficker, as a figure within *corridos*, shows that there is something in "I" that, by exceeding official schemas of identity, derails interpellation. As we will see, this trope also informs middle-class checkpoint jokes, mobilized in context to disavow the joker's attachment to the U.S. state.

In general, it is a discursive achievement for the speaking "I" to coincide with the "I" narrated (Jakobson 1984; Goffman 1979). Checkpoint reviews use a swift and highly standardized pair-part routine to calibrate the "I" of the subject physically present before the officer with an identity locatable in an abstract governmental space of identification: a single point mapped to precision by the ID. The trope of the trickster-trafficker works against this unification of "I." Instead, narratives involving this figure showcase an "I" that is split between false appearance and covert truth. Nowhere is the insistence on a second self starker, more clearly counter-posed to official interpellation, than in jokes.

"The Image of Malverde" (Incomparables de Tijuana 1999) narrates the passage of a young man through a port of entry on his way to deliver a load

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of drugs.[9] The title refers to the folk saint Jesús Malverde, widely recognized as patron of traffickers.

Al llegar a la garita	*Upon arriving at the port of entry,*
le da un besito a la imagen,	*he gives the image a little kiss;*
le dice a Jesús Malverde,	*he says to Jesús Malverde,*
"Aquí es donde has de ayudarme	*"Here is where you're to help me,*
y de antemano muchas gracias;	*and in advance, many thanks—*
sé que no has de abandonarme".	*I know you will not abandon me."*
Le pidieron sus papeles;	*They asked him for his papers;*
se los mostró muy tranquilo	*he showed them very calmly,*
y le dijo el inmigrante,	*and the immigration officer said to him,*
"¿Par'adónde va, mi amigo?"	*"Where are you going, my friend?"*
"Me dirijo a San Antonio	*"I'm headed to San Antonio*
porque allá es donde yo vivo".	*because that's where I live."*
"Pasa, que Dios te bendiga	*"Pass, may God bless you,*
y que tengas muy buen viaje",	*and have a nice trip,"*
y con una sonrisita	*and with a little smile*
pasó el narcotraficante	*the drug-trafficker passed,*
y también discretamente	*and also, discreetly,*
volvió a besar a la imagen.	*he again kissed the image.*

The state's pair-part routine is not disturbed, but a different ritual frames it, which depends on a little token analogous to the ID: Malverde's image, hung on a scapulary about the young man's neck. With it, he slips a double meaning into his "I" that the officer does not catch. His ID should locate him in the space of state identification, but the scapulary suspends him in the miraculous space of Malverde's holy potency. In this space, San Antonio (Texas), the checkpoint, and the youth's point of origin are related to each other by a logic that fuses Malverde's power both with the market economy of drug-traffic and with kinship. As the youth crosses the border, "meanwhile," back home, his mother takes roses to Malverde's shrine. The simultaneity of their devotion pulls these scattered geographic points together. They form a continuum within which the ritual of checkpoint interpellation can be simply bracketed.

Malverde leaves the state's ritual intact but for one small piece of evidence demonstrating how it has in fact transformed the pair-part routine from the inside out. "God bless you!" the officer says, unaware Malverde already has, and then, to top it off, "Have a nice trip!" The trafficker does not just smile out of satisfaction; his smile is suppressed laughter at a joke, for *viaje* is slang specifically for the trip north to deliver a load of contraband (the

[9] Many thanks to Garmex Music for permission to reprint the lyrics.

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double entendre is confirmed a moment later). Malverde inserts this second meaning into the officer's banal use of the word. In Freud's terms, a process of condensation has occurred. However, it is not just an inadmissible thought that has found its way into expression, but an entire world of proscribed social relations.

The officer in "The Image of Malverde" never notices the alternate identity, and the space of traffic it belongs to, that has been passed as contraband under his nose, and that his own language bears unconscious witness to. In "Contraband in the Eggs" (Exterminador 2001) and "The Little Nuns" (Exterminador 1996), the officers come, disastrously, face to face with traffic. "Clavo en los Huevos," as the song is often called, is a double double entendre, for *clavo* means both "nail" and hidden stash of contraband, and *huevos* means "eggs" but is also slang for "testicles." In the song's spoken opening, U.S. officers receive a call from their snitch: "A man with a lot of *huevos* just got by you!" The officers think they are being made fun of (*que los habían albureado*; an *albur* is a sexual pun), but they quickly find out the information is true. Trafficking and trickstering are the same thing here; the joke here is for real. Having pursued the trafficker up Interstate 5 from Tijuana to Los Angeles, the sergeant finally accuses him, "You've got a *clavo* in your *huevos*!" to which the trafficker cheekily replies, "If that were so, sergeant, I would not be sitting down […] I'll show them to you if you want."[10] But the officer, as such, cannot laugh: "I am of the law," he says, "do not forget it. This is no joking matter [*cosa de juegos*]. Open up the trunk; I'm going to rummage through your *huevos*." The Law personified knows no prevarications; it is monolithic and absolute—and yet, just as in "The Image of Malverde," the joke creeps into the officer's own language. At this point, the trafficker's suppressed identity, which had only gained partial expression in the joke, appears overtly. The exchange is still pair-part, and in terms perfectly familiar to the state:

Sonó una 9D15, también armas del gobierno,	*A 9D15 sounded, also government-issue weapons;*
traficante y policías fueron a dar al infierno.	*trafficker and policemen wound up in hell.*[11]

In "The Little Nuns," the moment of revelation and the switch to violent exchange is itself the joke, the word bearing two meanings, one corresponding to the pair-part routine of the state, the other to the covert and disruptive logics of traffic. Stopped at a highway checkpoint, two traffickers disguised as nuns

[10] Like the unskillful *albures* despised by Gutiérrez González's (1993) informants, this one borders on being a plain insult, openly combative, and with none of the collusion between parties that marks the finer forms of the practice.

[11] I have transcribed as "9D15" what Internet lyrics transcribe as either "9F15" or "9 de 15" (nine of fifteen). While the term clearly refers to a weapon, I am apparently not alone in my ignorance as to which it might be.

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tell the officer (this time he is Mexican) that they are delivering powdered milk to an orphanage. The officer, though, discovers the cocaine hidden therein, and confronts the "nuns" with patronizing irony. "I'm so sorry for the little orphans," he sneers, "they won't be drinking their milk after all." Then he asks the "dear little sisters" (*hermanitas*) for their names. They reply thus:

Una dijo, "Me llamo Sor Juana",	*One said, "My name is Sor Juana [Sister Juana];"*
la otra dijo, "Me llamo Sor… ¡Presa!"	*the other said, "My name is Sor Presa [Surprise]!"*

The answer preserves the proper form while in the same gesture throwing off all pretense. The first half ("One said, 'My name is Sor Juana'") sets up the second not only in rhythm and form, but by being a patently fictitious identification. The name "Sor Juana" appropriates and ambiguously twists the national pantheon; Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the proto-feminist poet, is most often encountered staring out from the 200-peso note. Is the use of her name an honor or an insult? The joke short-circuits this opposition. A moment later, when "surprise" irrupts, it does so in the song itself: the *presa* of *sorpresa* is not sung but shouted, bursting through the tightly-regimented melodic form. The proper name should anchor the "I" of the subject, but the trafficker replaces it with not just the announcement of the ritual's inversion and the cancelling of interpellative exchange, but also with surprise itself, emerging from within the expected form. This is the only way, she seems to say, in which she might be identifiable before the state: as a figure that embodies the disruption of ritual, as the enacted impossibility of locating any subject "here" at all. In the same moment as the joke leaps upon the officer, the two nuns literally throw off appearances: they raise their habits. As in the previous example, they reveal beneath nothing but heavy firepower and death.[12]

According to Freud, a joke holds together two thoughts. From a certain perspective, one is acceptable and the other is not. And yet the second thought, despite the pressure upon it, will not disappear. It makes itself manifest, causing laughter. In these *corridos*, the sign of the pressure exerted upon the repressed "thought" is the very violence that the joke foretells: no dialogue is possible once the discrepancy between two social spaces, that of the state and that of traffic, has come out into the open. The exaggerated violence underlines both the force of repression and the power of what has been repressed. In these jokes, much more is being smuggled than literal contraband. These *corridos*, though, focus on the structure of repression without bothering

[12] One might take the pun a step further: *presa* means "prisoner" or "prey." Taken thus, the shout becomes not just a false name but a vocative, for "prey" is what the officer becomes. A twisted "I" in the mouth of the trafficker is also a transformed "you."

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much to describe its content. While "The Image of Malverde" sketches some incipient coordinates (kinship, the market) for the second space smuggled by the trafficker's joke, in the other two examples, the only thing behind shape-shifting and wordplay is the negativity of violence and death.

Playing with violence and laughter, these jokes also play along the edges between lordship and sovereignty. The trafficker hovers between two roles: like all criminals, he (or she) provides the state with a pretext to dramatically re-found the law but, at the same time, nonetheless suggests that a different order might be possible (see Benjamin 1978). As represented in these *corridos*, the trafficker emerges as a trickster confounding the state's procedures and reflecting back to it its own ignominious reliance on violence. The jokes I have presented highlight a double structure found as well in other *corridos* that deal with trafficker-officer encounters: they insist on the irreconcilability of official identity with the full social identity of the trafficker. However, *narcocorridos* do not just present an argument about traffickers' relation to the state; they act it out performatively. As a genre, *narcocorridos* have been increasingly criminalized (Astorga 2005), and this criminalization has become an essential component of the genre's self-constitution. Pirated CDs are labelled *Corridos Prohibidos* (Prohibited *Corridos*), after a classic album by Los Tigres del Norte (1989). The master of ceremonies at a concert in California tells his audience that the performer has brought them from Mexico "a heavy load of *corridos*," where "heavy load" is, like *viaje*, a double entendre and a nod to the lingo of traffickers. *Corridos* themselves appear as contraband, and listening to or reproducing them carries something of the trafficker's defiance. They interpellate their listeners as traffickers too, smuggling narrative contraband that bears a "heavy load" of social relations beyond the purview of the state.

MIDDLE-CLASS TRICKSTERS

I now turn to middle-class *tijuanenses* invested in proper citizenship to show how, despite their erstwhile rejection of *narcocorridos*, they can use jokes that draw on tropes of trafficking as trickstering to reframe their encounters with the U.S. state. Like *narcocorridos*, these middle-class jokes appear as themselves contraband. As such, they work as performative arguments, positing an authentic self that directly contradicts the surface appearance of attachment to the state. The jokes flamboyantly disavow the state from within its very clutches: in the first two examples, from within the maw of the port of entry itself. In the last, more extended case, a young woman explains her son's U.S. citizenship as itself a perduring joke on the U.S. state. The richness of these jokes lies in the way they so emphatically illuminate citizenship as it takes shape within a complex global system of graduated sovereignties. By acting out the disjuncture of citizenship at the border, the jokes provide a

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revealing point at which subjects begin to acknowledge the contradictory nature of the citizen-state relation.

Braulio and Mercedes are brother and sister; they came to Tijuana in the 1950s and are now decent retirees. Early on, Braulio found work in San Diego's ship-building industry, and, though he never lived in the United States, he obtained Permanent Residency through his employer.[13] Mercedes, in contrast, was a BCC-holder until recently. Her husband worked with Braulio and was also a U.S. Permanent Resident, but though he had helped his children obtain this status, he had refused to do so for his wife. It was only after he died that, through her daughter, Mercedes became a Permanent Resident. She did so in order to keep the benefits her husband had earned for her with a lifetime of work in the United States. Her change of legal status thus implied no profound shift in the relation she had maintained with the United States and its state since her youth.

In 2006, I accompanied Braulio and Mercedes on an errand to San Diego. It was an uneventful expedition: the usual wait in traffic before the presentation of documents at the port, a quick round of questions, and then the acceleration up to highway speed. As she handed my passport back to me, Mercedes told a story about her mother-in-law. One day, she was deep in conversation as she drove up to the port of entry. Still chatting, she took her visa out of her wallet and handed it to the officer. He looked at it, he looked at her; he looked at it, he looked at her. "This no be you!" he finally exclaimed, perplexed, in broken Spanish. In her distraction, she had handed him a prayer-card of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

After more than an hour in the car with Braulio and Mercedes, it is hard to imagine such nonchalance: "Did you bring your passport?"; "I told you to make sure you had everything!"[14] The entire trip has been a struggle with the specter of inadequacies and lacunae that might crop up before the state at the crucial moment, and the distraction Mercedes attributes to her mother-in-law stands in stark contrast to the anxiety that has permeated the whole morning. The joke, which Mercedes told with obvious relish, is as if to exult, "And even with all that we passed!" To be distracted appears as a fantasy of disruption not unlike the violence of the *corridos*' jokes.

The placement of Mercedes' joke bears witness to its status as contraband. Here on the other side of the border, where it should not appear, it crops up as itself the second meaning that has been suppressed, smuggled through, and that can no longer be contained. Our laughter comes with the rush as Braulio steps

[13] Braulio was a "commuter," a legal category that allows U.S. Permanent Residents to reside in Mexico if employed in the United States (LaBrucherie 1969; Balandrán 2010). When he retired, Braulio lost this status. The news came as a shock: he was hospitalized for cardiac arrest.

[14] Conversation on the way to the border almost always focuses on passage itself: anticipating the encounter with the state, narrating past crossings, or simply discussing the flow of traffic. Mercedes' anecdote is highly unusual in coming after we had crossed.

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on the gas—much as the trafficker in "Contraband in the Eggs" sped up this very same freeway. The joke represents elation and release, but it is ambiguous, for the elation of passing is at once that of having been interpellated and of retaining something that is not recognized. At this moment, the distinction collapses between Braulio and Mercedes as good citizens, reasonably well-disciplined subjects, and the trafficker as criminal. By its very placement, the moment and spot where it is told, the joke frames the state as repressive, and posits that, like the traffickers of the *corridos*, Braulio and Mercedes, too, have smuggled through the truth of who they are. Our laughter is not unlike the little smile on the face of the trafficker in "The Image of Malverde"—and the prayer-card of the Virgin, offered by mistake, is not so different either from Malverde's scapulary. The Virgin appears not in place of Mercedes' mother-in-law, but in place of the state. She sets down into the middle of the interpellative routine a space of social relations portrayed as unassimilable to the state. In the moment of the officer's bafflement, the crosser is un-locatable—even though, the joke seems to say, the card locates her even more authentically than the visa ever could, for it is proof of her relation with another source of authority, the Virgin, who might intercede for her at any moment.[15] This is the second meaning that emerges within the forms of the state (a little card carried in one's wallet and proffered upon demand) but that threatens to supersede it. In the anecdote, distraction smuggles the Virgin's alternate authority before the uncomprehending eyes of the officer, just as, speeding away from the real officer, our laughter builds a complicity between us that excludes him.

On another occasion, I was crossing alone, by foot, when the woman in front of me struck up a conversation. As is often the case, her topic of choice was border-crossing. She was retirement-aged, petite and pale-skinned, neatly groomed in a matching gray sweat-suit—not the sort of look common in Tijuana's working-class neighborhoods. She told me her sister's husband is a great joker. "One of these days they'll take your papers away from you!" she tells him, but he pays no heed. When they ask him, for instance, "What are you bringing with you from Mexico?" he answers, "Much happiness!" The joke's seriousness is revealed in its feared effects, for the brother-in-law does not just throw a kink into the pair-part routine. Instead, he brings into play a dimension of himself that has no place there and that, just as in every other joke we have seen, transforms the routine from the inside out.

As we waited, my interlocutor spun her yarn of complicity tighter and tighter, standing closer and closer to me, her voice lower and lower, until she came to the last joke, which involved the repetition of the word *mota* (weed), whispered now just a few meters from the officers, under the very signs that

[15] Compare Bernstein's (2012) "sovereign bodies," which likewise draw on the authority of religion to supersede the borders between nation-states.

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warn (in Spanish), "YOUR ACTIONS AND CONVERSATIONS ARE BEING RECORDED ON VIDEO TAPE." This is the joke she told: A man used to cross by bicycle, very frequently. Always they would ask him what he was bringing with him, and always he would answer, "Weed." And always they took it as a joke. All the officers knew him: the man on a bicycle who says he is bringing weed. This went on until one day they inspected him and found he was indeed bringing weed. But they let him go, because he was telling the truth. "Well," she said, "I've always answered them honestly." Suddenly, her "honest" answers appear undecidable, as if her banal middle-class responses might, like the trafficker's, conceal unacknowledged contraband. I laughed at the idea that the man would be released, as if the punishable offense were lying and not introducing illegal drugs into the United States. But she insisted that was what had happened. Just as in the *corridos*, what is at stake in the ritual of interpellation is not trafficking per se, but the possibilities and slippages of calibrating "I" to who the state says I should be.[16]

The closer we get to the border, the harder my companion transgresses. She cultivates the same space that in the *corridos* erupted into violence as an interpersonal space between the two of us. This whispering is the space of traffic, smuggled through under the cameras and signs and officers, all there to guarantee its erasure and the cleanliness of identification. In this space a second meaning waits to erupt, neatly concealed within the most platitudinous forms. It contains all that exceeds the state's space of identification, and that should remain secondary to it. "What are you bringing with you from Mexico?" means, literally, "Are you a trafficker?" In the very clutches of state interpellation, jokes insist on smuggling through the answer, "Yes, I am"—though this answer also means, impossibly, "I am not here."

While Mercedes and the woman in the sweat-suit use jokes incidentally, as an on-the-spot defense against state interpellation, Betty uses the trope of the trickster-trafficker to ground her sense of self more permanently. Betty is a young professional who, as is common amongst middle-class *tijuanenses*, had held a BCC since childhood. Her father, however, is a native U.S. citizen, and in preparation for graduate school in the United States, Betty applied for citizenship herself. The decision, she explained, was purely practical—she thought it would be simpler than getting a student visa every year—and so she was not particularly concerned when her application was rejected. It was not until she sought her student visa that the reasons for her rejection came to light.

And then, then, then my interview was over. So then they were accusing me, I found out [later?] of, of fraud against the government of the United States for not having

[16] Paredes presents a very similar joke, which remains in circulation, and in which the bicycle itself is the contraband (1993a: 101–2). In Paredes' version, too, telling the truth exempts the smuggler from state retribution.

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declared that I was adopted. But I didn't know I was adopted. But they didn't, didn't believe me.
…

So then what with that, I can't, I can't get a visa anymore. Ever. So then that happened after the family trauma … because my parents didn't want me to know, I mean, they had made the decision that I not know they had adopted me, and, because they [the Consulate] told me that [that she was adopted], and also because they were accusing me of fraud when I didn't know.

The "trauma," Betty says, involved both the personal revelation and her literal criminalization. Betty's life plans had been charted on the assumption of legal access to the United States, and the shattering of that assumption had far-reaching effects. She described both a long process of personal recovery and a twin institutional process of appealing her case. Her birth certificate may have been inauthentic, but her self-presentation was sincere, and the state should recognize her authentic identity as a good, middle-class Mexican citizen. The officer's accusation—"You just want the visa to go live in the U.S.!"—outrages her. To explain the gravity of the situation, Betty goes a step further: "If the officer decides to say, 'You're no-, I'm gonna put down that you're a drug-trafficker, don't ever enter the United States again,' you don't enter again, because she has the power, they have the power to put things on there? [on your file] and we don't know who has the power to take them off." Betty evokes the trafficker as the extreme of criminal branding, illustrating both the absoluteness and the ludicrousness of the U.S. state's classificatory operations. The state, she has discovered, is not a rational machine of class legitimation but a source of arbitrary violence. At the same time, unauthorized border-crossing is still not even an imaginative option for her: if the officer says you don't enter, you don't enter. Betty's "trauma," her outrage, and her sense of her life possibilities develop only in reference to a social world in which legal access to the U.S. can be treated as a given.

Betty's exclusion from the United States, however, revealed a power she did not know she had. Instead of seeking her master's degree, Betty decided to pursue an alternate future: she had a baby. Because her BCC was, ironically, never cancelled, she was able to give birth in the United States, guaranteeing her son the opportunities she was so bluntly denied. The legality of his birth makes her son's citizenship a joke on the state: "To screw them," she laughed. Within legal forms themselves, transgression emerges. Accused of trying to pass, Betty need change nothing about herself outwardly to turn the meaning of her legal border-crossing inside out. Within the law itself, she has smuggled her child across the border as contraband. It is as if she were to assert, "I *am* a trafficker."

If Betty frames her son's citizenship as a joke on the state, this is because she realized that her own legal status was a joke to begin with. Her desire to joke, as she tells it, emerged when she realized state violence as such. Now,

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she says, all the petty injustices of the U.S. state leap out at her where she never noticed them before: in line for the visa interview, the elderly must stand in the hot sun for hours, at military attention, like everyone else; a woman carries her handicapped daughter through this ordeal, for wheelchairs are not allowed. For Betty, the state is reduced to this unnecessary cruelty, and violence contaminates all pretense of bureaucratic order. As a joke, her son's citizenship crystallizes the double bind of Mexican citizenship in its deep play with U.S. state recognition. On the surface is his legal status, perfectly valid and irreproachable. Beneath it lies his mother's irremediable and utterly unjust exclusion as the hidden truth of the whole system. As a middle-class visa-holder in Tijuana, part of a social group that takes legal access to the United States by and large for granted, Betty partakes of the undecidability of citizenship that Salter describes. She has been banned when she least expected it. Yet the disjuncture in her relation to the U.S. state was, if anything, strengthened. Through her son, she is as tightly bound to the U.S. state as ever: several years later, she described to me her meticulous efforts to ensure that her son's documentation as a U.S. citizen is continuous. She seems to believe full U.S. citizenship will seal the disjuncture and save her son from going through what she did. It remains to be seen if he will not be more aware of the disjuncture that will inevitably haunt his citizenship as well.

THE VISA INTERVIEW

For middle-class *tijuanenses*, the logics of trafficking as trickstering provide a frame for jokes to function as performative arguments that work through the undecidable disjuncture haunting Mexican citizenship at the border: attachment to the U.S. state insofar as it provides rational, transparent legitimation of social status; disavowal insofar as it exposes one to violences both subtle and overt. Like *corridos*' jokes, middle-class jokes highlight contradictions of citizenship and sovereignty that broader discourses also deal with, though usually only by switching between accusations of violence and acceptance of the state's terms of recognition. In this section, I show how middle-class subjects' investment in authentic identity—their belief that they present themselves transparently to the U.S. state, and that it recognizes them for what they are—cannot be clearly distinguished from working-class subjects' emphasis on the need for dissimulation in encounters with that same state. The state's incitement to authenticity can turn inside out to become, in effect, an incitement to duplicity. My point is not that subjects are indeed "split between state-imposed identity and personal identity" (Ong 1999: 2), but rather that the desire for authentic identity ends up putting pressure on people to perform themselves as just the opposite, for instance, but not only, in the jokes we have already seen.[17]

[17] I did not hear working-class visa-holders joke about their encounters with officials, though they did joke about other aspects of crossing. In their case, anger and anxiety tended to be balder.

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To grasp how the investment in authenticity undoes itself, I focus on a basic rite of citizenship in Tijuana: the consular interview for the U.S. Border Crossing Card.[18] The BCC has existed in different incarnations since 1918 (Wilson 1918). It is good for ten years, and renewal is fairly simple; many *tijuanenses* acquire their visa in infancy and hold it throughout their life. The BCC does not permit legal employment in the United States but only short visits. It is a basic emblem of local belonging: in a college professor's words, "*todo mundo tiene*" (*everybody* has one). As anthropological work on identity documents emphasizes (Bear 2001; Gordillo 2006; Navaro-Yashin 2007; Chu 2009), the visa is embedded in local histories, and it is through them that it becomes saturated with the ambivalence of citizen-sovereign relations.

In Tijuana, the visa plays a crucial role in ratifying local, liberally oriented ideals of citizenship (though of course not all visa-holders orient to these ideals). U.S. Permanent Residents (like Braulio and Mercedes) and even dual citizens (as Betty aspired to become) can position themselves similarly as civic-minded, patriotic *tijuanenses*, so long as they did not obtain their papers by themselves having lived without authorization in the United States. In middle-class Tijuana, unauthorized labor migration is widely stigmatized. "He'd never admit it," a friend sniffed to me about a mutual acquaintance, "but I'm sure he's working construction in the U.S." Many people do use their BCCs to facilitate unauthorized labor in the United States, but the vast majority of residents with documents for legal border-crossing both live and work in the city.[19] Though my argument does not depend on the size of Tijuana's liberally oriented middle class, it is nonetheless a substantial group in this relatively prosperous, politically conservative city that widely thinks of itself as *clasemediera* (middle-class).

If the visa is a necessity, this is not for practical but historical reasons. The challenge the United States poses to Mexican citizenship has been exacerbated with the sharpening of logics of suspicion at the border since 9–11, but its roots lie in the border's historical role in instituting the stereotype of the Mexican as poor, dark, and "illegal" (Montejano 1987; Ngai 2004). This stereotype haunts *tijuanenses*' efforts to establish themselves as upright citizens of a sovereign nation on a par with the United States. They seek the visa for the exorcism it

[18] I did not observe interviews, though I accompanied several applicants before and after them. Heyman (2001) describes BCC interviews in the early 1990s. Heyman (1995), Gilboy (1991), Chalfin (2008), and Friedman (2010) examine interview situations, but all focus on the officers. Here, I am less interested in the interview per se than in folk theories about it.

[19] Alegría's (2009: 86) estimate of the percentage of residents with legal access to the United States is from 2001, but if we apply it to the current population, this group would comprise close to a million people. In comparison, less than twenty thousand of Tijuana's Mexican-born residents commuted across the border for work in 2010 (Orraca 2015). These figures make implausible any claim that residents of Tijuana seek the BCC only to facilitate unauthorized labor in the United States.

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promises: for the assurance that they are not and never would be poor, dark, "illegal aliens." At the time of my fieldwork in 2006 and 2007, Mexico's "neoliberal turn" and its "democratic transition" of 2000 had driven the stakes of sloughing off this stereotype higher than ever. Still today, a plethora of state and civil society projects promote *formación ciudadana* (citizen formation), and many *tijuanenses* eagerly take up this language. They both speak of themselves as "citizens" and try to fulfil their obligations as such by voting, paying taxes, not giving bribes, and so forth. In contrast, the "illegal alien" is often said (echoing conservative U.S. discourses) to have no respect for the law. Where lawfulness has been valorized in this way, and where the United States is often seen as a model of the rule of law, the U.S. state is especially important as an arbiter of differentiated Mexican citizenship.

Quite literally, the BCC certifies that one is not a potential unauthorized labor migrant. Upon failing the visa interview, one receives a piece of paper explaining, "The Immigration Law of the United States presumes that every applicant for a non-immigrant visa is a possible immigrant." At a basic level, the interview is a rite of passage instituting a new social status in the successful applicant. It secures a "lasting difference between those to whom the rite pertains and those to whom it does not pertain" (Bourdieu 1991: 117): between the territorially rooted, upstanding, middle-class Mexican citizen and the "possible immigrant" to the United States, in whom a future as an "illegal alien" remains a legible potential. The interview calques the stigma of the "illegal alien" onto all those who are or might be visa rejects. It reconfirms Tijuana's prejudice against its poor as "migrants," neither committed to the city nor rightfully part of its civic life. For the better-off, the visa interview definitively consolidates their standing. Or at least, it seems to.

How does this ritual work? To be classified as a "non-immigrant," one must provide what the Consulate calls "guarantees" of one's return to Mexico: letters of employment, paycheck stubs, educational diplomas, family members' visas, property deeds, electricity bills, water contracts, even marriage certificates. The list is not finite, nor is any item specifically required; instead, one takes to the interview any and all proof one can amass. In Mexico, access to state institutions has been a central idiom of social status since colonial times (Lomnitz 2001). In this context, there is no ritual that validates one's status as a fully documented person, and that sums up a life-long relation to formal institutions, the way the visa interview does. At the same time, the presentation of documents is not enough. Indeed, to lay them all out before the officer, it is believed, would mean failure. An engineer in one of Tijuana's multitudinous assembly-plants described the advice he gave to his subordinates:[20]

[20] Because this plant was closing, many employees were applying for the visa. I conducted fieldwork there for just a few weeks, but had contact with several employees over a number of years.

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Take it with you in a folder like so, I tell him, all orderly. Bills, don't take all of them. In sight: take a month's. If he asks for two months', [have them ready?] someplace else.
…
I think when they should go there they shouldn't, they should take everything ready with them just in case, but. Not show anything until they ask you for it? And not show everything.
…
So, why take all of them, I mean. It's like showing all your cards, it's … for me personally, it's … a sign of desperation.

This analysis projects an apex of success in the interview. The ideal applicant is the one who presents the fewest documents, whose status is simply evident in his or her person: in bearing, dress, tone of speech; in the color and softness of skin and hair. More than once I have heard the story, told in awe, of the impeccable applicant of whom consular officials did not demand a single document. The engineer himself was no amateur in the art of self-presentation. He showed up to his interview without his ID, the one indispensable document. But when he explained with a shrug he had forgotten it, he was given his visa anyway. In the brief minutes the interview lasts, the best evidence of a lifetime of self-fashioning is the classic restraint of the bourgeois subject. As Bourdieu points out of all such rites of institution, the interview's basic message is, "Become what you are."[21]

"You and I know it's about class," the engineer told me. His statement reflects the belief that U.S. state recognition in the interview is a straightforward evaluation of the individual applicant's authentic identity. This belief is necessary if the visa is to be understood as a simple validation of social status and full Mexican citizenship. Indeed, office-workers at the factory insisted without exception that the visa was a matter of course for them, and that they were not nervous about their upcoming interviews because they knew they were the sort of person to whom the United States gives BCCs.

In contrast, line-workers said the outcome of the interview was a matter of luck. They would adamantly rebut remarks like the engineer's ("It's about class"), pointing out that there were line-workers with visas and office-workers without. In their small talk, they spoke of the interview much as a game, along the lines of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, with lengthy discussions and regrets over the question that got each failed applicant "out." For them, success reflects, rather than the grooming of a lifetime, a combination of luck and quick-wittedness. Instead of a unitary, authentic identity, their theory of the interview projects a subject split between authentic interior and façade. In fact, when explaining the interview to his subordinates, the engineer

[21] Compare Chu on the "convincing interweaving of paper evidence and embodied performance" (2010: 131) in U.S. visa interviews in China. Though applicants there focus on crafting their "file selves" more than their self-presentation, there is a similar dialectic between internalized identity and official identifications (ibid.: 62).

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framed it in exactly this way: as pragmatic calculus, the manipulation of appearances and nothing more.

The distinction between those who posit performance as sincere and those who posit it as duplicitous, however, is unstable. Two technicians in their mid-twenties, one of whom was the last person to receive the engineer's advice, explained to me how they prepared for the visa interview. They had held off applying for several years, they said, until they felt they had fully transformed themselves into desirable candidates. "I waited until I knew for myself I didn't want it in order to go work in the U.S.," one of them told me. That is, he expected his inmost impulses to be legible to the state, and carefully modified them. At the same time, the two friends changed outwardly, too: they slowly shifted their sartorial habits from *cholo* (gangster) style to khakis, button-down shirts, and dress shoes.[22] Quite consciously, they taught themselves to dress "presentably" (their word) on a daily basis. This strategy is consonant with the wisdom frequently repeated by successful applicants: it is essential to dress as one would any other day.[23] Like the office-workers, the technicians treated the visa as the finishing touch to the profound process of inward and outward self-transformation that upward mobility entails.

The very care they took, however, bears the traces of an attitude in which the visa is *not* a simple confirmation of social distinction. The technicians said they waited until they had accumulated a respectable number of years at the same job, until they had bought homes, until they had married. Both of their wives were native-born *tijuanenses*, and both already held visas that their husbands presented at the interview. Though marrying a visa-holding *tijuanense* is generally considered an advantage in the interview, it is hard to imagine going to such trouble for a BCC. Yet the technicians' co-workers loudly teased them, "This guy got married just for the visa!" It thus remains ambiguous whether the technicians' life-project of the last few years is a project of self-transformation and upward mobility, or if it is nothing but hollow strategizing to increase the chances at a visa. The very objectivity with which they described the advantages they had taken so long to accumulate suggests the latter. Those who warn to wear everyday dress to the interview, after all, never verbalize what was obvious to the technicians: that everyday dress must be acceptable by the standards of business casual.

Edith is an engineer at the factory who, like the technicians, has worked her way up in the world through diligent self-fashioning as well as study. Like other office-workers, she is invested in the visa as an emblem of status, or at least she

[22] Indeed, on my first visit to the plant, I was shocked to see one of them in his uniform—we had met at an office-workers' party, and I had had no idea he was not one of them.

[23] Another technician, who failed his interview, reported that he wore his "Sunday best." According to an office-worker, this man has "the look of someone who wants to go work [without authorization] in the United States." With this remark, she naturalizes the visa as a sign of social distinction.

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feels she must keep up the appearance that this is what it means to her. Sometimes, she tells me, she thinks of using her BCC to work without authorization in the United States. Immediately, though, a vivid image pops into her head of her fellow engineers sneering at her: "Ugh, is *that* what you went to college for?" Away from them, she can more openly muse, "I think the best way to go to the U.S. is to make your life here in Mexico, appear to be well-off (*aparentar estar bien*), and cross with papers to work."

In Edith's case as in the technicians', the sense of duplicity that haunts their efforts to remake themselves as proper, middle-class citizens is clearly due to their social background: the world in which unauthorized labor migration is normal is not far behind them. Moving up the social ladder, though, the split between false appearance and true self persists. Years before, the plant's head supervisor had been stung by rejection on his first try at a visa, probably because he had only just moved to Tijuana. Upon succeeding, he finally agreed to talk with me. The shirt he wore to the interview, he told me, had a microscopic hole in the front. As he proudly pointed out the spot, it was clear he considered the hole a memorial to his earlier rejection, a tiny "fuck you" imperceptibly installed right in the middle of his very façade of presentability. This tiny rebellion, at once open and covert, echoes with the jokes I have discussed. At first, it would seem to show how the state's regime of suspicion propitiates, finally, not the consolidation of identity but its chronic denial. Away from the watchful eyes of consular officers and border guards, technicians, engineers, and even supervisors secretly insist (like the *corridos*' traffickers) that they are not what they seem. However, the hole in the supervisor's shirt is ultimately undecidable. As per the command to dress as one would any other day, the performance of not caring what the state thinks is also what ensures that one really is an eligible subject. This double meaning of the hole—at once attaching the subject to the state, at once disavowing that attachment—is the beginning of the contradiction in citizenship that jokes so flamboyantly attempt to manage.

CONCLUSION

Jokes' boundary-policing function is well-known; the line between accepted and hidden meanings is a line between groups. Embedded in *corridos*, this group-creating function becomes part of the song's evocation of a public. There, as in the port of entry, the line at the heart of the joke merges with the border itself.[24] The presumption of shared Mexican-ness in the example

[24] Conversely, border officers sometimes use jokes to determine cultural citizenship and confirm mutual membership in the U.S. nation. Once, while questioning me, an officer shot me a particularly intimidating look. Something in it, though, led me to let just a trace of a smile show; his face immediately loosened into a grin, reframing his inquisitorial air as a joke. Here, to get the joke was to pass the border. Of course, had I not smiled, it would not have been a joke at all.

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of the woman in the sweat-suit, for instance, seemed so strong that I never dared clarify that I was American, since it could only have appeared as a rejection of the communality my fellow-crosser offered me. But it is exactly where U.S. state recognition is so fundamental for Mexican citizenship that the need to insist on nationality becomes so pressing. James Siegel (1997) explains how revolution in Java depended on the Javanese discovery of their own power to pass, to inhabit other identities. This discovery brought with it, however, the anxiety that one might actually become the colonial enemy. One needed certain slogans—passwords, Siegel calls them (ibid.: 209)—to pass continually back into the in-group, to remain a nationalist. Jokes at the border serve a similar purpose, letting one back into Mexico even as one physically passes into the United States. They perform the boundary just where what binds the subject is no clear-cut dialectic between citizen and (Mexican) state, but rather the ambivalence that subordinates that relation to a larger system.

Jokes perform as a structure of duality, as an unbridgeable opposition, the ambivalences, tensions, and tiny slippages that the state inserts into one's identity as a citizen. They counter-pose things that are not, in fact, strictly separable. They take as straw-man the well-known "split between state-imposed identity and personal identity," the sense of duplicity that might haunt any interview situation, and blow it up into a dramatic confrontation, with Mexican jokers firmly on one side, the U.S. state firmly on the other. However, as the examples show, middle-class subjects in Tijuana joke the most just when they are most tightly bound to the state. The jokes, indeed, help bind them, not through recognition of a unitary identity, but through ambivalence and undecidability as hallmarks of the citizen-state relation. They work similarly to the Cameroonian cartoons Mbembe describes, which, though they strive to debase the autocrat, answering his violence with the violence of laughter, end up extending and intensifying his omnipresence (2001: 165).

Through close attention to the details of not just their narrative form but also how they are deployed in interaction, jokes can be useful comparatively to grasp how people in different contexts begin to posit the contradictions of their relation to the state. It is, after all, not for nothing that checkpoints so often censor humor. Beyond the mass-mediated public texts on which studies of political satire usually focus (Mbembe 2001; Sánchez 2006; Boyer and Yurchak 2010), jokes' comparative value as I have developed it here lies in seeing them as performative arguments, mobilized in context to different ends, that declare subjects to be split between authentic interior and inauthentic exterior. Among middle-class *tijuanenses*, this declaration helps manage overwhelming pressures toward authentic identity and a unitary self, thus facilitating their relation with the U.S. state. By examining jokes in context, analysis reveals just how they posit subjects as split in different contexts for pragmatic reasons rooted in local and personal histories of citizenship and sovereignty, but also entangled in a global system in formation.

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As in many places across the globe, liberal lawfulness has been an increasingly important way to perform middle-class status in Mexico. In Tijuana, however, respect for Mexican law is conflated, through the visa, with respect for U.S. law. Over and again I heard middle-class *tijuanenses* voice their frustration with those who try to get into the United States without authorization and thereby make things more difficult for "us" law-abiding folk (as well as dirtying our city, making it crime-ridden, giving it a bad name, and so forth). If it were not for them, we could pass freely—or so middle-class Tijuana imagines. And yet its relation to the U.S. state is deeply contradictory. The harder surveillance at the port clamps down, the more life itself seems in excess of this system, and the more jokes bubble up beneath the surface of interpellation, manifesting the ambivalence of which citizenship is made. As borders are securitized across the globe at the same time that expedited mobility becomes an ever-more-central mode of social distinction, it may be a healthy sign if we begin to see more border-crossing jokes on a global scale: more explicit thematization, that is, of the contradictions that constitute us as citizens.

In Tijuana, what it means to be a trafficker, as this figure circulates popularly, is to be "not here" except as a figure of disruption, of the spectacular failure of state interpellation in the face of all that exceeds it. Bundled into the joke-form, this suggestion at once keeps present the imaginative possibility of the explosive derailment of state recognition and hooks subjects deeper into it. Betty, for instance, has perpetuated her relation with the United States through her son. Likewise, Tijuana's new middle-class citizens cling to describing their performance in the visa interview as an "appearance" (recall the nuns with their habits), but they only do so in response to the formalization of their status as "non-immigrants." The point, however, is not just these subjects' ambivalence regarding the U.S. state, but also the way in which the U.S. state inserts this ambivalence into Mexican citizenship. In Tijuana, even the blandest sort of middle-class citizenship takes shape only through this mediation from abroad, with all its complex dynamics of desire, fear, and disavowal. The Mexican state is a minor fetish, more despised than awe-inspiring, on the way to the U.S. state as pinnacle of the ignominious admixture of violence and reason. The case shows how different national regimes of citizenship are bound together at many levels, and not only by those who cross their borders without official authorization.

Where national regimes of citizenship have emerged historically in relation to each other and continue to be substantially linked (as with Mexico and the United States), citizenship cannot be an exclusively national matter. Graduated sovereignty on a global scale depends on the fortification of international borders, but also on the links that knit differentiated zones into an enormous if apparently disaggregated whole. These links, as jokes show, are made of ambivalence. The more cagey the subject and the more constitutively split, the stronger the motivation drawing him or her in to this ambiguous exchange.

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Even as jokes facilitate the extension of this hierarchical system of slippage and suspicion, however, they keep present, as its hidden truth, everything that lies beyond it. However faintly, their laughter still echoes with another sovereignty.

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Abstract: This article explores citizenship and sovereignty at the Mexico–U.S. border through jokes told about and around checkpoint encounters—most centrally, those staged at the main port of entry connecting Tijuana, Mexico, and San Diego, California. In Tijuana, I argue, U.S. state recognition validates the proper, middle-class citizenship of Mexicans resident in Mexico. Attitudes towards the United States, however, remain ambivalent. I begin by exploring the checkpoint jokes of drug-traffickers as represented in several *narcocorridos* (popular ballads about drug-trafficking). Though this music is disapproved of by most people invested in U.S. state recognition, I show next how middle-class jokes build on the trope of the trickster-trafficker to parry state interpellation. The jokes work as performative arguments where people begin to articulate the tensions that constitute citizenship and sovereignty at the border. Finally, I examine the consular interview for the U.S. Border Crossing Card, a key site knitting together U.S. and Mexican regimes of citizenship. Folk theories of how the interview works anticipate the jokes' bald thematization of duplicity, explaining why middle-class people would turn to jokes that frame them as traffickers. Understood in the context of the BCC interview, middle-class checkpoint jokes reveal Mexican citizenship as embedded in an international system organized not by principles of authentic identity, but by ambivalence, contradiction, and undecidability.

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