

## Caught on the Mexican–US border: the insecurity and desire of collaboration between two universities

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Understandings of cross-border university collaboration are often informed by a concept of internationalisation that privileges the rationales of university administrators. A case study of two asymmetric universities along the border of Mexico and the United States – one of the most active and problematic borders in the world – found that, rather than administrative rationales, the insecurities and desires of individual collaborators play a more prominent role in cross-border academic work. Through studying the interaction between two universities, this study found that social, cultural, historical, and economic contexts at national, institutional and individual levels condition cross-border collaboration. The effects of these contexts, however, are sometimes contradictory and can lead both to closer ties (hybridisation) and stronger divisions (bordering) between faculty and students in two geographically nearby and academically distant universities.

### Introduction

In his essay *Mexico and the United States*, Octavio Paz argues that the differences between these countries go far beyond the asymmetries of power and wealth that divide developing and developed nations. The source of divergence is rooted in history, stretching back to pre-Columbian times. Yet these divided countries are neighbours with many cultural and economic interconnections. ‘In short, the history of [the Mexico–US] relationship is the history of a mutual and stubborn deceit, usually involuntary though not always so’ (Paz 1985, 358). The historian Edmundo O’Gorman (1999) also describes ‘two Americas’ (*Anglo-Saxon* and *Iberio-America*), divided from the beginning of the colonial project. The Mexico–US border region and its inhabitants are at the centre of this overlap and division. As a region, the borderland is distinct culturally and economically; not entirely Mexican or American on either side. Nonetheless, it *is* part of two very different countries and in many ways is the manifestation of the fears and desires of these two countries with respect to each other.

Borderland public higher education is equally complex. Universities are, on the one hand, cosmopolitan academies, which from medieval times have been international (Altbach 2004, 4). On the other hand, they are state institutions with a largely domestic faculty and student body. This paper explores insecurity and desire in contemporary Mexican–American relations through the collaboration and exchange of two borderland universities. Our data are drawn from the voices of faculty and students at La Universidad de Sonora (UNISON) in Mexico and the University of Arizona (U of A) in the United States.

We understand desire as personal, social and cultural. Desires represent absences, losses and dreams. In this case, proximity feeds desire and national contexts frame what desires

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might be. As external forces narrow the range of national policy options (Leys 2002), there is a desire for self-determination, which is especially pertinent along North America's borders where sovereignty is challenged by hegemonic unilateralism (Drache 2004). Later in this analysis, we also refer to 'fears'. In some cases one person's desire is another's fear. In other cases, fear is the manifestation of vulnerability, a state which is characteristic of globalisation (Kirby 2006). Fears are not entirely equivalent to insecurity. Fears do contribute to insecurity, which is distinguished from vulnerability in that vulnerability includes people's ability to respond (Kirby 2006), but are more specific and can be acted upon and may be related to desires.

In the next section we discuss methods of analysis followed by some contextual data on the region and the universities. In the following section we describe our study and its main findings, with some concluding remarks.

### **Analytical framework**

In constructing an analytical framework to guide our study of higher education collaboration in this unique region, it has been necessary to reach across disciplinary boundaries. To begin, we consider the insights of postcolonial theory. Any discussion of Mexico-US relations rests on the historical construction of colonial domination and subordination. Technically, Mexico has never been a US colony, yet there is a long history of American imperialism in Mexico. After the annexation of Texas in 1845, the US invaded Mexico in 1846 initiating a two-year conflict in a failed attempt to acquire additional Mexican territories. According to Fuller (1969), this incursion was related to a US desire for all of Mexico. Furthermore, in recent history, observers have seen the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a regional economic integration project involving Canada, Mexico and the US, as the continuation of Mexican subordination and dependency to the United States (Aboites 2006).

The idea of 'cultural hybridity' also resonates with the setting of this study. The long reach of neoliberal capitalism through private enterprise and the Washington Consensus is Americanising much of the world, including Mexico (Stiglitz 1998). In the US, large-scale immigration from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America has established a Latino culture side-by-side and intertwined with that of Anglo-America. Over the past few decades hybridity analyses have been employed to explore a number of social phenomena including continued language blending (e.g., 'Spanglish', a dialect widely used in Arizona), fusions of art, literature and cuisine, and the interaction of public institutions (García Canclini 2001, III). Thus, hybridisation should be understood not as a product but as a process (*ibid.*, VI).

Despite processes of cultural and linguistic hybridity, the ongoing process of bordering constructs and (re)enforces difference. Some geographers argue that globalisation has not eliminated borders but, in many cases, has led to further border restrictions: 'nowhere is this more apparent than the two borders of the United States, with Mexico and Canada' (Newman 2006, 149). For example, the US-Mexico border is one of the three most problematic migration points worldwide, after only the Canary Islands and before the Straits of Gibraltar (Tejeda 2006). Heightened border security and measures that assert the primacy of English and deny undocumented immigrants social services reflect post-September 11 anxieties, and conjure a myth of an idyllic past in which territorial and cultural integrity was unchallenged and in a peaceful balance.

This process of 'bordering', or reinvigorated separation, is associated with casting the 'Other' and constructing borderland identities. Much of the south-western US was taken from Mexico by force: 'remember the Alamo' is a still familiar battle cry recalling Texans' defeat in an 1836 battle at the Alamo Mission during the state's war of independence with

Mexico. 'I didn't cross the border, the border crossed me' is a lyric in a ranchero song (*Somos más americanos* [We are more American], Enrique Valencia), which asserts that because the US 'took eight states from Mexico' it is unfair to call Mexican immigrants invaders in these territories. Today, for the Minute Men, a vigilante border force, and Coyotes, border smugglers, 'the Other' is clearly an integral part of identity.

According to Young (2003), postcolonialism is built on the argument that the non-west is subordinated by the west and is an approach that contests this disparity. We too contest the disparity of power between Mexico and the US but also recognise that the world is not binary. Therefore, we also turn to world systems theory. For Wallerstein (1979), the world system is a highly structured, multilayered division of labour between nation states. The US is located at the 'core' of this system and Mexico is in the 'semi-periphery,' not the 'periphery.' In terms of education, while Mexico is dependent on the US as a source of higher education, many students from elsewhere in Latin America are dependent on Mexico (Altbach 2004, 13–14). As such, though US domination of Mexico – mainly but not exclusively economic, is undeniable, exploitation is not entirely one way, and sometimes these countries cooperate.

To explain this construction of 'the Other', we use concepts related to social impressions and collective memory. We employ concepts like 'cultural code', defined by Rapaille (2006) as the cultural archetypes, unconscious meaning and/or social imprints that all cultures have, and the more traditional concept of 'social representation', used by Moscovici (1979) to characterise a cultural synthesis and a socially collective conception of our realities. The role of language is also recognised in this study, as several linguists have concluded (e.g. Frawley 1997) that language is a significant aspect in the construction of cultural imprints.

Finally, we also draw on literature from our own field, higher education. Altbach (1998), Van der Wende (2001), Knight (2004) and others have made important contributions towards understanding internationalisation in higher education. 'Internationalization is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education' (Knight 2004, 4). In short, internationalisation is higher education's response to globalisation. The scope of internationalisation is wide and includes national and sectoral levels, curricula, institutional agreements and cross-border activities.

Marginson and Sawir (2005) criticise traditional metaphors used to understand internationalisation. They ask, 'why has the liquid metaphor of "flows" become central to our understanding of cross-border relations and effects?' Indeed, in the case of UNISON and the U of A it is difficult to use the idea of flows since there is a wall cutting through the region, damming and redirecting all forms of exchange. Alternatively, we seek to understand this relationship within its cultural and historical contexts, and from the point of view of those at borderland universities because academic production is an active, not a passive or automatic process.

There have been a few studies about higher education collaboration within NAFTA. Some explore the impact of NAFTA on higher education (i.e. Castaños-Lomnitz et al. 1998; Barrow et al. 2003), student flows (Lee et al. 2006), and the internationalisation of higher education institutions (Kent 2003). However, there has been less scholarship analysing these relationships equally in the two countries and addressing the fears and desires associated with collaboration between students and faculty at institutions in Mexico and the US.

## **The border context and the universities**

### ***The border context***

The Mexico–US border stretches over 3000 kilometres, traversing mostly desolate mountains, deserts and riverbed. The adjoining states of Sonora and Arizona share 580 kilometres

of the border. UNISON is located in Hermosillo, Sonora's state capital and the U of A is 400 kilometres to the north in Tucson, the second largest city in Arizona. In 2005, Hermosillo's population was around 700,000 and its gross national income (GNI) per capita was US\$7639, almost 11% higher than the national GNI per capita (US\$6770) (World Bank 2006). That year, Tucson's population was just over 500,000 (United States Census Bureau 2006). US GNI per capita was US\$43,740 (World Bank 2006) while average income in the state of Arizona was only US\$40,290 and is even lower (US\$36,913 in 2004) in Tucson (US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2005). In terms of education, 59.4% of Sonora's population had completed secondary school in 1995 while Arizona reported a rate of 82.3%. Some 10.2% of Sonora's population and 19.1% of the people in Arizona hold a college degree or equivalent (Charney and Pavlakovich-Kochi 2002).

Social and economic contact between Arizona and Sonora is extensive. Some 36% of Tucsonans speak a language other than English at home, predominantly Spanish (United States Census Bureau 2006). In 2001, Mexicans crossed the border into Arizona on 23 million day trips and 99% of those who crossed were from Sonora. Mexican visitors spent over US\$900 million in Arizona and more than US\$300 million in the county (Pima) in which Tucson is located (Charney and Pavlakovich-Kochi 2002). Many Arizonans also cross the border regularly for recreation, shopping, and dental care and to buy less expensive pharmaceuticals. Sonora and Arizona participate actively in the Arizona–Mexico Commission, the oldest US–Mexico governmental cross-border organisation. The informal economy also thrives along the border, as does criminal enterprise including human and drug trafficking. There is a tragic side to this interaction; in 2005 more than 500 migrants died crossing the border, 271 of whom perished in Arizona (Lomonaco 2006). In fact, in 2006 Pima County expanded its morgue to include a new refrigerated storage facility to hold bodies found in the desert.

### **University profiles**

UNISON was established in 1942, four years after the initiation of a special committee to create a state university and 110 years after Sonora became a state in the Mexican federal republic. UNISON is the state's flagship public university. In the academic year 2004–2005 UNISON enrolled 28,811 students. Of those, 22,106 were undergraduate students, 591 post-graduates and about 6000 extension students (Universidad de Sonora 2006). The number of international students at UNISON is very small.

The U of A is also its state's flagship public university. The U of A was founded 1885, 27 years before Arizona became a state in the union and only three years after Tucson was acquired by the United States. Today, the university is a *Carnegie Classification* research university and in 2005 enrolled about 35,000 students (Arizona Board of Regents 2006, 9). Of those, around 8500 were postgraduate students and 2500 international students (*ibid.*, 11, 18). Two hundred students from Mexico were enrolled at the U of A in 2005, fourth in number among international students behind only India, China, and the Republic of Korea (*ibid.*, 19).

### **Methods**

The methodology for this research was a qualitative comparative case study (Ragin and Becker 1992). Data were gathered from 46 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups consisting of 8 to 12 students at three institutions of higher education: the University of Arizona, Universidad de Sonora, and Colegio de Sonora. All interviews and focus groups

lasted around an hour and were conducted over a period of several months during the spring and summer of 2006. Interviewees were initially identified through a search of institutional websites and subsequent participants were identified by the snowball method of sampling. One undergraduate focus group, two graduate student interviews, and 21 faculty member interviews were conducted at the University of Arizona. Sixteen faculty member interviews, four graduate student interviews, and three undergraduate focus groups were conducted at Universidad de Sonora. At Colegio de Sonora one administrator and one student were interviewed. Only 16 of the interviewees were women and the majority of women who participated in the study were from the U of A; also 12 graduates from the University of Arizona were current professors at the University of Sonora.

The interviews and focus groups were first coded for emerging themes by the authors independently. These themes were then compared and merged to develop the codes used in the final analysis. Since so few interviews were conducted at Colegio de Sonora our analysis focuses on the U of A and UNISON. The university, gender and position of participants are identified in in-text citations.

## Findings

Given the differences between UNISON and the U of A, and the complicated and often contradictory history that frames these institutions, we expected to find very different perceptions and experiences of collaboration and exchange. We assumed that there would also be a great deal of variation within each university and therefore attempted to gather stories from faculty and students from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds. The findings from our study do not formally document the number of collaborations or extent of contact between UNISON and the U of A. Rather, we focus on the stories provided by faculty members and students and the types of collaboration they describe. Structures of power, domination, subordination and resource asymmetries serve as a backdrop to our study, as does the border, and are expressed in the findings through the voices of those who participated in our study. From these stories, we explore in particular the desires and fears associated with academic collaboration on the border. Thus, our findings describe the fears and desires perceived and experienced by collaborators as well as the ways in which they tend to collaborate. Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of the fears and desires found at UNISON and the U of A.

Tables 1 and 2 show a great deal of asymmetry between the fears and desires from UNISON and the U of A. While there is parity in that some of the fears and desires are shared at both universities, the imbalance is clear quantitatively and qualitatively. Those at UNISON expressed more fears and those at the U of A expressed more desires. Furthermore, many of the fears expressed by UNISON are of deep insecurities associated with an identity of oppression and historical scars, while fears at the U of A tend to be functional. The language of 'exploitation', 'hegemony', and 'unfairness' stands in contrast to that of 'financial concerns', 'safety' and 'publishing interests'. In terms of desires, both universities want to get what they can from the 'Other'. Shared lofty academic motivations, such as knowledge production and solving social and environmental problems, seem to be more related to their external identity as universities in the western tradition than with reference to their relationship itself.

This imbalance in fears and desires is associated with the historical context described above; however, it is more directly related to the set of institutional asymmetries which constitute the collaboration and exchange between UNISON and the U of A, which are in turn the product of historical relations. In order to understand fully the fears and desires we

Table 1. Fears (summary of interviews).

	UNISON	U of A
<b>Both</b>		
<b>Fears</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Border (geographical, political and socially). Bureaucratic tie-ups and delays.</li> <li>• Language and cultural differences.</li> <li>• Different approaches to research and different types of knowledge.</li> <li>• Finding funds and sharing monies.</li> <li>• Collaboration.</li> <li>• Prestige.</li> <li>• Personal experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crime/drug trafficking/personal safety.</li> <li>• Speaking Spanish.</li> <li>• UNISON does not work to the same standards for publication.</li> <li>• Lack of institutional support at home. Few funding sources. Working in a place with few resources.</li> <li>• Being 'useless' or unable to help UNISON.</li> <li>• Low prestige compared to collaboration with US/European universities.</li> <li>• Spending too much time in establishing collaborations.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crossing the border and being treated badly.</li> <li>• Speaking English.</li> <li>• Racism.</li> <li>• Professional/academic exploitation by U of A. Students being 'used' by U of A. Losing best students and getting nothing in return. U of A does not read everything, we do.</li> <li>• Having to pay a heavy (monetary) price to participate in collaboration.</li> <li>• National/cultural exploitation. Draining the few resources available instead of receiving help.</li> <li>• Parochialism on the part of collaborating partners. Finding other more prestigious universities in the US.</li> <li>• Changing power position – professor at UNISON becomes a student at U of A.</li> </ul>	



Table 2. Desires (summary of interviews).

	UNISON	U of A
<b>Both</b>		
<b>Desires</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address common regional problems (social, environmental).</li> <li>• Advance science. Get broader perspective/expand knowledge base/produce better research.</li> <li>• Economic advantages.</li> <li>• Get to know/understand each other better.</li> <li>• Proximity.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Study common topics and learn from other experiences.</i></p> <p><i>Feel like they are helping UNISON/Mexico; deal with guilt associated with resource asymmetry.</i></p> <p><i>High quality students who are already funded.</i></p> <p><i>Generate revenues from incoming students and have research activities subsidised.</i></p> <p><i>Free/low-cost research labour.</i></p> <p><i>Curiosity.</i></p> <p><i>Learn about 'the other'.</i></p> <p><i>Not to have to travel to Mexico and being able to collaborate from home institution.</i></p> <p><i>Use English in collaboration.</i></p> <p><i>Learn some Spanish.</i></p>
	<p><i>Study/work in a place in the US that is more like Sonora (environmentally, culturally, language).</i></p> <p><i>Access to education, hopefully in fields not available in Sonora.</i></p> <p><i>Access to research infrastructure not available.</i></p> <p><i>Access U of A facilities.</i></p> <p><i>Receiving help from US/U of A counterparts.</i></p> <p><i>Improving the understanding among neighbours.</i></p> <p><i>Not to experience major changes in terms of climate or environment.</i></p> <p><i>Practising and improving English.</i></p>	

found it is useful to place them in the context of institutional asymmetry. There are three principle asymmetries that define contact between UNISON and the U of A: graduate exchange, research, and non-degree seeking student exchange.

### ***Three institutional asymmetries***

#### *Asymmetric graduate student exchange*

The first institutional asymmetry has to do with graduate student exchange. The gulf between graduate enrolments at both universities is vast (591 at UNISON, 8500 at U of A in 2005). These differences are even more explicit when you compare the number of programmes offered. UNISON has only 4 Ph.D. programmes, 17 Master programmes and five Specialties. The U of A offers 84 Ph.D. programmes, 117 Master programmes and a number of professional degrees. With limited graduate offerings at home and the need/desire for this education, it is not surprising that many UNISON faculty and students come to the U of A for graduate study. According to one professor at UNISON, faculty members there want to establish agreements with the U of A to help compensate for their limited graduate course offerings. By way of contrast, virtually no U of A students study at UNISON.

Likewise, U of A professors have a strong interest in receiving students from UNISON. These students are often bright, capable and help advance research. According to one U of A professor, 'they've just been a great addition to pushing some of the work forward, or giving another view.' Additionally, Mexican students are highly desired because they often come with funding from Mexico and therefore require little support. Even when students from other regions are preferred, post-September 11 visa restrictions has made recruiting students from Asia more difficult and professors are now turning to Mexican students as the 'second best choice.'

This asymmetric exchange of graduate students is not without problems. For some UNISON professors it represents the U of A poaching students in order to boost enrolments and generate revenues. Others identify the imbalance in student exchange as both symptomatic of and contributing to the power relations between Mexico and the US. As one professor put it, 'it would be very difficult to find an American studying a Ph.D. in Mexico... this is call h-e-g-e-m-o-n-y, political, economic, scientific and academic' (UNISON professor/U of A alumni, female, social sciences). In other words, the pattern of Mexican students coming to the US for graduate school and paying for their education with either personal funds or government scholarships without the reciprocation of American students studying in Mexico increases the disparities in higher education between the countries.

#### *Asymmetric research collaborations*

According to available information, in 2005 UNISON spent about US\$7687 directly on research and another US\$34,153 in indirect research expenditures (UNISON 2006). That same year the U of A spent US\$395,455,669 on academic research (Arizona Board of Regents 2006). The amount spent by the U of A is thousands of times the amount spent by UNISON. This is a perfect example of the depth of asymmetry between these institutions. This imbalance in research expenditures is also associated with a central tension in the research collaboration between UNISON and the U of A.

UNISON professors often seek monetary help from U of A faculty who find it impossible to meet these expectations. 'They feel like beggars and I feel badly because I don't know



where to get the funds to help' explained a U of A scholar. The U of A is sometimes able to offer resources to UNISON and has made a number of donations. Yet, paradoxically UNISON often bears a much larger relative cost associated with collaboration and in some cases UNISON or other Mexican sources pay *all* of the collaborative costs. Some Mexican professors see this relationship as unfair and contrast the situation with other countries. When 'Europeans invite [UNISON faculty] to teach courses, give conferences ... simply they pay everything. Americans invite us and we pay everything [but] we invite them and we pay everything for them' (UNISON professor/U of A alumni, male, social sciences). Some UNISON professors feel their counterparts are obliged to help them more. On the other side, many U of A scholars do not have the flexibility to mobilise resources. For example, when funds are dispersed by external granting agencies, very often financial imbalances between US and Mexican collaborators are part of the terms of the grant. Some U of A faculty accept and even prefer this imbalance, others contest it.

Another research tension has to do with the differences in academic practices. Mexican scholars feel they are more theoretical and are more widely read than their American counterparts (Colegio de Sonora Ph.D. student/U of A alumni, female, social sciences). US faculty members believe that Mexicans work on a different timeframe and take forever to get things done (U of A professor, male, sciences; U of A professor, female, social sciences; U of A Ph.D. student/UNISON alumni, male, sciences). Others assume that Mexican scholars do not work to the same level and are not interested in the same types of publications (U of A professor, female, social sciences).

Despite these tensions, there are benefits to collaboration and most of our informants at both universities said they wished they collaborated more. UNISON academics who have had collaborations acknowledge the benefits in terms of 'getting publications' (UNISON professor/U of A alumni, male, sciences). Some even see collaborating with the U of A as a way to get more research funding from external agencies (UNISON professor/U of A alumni, male, sciences). US scholars are also aware of advantages. Collaborating with UNISON can cut down on travel and fieldwork (U of A professor, female, sciences). Collaboration also means better access to archives, populations and government offices in Mexico. Faculty at both universities agreed that a strong collaboration can produce very good research. Addressing shared regional problems is also seen as a benefit of collaboration.

One way to overcome the tensions and realise the benefits of collaboration is through personal contact. Some researchers who participate in cross-border research have family and social ties on both sides of the border. Others have become good friends with their collaborative partners. Certainly, collaboration helps to change the stereotypes people have about the 'Other'. This seems particularly true in the case of US scholars regarding Mexico.

### *Asymmetric exchange of non-degree seeking students*

The third asymmetry involves the exchange of non-degree-seeking students. According to the OECD (2006), in 2002 there were 12,518 Mexican students in the US while only 830 Americans were studying in Mexico. Our case study follows the same pattern. Since 2002 when UNISON opened its *Mobility, Exchange and Academic Cooperation Office*, three UNISON students have enrolled in temporary exchange programmes to the U of A alone. To date no students from the U of A have participated in the programme. Clearly, students' desire for exchange is one-sided. When joint classes are offered between the two universities interest by US students is almost non-existent (U of A instructor/ UNISON alumni, male, sciences). US students are simply not as interested in studying in Sonora.

Cultural imprints or subjectivities and feelings of insecurity help to explain these asymmetries. As one student said ‘We all have prejudices, I think there is a lack of information, ignorance because you do not know the place’ (UNISON professor/U of A alumni, male, sciences). Students on both sides believe that violent crime is more prevalent on the other side. Both groups of students also fear being singled out. U of A students assume that endemic corruption would prevent them from travelling without being hassled by bribe-seeking officials. UNISON students fear discrimination, racism, being mistaken for illegal immigrants and overall poor or abusive treatment by Americans. The principle difference between students from UNISON and the U of A is their desire. Despite their fears, Mexican students see the value of studying in the US and want to go. US students, however, tend to see little value in studying in Mexico.

Language has a lot to do with subjectivity, social representations and the process of ‘Othering’. It was among the most frequently mentioned barriers to exchange. Some Mexican students often find it difficult to pass the English exam necessary to study in the US and very few American students are proficient enough in Spanish to study in Mexico. The structure of language involves cognitive development, but also the social context and individual realities, as Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, and others have discussed (Frawley 1997). The global dominance of English, especially within science, casts student exchange within unequal terms. Most U of A students believe study in Mexico is only useful for language acquisition, not for content learning. Conversely, students at UNISON see the US as myopic and arrogant. For those who are fluent in both Spanish and English, however, language can be empowering. It allows them to engage in exchange with confidence and, through mutual understanding, to dissolve the representations that hinder collaboration.

## Discussion

Other researchers have contrasted universities in asymmetrical contexts. For example, Marginson and Sawir (2005) examine the Australian National University and Universitas Indonesia but they focus on the universities’ position towards and understanding of globalisation as it pertains to higher education. Using a post-colonial analysis, Dixon (2006) looks at a twinning programme offered by an Australian university in a Thai institution. She finds that the Australian partner positions itself as both benevolent and entrepreneurial, while the Thai university feels in need of help but also taken advantage of by the Australians. These findings are similar to our own. Still, Dixon does not address collaboration overall and is mostly concerned with positioning a particular programme within the contexts of globalisation and international higher education.

There are abundant examples of ‘neo-colonialist desire’, as well as contested positions between the hegemonic core and the semi-periphery. Our study, however, seems to be the first to explicitly consider collaboration and exchange between two universities which are at the same time both very close and separated by a physical barrier as well as a massive socio-economic divide. To consider the impact of the border in collaborations between UNISON and the U of A we return to the ideas outlined in our theoretical framework.

The insecurities and desires, which underline contact between UNISON and the U of A, are expressed through a set of asymmetrical exchanges. Asymmetry between countries and their institutions has the effect of making borders more rigid. When comparing general indicators from Tucson, Arizona and Hermosillo, Sonora, the differences are less extreme than when comparing the U of A and UNISON. This, along with our findings, suggests that universities are less permeable institutions than one might expect. Still, UNISON faculty and students continue to study at the U of A, several joint research projects are ongoing and

there are more cross-cultural influences than on most other campuses in both countries. In order to explore this complexity we highlight institutional, academic and cultural elements of exchange through the contradictory lenses of hybridisation, which refers to the cultural and intellectual blending that results from trans-national interaction (García Canclini 2001), and bordering, which is the construction of rigid boundaries dividing social spaces (Newman 2006).

### ***Institutional hybridisation and bordering***

In some departments at UNISON, the majority of academics were trained at the U of A. This affects the dynamics within the departments in terms of organisation, teaching practices, and curriculum content. As a result of this relationship, the first physicist doing optics at UNISON was a U of A graduate, as was its first Ph.D. astronomer. UNISON now has programmes in both these fields.

The relationship between the universities has resulted in several official agreements, including one that allowed students from Sonora to pay Arizona in-state tuition fees. Yet many do not last. For instance, in the early 1990s UNISON established an agreement to send students to some graduate programmes with 'mixed results' (UNISON professor, male, sciences). Faculty at both institutions indicated that some agreements are purely ceremonial.

Ongoing bordering can be seen in administrative practices as well. The previous U of A president only visited Mexico once in his 10 year tenure, and until recently U of A international travel grants applied to all countries in the world *except* Mexico. The Spanish department focuses on exchange programmes in Spain, not Mexico. A Mexican-American faculty member at the U of A said he believes there is a general attitude that Mexico is 'not an equal partner' (U of A professor, male, social sciences).

### ***Academic hybridisation and bordering***

Academic hybridisation is also occurring, particularly in the natural sciences like geology, meteorology, biology and ecology but also in other fields such as public health, linguistics and geography. Among informants from these fields, many felt that their work 'naturally' lent itself to collaboration and that their orientation was to the region rather than one country or another. Collaborative relationships among these fields tended to be the strongest and often extended beyond the professional to the personal level. A few faculty members experienced so many physical and social interconnections between Arizona and Sonora that they identified bi-nationally.

However, tensions emerge when scientific or research interests do not coincide so clearly. Some found it difficult to identify a collaborative partner: 'Finding someone who coincides with you, who wants to study the same thing is like finding a needle in the haystack' (UNISON professor/U of A alumni, female, social sciences). In some of the social sciences, like political science and economics, we had such a difficult time locating individuals who had experience with bi-national collaboration that we assume there are fewer collaborations in these areas. Furthermore, Mexicans sometimes resist American researchers in Mexico. One U of A researcher described being at libraries in Sonora and encountering Mexican researchers who felt that an American should not be 'poking around [their] archives' (U of A instructor, male, social sciences). Mistrust develops when the Mexican partners do not believe that their American counterparts' interests are scientific but are rather related to the US hegemony and a desire to exploit Mexico.

***Cultural hybridisation and bordering***

In some ways U of A has integrated cultural expressions from Mexico even more than UNISON has adopted US customs. A clear example of this is the large Mexican Day of the Dead celebration held at the U of A. Similar climates, blended cultures and a large bilingual/bicultural population make Tucson attractive to many students and researchers from Northern Mexico. Proximity clearly contributes to this hybridity. Some people believe that Sonora and Arizona are very strongly tied. For instance, one informant from Sonora considers it is easier to travel to any part of the US than to go to Mexico City (UNISON professor/U of A alumni, female, social sciences). One U of A professor said asking him what it is like to work on the border is 'like asking a fish to describe water' (U of A professor, male, social sciences) and an American student with experience of living in both Sonora and the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas noted that Sonora seemed to be more like the US and she was much more accepted there than in Chiapas (Colegio de Sonora student, female, social sciences).

Proximity makes the U of A and UNISON attractive to each other but, as with other neighbourhood relationships, there are problems as well. There is a tension in proximity because, while these institutions are familiar to each, they have both been impacted by increased border crossings, immigration restrictions and border militarisation. For example, the U of A is playing an active role in 'tightening' the border. Recently it joined a consortium with ties to the Department of Homeland Security to help develop 'border security' technology and policy (University of Arizona 2006).

Obtaining visas has added a major layer of difficulty in establishing collaborative relationships, particularly since September 11 (U of A professor, male, sciences; Colegio de Sonora, professor, female, social sciences). The unwelcoming signs of US immigration policy are no longer surprising; however, the border situation has affected the way Mexicans feel about coming to the US. For those who frequently visited Arizona but now seldom do, avoiding coming to the US is not only related to the hassles of crossing 'the line', it is also related to the way Mexicans are now treated in the US. Comments like 'The way they treat us [Mexicans] has changed, it is not really pleasant, so I used to go more, not anymore' are common among Sonorans (UNISON professor/U of A alumni, male, sciences). Interestingly, this comment comes from a European immigrant to Mexico who is now a UNISON professor, indicating that international academic visitors to the United States not only face traditional racism based on skin colour but also a deep resistance to different cultures (Lee and Rice 2007). Another scholar used the word 'persecution' to describe the unequal treatment experienced when crossing the border and explains that each time she crosses she needs to bring a 'box of documents' (Colegio de Sonora, professor, female, social sciences). Since crossing the border is more time-consuming, US scholars also do not cross as often as they used to and even less than their Mexican counterparts. A Mexican national who is a researcher at the U of A (U of A instructor/UNISON professor, male, sciences) says that some U of A environmentalists, who do not want to travel to Mexico, prefer to 'redefine' the Sonoran desert, which includes much of Arizona, Sonora and Baja California, to mean only Arizona.

**Conclusions**

Durkheim (1984) was among the first to discuss 'collective representation' when distinguishing the specificities of social thoughts versus individual thoughts. Later, Moscovici (1979) used the concept of social representation and more recently, Rapaille (2006) suggests the term 'cultural codes'. Following the tradition of these thinkers, in this paper we have referred to subjectivities since these social representations reflect a dialectic process

between individual and grouped subjective imprints. It is only possible to understand subjectivities when focus is given to the dialogue between agency and cultural and historical contexts. In our case we recognise there are dominant cultural codes, social representations or simply stereotypes held between Arizona and Sonora and more specifically between the U of A and UNISON communities. These social imprints are expressed through the fears and desires associated with academic exchange. Subjectivities are connected to nationality but not uniformly so – there are contradictions within both UNISON and the U of A and some shared representations across the border.

At the individual level, most Mexicans cross the border to satisfy economic desires. Many Americans go to Mexico to satisfy culinary, cultural or sexual desires. At the organisational level, there are economic and academic desires associated with UNISON and the U of A. In order to realise their desires, Mexicans and Americans have to overcome their insecurities and fears.

Higher education scholars may be right in decoupling the international activities of individual universities from the meta-process of globalisation (Altbach 1998; Van der Wende 2001; Knight 2004), but in that decoupling there is a tendency to abstract the university further from its (multiple) cultural, political, economic, historical and geographical contexts and positionalities. For example, Knight (2004) suggests that when studying higher education internationalisation, including cross-border collaboration, individual university ‘rationales’ should be the focus of analysis. This approach can over-rationalise a process, which we have found to be more closely related to social subjectivities, fears and desires than with administrative rationality. In short, the story of collaboration and exchange between La Universidad de Sonora and the University of Arizona is in many ways the story of fears and desires caught on the border.

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### Caught on the Mexican-US border: the insecurity and desire of collaboration between two universities

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