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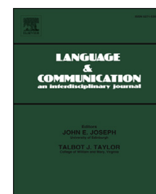

From South to North and back again: Making and blurring boundaries in conversations across borders

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Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in El Salvador, Mexico, and the United States, we examine migration discourse produced by migrants and nonmigrants to explore the complex dynamics of belonging that unfold as speakers reify and violate a putative divide between North and South. We argue that North and South function as semi-stable shifters that enact and interweave relationships across several politically-loaded domains, projecting relations of dominance and dependence between these spheres. The fractally recursive relations enabled by these North/South distinctions allow those involved in migration to manage the consequences of cross-border connection, producing closeness even as they assume distance.

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1. Introduction

1.1. *Snapshot one: sovereignty on the tracks*

In the early 1870s, Mexico's lawmakers debated whether to build a rail link connecting Mexico to the United States. Mexican President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada argued against the northern links, asserting that Mexico needed a geographical buffer to safeguard its sovereignty, a protectionist position he summed up in the tidy phrase: "*Entre la debilidad y la fuerza—el desierto*/Between weakness and strength—the desert" (Lomnitz, 2009). Lerdo's proposition, however, did not become Mexico's future, as he was ousted in the 1876 coup that installed infamous dictator Porfirio Díaz, who ruled Mexico until 1910. In Díaz's estimation, the expansion of Mexico's railroads would display and facilitate the country's modernization. He countered Lerdo's phrase with his own pithy formulation, which for many Mexicans still epitomizes their relationship with the United States: "*¡Pobre México!—tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos*/Poor Mexico!—so far from God and so close to the United States." Under Diaz, Mexico dramatically expanded its U.S. rail links (Cardoso, 1980). These links encouraged U.S. firms to set up plants in Mexico, while creating an infrastructure for the recruitment of Mexican labor, encouraging the first massive influx of Mexican migrants to the United States (Ngai, 2004; Sánchez, 1993). And so, as Lerdo had feared, the rail links enabled the United States to realize its imperialist economic ambitions via the exploitation of Mexico's land and people.

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1.2. Snapshot two: riding La Bestia/the beast

In the 1990s, Mexico privatized its railway system as part of the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms that eschewed government ownership of industry. At that time, passenger rail service in Mexico came to an abrupt halt as the new owners focused on the more lucrative freight service, turning the railways into an infrastructure for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). But in the early years of this century, Mexico's trains again became passenger lines, though unintentionally, as migrants from Central America began to ride atop them to accelerate their northern journeys. Now known as "*La Bestia*/The Beast" or "the death train," the freight trains have become sites of danger where migrants experience dismemberment or death and suffer abuse at the hands of organized crime and police. La Bestia is a lightning rod for lawmakers, as the United States urges Mexico to "crackdown" on migrants' use of the rail lines, and Mexico accuses the U.S. owned company that runs one of these lines of aiding the abuse of migrants. As in the late 19th century, the train is a potent symbol of struggles for self-determination in the Global South of the American continent and the overwhelming influence of *El Norte*/The North, the United States on the political economic life of the region. But La Bestia also constitutes a powerful symbol of Mexican disregard for Central American lives. A controversy over such disregard was sparked in fall 2016 when a Mexican newspaper led an article about a soccer match between El Salvador and Mexico with the title: "*¡Mándenlos a la Bestia*!/Send them to the Beast!" Salvadorans and others accused the newspaper of fomenting anti-Central American sentiment; the newspaper quickly issued an apology. ******

These tales of the railways that link Central America, Mexico, and the United States illustrate that the deep connections between these places are fundamentally informed by North–South frameworks. In the United States, the country's "destiny" as a world leader and economic hegemon has long relied on the paternalistic construal of South-of-the-Border as both Other and ally—as not 'like us', but needing us to realize their potential. In Mexico—a focus of Hilary Parsons Dick's research—the United States has, conversely, been positioned as a menacing imperial Other, with whom relationships are nevertheless a necessary evil that can help political economic development. Comparable framings of El Norte can be found in El Salvador, a site of Lynnette Arnold's research, where relationships with the United States are also posited as both imperialist and as a lynchpin in development. Yet, from the Salvadoran perspective, the northern menace expands to include Mexico. And, as our opening snapshots show, in every instance, representations of migration are central to how North–South frameworks emerge, circulate, and become contested. Since the 19th century, the United States has used loaded representations of the migration of "Southern Others" to defend the boundaries of "real America." Similar stories are told in Mexico, where Central American migration is a flash point of nation-building that positions the South as dangerous. Across these settings, it is migrants who bear the brunt of North–South frameworks, and their lives are often at stake as a result.

But even as North–South (hereafter "N/S") frameworks render countries positioned as 'north' or 'south' as distinct realms occupied by Others, they blur social and geopolitical borders—between nation-states, between people "from here" and people "from there." The tension between the creation of N/S distinctions and the lived porosity of social and geopolitical borders has been an undercurrent in the scholarship on migration over the last several decades, highlighted, for example, in work theorizing "transnationalism": the connections migrants produce that allow them to live in more than one place at a time (Basch et al., 1994; Kearney, 1995; Vertovec, 1999). Nevertheless, this work has left largely unexplored the question of how N/S distinctions are produced, navigated, and resisted in interaction (though see Chávez, 2015; Mendoza-Denton, 2008). A key site for these processes is *migration discourse*: talk and writing that draws on and invokes figures, themes, and presuppositions related to the causes and consequences of migration (Dick, 2010, 2017a). While attention has been paid to the "Othering" of the South in U.S. immigration policy (e.g., De Genova, 2005; Dick, 2011; Santa Ana, 2002), much less attention has been paid to how N/S framings are produced in the migration discourse of Mexico or El Salvador, or to how migrants and their nonmigrant relatives engage with such framings.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in El Salvador, Mexico, and the United States, we examine migration discourse produced by migrants and their family members to explore how people take up and critique the divide between North and South in interaction. Through analysis of an interaction between Hilary and her host family in Mexico and a phone conversation between a Salvadoran mother and son separated by migration drawn from Lynnette's research, we show that speakers create their own N/S divides that maintain familial ties and render incisive critiques of the political economy of migration. Our central argument is that the construction of N/S divides in migration discourse allows people to enact and interweave relationships across several politically-loaded domains, from those of the immediate interaction, to the sphere of intimate relationships, to one's neighborhood and country, to the dynamics between the United States and its southern neighbors. Our analysis reveals a "fractal recursivity" in which relations of dominance and dependence are projected between these domains. In making this argument, we conceive of politics holistically, as encompassing both the realm of international immigration policy and the intimate politics of social difference within families. The recursion of N/S allows people to make fine grained and fluid distinctions between insider and outsider across these realms, which belie simplistic understandings of social boundaries in contexts of migration.

The concept of fractal recursivity refers to the projection of an opposition, such as N/S, that is salient in one context into other contexts (Irvine and Gal, 2000: 38). This "anchoring" opposition is aligned with complementary qualities framed as the same and contrasted with the qualities associated with the opposing term (Gal, 2016: 96–98). For instance, in the migration discourse of Hilary and Lynnette's research participants, North is aligned with imperialism, greed, individualism, socioeconomic dominance and South with vulnerability, generosity, family, economic dependency. N/S distinctions are especially interesting examples of fractal recursion because they are also spatial deictics and, therefore, shifters—that is, the places to

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