

## TWO PUBLICS IN A MEXICAN BORDER CITY

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### THE NEWS READERS' FORUM

In July 2009, the web edition of the Tijuana newspaper *Frontera* ran an article titled “Police Agent Shot Last Sunday Dies” (Andrade 2009). Though the piece was but a short follow-up on the ambushing of several municipal police the weekend before, it received a robust response from the readership. The following illustrate the general tenor of the online comments:

diegoramirez: Rest in peace. And to the criminals, WE *TIJUANENSES* say; we won't give up control of Tijuana's streets.

miguel.angel12: ALL MY SUPPORT FOR THE TIJUANA POLICE. [...] Tijuana is with you.

rafasalazar09: I join the comments supporting the police. [...] Hopefully this will serve as one more motivation to CRUSH the damned rats [thieves; petty criminals] that there are in Tijuana.<sup>1</sup>

Signing their names to the affirmation “I support,” these readers perform in their brief remarks their identities as upstanding citizens, diligent participants in a public discourse that, while it may sometimes complain of or criticize the state, remains fundamentally oriented to it. Amid a national crisis of public security, in which Tijuana has been a hot spot, *Frontera's* readership appears as a citizenry of individual subjects arrayed before state authority, each replicating—thanks to the mediating evidential authority of *Frontera*—the same relationship to it. But the

display of a supportive public is disrupted by a comment that enters at right angles to this modality of public expression:

one-thousand: what I heard [lo que supe], was that some cops, beat up someone who supplied crystal meth [to] terrazas [the neighborhood where the shooting occurred] and the friend [the dealer] fell into a coma and died and in revenge they [the dealer's allies] did this [ambush the police].

When "one-thousand" receives a response, it is not directed toward the content of his or her message. It is a response exclusively to "what I heard" and the concrete connections the phrase implies between the speaker and the source of information:

user91: user one-thousand you don't know how to write and I don't doubt that you are friends with rats who supply drugs, typical opinions of criminals and their buddies here . . .

The voice of dissent, the voice that does not conform to the ritualistic celebration of state and media authority underway, is immediately branded not only as illiterate but as criminal. What follows "what I heard" does not matter, for it is proffered not by a citizen who may legitimately opine on matters of public concern but an associate of, as this post puts it, "rats."

Switching from the particularity of "what I heard" to a broader argument about the nomic truths that underlie the readers' shared sociopolitical reality, "TJ2009" takes up the challenge:

TJ2009: OH USER91 [. . .] DON'T FOOL YOURSELF[,] THIS IS NEVER GOING TO END AND YOU KNOW WHY[?] BECAUSE MONEY MOVES PEOPLE AND THOSE YOU PRAISE WANTING TO MAKE HEROES OF THEM ARE JUST RATS THE SAME AS THE RUFFIANS [*malandros*][.] I TELL YOU THIS BECAUSE I KNOW IT AND [I know it] VERY WELL

The post continues for a full page, moving from the street-level sort of graft that "TJ2009" proposes led to this policewoman's death all the way to a view of the national state of affairs, in which even the good citizens of the web forum are, despite themselves, implicated in and dependent on the drug trade:

WITHOUT DRUG TRAFFICKING THERE WOULD BE NO MONEY IN MEXICO[.] I THINK WE WERE BETTER OFF BEFORE[,] WHEN THEY [the authorities] LET THEM WORK

The truth “TJ2009” represents is, in his or her eyes, a national truth. Regardless of possible connections to the criminal underworld (“I tell you this because I know it”), “TJ2009” speaks first as a member of the tijuaneño community and of the general public, as made clear by his or her use of the first person plural. And yet, “TJ2009”’s interlocutors refuse to recognize him or her as such; “TJ2009”’s outpouring secures no substantive engagement. Instead, the voices of exclusion tighten:

diegoramirez: TJ2009[,] you’re the typical rat rubbed the wrong way by the fact they’re fighting crime. don’t pretend[,] you fucking rat. there’s no room for your attack-opinions here.

user91: For TJ2009: I do see that the government is fighting organized crime harder than ever. And negative people like you are just in the way.

“TJ2009”’s next post is titled “I WAS CENSORED.” That is, *Frontera* did not upload his or her previous comment.<sup>2</sup> For whatever reason, the calls for silence were enforced. Before this front, “TJ2009” can do little. He or she resorts to an appeal to common knowledge, an assertion that his or her representation of the world is not merely personal but that of “everyone” [*todos*]:

THEY DIDN’T OFF THIS COP FOR BEING A LITTLE WHITE DOVE, WE ALL KNOW [*todos sabemos*] THAT THOSE WHO DIE DO SO BECAUSE THEY OWE SOMETHING. THE CITIZENRY KNOWS THAT THE POLICE ARE IN BED WITH THE MAFIA, AND IF THEY KILLED HER IT WAS FOR A REASON.

But this intervention receives just one reply before the comments move off in another direction: “ENOUGH!”

## TWO PUBLICS AT THE BORDER

On *Frontera*’s website, two publics emerge in opposition to each other. On the one hand, and despite its acclamatory leanings, a dominant public models itself after the bourgeois public sphere much as Jürgen Habermas (1989) described it. Though its dependence on a system of authority running back to the state is evident, the “I” of the opining citizen takes front stage. On the other hand, a counterpublic takes shape, rather differently, through genres of hearsay ranging from the specificity of “what I heard” to the vast generality of “we all know. . . .”<sup>3</sup> In *Frontera*’s news

forum, this counterpublic finds little interpellative traction; in the gestures of exclusion from “informed debate,” it is quite literally criminalized.

The bourgeois-type public and the hearsay public,<sup>4</sup> as I call them, articulate themselves according to very different logics of representation, circulation, evidence, and authority. When “TJ2009” writes, “we all know,” and then, a breath later, “the citizenry knows,” he or she attempts to seal over the basic schism at stake in the interaction. The move is hopeless. “We all know” is inevitably allied with “what I heard”; they evoke a public locked in dispute with the “citizenry” of news readers arrayed before state authority, and they evoke a radically different imaginary of the sociopolitical world and one’s place in it. The things “TJ2009” insists “we all know” are not things that can be known by reading *Frontera* but only by entering the murky flow of communication that itself moves through (or frames itself as moving through) the backstage of the polity, where (it is imagined) deals are cut and private vengeance taken.

For the two publics, different models of circulation, based on different sources of evidential authority (formal news backed by the state vs. what “we all know”), entail different individual selves (the “I” of the good citizen vs. the rat) but also different collective subjects: not just “we tijuanaenses” but the “we” “TJ2009” proffers directly after mentioning “Mexico.”<sup>5</sup> Behind the claims to represent Tijuana lie latent broader claims to represent the national state of affairs and even to voice the national *we* itself. The two publics, slipping between local and national pretensions, take on substance as individuals voice different collective subjects to dispute not only their personal right to participate in the discussion but the right of their “we” to occupy the public space of the web forum and represent itself as the public at large. This performative process, embedded in the give-and-take of interaction and the risks of recognition it implies, is at the heart of how social groups, grounded in objective realities of social difference, become presupposable referents within which individuals may routinely locate themselves.

In this article, I pose the problem of the public sphere as a question of a range of performative enactments of collective subjectivity (see Lee 1997). To think of publics in this sense is to think of groupness as a discursive achievement, dependent on ongoing processes of uptake and recruitment to role (Silverstein 2004)—performativity, always tightly regimented by felicity conditions (Austin 1962), brings into empirical focus just how sociological entities become not only imaginable but also inhabitable. Expanding on Michael Warner’s insight that publics are “the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (2002:90), I track linguistic forms (“we tijuanaenses,” “what I heard”) that help frame the

interactions in which they appear as instantiations of different types of public association. Sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, they summon up the group of those who participate in such forms of association. But as the example from *Frontera* intimates, the reflexive evocation of groupness is never homogeneous; the “social space” of publicity comprehends a cline of voicings that cluster, overlap, and contend dialogically among themselves. These include both articulations of mass subjects (e.g., the nation) and of more limited collective subjects that may locate themselves within the larger ones or vie to represent the whole.<sup>6</sup>

The word *we* is a relatively unexamined standby in theoretical discussions of the public sphere, and in the example from *Frontera*, both publics do indeed use it. But the hearsay public generally relies on more linguistically complex mechanisms, reflexive appeals to “it is said . . .” or “everyone knows that . . .”<sup>7</sup> From the perspective of received notions of the public sphere, these reflexive markers are as unfamiliar as is the cultural imaginary thanks to which they work in practice to evoke publics. The hearsay public does not rely on broadcast communication or the circulation of text-artifacts; it is not, nor does it represent itself as, a modality of debate for the agonistic exchange of opinions or the production of rational consensus. Its topics may be political, but it is not oriented toward a future in which conversation might influence formal political decision making. Nonetheless, it appears on *Frontera*’s website as an entity of the same order as the far more standard public it opposes itself to. Instead of measuring these social forms by the ideals of the political public sphere as an institution for the management of dissent, I explore the ethnographic contours of the collective subjects they performatively trace.

An empirical grasp on publics and the public sphere is essential to consolidating anthropology’s contribution to interdisciplinary debates on the topic, still (despite Foucauldian critiques) dominated by a liberal politico-philosophical tradition.<sup>8</sup> Anthropology’s great potential here lies in its capacity to upset a series of conceptual oppositions: bourgeois versus popular publics, publics of rational debate versus mass media publics, and Western traditions of publicity versus their “derivative” variations elsewhere. The ethnographic tracking of collective subjectivity brings these dichotomies into focus as an object of analysis, as they are produced, negotiated, and redefined on the ground, as ideas that effectively shape contemporary social groups. Building on semiotically oriented theories of circulation (Lee and LiPuma 2002; Silverstein and Urban 1996), I approach the public sphere as part of a broader problematic: the performative enactment of collective subjectivity, split between multiple voicings, affords an ethnographic grip on the constitutive

conundrums of the public sphere as a historical model, without reproducing them as part of the analytic apparatus.<sup>9</sup>

The “we” of the public sphere is inherently unstable. On the one hand, the status of the exemplary citizen depends on his or her capacity to move beyond national borders, personally or via flows of information and goods. But this cosmopolitan bent of the public sphere must continually be curbed to the nation-state (cf. Kant 1970). On the other hand, and as many of Habermas’s critics have pointed out, the public sphere’s lauded utopian promise of inclusion is dogged by the sharp rejoinder of one or another imperative of exclusion.<sup>10</sup> As Jodi Dean (2002) argues, the problem of the public sphere’s relation to its internal others (classically, the unenlightened plebeians) constitutes it both as ideological model and sociological reality. Despite its failure to break into *Frontera*’s forum, however, the hearsay public is by no means defined solely by its exclusion. It is a mass social formation, commanding perduring allegiances and regimenting the worldviews of a vast population. Its sociological bulk makes it a crucial counter to the idea that the public sphere has fragmented into interest groups and that its large contours escape the questions of class and status that Habermas foregrounded. In Tijuana, the international border throws both of these conundrums into stark relief.

A bustling industrial city of perhaps two million, Tijuana borders on prosperous, conservative, and relatively white San Diego, California—one of the greatest contrasts across an international border anywhere.<sup>11</sup> Its public sphere takes shape under the shadow of the U.S. border apparatus and its relentless sorting of subjects into those fit and unfit to cross it legally. The ethnographic examples that follow show how, against the historical racialization and classing of Mexicans in the United States,<sup>12</sup> Tijuana’s bourgeois-type public seeks to assert that Mexico is not a country of poor, dark migrants and that it itself, with its emblematic genre of rational debate among equals, represents a national horizon of possibility. Those who animate this public are, unsurprisingly, deeply invested in asserting that they as individuals would never be “illegal aliens”—proof of which is furnished by the U.S. nonimmigrant visa.<sup>13</sup> Tijuana’s bourgeois-type public, with its nationalist pretensions and its championing of territorialized citizenship, is ultimately buttressed by U.S. state recognition.

The hearsay public, in contrast, involves a diffuse spatiotemporal imaginary of anonymous encounter in public. In the narrative representations I present below, movement on Tijuana’s street has migration from southern Mexico at its root, a migration that extends itself indiscriminately (just as established Tijuana

prejudicially accuses) into the United States.<sup>14</sup> This public posits wage labor and undocumented border crossing as national conditions.<sup>15</sup> Its spatiotemporal horizon is defined not by the territorial limit of the border but by hearsay's own expansive demand to be repeated.

The ethnographic bulk of this article, then, explores not just the reflexive markers so crucial for public-formation but also the narrative representations bound up with them. Public-making interactions are rich in narratives that, intimately tied to the assumptions implicit in the reflexive markers that frame and buttress them, refigure crucial dimensions of groupness—most importantly here, race, class, and citizenship—both spatially, in represented geographies of social difference, and temporally, in notions of “progress,” for instance. Performatively mobilized, these narratives produce “a fiction of premediated existence” (Mazzarella 2004:357) that includes not just the collective subjects of publicity themselves but the spatiotemporal world in which they find their place.<sup>16</sup> Linguistic representation, in the sense of both depiction and delegation (claims to speak for a larger group), thus plays a key role in the evocation of publics. When a public is performatively successful, it is the whole world defining “we” that is established as a shared reality. In Tijuana, these worlds, at once represented and performed, inevitably reflect the political economy of dependence between the United States and Mexico, as well as the immense and subtle web of social distinctions that make up national society, within which they take shape. But the two publics deal with this political economy, and position themselves in relation to it, quite differently and in ways that are telling for societies far beyond.

By distinguishing between legal and illegal border crossers, the border accents and articulates socioeconomic divisions common throughout urban Latin America. One bolstered (though ambiguously) by U.S. recognition, the other stigmatized by it, two publics here dispute between them not only their rights to the city but their status as embodiments of the national subject itself.<sup>17</sup> The examples that follow show two competing visions of Mexico and of Tijuana's place within it; the first struggles to establish itself against the conflation of “Mexican” with “illegal alien,” while the second takes up that conflation as an imaginary to be inhabited.<sup>18</sup> The bourgeois-type public (rooted in the “I” of the citizen) and the hearsay public (rooted in the “everyone” who participates in the circulation of hearsay) represent the two main clusters of voicings of collective subjectivity in Tijuana. Each is mobilized as actors seek to redefine themselves and their interlocutors in the flow of interaction; neither is homogeneous either in its representation of society or in

the sociological profile of those it interpellates. But, though the subject positions these publics depend on and re-create are not fixed, they are not free either of sociological constraints, most overwhelmingly here, legal passage across the border and all the details of class and status it sums up. Between them, in the way they draw together race, class, and citizenship at the border, the two publics throw light on the conundrums Mexico inherits from the classic model of the bourgeois public sphere and on the basic social schism it faces in its attempt to posit itself as a collective subject.

### THE BOURGEOIS-TYPE PUBLIC

Asking about visas, I conducted a series of interviews in one of the transnational assembly plants for which the northern Mexican border is wellknown. When the manager's turn came, he invited me into a boardroom to wait while he and four other men transferred files over their laptops. Only mildly occupied, the men had time for chitchat. This interaction, and, especially, what the manager had to say about it afterward, reveals how the model of bourgeois publicity and rational debate emerges out of a complex articulation of (often racialized) national, regional, and class differences and how this model may be mobilized as the crux of a bid for recognition of a particular social group's legitimacy and its claim to define a national horizon of possibility.

The men began, courteously enough, with a topic that might well interest me: a gringo, an American, regularly sent down by the company's U.S. headquarters.<sup>19</sup> They recommended I interview him. A good Spanish speaker, remarkably familiar with Mexican culture, he fulfills well (they seemed to judge) his formal role as cultural intermediary. "When we get like, 'Fucking gringos!,'" one man explained, "he says to us, 'No, the thing is, it's like this, it's like that . . . ' And when they [the Americans at headquarters] get like, 'Fucking Mexicans!,' he also says to them, 'No, the thing is, it's like this . . .'"

The real inequality between interlocutors is of course the underlying theme of the anecdote; "fucking gringos!" coming from the plant is in no way symmetrical to "fucking Mexicans!" coming from corporate headquarters. But the anecdote sets the two parties up as equivalent. In portraying both sides as equally reaching a breaking point that is resolved in exactly the same way, it posits an equality free from the power differential not only between headquarters and plant, but between the United States and Mexico. Addressed to an American (myself), it is a reminder of the equivalence of interlocutors under the principle of equivalent national sovereignties. The gringo, as a figure, functions



metapragmatically; I am interpellated into a role parallel to his own. That is, my future writings (such as this one) should essentially communicate, “No, the thing is . . .”

The gringo emerges, however, not just as a mediator but as defender of Mexican national sovereignty against even internal assaults. The men recounted with delight an incident between this American and a taxi driver. When the driver insisted on being paid in dollars, the gringo threw his pesos at him, shouting, “Mexican! You’re in Mexico!” We may infer that the taxi driver recognized the nationalist accusation in the mouth of the gringo and was thus shamed into accepting payment in pesos. His countrymen in the boardroom, at any rate, laugh at him; he is shown up as a traitor.

However oddly, the authority of a Mexican nationalist discourse of equivalence is confirmed by the gringo’s use of it. The in-group mode of the men’s address to me (the convivial extension of their camaraderie) subtly undoes itself; they address me precisely as that most problematic of interlocutors, the American, one of the “they” who in some remote, off-stage location explode, “fucking Mexicans!,” all too quick to abuse a very real power, which yet remains all too necessary in authorizing its own restraint. That is, the men end up invoking U.S. power and re-creating it in the interaction. This conundrum, the tension between egalitarian address and subtly resuscitated distinctions, was repeated as the discussion turned to regional differences and an explicit mobilization of debate among equals as a model for Mexico internally.

One man, darker skinned than the rest, informed the group, “In Mexico City, they really are spicy; here they aren’t. There they really are enchiladas. Here your momma takes the seeds out, and there they stuff more chilies in.” With “your momma,” he addresses his fellows as native tijuanaenses, people from “here,” which at least two of them were. When the talk turned to soccer a moment later, this same man spoke with equal gusto as the sole defender of the Mexico City team. With beaming smiles, addressing each other frequently and universally as *Ingeniero* (Engineer), the men hammed up verbal flourishes of politesse before delivering their barbed puns and insults. The manager, next to me, glanced over more than once, and in a lull, after about 15 minutes of banter, took it upon himself to do some explaining: “Here in the North they don’t come to blows over these things; it’s peaceable. Here, to each his own opinion, and talking [i.e., people talk things out], and that’s it.” He made hand motions in the air, referring to their just-enacted egalitarian exchange of opinions, little motions in the direction of each participant. “But there in the stadium, with the beers and the heat. . . .”

The exchange is clearly ludic, and yet the manager reframes it as debate, the core genre of bourgeois publicity. The men's joking insults become "opinions" to which each is entitled; the speaking of one's mind appears as a right to be respected. This type of interaction, he says, is characteristic of "the North." The South, in contrast, is represented by the stadium, where plebeian passions rise to blows. The feisty provocations of the dark-skinned man do not, however, represent an element of the stadium in the midst of rational debate. The North with its emblematic mode of interaction is more robust than that. The southerner here has already been reframed as northern. His contributions both provide the opportunity for and cinch the manager's claim as to the nature of the North and of the interaction. Like my own status as American, the color of his skin (the South is stereotypically indigenous; the North stereotypically white) is a difference curiously both at issue and suppressed in the interaction. It must be there, if only to be ignored. If the North is the place where all parts of the Republic (as it is often called) can represent themselves equally in the public space of free rational debate, if the North wins because it represents a future and a model for national being as a whole, this is thanks only to the presence of the South, covertly summoned up in the interaction.

The exchange as a display of egalitarianism is anchored in the vocative, "Engineer." All addressed all as *Ingeniero*; the term is a reminder of equal status in debate. It clears a space within which "opinions" will be respected. In this space, the manager is willing to shed his status and assume equality with his subordinates—but this equality depends on the exclusivity of the boardroom. *Ingeniero* is also a reminder of relative status, of one's educational degree and of one's position in the plant as in society. It is a reminder of those who are not present, who are not *Ingenieros*, and who could not contribute so elegantly to the virtuosic tending of "opinion." The man from the South is, before all else, an Engineer like the rest of "us." But even within the boardroom equality has its limits, for it is in fact the manager's status that licenses the whole performance—which is why he retains the right of explaining it.

As rational debate, the banter in the boardroom may fall a bit short. And yet it is held up in all seriousness as an image that typifies Tijuana and underlies social relations in the plant. In our interview later, the manager twice brought up the debate on soccer as an example of his personal ethos ("that's who I am") and a managerial style that, he claims, underpins daily interaction in the plant. "So if you treat your companions like people, I mean, or as equals? There won't be any problem. For example, in the discussion we had just now. The supervisor, a,

uh, clerk from Materials, [the] coordinator, the plant manager. I mean, within the social structure in Mexico. ‘No [way], how [could this be]?!’” The scandalized voice the manager mocks is that of the “old Mexico” he opposes himself to. He is able to create the boardroom as a new Mexico of equals because his status as manager allows him to impose his personal, tijuanaense ethos. But he is not just licensed as manager by U.S. headquarters—his status and the bourgeois-type publicity he animates as Tijuana’s are underwritten by the U.S. state in the form of his nonimmigrant visa.

The manager has held a visa since early childhood. When he reapplied as an adult, “I had no problem. The information you have to present is that you have to be economically solvent and that it’s not your idea to have the visa to go work in the U.S.” In Tijuana, the undocumented migrant to the United States is stereotypically southern; “we” tijuanaenses are visa holders. Many still consider the migrant, much as the taxi driver desirous of dollars, to be degrading “us” both in real economic terms and in foreign eyes, and the manager has been described to me as “one of those who think you’re betraying Mexico if you go work in the U.S.” In our interview he told me, “I prefer to be a first-rate citizen in my own country than to live better in another country where I won’t be treated the same.” With a salary 12 times higher than that of the line operators in his plant (also, stereotypically, southern migrants), the manager could not very well live “better” in the United States. If he feels he is treated “the same” in Mexico, that is, in egalitarian fashion, this is only because he can accede to the sphere of “first-rate citizenship.” Tijuana’s bourgeois-type public is made up of the “first-rate citizens” who know they are such because the impossibility of their becoming “illegal aliens” has been embalmed for them in the form of a visa.

In the boardroom, the manager explained that baseball is the region’s true sport. He traced a map in the air, signaling soccer and baseball states: “When I was little, soccer [he squinches his face, shaking his head]. We watched it on TV. Baseball we did follow, here in San Diego [he signals north, casually], because of the Padres.” His gestures in the air, dividing regions on an imaginary map of Mexico, parallel the ones he made earlier, signaling the participants to debate: “to each his own opinion.” “We” who first took shape as children, as a sports-viewing public, are just the ones to offer the possibility of seeing and representing as equivalent all those regional and personal differences that make up Mexico. This tijuanaense “we” articulates itself through an attempt to instantiate a classic communicative genre of bourgeois publicity: rational debate among equals, and the formation of “opinions” in a protected sphere of tolerance, where status is shed. But this “we” is

anchored in the last gesture of the manager's, pointing even farther north, across the border. It is the same gesture as that which evokes the gringo as authorizer of a Mexican nationalist discourse of equivalence; it is the same gesture as this entire performance before myself as but another figure for the United States, from which recognition must always, in the end, be obtained. The collective subject of bourgeois publicity, which seeks to extend itself from the "we" of Tijuana to all of Mexico, only appears deictically situated between, on the one hand, a map on which "we" can be located and, on the other hand, the anchoring gesture, "here in San Diego."

### THE HEARSAY PUBLIC

I continue with another well-to-do character from the world of industry, this one a capitalist in his own right, owner of a now-foundering auto parts plant. Despite his wealth, the mode of public communication and the image of Tijuana-in-Mexico that this man draws on is radically different from those deployed by the educated, Tijuana-born, visa-holding manager. Although the entrepreneur claims to have been always a legal border crosser, the main source of capital for his factory came from his (low-status) wage labor in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Arriving from the South in the 1950s, he worked as a welder in San Diego until the 1970s, when he was finally able to dedicate himself fulltime to his own business. He has long lived in the United States and commutes to Tijuana daily.

The entrepreneur took control of our interview from the start, explaining that Tijuana is but a "cell" of Mexico. "You go to analyze Tijuana, you say you're already analyzing Mexico. No, well, not even as a joke, right?" He then bade me choose between social, political, or economic disquisitions.

- 1 social. alright. look.  
     they say that Tijuana is Mexico  
         where the fatherland begins  
         and where the fatherland ends.
- 5 and they say that in Tijuana, Mexico is here.  
     why? because all of us, all of us come from the interior, from some part  
     of the interior.  
     so Tijuana is characterized by having different cultures within a single  
     city.  
     they come from Querétaro,  
     (I'm from Querétaro).

- 10        they come from Jalisco,  
            they come from Chiapas,  
                    they come from all parts of the Republic,  
                    you can find people [from everywhere] here.  
            you can find [people] from Yucatán,  
 15        from Veracruz,  
            from Colima,  
                    from everywhere.  
            so it's a mosaic, they say, of cultures within this city.

Given that he had just stated that Tijuana by no means provides an *entrée* to understanding Mexico, the “they say” with which the entrepreneur begins his exposition appears as the marker of a fatuous commonplace he will controvert. But he does not. Instead, he proceeds to justify the popular claim: “All of us, all of us come from the interior, from some part of the interior.” The repetition of “all of us,” as of the last part of the sentence, underlines its character as a rule. Absolutely everyone comes from the interior, from somewhere in the interior. And with the “we” of “we come,” the entrepreneur includes himself in this basic introductory image of Tijuana, before moving to the nomic statement, “so Tijuana is characterized because it has different cultures within a single city.” “We” appears first as the subject of “they say,” and “they say,” by line 6 of the excerpt, has the authority of rule-bound truth.

In lines 8–13, the entrepreneur expands that image of Tijuana, unfolding it as an accordion, and he includes himself folded into the series: “I’m from Querétaro.” Recall the manager’s contrast between North and South, and how Tijuana came to represent the North in this opposition. As the North shrinks, so the South may bloat to include virtually all of Mexico besides Tijuana. The entrepreneur calls it “the interior.” Thus “Mexico,” “the South,” and “the interior” are all more or less coterminous. They include everything in the country besides Tijuana (its northernmost point), which becomes a weird appendage, neither within nor without Mexico, but condensing it in miniature. Tijuana becomes a kind of apparatus for knowing the nation.

The entrepreneur’s claim that “Tijuana is Mexico” does not upset the binomial contrast between North and South; rather, it complicates and elaborates it in the poetic structure of this unfolding accordion image. Immediately, in lines 14–17, he turns his rhythmic list. The shift in person and verb (“you can find” instead of “they come”) confirms the truth of what “they say,” to be borne out in the repetition of

experience: “your” repeated encounter with “Tijuana.” Our own encounter becomes merely one in a series. As the entrepreneur remarked on first meeting me, “It seems to me you’ve run into [*díste con*] just the right person.” The list iconically prefigures “your” movement through “Tijuana,” encountering people from state after state and through them hearing “Mexico.” “Everyone” has already been welded to the “I” of the speaker by the phrase “all of us”—“we” are the “they” of “they come,” the public of Tijuana’s street. But this “they” is only part of the “they” that say, the public of discourse. When the entrepreneur addresses me in the second person, the “they” that say extends itself. I will find and I will repeat; I too will embody and reconstitute “they say.”<sup>21</sup>

The evidential claims the entrepreneur makes trace out not just a regime of knowledge and its circulation but Tijuana as a public space in which one speaks and moves and as a “we” that inhabits that public space. In this imaginary, “Mexico” appears as a witnessing chronically passed on, which stimulates an unending and repetitive communication that catches subjects up in its outwardly spiraling circulation. In encounter after encounter, what is to be overheard is “us,” all of us, the masses of migrants who come from elsewhere, from all of Mexico, and who make up Tijuana as Mexico.<sup>22</sup> We come to be “we” in our overhearing of ourselves, projected expansively and indefinitely into the future as an endless series of encounters. To experience this migrant Tijuana, to hear it repeated, and to come to be it are the same thing. “We” are first, though, not “we” but “they”; the collective subject of this mode of publicity does not articulate itself as a positive entity. The “I” of the speaker, nothing but an example of an item on a list, sequesters itself into inconsequentiality in favor of “they.” The individual voice is, like “Tijuana,” but a “cell” tucked into the list, a cell that flourishes out in the chance of our encounter, so that in it I may hear the voice of this weird “Mexico,” itself the slowly, surreptitiously authoritative voice of “they say.”

For Émile Benveniste (1971), the third person is not a proper subject but merely that which, representing the world-as-object-of-discourse, passes between “you” and “I” in our dialogic constitution of subjectivity. It is what is supposed to be absent and yet has to be evoked between us for “us” to be us at all. If the hearsay public, positing itself in the third person, tends to take the odd and somewhat impossible position of that which is excluded from subjectivity, this has to do with the historical conditions under which it arises.<sup>23</sup> Mae Ngai (2004) writes of “illegal aliens” as “impossible subjects,” both part and not part of U.S. society, but the force of the conflation of “Mexican” with “illegal alien” reaches beyond U.S.

borders to shape Mexico itself in its own self-articulation. With his factory and his legal status in the United States, the entrepreneur can take us only so far in this understanding.

Mrs. E, her husband a onetime undocumented migrant, hails from a peasant family in the state of Oaxaca. When I asked her how she came to Tijuana, she took the question literally and began with her bus ride. On the bus, she was solicited by coyotes, those traffickers of sorts who ferry the undocumented across the border. Mrs. E's narrative soon degenerated into an invective against coyotes and all the horrible things they do, luring folks out into the desert only to rob, rape, and kill them. Her remarks were general and the sources of her knowledge equally general. As she put it, "All the time you hear the same thing, the same thing." Earlier, in justification of her assuming the role of expert regarding coyotes, she said, "Because I, with time, I have by now learned much of here." Her authority lies in her participation in Tijuana's system of repetitions, coming to know "Tijuana" by hearing "all the time the same thing, the same thing." In effect, she replaced the story of how she came to Tijuana with the demonstration of her participation in the hearsay public, by making the interview, much as the entrepreneur did, a reinstantiation of "they say. . . ." In the following anecdote, she provided detailed proof of her legitimacy, her real participation in the face-to-face circulation of discourse that makes the hearsay public:

I tell you because I . . .  
 the other time, uh,  
 on the bus a lady was crying.  
 and I say to her, uh . . .  
 "what's the matter, lady, why are you crying?"  
 she says, "oh," she says, "see [*viera que*], I'm going to . . .  
 I went to, to recognize [*reconocer*] my daughter."  
 I say to her, "what for, did she graduate, or what?"  
 "no," she says, "see . . . uh, there at the DIF.  
 uh, she wanted to cross over to the other side [the United States].  
 and, since I live on the other side, I sent for her.  
 I paid the coyote. to cross her over.  
 but the one who crossed her over raped her and killed her."  
 and her daughter had already been lost for like a month, two months,  
 she neither arrived there, nor did she return here.  
 so then she was going around looking for her in all of the . . . the morgues [*sic*].

and she went to identify her finally here at the morgue of the DIF.  
 who knows for how many months she had already been lying there dead.<sup>24</sup>

As I repeat this story, you hear through it to the encounter between Mrs. E and myself, and through that to the one between Mrs. E and the distraught mother on the bus. Beyond that can be heard the meeting in the morgue between mother and murdered daughter, and beyond that the originary encounter, out in the desert, between the daughter and the coyote. In each encounter, it is the absent party that mediates between “I” and “you,” most powerfully in the encounter between mother and daughter. Between them, the coyote interposed himself as the very personification of agency, wreaking the ultimate transformation of death. The daughter appeared neither here nor there; she was lost for “who knows how many months.” If deictics situate the spatiotemporal world around the speaker as subject (Benveniste 1971), the daughter was utterly unsituable, simply not a subject any more, nor in relation to anything in this world. When the mother finally finds and recognizes her daughter, she can only recognize her as completely other. There is no “you” to be addressed, nor to reciprocate address, and the mother’s “I” will never recover itself from that lack. Between herself and her daughter no “we” can be had. The mother’s “I” will be haunted, not by the daughter, but by the coyote. His spectral figure runs through the entire chain of overhearings to infect the lone “I” Mrs. E leaves hanging over her anecdote: “I tell you because I . . .”

## CONCLUSION

Thought on the public sphere has been dominated by a tradition of political philosophy that relies on an unexamined theory of speech and the speaking subject: “The transformation of ‘I’ into ‘we,’” as Jane Mansbridge, writing in this tradition, puts it (Fraser 1992:119). A growing literature has responded to this lacuna by asking after the institutionally embedded genres, the narrative mechanics and cultural presuppositions, through which the first-person plural and other reflexive markers actually operate in practice (Lee 1992, 1997, 2001; Paz 2009; Silverstein 2000; Urban 2001; Warner 1990, 2002). The examples I present show how individual actors use representations of the public, or of society at large, to redefine themselves, their interlocutors, and the interaction at hand. Through this performative process, large-scale groups emerge as collective subjects. They do so very differently, though, depending on the genres through which they articulate themselves.



To grasp these differences, ethnographic focus on the more obvious public-making genres of interaction (such as formal news or street demonstrations) or even on the first-person plural itself is insufficient. Representations of the public are implicit, too, in such unremarkable statements as “To each his own opinion” or “Everybody knows that. . . .” The first evokes the epistemic stance integral to the rational, egalitarian debate of bourgeois publicity, dependent on the fiction of an autonomous speaking subject individually accountable for his or her enunciations (Lee 1997). The second, in the mode of hearsay, distributes responsibility for the utterance among an anonymous group (cf. Hill and Irvine 1992). In Tijuana, voicings of the public cluster around each of these two polar types of epistemic stances; to mobilize one or the other is to place oneself as a subject within a social group: “we” who base our articulations on some given type of circulation, information that may be vouched for or information the authority of which emanates from its very repetition. Each example repeats a variation on one or the other, rational debate or hearsay, mobilized not by whim but by polemic, by the danger of misrecognition (recall the Engineers’ efforts to manage my presence in the boardroom), by commitments forged over the lifetime of an individual’s formation as a subject—for not all are equally well positioned to evoke and inhabit one public or the other.

The manager’s commitment to the public-making genre of rational debate is only the attempt to inhabit and make a shared reality of a national imaginary in which a prospering, visa-holding, relatively white Tijuana can finally be the real Mexico. But this attempt subtly reproduces the dark-skinned man’s difference as southern as much as mine as American; the management of these differences, and ultimately the culling of them out of the core group, is just what motivates the display of egalitarian debate to begin with. This display, too, can take place only under certain conditions: the protected sphere of the boardroom, my status as guest there, the dark-skinned man’s status as engineer. Neither does reason or “opinion” stand on its own; it must be underwritten by an external system of status and authority, in this case not the state to which a bourgeois public sphere should ideally be oriented but that of a foreign country. Thus this public’s “we” remains bound to a nest of binary distinctions—gringo versus *mexicano*, North versus South, patriot versus traitor, visa holder versus “illegal alien,” economically solvent versus impoverished—all articulated within the logic of bourgeois publicity, which only tenuously holds together the principle of equal national sovereignties and that of equal parties to debate within the nation.

In contrast, both the entrepreneur and Mrs. E (despite the socioeconomic distance between them) situate themselves within a Tijuana of migrants made in the circulation of hearsay through anonymous encounter on the street. With the reflexive forms of “they say,” they animate a collective subject that constitutes itself in its own self-imagination. This public’s temporality is that of a compulsive repetition marked by ever-new encounters; extending their world indiscriminately to me, each of them reframes our interview as another of these encounters.<sup>25</sup> This public does not rely on the opposition between “we” and “they,” but simply articulates itself by fixation on a condition that is represented as infinitely replicated: what “they say” is what is true of “everyone.” As a mass formation in powerful contention with the bourgeois model (as illustrated in the opening example from *Frontera*), the hearsay public extends our empirical understanding of the transit between “I” and “we,” so crucial to conceptions of publicity. It can only be grasped as a public, though, thanks to a reconceptualization of the public sphere as the social space performatively opened by a whole range of voicings in context—some separated by shades, some by sharp contrasts—of collective subjectivity.

### ABSTRACT

*In the Mexican border city of Tijuana, two publics contend to represent the city as a whole. One styles itself after the classic bourgeois public sphere, showing the continued relevance of this model even in an only ambivalently Western society such as Mexico’s. The other, taking shape through genres of hearsay, significantly expands received conceptions of publicity. Ethnographic examination of the two publics together renders a picture of the public sphere as a broad range of voicings of collective subjectivity and of publics as focused clusters of these. The Mexico–U.S. border highlights the problematic nature of these voicings; each public responds in different ways to the challenges the border poses to the articulation of a Mexican “we.” Through analysis of this conflictive and conflicted setting, the article offers an ethnographic perspective on the dialogic, contextual, and highly contradictory processes that constitute the public sphere and “society” as a subjective whole. [publics and the public sphere, subjectivity, borders]*

### NOTES

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1. For confidentiality, I have changed some details of the ethnographic texts in this article.
2. *Frontera*’s policy when I conducted fieldwork was to review each comment individually.

3. I prefer *hearsay* to *rumor* (cf. Lomnitz 2001; Paz 2009) because it refers explicitly to the chain of “shadow conversations” (Irvine 1996) that, by representing discourse as in circulation, “help to project the group that is purportedly circulating the story” (Paz 2009:120).
4. I use the term *bourgeois-type* to indicate that this public is not composed of bourgeois individuals but models itself after the classic bourgeois public sphere.
5. On subjectivity in language, I take Benveniste’s (1971) work as cardinal; I see his approach as fundamentally performative.
6. Hence, I use *public sphere* to refer to a broad range of interrelated voicings and *publics* to refer to more focused clusterings of these.
7. Warner suggests that—thanks to the reflexivity of prefaces such as “People are saying . . .” or “Everybody knows that . . .”—gossip can be a public-making genre (2002:79). Paz dubs such prefaces “evidential frames” (2009:128) and argues that, as they evoke imagined chains of discourse, they can serve as an important mechanism of group formation.
8. On Foucault’s response to Habermas, see Warner (2002:151–158).
9. The anthropological literature on publics and the public sphere is quickly consolidating, but still slightly inchoate as a field. For a review, see Cody 2011. Use of the concepts is rife but often relatively unexamined; other texts make key contributions without phrasing them in terms of publicity (cf. Siegel 1986, 1997, 1998). Studies tend to focus on medium-specific or topically defined publics, with less emphasis on the broader, interdiscursive processes that constitute the public sphere as a (problematic) whole. The ethnographic working-through of anthropological critiques of liberal conceptions of the public sphere (cf. Gal and Woolard 2001; Povinelli 2001) and of the suggestive analytics (such as circulation and reflexivity) offered by literary and linguistic-anthropological approaches is as yet taking off.
10. Rorty writes with pride of the “gradual willingness [of those in power] to use the term ‘we’ to include more and more different sorts of people” (1991:207), but he winds up proposing “a world order whose model is a bazaar surrounded by lots and lots of exclusive private clubs” (1991:209). Mouffe argues for a “vibrant agonistic public sphere” (2005:76) but concludes with an unequivocal warning: “The pluralism that I advocate requires discriminating between demands which are to be accepted as part of the agonistic debate and those which are to be excluded. . . . A line should therefore be drawn” (2005:120–121).
11. Even for the U.S.–Mexico border, where so-called Third and First Worlds abut as in few places, the contrast is particularly stark. South Texas and New Mexico include some of the most economically depressed areas in the United States and also boast large Hispanic populations. Only 14 percent of El Paso County, Texas (across from Mexico’s other major border city), is composed of “white persons not Hispanic” (U.S. Census Bureau 2009a), whereas San Diego County, 50 percent non-Hispanic white, is significantly more Anglo than the rest of California (U.S. Census 2009b).
12. Montejano (1987) shows how, in 19th-century Texas, “Mexican” was first racialized and made synonymous with low socioeconomic status; Ngai (2004) argues that the 20th-century development of the legal category of the “illegal alien” in the United States and of the border as a policing mechanism produced a vulnerable, stereotypically Mexican laboring population. San Diego, spearheading the 1990s push to put border policing on the national agenda (Nevins 2002), has played a key role in the contemporary development of these processes.
13. Alegria (2009:86) calculated ten years ago that 55 percent of residents could cross the border legally. Elsewhere, I argue that the visa functions as a standard in Tijuana, as the one indispensable status symbol summing up all others (2009a:353–366).
14. Although Mexico’s border cities have long been migratory destinations in their own right, locals often portray Tijuana’s lower classes as composed of people who came north to cross the border but failed.
15. Because of the criminalization of undocumented crossing, it can be difficult to find a hard boundary between the hearsay public at large and criminal counterpublics as seen on *Frontera*’s website. For more on the relation between these two, see Yeh (2009a:255–294, 362–417).
16. See Warner on publics as “poetic world-making” (2002:114).
17. Holston and Appadurai (1996) have influentially argued the occlusion of the nation and importance of the city as the primary sphere of citizenship. Recent ethnographies of

- citizenship in Latin America (Caldeira 2000; Goldstein 2004; Holston 2008) indeed privilege the latter arena. In contrast, I highlight the continuities between urban and national citizenship.
18. Cases of direct confrontation between the two publics, as in the opening example, are fairly rare. Here, I explore the performative logics of each public; elsewhere I deal more fully with the struggle between them (2009a, 2009b).
  19. *Gringo* connotes Anglo ethnicity; as in the quote in the text, it is a fairly standard analogue of *mexicano*.
  20. Recall the pains the manager took to show such wage labor had never attracted him.
  21. The chronotope of the hearsay public resonates with Bakhtin's description of Greek genres of adventure; it develops the "motif of meeting" (1981:98).
  22. Note that the native-born manager is not included in this image.
  23. Compare Rutherford (2008) on "third-person nationalism" in Papua New Guinea.
  24. *Reconocer*, above, means also to identify or acknowledge, as one publicly acknowledges the recipient of a prize. The DIF (Integrated Development of the Family) is Mexico's social programs and welfare agency.
  25. The hearsay public can also, of course, be mobilized for purposes of exclusion. Conversing about Mexican history with a teenage girl, I presumed to correct a few of her facts; she answered by disputing my claim to authoritative knowledge in general: "If you were Mexican, Rihan, you'd think differently, because one hears so many things." She makes the hearsay public clearly coterminous with the nation.

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