RARAMURI AND MESTIZOS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A RURAL MEXICAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

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This ethnographic study examines the construction of boundaries between two ethnically diverse groups in a small, isolated community of northern Mexico. It uncovers the underlying methods by which social boundaries and symbolic boundaries are constructed around the mestizo and Raramri ethnic groups, and how these boundaries in turn provide a sense of shared understanding for group members. Boundary construction can transpire around differences in residency and resources, language, clothing, and perceptions of behavior. These boundaries can then influence interactions between the groups. The findings of this study suggest that, the stability of the community is an indication of a working relationship between the two groups, as a result of two factors in overcoming the boundaries. First, the groups can unite together during special or difficult moments because community members are well socialized. Second, the findings also suggest the existence of a space between the ethnic boundaries where group members from both sides can meet each other in the middle and agree upon certain values and beliefs of their community.
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the interactional dynamics of the mestizo and Raramuri people in the town of La Puerta, in the Sierra Madre mountains of northern Mexico. This study is of utmost sociological significance because it sheds light on the complex workings of a pivotal topic, ethnic boundaries. That is, it reveals how mestizos and Raramuri construct social and symbolic boundaries and identities around ethnicity in contrast to each other. This research study illustrates the actual mechanisms that preserve boundaries and identities despite external forces that press for integration and assimilation.

La Puerta

The small town of La Puerta lies in the middle of a valley alongside the Sierra Madre mountain range which is known for its deep canyons and high mountains. An agricultural community with about 260 residents surrounded by fields of various crops, La Puerta is not easy to get to and therefore somewhat isolated. The town is overwhelmingly populated by mestizos, with the Raramuri population size ranging around 12 or more families and a few lone individuals. Two pueblos of similar size lie a few miles away on each side. Only one road travels past it in the direction of a larger town around forty-five minutes deeper into the Sierra Madre, with a population in the thousands. It is the nearest location to find a hospital, police station, or grocery store. Mestizos and Raramuri have been linked for hundreds of years in La Puerta, yet there has been no systematic analysis examining exactly how these relationships play out in this once isolated rural pueblo. On the one hand, there seems to be a traditional hierarchical division between them with the mestizos usually having the upper hand in regards to resources and power. On the other hand, however, their lives are intermixed in the closely knit aspect of the community. Consequently, in daily interactions
who is a part of one ethnic group and its culture and who is not is constantly being reaffirmed.

Prior research has found that boundaries between mestizos and Raramuri are maintained through conflict, negotiation, and avoidance (Levi 1998, Martinez-Novó 2006, Merrill and Quezada 1997, Slaney 1997). In this research project, I use a ethnography and interviews to shed light on the actual social and symbolic mechanisms that mestizos and Rarmuri use to maintain and alter their ethnic identities and boundaries. In addition, I illustrate the complexity of boundaries which maintain the overall nature of stability between the mestizo and Raramuri ethnic groups in this rural town. This research will highlight the fluidity of both ethnicities, what defines the space between them, and how that is constantly being reshaped. This study will demonstrate how the structure and resources of the community, the cultural tools of language and clothing, and the perceptions and behaviors are relevant to the construction of ethnic boundaries.
THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Boundaries (Social and Symbolic)

Boundaries serve to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, and by examining them we can learn much about the groups they encompass and how they deal with each other. Boundaries can be constructed around many features of society, such as status, gender, age, and race. To keep from covering all types of boundaries, the focus of this study will be narrowed to symbolic and social boundaries and their resulting construction around ethnicity.

Lamont and Molnar (2002) described symbolic boundaries as abstract distinctions made by people to categorize objects, individuals, actions and even time and space. Furthermore, they understood social boundaries as objectified forms of social differences which become established into unequal access to resources and patterns of social exclusion (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Symbolic boundaries can fuel the construction of social boundaries when groups come to agree upon interpretations of reality. Social boundaries however do not require the existence of symbolic boundaries. Epstein (1992) reinforces the importance of distinctions. It is the distinctions between groups that separate them physically and symbolically. Any distinction small or large which may arise can lead to the creation of these boundaries. These distinctions can be overt and blatant or underlying and unannounced. People may become invested in the resulting boundaries making them resilient and long-lasting. Epstein (1992) goes on to argue that boundaries provide group members with a sense of self and understanding of who they are. Wolfe (1992) suggested analyzing the factors which make up the character of the boundaries in order to understand them, such as how permanent they are, and whether they are more or less rational. Accordingly, by describing the essential qualities of boundaries we are describing the people they encapsulate, how they
create a feeling of group membership, and how they perceive outsiders to be different from them.

Ethnic Boundaries

Ethnicity, a complicated term, has played out its influence on societies throughout the world. Fenton (2003) explains it as “a gatherer-all term to denote these dimensions of descent and culture and how they are mobilized to sustain public definitions of groups and the boundaries between them” (p.7). Through the actions of groups united under one flag ethnicity is constructed. The identity is therefore shaped by defining who is a part of the group and who is not. Fishman ([1980] 1996) argued that the doings of ethnicity preserve, and confirm, the collective identities. Members of a group do things relating to their ethnic identity which creates a sense of belonging to the community, such as calling each other by a certain name that only they truly understand. According to Wimmer (2008), the members of two ethnic groups consistently interacting not only identify themselves with a group, but are also identified by others as belonging to a group. Strong emotional attachments to an ethnic category are expected to arise when individuals share easily identifiable and agreed upon characteristics. Nagel (2001) argued that ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries and the sexual aspects contribute to prejudices against other ethnic groups.

The most fruitful contribution to the understanding of ethnic boundaries may have come from Barth’s (1969) work as he found that the construction of borders in opposition to the other serve to maintain the different identities. People negotiate and experience struggles with each other which then shape who is and who isn’t a part of the group, thus making ethnic boundary construction an active process. Ethnicity is a social activity not a predetermined category. Boundaries also serve to shield against confrontation and
modification through stable inter-ethnic relations which imply a certain structure of interactions has been formed (Barth 1969). People may pass through these boundaries, but the boundaries still remain intact. An actor can change his position within a boundary system passing through to escape the minority position, but not changing the boundary structure; the boundaries are not expand or contracted as a result (Wimmer 2008). In regards to culture, certain dimensions are connected to the construction of ethnicity. Cultural symbols and objects promote the formation of boundaries and how those within the ethnic group will define themselves. The shared culture of a group becomes the means to promote unity. An ethnic group that uses cultural symbols to define itself in this way builds a yardstick by which to measure who is included and excluded (Brass [1991] 1996). According to Barth (1969), labeling others members of a different ethnic group indicates a lack of shared understanding. By not completely understanding the other, a sense of unfamiliarity is maintained even within close physical contact. In contrast to many other researchers Warner ([1945] 2003) believed that ethnic groups would eventually fade away as they assimilated into the larger society. The possible strengthening or weakening of ethnic ties among many communities continues to be a pertinent debate.

The data from my study will describe the ways in which people shape the borders of their group’s identity by performing their ethnicity through the use of their culture during interactions, and its continued relevance in their lives.

Mestizos

The term “mestizo” traces back to the post-revolutionary era of the early 20th century, as the nation tried to bring about unity and understanding of who they are as a people (Moreno-Figueroa 2010). The term mestizo refers to a racial mix of European and
Indian descent. According to Moreno Figueroa (2010), the mestizo is portrayed as the ideal identity toward which people should strive. The concept of a mestizo can have different meanings. For some it is seen as a transitional phase as one moves farther away from indigenous roots in a process of whitening. This demonstrates the complexity of the mestizo identity and how it can vary from person to person and the communities they inhabit.

Indigenous Communities

Being Indian in Mexico presents a dualism. On the one hand, being Indian is sometimes glorified. Indians are held up as bearers of tradition and communal social forms who can still fabricate authenticity on looms and potters wheels. This version of the Indian is seen as carrying on a beautiful ancient past. On the other hand, being Indian is also disdained. Indians are presented as monolingual, traditional, and backward children mired in poverty, illiteracy, and dependency (Stephen 1996). In a study of Mixtec workers near the U.S border, Carmen Martinez-Novo (2006) found that their lack of resources and community development was constructed as a cultural choice in the eyes of mestizos. They are considered poor and illiterate because they choose to be instead of assimilating and progressing. Judith Friedlander (2006), uncovered how the residents of an Indian village described their identity by talking about what they did not have, “more than anything being Indian, in their eyes, meant being poor and uneducated” (p. 71). The negative image does not remain within the mestizo mentality, as Friedlander’s (2006) evidence indicates that it is internalized by the Indian population.

Mestizos and Indigenous People

The mestizo and Indigenous identities become an active negotiation between the groups. The form of these interactions has been found to vary throughout the country. In
studying interactions near the border, Martinez-Novo (2006) found that paternalism was the underlying factor when the Mixtec and mestizos where socializing. The dominant group understands their interactions as treating them like children for their own good. That form of discrimination is not hostile as long as the indigenous people “stay in their place”. Thus, paternalism benefits the mestizos who can be granted a higher status. Martinez-Novo (2006), however, never discussed situations when paternalism became hostile and its impact on the Mixtec. Treating them like children “for their own good” may create a volatile situation. There needs to be an exploration into the various degrees to which hostility is a factor during social exchanges. “Conflict and competition imply that indigenous ethnicity is part of a continual process of negotiation with other ethnic groups” (Stephen 1996:18). If conflict does not exist there must be other factors to keep the ethnic groups separate. Sanabria (2007) put forth the concept of “decency” to explain how people are often categorized in Latin America. The forms of dressing, speaking, occupation and living condition, even hairstyles and mannerisms can indicate whether a person has decency, in order to differentiate Whites or mestizos from Indians. The ethnic identity of both groups will be shaped differently, compared to other locations, based on the forms of interaction and how boundaries are constructed. This demonstrates that certain findings cannot be generalized to mestizo and indigenous relations in the entire country. For example, the Zapotecs of Teotlitlan provided a type of Indian identity that benefitted them during their interactions with tourist and consumers which met expectations that they were humble creators of authentic indigenous products (Stephen 1996). Their construction of an image that visitors sought out, helped them sell products and draw more people to their area. Evidently the interactional dynamics in La Puerta lead to a different result due to the circumstances of a secluded small town life.
Therefore, the nature of the boundaries is the important factor in understanding the relationship between mestizos and Indigenous people. The complexity of their ethnic identity and boundary construction intertwine latently and overtly to sway these interrelations. Interethnic exchanges reveal the influence of ethnicity which otherwise would be concealed among a seemingly homogenous united group. This homogenous group does not exist in La Puerta. the reasons for this absence are important and reside in the daily interactions and lifestyles of the groups.

Boundaries serve to keep people apart, but crossing them is possible in order to construct interethnic bonds between individuals. Studies demonstrate the possibility for connections to be made across boundaries with relative ease and various benefits coming from the association. They also demonstrate the importance of interactional dynamics for determining when the lines can be crossed and when they become firm, shunning outsiders. The importance of these bonds cannot be underestimated. “Social networks have a positive and significant effect on the employment of adult males as daily workers in rural and urban areas” (Skoufias, Lunde, and Patrinos 2010:58). By expanding a social network beyond their ethnic group, indigenous people can form beneficial relationships. 

Nutini (1997) found that indigenous people have the ability to assimilate into the larger mestizo ethnic group easily breaking through the division. Indians become culturally mestizo in communal, regional, and urban environments by acquiring mestizo cultural aspects and dropping Indian ones (Nutini 1997). However, Nutini’s (1997) study did not observe how this took place on a daily basis and what motivates the dominant group to credit their assimilation. In addition, many of them occupy a middle ground by partially integrating into both groups, and although their true identity is known, Indigenous individuals who
transition are treated in a more respectful manner by mestizos. Conversely, mestizos might integrate more with indigenous people by becoming part of their community through the god-parent system (compadrazgo). There is indication that this occurs in communities throughout the country. If the boundaries function to connect insiders and outsiders instead of preventing access to each other, this encourages intergroup association (Sanders 2002). When this type of association is diminished or blocked, one of the factors preventing integration may lie in the value people place on their ethnic identity. Group members will defend the authenticity of their culture and community honor which stabilizes a boundary (Wimmer 2008). Firm borders will undoubtedly reduce interethnic connections, but may also foster stronger in-group unity.

The boundaries between mestizo and indigenous group members are therefore very important in their identity construction. The mestizos of the community have features in their identity which link them to their indigenous ancestry and bring them closer to indigenous groups. The possibility of finding common ground allows them to identify with each other, making it difficult to argue that they are polarizing or two distinct groups. There is plenty of correspondence and overlap in the culture, but not enough impetus to unite into one group. The reasons two distinct ethnic identities remain are crucial for understanding the unique interactional dynamics.

The Raramuri/Tarahumara

The Raramuri are an indigenous group in northern Mexico. “They are the most numerous ethnic group of northern Mexico, with about 87,000 members, representing 2.8% of the Chihuahua state population and 1.1% of the country’s indigenous population” (Monarrez-Espino, Martinez, Martinez, and Greiner 2004:533). Even with such large
numbers they are a minority outside of their territory in the Sierra Madre mountain range. They have attempted to prevent outside forces from controlling their destiny for hundreds of years. Retreating into the Sierra Madre has helped them maintain boundaries against the Spanish, Mexicans, and tourists. Unfortunately, the seclusion has become problematic. Their lands are being taken, but more aid is not being provided by the government. Research has shown that the Tarahumara have less access to resources, such as education and health care. “Infant mortality rates are twice those found in other indigenous groups, and thrice those found in the rest of the country” (Monarrez-Espino et al 2004:533). They must leave their territories in search of labor and many of them find labor in mestizo controlled towns and cities. This is how some Tarahumara, end up living in La Puerta. Their numbers never reaching a high proportion of the population in La Puerta. The Raramuri arrivals are usually composed of families of various sizes, with most living in the government housing and others dispersed throughout town.

There are a few basic perspectives regarding Tarahumara identity and culture. Raramuri who choose to hold on to their traditions and native tongue are praised by some and insulted by others. They have received extensive attention for their running abilities and maintenance of what are claimed to be pre-Hispanic traditions. Slaney (1997), Merril and Quezada (1997), and Levi (1998, 1999), focused on various aspects of Raramuri culture ranging from, their religion, traditions, behaviors and intergroup strategies.

In this study I follow closely with Levi’s work, but gain valuable insight from the contrasting views proposed by Slaney (1997), and Merril and Quezada (1997). On the one hand, Slaney (1997), maintains that the Raramuri baptism rituals are crucial for understanding their view of the world and their place within it. The dualism of a fire and
water ceremony connect them to their own culture and the mestizo outsiders, allowing them to navigate through both groups.

On the other hand Merrill and Quezada (1997) challenge the idea that some of the Raramuri beliefs and traditions have a large impact on their identity. This gives the impression that they themselves can be defined by those supposedly unchanged traditions. In contrast to Slaney (1997), a different perspective is to view the identity of the Raramuri as continuously being constructed instead of remaining static for hundreds of years. “In the final analysis, the production and reproduction of Raramuri identity must be understood primarily in terms of more encompassing processes played out through the mundane practices of everyday life” (Merrill and Quezada 1997:306). The construction of Raramuri ethnic identity is better understood as a process. In a Raramuri community where a mestizo population was growing in numbers and taking control of the area, Merrill and Quezada (1997) found that the Raramuri took members of the powerful group as godparents for their children in order to obtain benefits from the connection. Having them as godparents provided access to work and money. They understood the importance of the godparent system and utilized it to meet their needs. Instead of withdrawing to maintain ethnic autonomy, they shaped their ethnic identity to adapt and live with their neighbors.

In this study I follow along the lines of Levi’s (1998, 1999) work as he focuses on the Raramuri protective strategies which form boundaries both through their behavior and cultural objects. The Raramuri may allow the idea that they are childlike Indians as a defensive strategy in the presence of mestizos, but then may take on a different persona among their own people. “Raramuri may exhibit outwardly deferential speech and behavior, feign ignorance about a certain topic, pretend not to speak Spanish, play the fool, or quietly
absorb the indignation that comes from being addressed as muchacho, towi (Raramuri for boy), or indito (little Indian)” (Levi 1998:96). They can create a buffer zone between themselves and mestizos by appearing ignorant or oblivious to things they have done wrong.

Additionally, Levi (1998) found that the Raramuri use their cultural objects to secure their autonomy. The traditional clothing and language of the Raramuri can be seen as a form of resistance and boundary maintenance. Levi (1998) argued that they used their own homemade things in order to prevent from becoming dependent on mestizos. Economically, if they are using only their own cultural products no one can force them into debt. Inability to sustain economic independence may weaken the boundary necessitating inter-group negotiations to meet economic needs. It is also crucial to understand what social goods the Raramuri could provide to their members, because Sanders (2002) claimed that intense feelings of ethnic identity and involvement in the ethnic group are more likely when the bonds can provide resources. There is substantial evidence demonstrating the protective features of ethnic boundaries for indigenous people. Ozer and Fernald (2008) observed that for an indigenous person living in a supportive indigenous community this resulted in lower use of alcohol and smoking. Whereas living in a majority mestizo community will lead to increase of smoking and alcohol use. Incorporating the study by Ozer and Fernald (2008), it was important to interpret if the protective characteristics of the boundaries would hold up when the Raramuri were nestled together in the edge of the town where most of them live in government provided housing. The Raramuri appear relatively impoverished, more so than the mestizos. The goods that their ethnic group can provide might be less material and more emotional and social.
Building on to Levi’s (1999) work, my research also examines the mestizos strategic use of material possessions. Bringing together the work of Ozer and Fernald (2008) along with Levi (1998) allows for possible idea that boundaries are purposefully being constructed as a shielding mechanism. The Raramuri group portrays a certain lifestyle and lives under particular conditions. As a result, they are categorized by themselves and outsiders, creating the insider and outsider dynamic. If there are protective benefits for mestizos and Raramuri to form boundaries then this needs to be examined further.

The fact that many Raramuri do not completely assimilate into the mestizo group while others do, demonstrates the complexities of boundary crossing. Friedlander (2006), argued that indigenous people desire to progressively integrate with mestizos. Friedlander’s breakthrough study took place in southern Mexico, but more importantly among indigenous people who did not have the option to escape into isolation. The Raramuri have employed the strategy of isolation to maintain a distance from mestizos instead of trying to integrate. In recent years there have been more transitions made by Raramuri. Once a Raramuri commits to transitioning into the mestizo group, this is not a brief move since they cannot become “civilized” one day and move backwards the next day; it is a process that takes time. Similarly, a mestizo will not be labeled uncivilized, and later regain his or her civility. Following the lines of Sanabria (2007), the concept of “decency” delineates what it means to be a decent person, and consistent behavior allows a person to shift from one ethnic group to another, regardless of skin color. Hence, the Raramuri could easily blend into the larger mestizo community of La Puerta and become equal members by changing their clothing and making their residence more permanent.
The Raramuri may not want to assimilate fully into La Puerta’s community in order to maintain their culture started by their ancestors. The reasons to resist assimilation are to be examined in La Puerta. The capability of assimilation regardless of physical features, adds another layer to the fluidity of boundaries. The community of La Puerta can exhibit the fluidity of the boundaries, but also how these cultural boundaries can remain stable for many years, stabilizing interactions into a consistent pattern between two groups.
LOCATING MYSELF

I have traveled to this town since my earliest years of life, spending summers visiting family. As a child I never noticed a difference between Raramuri and mestizos, to me everyone looked and acted the same. In my teenage years I became more aware of the entire community around me and my place within it. I found that I was continuously identified as my mother’s son or my grandmother’s grandson. My identity was connected to them and I was usually categorized a certain way, and treated in a certain manner, based on their actions within the community. Most of the older residents continue to acknowledge me based on the identity of my mother who was born and raised in the community until she left to the U.S at the age of 17. For the past few years however I have attempted to forge my own independent identity with people around my age. I also began to notice the indigenous people of the community, and one dramatic event opened my eyes wide to their existence. I was playing basketball at the plaza when I heard a loud commotion down the road. I looked and noticed a large crowd had gathered around two people who were fighting. I ran over and found a Raramuri man and woman beating each other. The surrounding individuals were mestizos who looked to be enjoying the situation, some were laughing and others were cheering them on. A third Raramuri man entered the fight and it became a chaotic scene. Nearby, little Raramuri children were sitting atop a wall and crying loudly while they watched helplessly. I was shocked to the point where I yelled, asking why everyone was just standing around watching. The Raramuri woman was knocked down to the ground, while the men fought. A mestizo boy took the opportunity to literally run over her back, stepping on her back as he laughed. The two men continued to wrestle with each other. Eventually, the Raramuri woman stood up and started throwing stones at the surrounding crowd as they all ran away laughing.
The three Raramuri adults soon left the scene. Some bystanders stated that they were drunk or on some kind of drug, while some of the mestizo onlookers followed them to see what would happen next.

This event clearly left a mark on me, it was not just the violence, but in the moment the division between Raramuri and mestizo became a reality. There was something dividing them which allowed a woman to be beaten and stomped on, to the delight of a watching crowd and I wanted to know what it was. From this point on, the indigenous and mestizo relationship became important to me.

While conducting the research I tried to become more of an insider, but my obvious U.S roots usually made me a clear outsider. My own identity as a Mexican American places me in a position of privilege in Mexico due to my U.S citizenship. I look upon myself as both a Mexican and an American, but in the town I am viewed as a wealthy, americanized individual. Therefore I cannot simply enter the community and expect to blend in. In a certain way I must prove myself by knowing the lyrics to songs, drinking like the men, and using Spanish in the style of community members, among many other things. Moments where I had a noticeable accent or could not handle the manual labor where opportunities to expose my americanized identity. Towards the end these small characteristics were put aside and I felt more immersed into the daily routine. I felt a notable shift in perception after I had shared many experiences with community members. In the final week, I seemed to be a known and accepted presence in the community. When I look upon the Raramuri and the mestizos living in La Puerta, I see a connection to my own families past and the cultures which have shaped my identity. It helps me understand what aspects of my own culture make me who I am.
METHODOLOGY

Ethnographic Methodology/Ethnography

I conducted an ethnographic study in order to immerse myself within the daily life of the community and make connections with community members. This method allowed me to perceive and document the seemingly ordinary interactions between community members. The ethnographic approach enabled me to take part in large community events and small intimate gatherings without appearing like an objective outsider. Thus, I was able to share in the experiences and emotions alongside community members. The research questions could be addressed by documenting the daily conversations and taking regular observation notes.

Some demographic data about the community was important to note. The population of the community currently lies between 250-300 people. The majority of community members I met, who were in their late 20’s and older, were in a relationship and had children. Most of the young families I observed had more than one child, but less than five. In the past the older generations commonly had nearly ten children or more. As a result of the changing birth rates the population size has decreased. For instance, there were only four kids in the kindergarden graduating class of this year. The average pay rate for a man working a regular job in the community such as, livestock care, field work or construction, was around $20.00 a day. Teenagers also participate in the workforce by helping their parents or getting a job of their own. If they decided to drop out of school, which was a common occurrence, they were expected to get a job right away.

The ethnographic study was conducted over a 7 week period. The weeks were broken into stages, in order to slowly immerse myself within the community and build trust among the residents of La Puerta. I made observations throughout the community and had informal
interviews with multiple individuals, both male and female. I also followed a few community members through a typical workday and participated in large community events such as school graduations and political rallies.

During the course of the research 8 people were informally interviewed, while I actively took notes in their presence and directed the conversation to specific topics. I met with six of these individuals regularly at least once a week, not through a predetermined schedule, but through random encounters. Two men identified themselves as Raramuri, with one of them stating he was mixed, which meant he had mestizo and Raramuri heritage. The rest identified as mestizo, however, the word mestizo was not utilized, they just understood themselves as non-indigenous. After these conversations I noted some of their statements in private. I conducted all the informal interviews in Spanish. The first few were initiated by the suggestions of my gatekeeper. He would introduce me to a person, I would explain my research study, and why I was conducting it. Most people appeared to be only slightly interested in the details, but seemed comfortable with me as a person. The fact that I was from the U.S was not surprising, and a lot of community members recognized me from previous visits. Other dialogue was documented through casual conversations, which I did not direct, with community members who were aware of my research study.

I followed 8 people at their regular place of work or while they completed a temporary job. There were 2 females and 6 males. I focused more on their interactions with their coworkers and customers, and not so much on interviewing them. Any questions I asked usually involved their work, such as the process of completing a certain job. The ages of these people ranged from early 20’s to late 60’s.
There were a few key observation points I regularly visited. From the early morning into the late afternoon the majority of people were either working or busy in their homes. The plaza, streets and most stores were empty with little to nothing occurring. I therefore positioned myself on a street near two stores, and a bar where much of the vehicle and pedestrian traffic passed through (see Figure 1). In the late evening I would then move to the plaza and find many people gathering to play sports or just socialize (see Figure 2). People would park their trucks around the perimeter of the plaza and sit inside their cars or casually lean on the vehicles to talk with each other. From this location I was able to meet with people after they were done with work. I was often invited to drive around town or to any local gatherings that were occurring. I also used the basketball and soccer games conducted in the plaza as an ice breaker. I also visited the stores sporadically throughout the day. I would sometimes sit inside on a chair or outside on the sidewalk and interact with people that dropped by. Other observation points outside of town were included when a large portion of the community was involved. For instance, the cemetery is located a few miles away in an open field, and some political events were held in a different town. However, the interactions included at these locations were composed of community members from La Puerta.
Figure 1- A local street used as a common observation point.

Figure 2- The town plaza and basketball court.
There were multiple community events which I observed and participated in, including funerals, birthday parties, and school graduations, as well as smaller more intimate meetings. During participant observations I actively immersed myself in the conversations and activities that took place. Being engaged in the situation meant that I would have to remove myself from time to time in order to write down observational notes including actions and comments. A note pad was used to document my observations and interactions. I jotted them down quickly and privately due to the fact that the surrounding individuals would also observe me and sometimes pause in their activities to figure out what I was recording. For workplace observations I was able to accompany a few workers as they went through their daily routine. This gave me an opportunity to observe participants in the workplace or socializing with friends.

In regards to formal and informal interviews, early attempts to use a tape recorder in the presence of community residents led them to become very cautious with their words, and at times, refusing to speak. Although the recording device was new to them, the cause of their embarrassment was simply having the sound of their voice recorded. I therefore focused mainly on informal conversation transcribed on paper and only sporadically used the tape recorder.

In the first week I established myself within my family’s home. I settled into my own room, where I set up a workspace and found a secure location for the data. I informed family members of the personal space and privacy I required to prevent any misunderstandings about my stay. I clarified the objectives and processes of my research with my gatekeeper who had plenty of time to help me since he was on vacation from work. My gatekeeper immediately helped me by driving me around to introduce me to various people in the
community. The first meetings were very casual serving to inform people of my research study. It also helped to reconnect with past acquaintances and friends. He was able to vouch for me with those in the community who did not know me, to inform them of my intentions and start building up some trust. I was identified early on as a northerner, and as a slight outsider, but this led more to curiosity than rejection. Those who didn’t know me often times asked for the names of my mother and grandmother in order to connect me to a certain family lineage. These new and old acquaintances enjoyed asking me questions, wanting to know what the U.S was like, what I did for work, and other things about my life.

In the second week I began spending more time focusing on the plaza where I hoped to meet new people and make connections with them. I observed the activity in the community always carrying a pen, notepad, and tape recorder to demonstrate my research tools to community members. I reconnected with individuals I met in the past and started rebuilding a rapport with them. I played sports, rode through town, and sought out information on current and future events in the community. I began to receive invitations to lunch and to travel to the larger town where people purchased their commodities. These experiences were enormously helpful for breaking the ice.

In the third to sixth week I was immersed enough within the community to have established a daily routine by making observations in specific locations on the street and regularly encountering people to find activities later in the evening. The plaza became the standard place to visit almost every day, and one of the only places to find people in the afternoon. Furthermore, during this time I was invited to workplaces and into people’s homes. The type of work I observed varied from stores, to the cinema, and general field work. The workplace observations were vital for interactions but were limited mostly to men,
except for two women. The men and women were mestizos who often worked with Raramuri community members. In addition I participated in multiple intimate gatherings bringing people together to share drinks or food. In the course of these moments members of the two groups were sometimes indistinguishable from each other, except for slight distinctions such as demeanor. Whenever I was unsure about ethnic identities while analyzing a group, I would ask my gatekeeper or an acquaintance to confirm who was Raramuri or mestizo. However, ethnic identity was mostly revealed by the people themselves through the use of language or cultural symbols. During this time span my gatekeeper continued to allow me to accompany him when he went to find his companions and spend time with them.

I also began to seek out participants for formal interviews, but most people wanted to have informal unstructured conversations without the process of setting a time and location, preferring to start talking whenever the topic was brought up. The data was also largely dependent on other people talking amongst themselves without my direct intervention, permitting the conversation to take a natural course. This revealed the habitual nature of ethnically related comments about life in the community, which provided key information about the interactional dynamics. The purpose of my research was evident to most everyone I interacted with, which often meant they decided to either censor themselves around me or increased their commentary about their fellow community members. Interestingly enough, the majority of people ignored my research and only viewed me as the same person who had visited multiple times before.

In the seventh week, I began to say my goodbyes in preparation to leave. I thanked community members for their hospitality and kindness. I also brought up controversial comments made by individuals and discussed whether they would be comfortable with those
words being added into the research paper. One controversial discussion could not be used and was removed from the data. Other people asked that small comments not be included. The topics involved sexual encounters, and violence between the groups. Overall, the participants knew my objectives when they made their comments and were okay with them.

Analysis Process

I included in my data, observation notes, interview notes, a few journal notes and some tape recordings. To analyze these various sources and create the themes, I looked for connections between different notes. I separated the data into three categories; observations, observations which included dialogue, informal interviews and conversations. Relevant information from these categories were then placed into the themes. When there were common features in the notes, I would bring the sources together. As a result, the data gathered under one theme could have been collected during different days and locations. A comment recorded in the first week of the ethnography may have been linked to one near the end.
FINDINGS

Spatial Boundaries and Resources:

*Where Do You Come From, And What Do You Need?*

Informal interviews, along with observations, demonstrated that ethnicity did in fact affect the interactional dynamics, changing the character of exchanges between the Raramuri and mestizos. Raramuri and mestizos were heavily informed by ethnic identity and ethnic boundaries. There was no outright declaration of ethnic pride from either side, yet its latent presence could be detected during regular community life. I observed cultural devices such as, body language and dialogue as people tried to get by with little conflict and maintain their comfort zone. The Raramuri women for instance would make their desire to avoid men by hiding their faces. Additionally, the informal and formal interviews shed light on various perspectives community members held about living in La Puerta.

The Raramuri and mestizos were separated by the spatial lay out of their homes, living conditions, and ownership of private property. These differences played a large role in establishing symbolic and social boundaries by designating the living space of the Raramuri as secluded, temporary and impoverished, and forming ideas that they required or wanted less private property.

The mestizos are the permanent residents, which appears to fuel the idea of a more stable group. A large number of mestizo families have lived in the community for generations, dominating the ownership of businesses and farmland. The larger houses and animals were always in their hands, clearly giving them a favorable position. The surrounding miles and miles of farmland, which can cost around 100,000 dollars per lot, belonged to mestizos. In La Puerta, I never documented a case in which a mestizo shifted his
or her living conditions to integrate with the Raramuri. The residential movement was in one direction towards the mestizo side, and was considered progress by many who saw these transitions on behalf of Raramuri as their attempt to become more forward thinking and civilized.

By contrast, many of the Raramuri were only in the town for certain seasons to work on the land before leaving to their home towns, spread throughout the Sierra Madre. Therefore they appeared to be temporary migrants to the area. Most lived deeper in the Sierra Madre within more traditional Raramuri communities where the land was not as fertile and jobs were limited. Their seasonal residence in La Puerta limited how much they contributed to community development. The boundary constructed around temporary versus permanent residents placed the two groups into the contrasting sides.

The Raramuri are the only occupants of the government housing which lies next to the entrance of the town (see Figure 3), by the lonely highway and a large event hall. There are two rows of small rooms facing each other with a family living in them (see Figure 4). The nearest mestizo home is across an open field and a road. The housing creates a strong cultural niche for the Raramuri. When they come home after a long day at work they find their Raramuri friends and family arriving to the same place as them. Additionally, many Raramuri work together in the fields and take advantage of the opportunity to carpool. A regular scene that played out was a large truck rumbling down the street carrying more than a dozen Raramuri on their way to work outside of town and back home to the housing complex. There is a division in the workforce as well. The traditional gender roles usually place women within the home, predominantly caring for children, and doing housework. The opportunities to work in small stores or something with low physical exertion are open to
women, but mestizas are predominantly in these positions. However, Raramuri women often work in the fields alongside men in large numbers. They have their lunches prepared, leave early in the morning to get through long hours and then continue to care for any children they may have. When I was talking with one Raramuri man he was sitting outside his home.

Figure 3- The entrance to town.
waiting with his baby until his wife arrived home from work and took the baby from him. The task of raising children falls heavily upon women, but men also contribute. The Raramuri and mestizo men dominate in the fields, construction, livestock care and other major sectors with no overt divisions between them.

The Raramuri who resided in the housing complex had communal showers, no electricity, and rooms that lacked the cozy vibe of mestizo homes. Larger economic and historical forces denying one ethnic group access to the comforts of a stable home and some modern appliances without a doubt divides Raramuri from the mestizos in the town that they share. The mestizos navigate the space by rarely traveling to the government housing. They never really have a reason to travel to the Raramuri area and even less of a motivation to enter their rooms. The implications of this state of affairs means the Raramuri are not fully
integrated on equal footing with the mestizos, and oddly their residency is considered temporary. Furthermore, the mestizos have the advantageous living conditions making any boundary crossing process in this realm flow in one direction. The Raramuri would be the ones integrating and taking on a more contemporary style of living. The Raramuri also possess less private property, from home appliances to personal goods, such as electronics. A slight inequality is distinguishable even though most of the population has relatively little overall wealth. Consequently, the symbolic boundaries are constructed in ideas about the two groups’ living conditions and access to resources. The social boundaries are objectified in the different distribution of resources and exclusion from equal living conditions.

Without more permanent shelter of their own in the community many Raramuri would end up on the street under difficult circumstances. For instance, one day the rain started pouring down and people took cover in their homes. I was traveling through town in a car when I spotted a few Raramuri standing and sitting in the rain. They had no roof over them and were getting completely drenched out in the open. One could assume they did not mind, or were used to it. However, it is more likely they either lived in the government housing and it would take a long walk across town to reach it, or with no one in the community to offer them shelter until the storm passed, they were left with no choice but to endure it. The very few Raramuri who lived in houses closer to the center of the community usually obtained a room in their employer’s home. In this case, the Raramuri have to abide by rules and restrictions of their employer’s home, possibly preventing them from offering shelter to their friends in the rain. In another case, catching Raramuri lying on the dirt sleeping or resting was often attributed to their low standards of comfort, while in reality, the truth may lie in their inadequate accommodations within the community. Other residents may
form a symbolic boundary around this situation by fabricating the ideas of a lower necessity for comfort among their indigenous neighbors.

Also, due to the fact that most Raramuri who live in government housing can choose to leave La Puerta at any time, they may not or cannot invest in purchasing a home or opening up their own business. Their objective might be to earn money and return to their Sierra Madre communities. This decreases the likelihood that they would invest in improving the government housing with interior remodeling, much like the mestizos do with their homes. For many of the mestizo homes, the outside infrastructure exhibits cracks and other damage, but for the most part, the insides are quite comfortable and consistently being updated. This portrays the image of one group enjoying better living conditions by choice, but the truth may lie in the inability to make a home out of temporary government housing.

Another implication of this temporary residency was illustrated during a local election. When politicians were campaigning throughout the area, they would arrive for rallies and door to door canvassing in La Puerta. Everyone seemed to enjoy talking about meeting the politicians, but when I asked a Raramuri man if they had visited their homes he said, “No, they didn’t come over here.” The politicians had been making promises to people to gain their support, but they did not come to the Raramuri homes to offer them anything, even the much needed electricity. This gave the impression that participation of Raramuri in the election was not necessary because many of them would leave to other parts of Durango or into Chihuahua. Their temporary residence results in a loss of political influence for the Raramuri.

The two groups also do not have equal possession of and access to private property, thus resulting in an economic relationship connected by mutual need. The social boundaries
are constructed around unequal resources and reinforced by symbolic boundaries which normalize the uneven ownership. The community has experienced enormous growth in material and technological resources within the last seven years. There has been an increase in cell phone usage, internet and t.v access, and vehicle ownership. The community went from sharing one landline, no internet and limited channels, to the abundance of cell phones in the hands of all mestizo adults, and teenagers, in addition to wireless internet, and satellite television. The phones have given everyone access to popular internet websites and easy communication, while television has flooded them with foreign programs exposing them to extravagant lifestyles. Furthermore, vehicle ownership has become common for almost every man, regardless of its old age or broken parts, they constantly repair them because they understand how important vehicles are in this rural location. The mestizo men have higher rates of vehicle ownership than Raramuri men. Mestiza women drive as well but I did not note any Raramuri woman who drove and still lived a more traditional lifestyle. Those in the community who do not have a vehicle must constantly carpool, travel by bus, or hitchhike.

In recent years the Raramuri have also increased their material wealth, by purchasing cell phones and vehicles, but their situation is slightly different due to their higher rates of poverty and lack of access to electricity, they have a decreased ability to purchase these items or easily utilize them. Most of the mestizos are also suffering economically, and try to make extra money by selling small items from their homes, such as snacks.

The mestizos have the upper hand in ownership, positioning the Raramuri as buyers and newcomers to ownership. I propose that this theme binds the groups together while maintaining their ethnic distinction. However, this also unintentionally perpetuates the attitude that mestizos are supposed to have more material possessions than the Raramuri. The
imbalance of resources results in a stable seller and buyer relationship, which unlike the other boundaries, creates a bridge between the groups. Ideas are formed about this relationship and the differences in possessions. This was demonstrated by a mestizas comment, “I think that they just don’t like furniture, they don’t like having things like we do, like beds. They don’t want those things.” Most mestizos do not have the same lack of resources securing a boundary around material possessions. This is not a rationally motivated goal to subjugate the Raramuri, but a consequence of historical oppression and government failure to alleviate indigenous poverty. The inequality, however, is not a rational construction on the part of mestizos in La Puerta to subjugate their indigenous neighbors by preventing their upward mobility. They do not make an organized effort to maintain their dominance, but rather mestizos appear to be accepting of those Raramuri who obtain material wealth as long as they are humble. Nevertheless, even if there is no strategic overt oppression or abuse and everyone is treated equally, the inequality in wealth and ownership gives the mestizos an advantage in most circumstances by positioning them as the vendors who can control prices and the supply of things such as gasoline. In the majority of documented instances when a person from one ethnic group purchased something from another in the community, it was a Raramuri seeking out a mestizo to buy a product, or mestizos dealing with themselves. This relationship makes the groups dependent on each other, with each product and resource providing grounds on which to build consistent interactions. As one mestizo man explains, the relationship is beneficial to the mestizo sellers who need to keep their Raramuri customers well supplied. He stated, “They’re very good clients too, it right away reflects in the sales, when the Tarahumara come, one sells a lot, a lot, a lot, and then they leave like right now in this time that it’s that we are in that it is really calm. Um one does sell but very,
but when they come everything, everything gets sold. .... All the food, all the food, all the food gets sold there is selling in the store, a lot is sold... and one puts out clothes, second hand clothes, used clothes and they buy it.” Additionally, if the mestizos control access to almost all items such as food, clothing, and even gasoline, the Raramuri as a group will obviously be at a disadvantage during interactions. The majority of the time the seller and buyer relationship has structured the boundaries to make exchanges occur consistently and on friendly terms.

Analyzing thoughts about these items exposes the existence of an idea among older mestizos suggesting it had become normal for the Raramuri to have fewer possessions. This situation has created underlying beliefs to fuel a symbolic boundary about ethnic groups and their material possessions. A man ridiculing two kids, who had run out of gas at their home, brings this to light. “So, they don’t have gas and they have to be outside huddled around a fire to make food, just like the inditos.” He laughed at their situation because the image was out of character. The inside of mestizos’ homes have begun to modernize with microwaves, stoves, washing machines, blenders, improved plumbing systems and so on. In the Raramuri housing complex, most of these objects are non-existent, once again limiting their ability to participate in a big part of social life. The expectation of disparity between the groups was also demonstrated by mestizo attitudes in regards to vehicles. Many of the older mestizos had grown accustomed to owning trucks, and their comments on the increasing vehicle ownership within the Raramuri community provided a glimpse into this mentality about the inequality. For example, when two mestizas were having breakfast one of them stated, “Now, all of the inditos have trucks and we do not even have enough to buy food. But all of them are going around in trucks, think about that.” She chuckled afterwards, but it was clear that
this odd unexpected change, to see an ever increasing number of indigenous people owning trucks, was new to her. The fact that she was struggling economically and compared her situation to indigenous people seemed to indicate that things were tilted incorrectly.

There was an apparent disparity in vehicle ownership, with almost every mestizo household owning one or more trucks, but on the Raramuri side there were far less truck owners. This gave mestizos a freedom of movement and independence not attained by Raramuri who needed to constantly carpool or hitchhike in order to travel. The Raramuri who did own trucks could conduct new forms of business with mestizos, weakening the boundary and shifting the interaction to more equal footing. For instance, a Raramuri man arrived to one of the local mechanics to get help with his truck. He needed some help with the engine. They discussed the problem and then had a conversation about the man’s truck. Their conversation revolved around the fuel efficiency, the power, and how it handles on the road. Working on and owning a truck is an enormous part of the male identity, and an important part of daily interactions. If the Raramuri man did not possess a truck this would have never happened and they possibly would not continue interacting. The man, however, would eventually return for more help and to have conversations about his truck. The interaction was not between ethnically distinct individuals, they came together as one because of their vehicles.

The Raramuri have uneven access to resources due to their poverty, making them ideal customers for those mestizos seeking to sell new things. The ones who live in the government housing do not have electricity; they cannot plug in a television or charge their cell phones, leading them to find other methods to power their electronics. One Raramuri man explained how he used his truck for electricity. A mestizo asked him, “Do you have
electricity?” He replied, “I have the battery,” and he pointed to his car’s engine. He would hook up appliances to his car battery and use it to power them. The innovative use of his truck allowed him some independence, but those who do not own a vehicle are prime candidates for mestizo vendors. A conversation between a mestizo and mestiza exhibited how they came about creating a new business idea specifically targeting Raramuri as customers. The man stated, “Over there in the store they are charging the inditos for a charge.” The woman replied, “What do you mean a charge?” He said, “Yeah, to charge their cell.” She sounded surprised and said, “Really, oh that’s harsh. And how much do they charge them?” He told her, “Like 10 pesos.” At this moment with little thought she had the idea, “Ah, well I can charge them 5, better for them to come over here.” He found it funny and agreed, “Hahaha, well yeah that’s good if you want get a little money, and it comes out better for them too.” These two adults found a way to profit from the Raramuri’s need for electricity and their increasing cell phone ownership. By selling electricity, mestizos would build a repetitive interactional dynamic in which they position themselves as providers, giving them a material advantage, but also providing a much needed resource to the Raramuri.

Another type of exchange further demonstrates this economic relationship. A Raramuri man stopped by a mestizo’s house to buy a portable DVD player. He asked the mestizo, “You don’t have the little t.v to watch movies?” The man replied, “I had it, but I already lent it to another person, and he will return it to me later. If you come on Saturday I will have it here for you.” The Raramuri man asks, “You sure?” The mestizo tells him, “Yes.” This exchange would connect them in the buyer and seller relationship based around the DVD player, which was adequate for the viewing needs of the Raramuri. They had
previously connected over the DVD player and would continue to seek each other out to make the deal.

The association and roles of supplier and consumer can be reversed when Raramuri turn the tables and sell raw materials back to the mestizos. The mestizo can take advantage of the Raramuri need, but mestizos can also provide Raramuri with the chance to become suppliers. This dynamic existed at the garbage dump. Mestizos usually traveled to the trash dump outside of town to throw away their trash, but every now and again they would search the area for scrap metal or other materials to sell. Interestingly enough, the Raramuri usually beat them to it, finding raw materials that others threw away, eventually selling the scrap metal and other things back to the mestizos, thus creating a constantly flowing link. Raramuri would also obtain old broken down trucks, strip them down and sell what they could.

Accordingly, this social and symbolic boundary based around the inequality of material possessions between the groups is magnetic, binding them together, while infusing ideas about ethnic identity into the positioning of the groups. An unintended consequence is the creation of a norm in which the Raramuri are expected to have less material wealth than the mestizo. This theme demonstrates the two groups working together and being dependent on each other, but the relationship still provides the mestizos with an advantage over the Raramuri. The examples illustrated the establishment of a bridge between the ethnic groups. They are not in competition for the resources, but provide each other with a buyer and seller relationship. The boundary therefore is actually an impetus to interact with each other regularly. The mestizo needs Raramuri customers and they, in turn, need mestizo providers. Without the Raramuri as consumers, they would have fewer customers to purchase their electricity or products, and businesses would suffer.
Something to Talk About

Language was the most recurring factor distinguishing the different identities of the two groups. The Raramuri are bilingual whereas the mestizos only speak Spanish, with the exception of a few who speak a little English. Raramuri utilize an Uto-Aztecan language infused with Spanish words, in the community the language is known as Tarahumara. Their common word to identify outsiders, such as whites and mestizos, is chabochi and not mestizo. The mestizo label was not used because they had their own word, with both sides basically understanding its meaning and being okay with it. On the other hand, the mestizos would label the Raramuri by various names such as comadrecita, indito, Taras, and Tarahumarsitos. Very often the indigenous language was brought up in a joking manner among mestizos in order to get a quick laugh or to play with the few words they knew. They always found it to be amusing, especially words that were apparently sexual or vulgar. Much like my English speaking abilities set me apart as a northerner, the Raramuri community’s identity was brought to light during many interactions as a result of their language. On the other hand, when the Raramuri used the language it gave them access to a private line of communication. They could talk to themselves in the presence of mestizos and not be concerned with the messages being intercepted. The strategic use of their language was evident early on, even their children learned to employ it effectively. The overall unseen effect of the Tarahumara language was to identify the two ethnic groups making it known what group individuals are a part of.

It is important to note that the mestizos found the words of the Tarahumara language to be funny because whenever they used them in the presence of Raramuri, they would draw
attention to those particular individuals, attempting to draw them into a playful game with their language as the main tool to joke with. There were a few recurring Tarahumara words that seemed to be used often enough to be part of most mestizo’s vocabulary, such as remeke and chicurri which mean tortilla and rat. Some children would say, “Do you want some chicurri with remeke.” Those who did not know the meaning of the words would fall into the trap, if they accepted the offer. These phrases never lost their comedic substance for mestizos no matter how often people used them. For every documented case in which the Tarahumara language became the topic of conversation, the mestizos were the ones to bring it up. This would then identify Raramuri as indigenous community members. Any interaction between members of both groups, which brought the indigenous language into play, led to the differentiation of insiders and outsiders. Once the identities had been established, any preconceived ideas in regards to the groups could then be connected to each person involved in the interaction.

One event exemplified the comedic use of the language. A group of men were working together and one mestizo played the role of a frustrated communicator, as he attempted to interact with a little boy from the U.S. When the boy would not reply to his questions he resorted to dramatically asking his Raramuri acquaintances to use their language. “Throw some Tarahumara at him let’s see if he answers!” Even though his goal was to be funny, it was in this abrupt moment when the indigenous identity of the Raramuri workers was made evident to all present. Whereas in one moment they were perfectly immersed with the rest of the group, in the next instant their language made them the center of attention and differentiated them as indigenous people. This interaction would continue to place the focus on the Raramuri when the mestizo men explained what had occurred to the
little boy’s guardian, who later joined the group. “We tried all the languages, English, Spanish, French, even Tarahumara.” Another added sarcastically, “Yeah, tara is the best”. The group laughed again in unison and a few begin taking turns reciting Tarahumara words they knew. The mestizos continued asking their Raramuri companions to say some funny words, but the Raramuri males respectfully refused to speak during the whole situation while laughing along with the rest of the group. These types of moments placed an unambiguous label on people, categorizing them into one of the two ethnic identities. An outsider watching the group would immediately know who belonged to which group.

The Raramuri used the language strategically to communicate amongst themselves privately, or even a few times to have a laugh at the expense of baffled mestizos. The Raramuri residents used their language to prevent the mestizos from listening in on their conversations, and the chabochi could only give them a blank stare after hearing them speak. For instance, this tactic was illustrated when a conversation between Tayo, a Raramuri and Niko, a mestizo, was interrupted by a Raramuri girl. The little girl running an errand had quietly snuck up on us and only peeked around the corner of a building to speak with Tayo. The two of them quickly talked in Tarahumara before she handed him a bag and ran home. Niko was quick to ask “What did she say?” and “Were you talking about us?” Tayo merely chuckled and said, “No”. Niko, however, pressed the issue, “What was she saying, something about money or what?” This immediately made myself and Niko feel outside the loop because we could not understand their words. From my point of view it appeared to be a well-guarded part of the Raramuri identity which gave them access to a private line of communication because Tayo was reluctant to admit they were in fact talking about Niko. There was no offer to teach the language to Niko who wanted to learn some words. Help
would not come easily from Tayo. Niko however was very persistent and Tayo eventually helped him practice some numbers and words, but not complete phrases. In the community, the majority of the time, the norm was for Raramuri not to mention their language or try to use it against the mestizos in an overt manner. The strategic usage went beyond merely whispering to each other into other strategic uses.

The children’s use of language demonstrates its continued importance as an aspect of the Raramuri identity, and its usefulness in a variety of settings. They acquire the language and the skills to utilize it advantageously when immersed in a mestizo dominated environment. An example of this strategic use was when a young Raramuri boy was pretending not to speak Spanish in the presence of mestizos at a gas station outside of town. The boy and other children like him only do this at a gas station outside of town next to a major highway where many northerners and city dwellers sporadically pass by on their way to major cities. He carried a note written in Spanish asking customers for some support because their community was experiencing economic difficulties. The note was also his only form of communicating because apparently he did not speak Spanish. His parents were concealed nearby, patiently waiting for him to drop off donations. The boy’s strategy was to obtain money without speaking to the people who would question him about the circumstances of his community’s troubles. To avoid scrutiny he pretended to be monolingual and positioned himself far from those who work closer to La Puerta. The people there know the boys speak Spanish and would not read the note and there is no gas station to approach travelers. By walking around with a note asking for money and pretending to be monolingual, the language related stigma immediately identifies him as a panhandling
indigenous boy. A mestizo boy could not employ the same strategy, because he would be exposed as a trickster.

In another instance, young Raramuri girls playing at a mestiza’s household during a community wide religious celebration were scolded by little Raramuri boys in their language, but they used the bilingualism to defend themselves. The celebration involved getting wet in honor of a saint, hence, the kids all through town were spending the day soaking each other. When the Raramuri boys arrived they needed to pass along a message to the girls. The boys wanted to communicate with them, but also prevent the mestizas from understanding the message. They apparently told them, in Tarahumara, that they were not allowed to get wet and had to go home. All the Raramuri girls were immediately distinguished from their mestiza friends by having to converse in their language. By replying in their language, it left their mestiza friends confused about what was occurring. The girls tried talking the boys into leaving them alone but they would not hear it. However, when the girls refused to leave they used Spanish to explain the situation to the mestiza girls and the adult in order to get support from them. The mestiza girls and the adult then came to their defense by forcing the boys to storm off. They opened the line of communication to the others and obstructed the boy’s efforts to be secretive. The underlying effect resulted in the verification of their identity as they navigated around the dilemma.

The mestizo curiosity and humorous perspective directed the focus on language towards the Raramuri and made it a recurrent topic of conversation. This identity marker was only placed upon the Tarahumara, they are the ones who are set apart by their bilingualism. The mestizos are not bilingual, but this is not viewed as a deficiency, it is seen as the norm. They do not feel the need to learn the Tarahumara language because it may not improve their
life chances and it is perceived to be less useful than English. As a result, they are identified by their monolingualism. The Raramuri also identified their ethnicity through their language, but their use of it was more strategic. The language skills are passed down to their children enabling them to utilize it in mestizo dominated environments. The Tarahumara children are well versed in their native tongue and continue to learn it, indicating they still value it and continue to find useful. Whether or not it is to get an upper hand on the mestizos who they deal with on a daily basis, the usage nonetheless links them to their ethnic identity. For example, when a young Raramuri boy defiantly responded to a mestizo, who wanted to know what he always yells at him, the boy said, “You’re a chabochi!” With this label the boy identified him as the other, not part of his group. These moments are quick and sometimes seem insignificant, but they serve the underlying effect of identifying people as indigenous or mestizo. Barth (1969) argued that the persistence of ethnic groups implies some signals for identifying them. Hence the first identity marker is language, stable for hundreds of years and never falling to distinguish the two ethnicities when it is used. Any interaction between the people in this small community can be fertile ground to use Tarahumara as a signal of one difference pressuring them to acknowledge the distinction.

Clothing:

*Dress Like Yourself*

The most visible ethnic identity marker was the Raramuri clothing and style. Their presentation was based on different standards than the mestizos which led to divergence in opinions about the proper look. They wore distinctive things, making it easier to identify them and attach negative connotations to the group as a whole, based on the actions of a few. Identifying people and placing labels on them is easier when they stand out in a crowd. When
Raramuri gather in a crowd or a certain part of town it sends a clear message about the composition of the group both to insiders and outsiders. The difference runs deeper than outward appearances. The garments are a symbolic connection to their past and culture, not something that can be tossed aside merely to blend in. Their permanence and visibility makes them another stable identity marker.

The Raramuri women tended to dress in long colorful skirts with brightly colored blouses and a cloth covering their hair and sides of their face. They walked around mostly in sandals or sometimes slip-on type shoes. Those who had babies would carry them on their back, wrapped into a quilt. Their mestiza counterparts wore more contemporary clothes, such as pants and tank tops, or mini-skirts and t-shirts. Mestizas never covered their hair without good reason, and regularly accessorized with makeup and jewelry. On Sundays, the standard day to relax and party for the entire community, mestizo men and woman dress up in their best clothing. Woman of all ages put on nice dresses and jewelry to match, with their hair done and perfume to provide the finishing touch. The Raramuri women, however, do not appear on the streets in small dresses or covered in makeup. Their clothing remains much the same, covered from head to toe. Nonetheless, their vibrant outfits still make them appear radiant and not at all underdressed alongside the mestizas.

The mestizo men dressed up by wearing their favorite sombrero, and matching boots, with large belt buckles keeping well ironed shirts tucked into their pants. The Raramuri men could also be seen sporting fancy shirts, sometimes with intricate designs of horses on them, which stand out among the many plain colored shirts of the mestizo men. These different fashion standards result in different presentations of self. The hair style of the Raramuri men came up a few times in conversations because many of them would let it grow longer than
the mestizos who received regular haircuts. For example, while talking with a few mestizas about getting a haircut for myself, one commented to me, “If you put on a sombrero then the hair will stick out at the bottom just like an indito (little indian).” Another added “He will look like the inditos, like when they are at work, and the sweat runs down their neck because of their long hair. That is so gross!” They all laughed because the joke was obviously understood by each of them. There are acceptable hairstyles for men, and if I had let my hair grow then I would have looked funny to them, like an indigenous person. A small group of mestizo men also commented on long hair. With one laughing as he talked, “And how does it look when they take off their hat? The long hairs that fall, all long and it is combed from front to back.” His companions laughed along with him. Like the mestizas, they also found these comments funny. There are fashion rules controlling the appearance of mestizo men and women, which are different from the Raramuri, leaving the groups to judge based on conflicting criteria. These divergent standards means they do not perceive each other in the same way.

The Raramuri style made it easier for others to scrutinize their positioning and actions during large events or on a routine day. At large political events they were always noticeable. They could be spotted huddled together, standing and sitting in their own group on the edges, rarely in the midst of the action. This gave off the sense of marginalization, the main players, organizers, and helpers of community events never wore the Raramuri garments. On a daily basis, the distinctive clothing gave mestizos the ability to recognize them at any moment which then created fertile ground for reinforcing stereotypes or keeping a watchful eye on them. This allowed for the construction of the other to occur regularly. For instance, one morning a mestiza walked out of her home, looked down the street and saw two groups of
Raramuri community members who had run into each other. Some did not know one another and were making introductions. She knew they were Raramuri based on their clothing and remarked about the gathering, “What, are they going to do, fight?” And upon realizing that was not the case, “Oh, no they are just getting to know each other.” She believed they might fight because their clothing indicated they were Raramuri, and based on preconceived ideas she assumed it was a violent encounter. If, for some reason, the interaction had become volatile, her beliefs would have been confirmed and attributed to the entire group, not just those present.

My observations indicate that the Raramuri style of clothing serves to identify insiders and possibly more trustworthy people. Within the Raramuri community, when looking for one of their own, the identity marker provided by the fashion makes the process easier. This was documented during the weekly Sunday outings when groups of Tarahumara found each other and formed groups throughout the streets. Any individual Tarahumara wanting to join could spot them and meld in with relative ease, while a mestizo trying to avoid them could use the same marker. Both of these interactions occurred often. For instance, when a large group of Raramuri gathered near the plaza to have a few drinks, the adults joined together while their children were nearby huddled in front of a gate. Other mestizo children did not go to play with them and mestizo adults drove by the parents without greeting them. The large group had formed quickly and only Raramuri clothing was visible sending off the signal that it was a Raramuri party. This situation exhibits how the clothing served to differentiate the people, both of them utilizing it to identify each other. Whether it is the hair, or dresses, the signal is sent out that this how one culture is expressing itself visibly. In another example, a group of Raramuri were walking through town together.
They passed by a few mestizos and no greetings were exchanged. Shortly after, they were walking past another group of Raramuri sitting on a sidewalk and greeted them, then walked up to them to introduce each other. They could be clearly heard making introductions and cheerfully talking to each other, even though they were strangers a few seconds before. The only difference between the mestizos on the sidewalk and the Raramuri group they approached was their outward appearance. Insiders and outsiders will consequently be held to different fashion standards, and wardrobe choices will be motivated by a person’s sense of connection to one of the two groups.

Perceptions and Behaviors:

*Strangers and Friends*

Now turning to behavior and its perception, the majority of data obtained presented a picture of a town which experiences a predictable pattern of social life, with nothing out of the ordinary. The people work, relax, socialize, and wake up the next day to start again. They rarely break the routine or encounter confrontations, and make a strong effort to avoid them. Politeness and positive attitudes uphold a healthy community with individuals who are very willing to help each other. No overt conflict could be detected between mestizos and Raramuri, and most interaction indicated they treat each other with kindness. There was no evidence of one group promoting a united front, or pride through symbolic objects, making it difficult to distinguish between them during group gatherings. Furthermore, there were bonds connecting members of the two sides, making it difficult to find any type of separation amongst all the boundary crossing relationships. The majority of daily observations uncovered repetitive scripts employed by community members during quick encounters on the street or in a store further concealing any boundaries. Most of the exchanges were cordial
and friendly, involving a simple greeting, a question, an answer, and a goodbye. An example of this consistent routine occurred when a Raramuri male walking through town was engaged by two mestizos. They asked him, “What’s up.” “Nothing” he replies, and in return asks them, “What’s new.” “Nothing, just here.” Both mestizos say, one quickly after the other. “See you later” the Raramuri says, as he continues walking never missing a step. “Bye” the mestizo replies. Countless interactions took place in this manner amidst the people of the town, with nothing new to be recorded. The interactions within the mestizo group and their Raramuri counterparts were very similar, one could not note any difference as they spoke on equal terms. There was also a strong sense of community as shown by the many times when people united to help one another with free labor, or when individuals gladly and enthusiastically gave food to fellow community members. These friendly interactions presented the image of non-existent boundaries, with one united group experiencing the same small town life. For instance, at the burial ceremony of one deceased person, cement was transported to the location, but could not be driven into the cemetery. With little hesitation the men organized themselves into a line to pass buckets from the truck to the gravesite. There was an immediate working line of men, a mixture of Raramuri and mestizos, with each one passing the bucket on to the other. The grieving women stood around the gravesite together, both Raramuri women and mestizas taking part in the feeling of sorrow. The people united and all boundaries disappeared, with the same scenario playing out at other funerals. Even drinking together created solidarity. One large beer was enough to unite men of the two groups. These different events share the common feature of unifying members of the groups, thus indicating that a large all-encompassing symbolic boundary can be formed around rituals, diminishing the existence of small divisions.
Yet, there were boundaries built around ethnicity based on the perceived differences between the people in regards to perceptions of their behavior. The perception of differences fueled symbolic boundaries and the actions taken to avoid each other solidified social boundaries. Each group had different standards to uphold and different ideals to live up to. For instance the contrasting perceptions of proper drinking behavior, proper presentation of self in daily life and so on, led to divisions. These miniscule differences were enough to ensure the division would be long lasting, but not always obvious. These ethnic boundaries were not rationally constructed around a coherent plan of defense to prevent intrusion from outsiders, nor to oppress the other; they were simply part of everyday life. They seemed like an invisible line drawn on the ground too risky to cross over, but never fully acknowledged by community members.

Indeed, the mestizos I interviewed revealed a variation of ideas about the Raramuri, with some believing they are basically the same, to others holding very prejudicial views about them. Some mestizo individuals believed Raramuri to be violent, alcoholics, and a few went far enough to label them as savage. From other ideas, not blatantly acknowledged but regularly reinforced, I gathered that they found the Raramuri to be different based on their drinking habits and ways of acting, living conditions, appearance, and religion (see Table 1). The mestizo perspectives became evident early on and would continue to be exhibited throughout the ethnography in the form of trivial everyday comments. During an early morning conversation with a middle aged mestiza, she spoke of the Raramuri in an almost fearful tone. “I see the inditos as very aggressive or I don’t know as savage.” In another casual discussion a mestizo man described them in a similar way, “It’s because they are by nature bad, by nature.” Surprisingly enough, with what appeared to be a complete disregard
of their own prejudice, both of these individuals would go on to have pleasant interactions with Raramuri, allowing them into their home, to play with their children, and even do business with them. Hence, although these conceptions about their fellow community members would appear to lead toward conflict or unequal treatment, I did not note such activity beyond private comments and the rare verbal abuse shouted between the groups, which displayed the prejudice. The almost equal treatment seems to be a contradiction of thoughts and actions, and would need to be further examined to understand why they can cooperate and live side by side relatively conflict free in the midst of these extreme attitudes.

Only two mestizas noted no obvious uniqueness about themselves or the Raramuri as people. A common idea from these participants was that language is the only difference between the two groups, if they had to pick something. When I asked the older mestiza who had spent decades living in the community what she believed the difference was, her reply was simple, “Well, I say that I think in no way. The difference is only in that they speak another language.” Her response was surprising, since she had witnessed the development of the community for nearly half a century. According to her and other individuals who held similar ideas, the only barrier was language; they were perceived to be similar in all other aspects.

While at first glance the social structure of the community did not show an overt separation between the two groups based on their identities, a deeper look into the ordinary exchanges exposed moments when identities were brought to the forefront both intentionally and unintentionally. Throughout the course of these moments notable variation arose in the interactions. An indication that exposed the identity of the individuals socializing in a group was their demeanor. When a mixed group of people were talking, the Raramuri tended to be
quieter, and more stoic, keeping their emotions in check and never making any attempt to
draw attention to themselves. Their demeanor did not place a spotlight on them or bring forth

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Table 1 - Number of people who made direct or indirect comments about differences between the groups.

any insider outsider dynamic with their mestizo counterparts, they merely blended in with the
rest of the group.

The topic of indigenous identity often times became a subject of conversation and
was acknowledged as independent of the mestizo identity. This was illustrated by the events
that took place in preparation for a burial ceremony. Community members gathered to dig
the grave with their own tools and manpower, due to a lack of heavy machinery. There was a
mixture of Raramuri and mestizo men present and each was participating equally, doing their
share of work while sharing food and drinks. The group was composed of about 20-25 men
with ages ranging from eighteen to fifty, and possibly older. There were about five Raramuri,
and three northerners, including myself present. I am set apart as a northerners because I am
often placed in a different category from the rest of the community; the rest of the group being mestizos from the town. The team was efficiently coordinating as they dug the hole, some people were digging while others took a break, constantly alternating without hesitation or resistance to work. They were not being paid, but completed the task out of respect and desire to aid their fellow community members. There was no method for an outsider to figure out who was indigenous or mestizo, but with very little provocation the Raramuri identity was brought to the forefront. As the men worked one mestizo ridiculed another, and the insulted man’s reaction was to throw a clump of dirt and pebbles at him. A third person made a joke saying, “He threw dirt on him like the inditos (little indians) do.” And then he demonstrated the action as everyone laughed including the Raramuri. I was expecting them to be offended by the joke, and was surprised by their laughter, because even though a mestizo performed the action of throwing dirt, the Raramuri were placed under a spotlight as the behavior was attributed to their indigenous identity. Other men joined in to ridicule the mestizo, but kept referring to the action as Indian behavior. Interestingly enough, the Raramuri men seemed to enjoy, as much as the rest, the ridiculing of the mestizo who was acting like an Indian. Even if they did not agree with the stereotype, it was a performance they enjoyed as he was chastised for his out of character actions. The label of a dirt throwing Indian was accepted in the moment instead of being challenged, allowing the gathering to continue free of conflict. The mestizo who originally threw the dirt had momentarily taken the role of an Indian and that was reason enough for ridicule, by being mocked by his mestizo friends, it re-established that he was part of the mestizo identity and had broken out of his role. In the end, the cooperation had shifted from a homogenous working group, to two different groups working together. A symbolic boundary was brought into existence by
placing a label on the behavior. The situation therefore demonstrated the understanding from both sides that their people are different, one can perform certain actions which another finds humorous. Without rational thought or motivation, the two groups can be distinguished, and this type of unveiling is common. The indigenous and mestizo ethnicity would continue to be exposed on a regular basis and identified by cultural symbols, such as language and clothing, forming the underlying pattern of differentiation. The actions of each group would serve to form the boundaries which community members needed to navigate around in order to maintain a working relationship.

Individuals encountering social boundaries also made them noticeable enough to perceive a change in the interaction. People were treated differently when crossing a boundary to interact with members of the other group. The events at a small birthday party illustrate this point. Dinner was being served plate by plate to the guests as they sat and mingled throughout the home and patio. The hostess was receiving help from some family members and friends to deliver the food and drinks from the small kitchen. All of the guests were mestizos, who were formally invited and welcomed into the home. When a Raramuri woman entered the party with two small children she was not greeted by anyone and did not seem to be acknowledged. She calmly walked past people almost like a ghost drifting through the excitement and commotion. She did not speak a word, and kept to herself, standing by a wall near the kitchen. Her two kids did not play with the other children, but patiently waited by her side until she sent the small boy into the kitchen to ask for food. He emerged with one plate and left by himself, while the woman continued to wait, leaning on the wall with the little girl. Finally, she was served by one of the hostesses and left with two plates, and after some time the boy returned to get more food. The movements of this small
family appeared to be well coordinated. There was no hesitation to walk in, they knew where the kitchen was located and they knew how to position themselves out of everyone’s way and not to overstep their boundaries. Outside, she and her kids joined a few other Raramuri who were huddled within an abandoned house. They shared the food with the group, standing upon its dirt floors among the trash and broken beer bottles left by previous users. The crumbling adobe walls and doorless rooms gave the abandoned house a haunting emptiness.

The Raramuri family was not invited to participate in the celebration, but they were not denied food either. They were not treated the same as other guests, and their presence was not formally acknowledged. The guidelines for acceptable and unacceptable behavior are embedded in this boundary and are connected to ethnicity. The mestizos believe the Raramuri are prone to beg for food and money, thus they allow them to enter into parties in order to receive a handout. The Raramuri family, even though they lived in the community, appeared more like strangers momentarily penetrating another group’s social space. The Raramuri woman was breaking mestizo social norms because she was not invited, but her actions are considered normal for a Raramuri since she was a poor indigenous person. These actions are assumed to be part of the indigenous group’s nature and they were allowed to get in and out quickly with their food. This resulted in a momentary crossing of a boundary to obtain a necessary meal. Most mestizos would not arrive uninvited, and much less enter a home to ask for a plate of food because this would break a few social rules. They would wait for an invitation or for an invited person to bring them food. By crossing the boundary in such a manner, the Raramuri woman and her children established their identity, but left in order to reaffirm the boundary preventing them from enjoying the food with everyone else at the party. Instead, they had to eat it in the abandoned home. Upon taking the food and joining
a Raramuri group across the dirt road, the gap separating the two ethnic group is given a symbolic existence of ethnic differences and divisions since these two groups would remain apart for the entire day and night.

The entire La Puerta community was connected one way or another, but obviously certain bonds were more important than others. The people spent a lot of time talking with each other—whether at work, home, a store, or in the streets—because the small town environment was conducive to constant contact. The regular friendly exchanges that built strong bonds between individuals were very dependent on the type of relationship they had. Mestizos and Raramuri appeared to stick with their own group when it came to repetitive and prolonged interactions. When I spotted groups of people together talking and laughing, it was usually composed of one ethnicity. Moreover, the Raramuri women made strong efforts to avoid mestizo men. Hence, a boundary was shaped around ethnically homogenous groups of friends and family who stuck together for celebrations and routine life. Groups of friends
would compete against the other group. The workplace would be divided and large community events were usually controlled and dominated by the mestizos. This partition formed a certain type of social distance, maintaining a sense of unfamiliarity between the ethnicities. If the group of friends and associates they keep were all from the same ethnic group, the individual would spend most of his or her time immersed in their own culture, thus limiting shared understandings and increasing the firmness of boundaries.

There were many moments when mestizos and Raramuri intermingled and spent time together, enjoying one another’s company. Individual had enough agency to enter these homogenous groups and become a part of them without completely assimilating. Individual men and women interacted with members of the other group, sharing stories with each other and helping each other cope with problems. This type of intermixing is common enough to
weaken this boundary dependent on social networks, but its influence is still applicable in an over proportionate amount of interactions. The stable social networks are more dependent upon the people within the same ethnic group. Remaining with a specific group, therefore, forms an undeniable buffer zone against others.

The women of the town would also engage in business negotiations and spend time bonding within and across ethnic groups. Raramuri woman continuously arrived to a mestizas home to buy cosmetics. They would talk about the products, different merchandise, and overall have a good time together. They also held good relationships with store owners who they regularly interacted with. On the other hand Raramuri women enjoyed each other’s company and privacy. They usually didn’t engage mestizo men and often made a strong effort to completely avoid them by hiding behind walls or running past them on the street. For example, on a sunny afternoon when three Raramuri women wanted to walk by the street where I was standing with a few men, they hid behind a house, cautiously peeking and waiting for us to leave. As soon as our attention was diverted they ran past us using the babies they carried to cover their faces. This type of scenario makes it obvious that they want to maintain their distance and keep to themselves. The message is clear and the men have become well accustomed to ignoring them. It is not likely for them to come together during social gatherings and may never learn more than basic information about each other. I asked a companion why they covered their face as they passed and he simply said, “I don’t know.” And he did not seem to care. The social network of the women were very secure and stable creating a definite social boundary.

A second situation reveals what occurs when one group of mestizo friends tries to enjoy the same activity as a group of Raramuri. The local cinema is a small room connected
to a home near the entrance to the town (see Figure 6). It is a small t.v with some chairs and a small sofa for seating. The owner also provides snacks, such as popcorn and soda. He has a large collection of DVD’s which he constantly updates. This town cinema was a common place for both sides to visit. The norm was for Raramuri to utilize it most of the time. Many of them did not have access to television or DVD player in their homes and would therefore utilize the cinema on a daily basis. The mestizos stayed away, opting to use their own homes for movies and were well aware the cinema would usually be occupied by Raramuri who joined together to pick the movie they wanted. The moment some mestizos wanted to see a movie together for the fun experience, the Raramuri would not show up. The mestizos would inform the owner and make an informal reservation. Any Raramuri who showed up would be told they could not watch a movie at a certain time, but were welcomed to come back. A few mestizo/as wanted to watch a movie at the local cinema, but not with the Raramuri who were already occupying the space. The Raramuri youth in the cinema room knew each other and were close friends. To the mestizo group they were more like acquaintances and not people they wanted to sit in a room with to talk and watch a film. The mestizos would find the experience more enjoyable with only their close friends present. The indigenous youth composed a different ethnically homogenous social network, and the lack of friendship between the two groups established a boundary. In this social context they could not merge together. The only option would be for one group to take over the small room to watch a movie. The boundary was made clear when one of the mestizas suggested, “We can go to the movie and kick out all the Tarahumarsitos so that we can watch one, ha ha. We have done it before. Are you in?”
My reply to her question was, “That sounds harsh.” She, however, insisted, “Come on lets go it will be easy.” In this situation the competition between the ethnic groups became evident since the offer was not to kick out whoever was there, but to kick out the Tarahumara who would be easier to push around. Instead of joining them to watch a film, this mestizo/a group would take over the space and even reserve it to prevent future competition for the space. They only had to send a message to the owner asking him to prepare for their arrival and he would ensure the space became available to them.

An examination of the workplace further substantiates how the social boundaries are built around ethnicity. Men working in the fields unite to help each other complete their tasks efficiently through team work. According to some young workers, things change during their
break when it is time to eat and relax. Apparently it is customary to gather around food and enjoy from everyone’s dish, but the Raramuri workers sit with each other to eat apart from the mestizos. The first young man explained, “When we are at work, they separate themselves. They go to eat alone instead of with everybody. Imagine we set up the lunch with everyone being able to get from each other’s food. I can get from your plate and you can get from mine, but they don’t take part in that.” His friend added, “The guys at work who are Tarahumara are very, I don’t know, serious, they don’t talk. Every now and again you get an energetic one, but most are very quiet.” Assuming the separation may be due to unequal treatment in the workplace I asked a Raramuri man, who stated that they are treated equally, “We get paid the same, none of the discrimination.” The disconnection at work is a major division since a large part of socializing time occurs in the workplace.

Finally, there was detachment during large political events. The ethnic composition of event organizers was purely mestizo, leaving the Raramuri outside the loop. From one political rally to another, small Raramuri groups could be usually spotted sitting in the back, and mostly on the ground. In one instance, the negative effects of this network division were illustrated. The day after a rally one man recounted how some Raramuri participants missed out on the free food being served. “The poor Taras, they didn’t get any food. They were waiting outside and I told them to go in because no one is going to serve them. When they went, they were told to go wait and food will be taken to them. But they didn’t get anything.” His acquaintance sadly replied, “Poor them.” And the man went on, ”Yeah, I felt bad for them, hehe.” The rest of the participants had friends and family in charge of serving food and could easily tell them to bring multiple plates, enough to take home for later. These interactions are therefore affected by social networks largely built around ethnicity identity.
informing the types of exchanges. These might range from competition for a movie night, to exclusion from free food, to fun drinking and adventures together. All these circumstance result in social networks with stronger connections within, rather than between, an ethnic group. The boundary is not a strong one, but its influence is felt in moments when group interactions are avoided or tense.

The factor which most dramatically and unpredictably affected the boundary construction involved drinking habits. The varying drinking patterns are attributed to the ethnic groups because the people believed their own ethnic groups did not drink the same amount. In addition there were differences in perception of behavior when intoxicated. Boundaries are thus shaped around acceptable and unacceptable drinking. Drinking is a large part of life in La Puerta. It takes place at nearly every gathering of men throughout the day and is very prominent during weekends. Every celebration and large or small event is an opportunity to break the regular routine, giving people a reason to let loose and have a great time with some beer. A regular greeting heard throughout town exemplifies the notion that drinking is extremely common on both sides. It was typical to see one man encounter another, give an upward head nod, open his hands wide and follow with the question “How’s the hangover?” The other would reply, “There isn’t one.” The first man would then say, “Yeah, I think you’re hungover.” Or ask, “Why not?” The exchange could be an even quicker one, “Where’s the drunkenness?” “That’s where we’re heading.” The tone is playful, it’s an easy way to greet someone and have a quick laugh when they are hungover after a wild night.

The factors relating to drinking affect interactions nearly every single day, because the community rarely has a dry spell or a sober social event. It makes people aware that
interactions should be navigated with extreme caution if people are getting wasted. The groups will avoid each other or be more connected depending on the nature of the moment. The interactions become unstable since people need to navigate around drunken behavior and its unpredictability. Everyone can become very friendly, even Raramuri are known to be more open and conversational. However, the volatility of the drunken moments means that at any moment the boundary can be solidified and turn conflictual. This unstable condition is the result of a few implications. The groups do not hold each other to the same standards of proper drinking, and view one another’s behavior from different perspectives. The disagreement on acceptable and unacceptable drinking leads to conflicting attitudes. Furthermore, mestizos or Raramuri do not feel safe in the presence of the other’s drunks, and by avoiding each other, important socializing opportunities are blocked. The sexualization of the other is also intensified as male boasting increases and women are at higher risk of being harassed. Despite that, consistent patterns indicate that beer also serves as a social lubricant bringing together men from both sides and helping them to open up emotionally. They become more expressive and reinforce their ties of brotherhood. Drinking often joined mestizo and Raramuri men. When three guys came looking for me in a truck to go drink with them it was an odd looking bunch. Two older mestizo men with a very young Raramuri male sitting in between them. They were extremely intoxicated and incoherent, but appeared to be having a great time with each other.

Alcohol is often used to ease social interaction. A majority of the time beer brought people together. On any given day men could be found gathering around a large caguama (32oz. beer), sharing it and having entire conversations about nothing more than drinking adventures. A caguama was commonly used to pay for favors, demonstrate camaraderie, and
a necessary item for almost any type of activity from funerals to school graduations. Men often needed these beers to socialize and relax the tongue. A group of men drinking would share the same bottle. There was no boundary and, everyone was equal, giving one another their share. Nobody was too important to reject an offer to drink from another man’s bottle.

When it came to drinking, all were on common ground. The importance of this ritual cannot be understated, countless out of blue encounters between men of the two groups were brought into existence because of a few drinks. The symbolism of these moments united them closely and broke any social boundaries during these peaceful gatherings.

However, alcohol can augment violence. When liquor is involved the danger of violence can arise between the groups and within both of them, sometimes at the slightest provocation. The mestizos tended to take a bystander role to the unconcealed Raramuri drinking, making sure not get involved. Examples of this were rampant on Sundays when the most blatant drunken behavior came to light. A case in point transpired when I was driving through town with two female mestizas late at night. The small street was dark and ahead we could see the moving shadows of a large crowd. The driver slowed to a crawl and approached very cautiously. The group made an opening for us to pass through, but the driver and second passenger were frightened because they realized the people were all Raramuri and were drinking. I had the window seat and they warned me to be careful in case they tried to do something. Driving closer we noticed there was one person on the dirt road attempting to get up. We approached and noticed it was a woman. She stumbled and fell, then, another woman helped her crawl out of the way. As we passed by, with a startled voice the startled driver mentioned that she recognized her from earlier years. The mestizas accompanying me did not want to stop; they were scared. Even though one of them was
friends with the fallen Raramuri, there was no suggestion to help her in this environment. We would drive on to meet up with a group of mestizos already drinking themselves, but amongst them, my mestiza companions felt no anxiety or fear.

The groups have different conceptions of acceptable drinking, and incorporate consumption into their cultures to different extents. The Raramuri have embedded it deeper into the core of their culture, permitting it to liberate them from social constraints. Kennedy (1963) found that the importance of drinking is infused into all major parts of their social organization. The important cultural component for the Raramuri necessitates the individual’s participation in order to maintain a connection with their people. The tesguinada, a large drinking party, is an essential part of their culture and they do not measure it against the standards of decency that come from outsiders. While talking with a Raramuri man, a woman was making some tesquino nearby and he explained the process of making it. Corn is cooked and fermented with a mixture of other ingredients, over a period of days, until it is ready to be consumed. It involved hours of work, but to him it was well worth it because in the end it brought his community together. The tesguinada can take place over a period of days, during which the people continuously get drunk and party. It must be used quickly since it spoils in a short period of time. The Raramuri allow drinking to become a liberating experience, to release all the emotions and behaviors they usually keep under tight control. They are not ashamed of being drunk, but take pride in it. The tesguinada can serve as an escape valve for hostility. In La Puerta, young Raramuri men often brandished a beer bottle with a big smile to show others what they were doing. Furthermore, the Raramuri women had the liberty to become intoxicated, which stood in stark contrast to the mestizas who made strong efforts to avoid drinking related gossip. Raramuri women got drunk as often as men,
and did it alongside them or independently. The Raramuri did not formally regulate each other’s behavior while intoxicated, but did constrain themselves from involving mestizos in their confrontations or allowing conflict to spread throughout the town.

On the mestizo side there was no similar cultural component to their consumption although the rate at which they drank seemed to be equally high and drinking was also an important mechanism for releasing social constraints. However, it could be argued from the data that drinking also penetrated into almost all parts of their culture as well. Religious festivals and ceremonies, such as baptisms and funerals, always involved some liquor. Those who refused to drink were commonly pressured into consuming. Deciding to have a life of sobriety removed some of the connections held within their group. Although mestizos used alcohol nearly as much, the lack of cultural emphasis leads them to regulate it more from the standpoint of common decency and an attempt to refrain from losing control. The mestizos had a few general unstated rules and norms, such as the expectation to share, and that women should rarely, if ever, drink because by getting drunk one could become the gossip of the town. The mestizos believed in drinking responsibly in order to leave enough money to support their family and live a sustainable life. Even though most of them drank alcohol every single day and used a lot of peer pressure to make others drink, they did not view it as out of control. As long as they were putting food on the table and saving for future expenses, they did not consider their alcohol consumption as a problem. The boundary is therefore established around acceptable and unacceptable drunken behavior based on different cultural standards which are not in sync. The consequences lead to separation and compel people to navigate around the circumstances in order to stabilize interactions. Disagreement about drinking norms leads to separation in the community.
When comparing the drinking habits of the groups no major difference was noticeable other than the visibility of the Raramuri drunken behavior as opposed to the more hidden controlled intoxication of the mestizos. In addition, Raramuri broke mestizo social norms, such as female intoxication. To community members these differences appeared to be very obvious. A few individuals presented the idea that their methods and duration of drinking were not similar and, hence, these factors placed them into contrasting groups. The perceptions of drunken behavior were biased, resulting in more favorable views of in-group members. For example, I talked to a store owner who sold beer. That day the owner had been dealing with some very intoxicated mestizos that were driving around town trying to get their hands on more liquor. The vendor was well aware of the mestizos driving around drunk, but completely changed the topic to focus on Raramuri drinking. I asked if the men had dropped by to buy beer, to which the vendor explained that they had arrived and wanted free beer. When they could not get it, they left angrily. I shared my experience with them and how strange it was to see men at such an early hour driving around completely drunk. The vendor then asked, “Have you seen the inditas getting drunk?” I say, “Yeah.” And with a worried look the vendor says, “It’s terrible how they get, you can find them just thrown on the ground.” This storeowner completely brushed aside our conversation about the overtly drunk mestizos who had been visiting the store abrasively asking for free liquor, as if it was a non-issue, and finding it more relevant to share observations about drunk Raramuri.

Mestizos perceive themselves as being more controlled and moderate in their drinking. The mestizo conception of proper drinking involves having a few beers, maybe every day, but drunken exploits should only occur on proper days, such as Sunday or during fiestas. They only get drunk for one crazy night every so often, but on the other hand, portray
the Raramuri as being drunk for entire weeks, allowing their drinking to negatively affect their work and other aspects of their life. It is assumed that the Raramuri not only become intoxicated, but also miss work, waste money and become violent. While conversing with one mestizo he said, “In the first place, the difference is in the drinking, no? That they drink more than us.” I then mention the mestizos habit of getting drunk, “Well, I have seen that you, that all of you too. I say hey, hey, hey calm down you’re all alarming me.” He replied by explaining the difference, “Yesss, yes we give ourselves one or two good jumps here, right, but yeah um it’s that they are, well, are very strange too, right. They can last a week here completely drunk.”

A mestizo who breaks this boundary of “acceptable behavior” suffers repercussions. For instance, a young mestizo was covertly rebuffed when he broke this group’s social norm by drinking excessively for a few days and becoming belligerent. I was invited to a small get together with drinks and a little bit of food, but was specifically asked not to let this particular individual find out if I were to run into him. The reason given was, “He gets out of control, and we do not want him over here.” He would need to ease up on his drinking in order to be accepted back into certain gatherings and within the social boundary. He did seem to notice a change in attitudes toward him and maybe heard some of the gossip, and eventually his rate of drinking decreased.

By contrast if the notion of acceptable drinking is broken by the Raramuri group, through extreme intoxication, the visibility of drunken behavior leads to the reinforcement of symbolic boundaries with stereotypes and prejudice. This point was illustrated one Sunday when two Raramuri women walked down the street completely intoxicated late at night. I was next to the plaza with two female acquaintances. Some men, mostly mestizos and a few
Raramuri, were getting drunk and driving around while others sat in their cars. The women I was with were not drinking, and could not, or else judgment would fall upon them by those nearby. As we talked, two Raramuri women came stumbling down the street, holding each other and trying to keep themselves upright. They walked by those in the area rather quickly while people stared at them, all of them mestizos. The reaction was an obvious sense of shock. They were breaking a mestizo norm right in front of them. The Raramuri women went about their way, heading in the direction of the government housing, swerving all over the dirt road until they were out of sight. As a result prejudicial ideas were reinforced and assumptions were made specifically aimed at the indigenous community. The “proper” mestizo behavior was confirmed in contrast to the “inappropriate” actions of Raramuri women. In turn, the Raramuri establish their insider cultural norms in opposition to the mestizo standards. These stereotypes that arise lead to common assumptions. When a Tarahumara man or woman is seen lying on the ground, or anywhere actually, people conclude that they must be drunk. For instance, one day I was sitting on a sidewalk with a young mestizo and a truck full of Raramuri passed by. We noticed a man lying in the back with his head resting on a woman, the mestizo said, “He is wasted.” I then said, “Maybe he is sleeping?” But the young mestizo did not seem to agree with me. Apparently, any time a mestizo sees a Raramuri lying down in the middle of the day they assume he is passed out drunk, and that standard image is brought up even when a person is in the back of a truck.

In contrast to the open drunkenness of the Raramuri, is the more concealed mestizo drunkenness. One day I watched a regular day at work for two mestizo men who were mixing powdery products together to make a crop fertilizer, in a house in the town. They needed to work in a small, hot room, with one tiny window. The particles from the mixture
would stay in the air stinging the nostrils and causing a choking sensation as they got inside of one’s mouth. To endure the tough working conditions the young men drank one caguama after another. The beer relaxed their muscles, numbed the pain, and washed away the chemicals. The ultimate goal was not to become intoxicated. These few beers eventually became too many as they went on to feed the livestock. Other mestizo men joined them, but only to drink the beers. By the time night had fallen the small group of mestizo men was drunk, and the two original workers had become violent towards each other, nearly fighting due to a small miscommunication. They had to be physically restrained until one finally passed out in a truck. The event took place far from others’ view and the passed out worker was kept hidden. This event led me to the conclude that both groups can have wild drunks, passing out or fighting, but the Raramuri do not conceal themselves and at times cannot. The difference between the groups is the Raramuri will cross the line of acceptable and unacceptable behavior more consistently and be more likely to publicly display it, as opposed to the mestizo’s efforts to conceal it. A common idea is that Raramuri will drink and look for a fight; therefore, they should be avoided. But as the above examples show, mestizos have their drinking conflicts too. Regardless, if both ethnic groups have their share of drama, they believe in their eyes that it is different pressuring them to avoid each other. Maintaining their distance from each other while drinking in large groups allows the formation of symbolic boundaries. Mestizos have their share of drunks and violence as well, but they are better able to hide their behavior because they can do it in their trucks or at their homes. Even if they consistently break the norms of acceptable drinking behavior, often times no one will find out, thus preventing negative perceptions about them from arising. Therefore, they can remain within the symbolic boundary and be perceived as moderate controlled drinkers.
The most obvious boundary separating women and men was exacerbated by drinking. Raramuri women keep to themselves more than the mestizas, and social norms allowed men more independence and opportunity to be adventurous throughout the community. These gender norms maintained a certain level of formality and strict guidelines in male and female interactions, which are rarely broken. While drinking, the sexualization of the other is mostly directed at woman and in particular, indigenous women. The men sometimes demonstrate their bravado in the manner that they speak about and attempt to control women. The women of a different group take on new meaning. In one occasion, a group of mestizos were drinking together at a party and there were no mestiza women accompanying them. A suggestion put forth by some of the men was to go find some indigenous women get them drunk and bring them over, then they would at least have something to do. They kept on bringing it up, daring each other to drive over to the government housing and bring back a truck full of them. The resulting gender dynamic alters the essence of the boundaries, further distinguishing the lives of women from men. It places women in a subordinate position, but also divides the lives of Raramuri woman from those of the mestizas. It is common to hear men state that to get an indigenous woman you just have to run and chase her down. This intersection of being an ethnic minority and a woman permits the men to view them from a more dominant perspective. On another occasion a group of mestizos’ intoxicated behavior frightened some Raramuri women. These women appeared frightened and anxious at the sight of a group of mestizo men who were drinking together near a river. I found that the Raramuri women would have to run past them out of possible fear of being attacked by the men. At the same gathering, an older Raramuri female was harassed verbally by a drunk mestizo who was part of the small group. She was merely walking to get water from a small
creek, when he aggressively shouted at her to come to him, and yelled “Where are you going, come here!” as she walked away. It was a surprising sight because elders are always respected in these rural communities. His disregard for her the Rarmuri woman’s age was probably due to his intoxication, but I have not witnessed an older mestiza receive similar verbal harassment, not even around drunks.

A final theme connected to the construction of ethnic boundaries is the notion of each group’s inherent nature. The perceptions and behaviors associated with this boundary influenced whether a person was considered civilized or uncivilized. There is an idea proposed by some mestizos claiming the Raramuri are naturally more savage or less civilized, while they themselves in turn are calmer, more forward thinking people. The Raramuri are also considered to be quieter and usually more serious in their demeanor. The aspects of this theme were made evident to me, not only through observations, but also by comments made by community members. One mestizo man discussing the differences said, “They’re not like us, one for instance, one is afraid of everything. If you fight with someone then you will feel regret that after you say, ‘no, well I fought, I did bad, no, you know what, forgive me’ so on and so on. And they, no, they are bad, they fight and then then try the other way wanting to kill him.” In contrast, I never heard the Raramuri disparage the mestizos, or make comments in regard to the mestizo’s nature. Of course, they may have obviously identified me as a mestizo, and either did not want to insult me or did not feel comfortable talking about such things knowing it would be directed at the group I am associated with. However, when I asked a Raramuri man a couple of times if he was treated well by mestizos, he said nothing more than, “Yes” a few times. Another only had a small complaint about employers. “Well here in La Puerta I do not have none of.... everyone is straightforward here,
and but yeah there are some that—well the bosses but there is nothing of, there is none of that stuff here.” He could not recount an incident when he was mistreated as a result of his ethnic identity.

A common belief from the mestizo perspective positioned them as a civilized people and a few clearly used the word in their descriptive language. For instance while chatting with two guys, I asked them if they had or would consider dating a Raramuri woman. One asked me, “Which kind?” I was confused by the question and was not sure how to clarify, but he continued by saying, “I would be willing to date a more civilized one.” His friend adds chuckling, “They would be perfect for the house because they are prepared for it.” To other mestizos, the nature of the Raramuri is more barbaric and wild. Individual mestizos stated they were fearful in certain situations because they needed to be aware of Raramuri threats. An older mestiza would advise family members to avoid them sometimes because they were unpredictable. “I always tell my son to be careful when he sees them getting drunk because one never knows.” These ideas about the inherent nature of the Raramuri led many worried mestizos to construct defensive boundaries, and reinforce negative stereotypes.

One dramatic event exemplified the extent to which mestizos seem to avoid the perceived savagery of their indigenous community members. In the following event, a line could almost be drawn in the ground. It was night time and a small birthday party was coming to an end when screams were heard in an adjacent abandoned and crumbling house. I was standing outside the party with another man and we paused to listen closely. We realized it was a woman shrieking and wailing. My companion walked into the house to make sure the few remaining girls, who were still celebrating with candy and games, were accounted for. Upon seeing that none were missing, we stood by the entry gate of the house, which was
near the abandoned home and listened. The screams continued, but in the darkness it was
difficult to find the source of the sound. The older man went back to help clean up with the
rest of the people and I was left with 2 younger guys, listening to the screams. I was
completely oblivious to what I should do in this situation. I was unsure about going into the
home to discover what was happening or stay away to avoid the unknown danger. A few
people came out to join us as they escorted the last party guest to leave. When one lady heard
the screams she asked “What is happening?” and someone quickly replied that “A woman is
being beaten.” The lady commented with disgust that the men should be punished in a
manner that I could not understand. She then drove off with her children. The screams
continued and most of the residents came out to the front gate to listen. A young woman
asked in a cautious whisper “is it la llorona?” (the crying woman), a ghost from urban
legends said to come out at night crying in search of her children. A teenager replied with a
playful tone “It’s the Tarahumarsitos!” Everyone quietly murmured in agreement as if it was
obvious the Tarahumara were involved in the screams. One older woman began telling her
friend a story which occurred earlier in the day, “I was collecting cans over there by the
house and I found a comadrecita lying on the dirt with her child.” The two old ladies
discussed how sad it is that they have to sleep in those conditions. The friend also warned her
to be careful under those circumstances because, “One doesn't know what they will do.”
There were other murmurs and whispers in the small group, with some wondering if the
woman is being violated, if someone had died, or if she was just really drunk. One man used
a flashlight to look into the dark rooms of the house from a distance, but nothing could be
seen through the pitch black darkness. He cautiously attempted to get a glimpse through the
open doors without getting too close to the home. However, the flashlight was not powerful
enough to reveal anything more than some shadows. Parts of the walls had completely fallen
down leaving the middle of the home visible from outside. There were moments in which
one or two men could be seen walking from one room into another with the small flicker of a
lit cigarette in their mouths. Nobody called out to say good evening or wave and the identity
of the men remained unknown. A young mestizo suddenly began mimicking the woman’s
cries. He laughed as he did it, obviously finding her shouts to be humorous. The underlying
assumption appeared to be that they were Tarahumara doing something strange and should
not be confronted.

Everyone seemed to clearly and uniformly agree they were indigenous people; even
the sound of the moans and screams identified the lady as Raramuri. The people could hear
the cries and distinguish them from the sounds of their own group members. According to a
mestiza, she had recognized a group of Raramuri the night before only from their screams
and cries because they have a different tone. Eventually, everyone got tired of standing
outside and one by one, they entered their rooms to get ready for bed. No one suggested
calling a local authority. The strategy was to avoid the situation. Trucks continued to pass by
the house all night long, some blasting loud music, others silently, but no one seemed to
notice or care about the screams. Similar screams from a mestiza may have immediately led
to a search and rescue type of situation, but the idea was never presented that the screaming
lady or men seen walking inside could have been mestizo.

A final example of behavioral boundaries concerns death. When it comes to death the
treatment can be different, because the death of some Raramuri is sudden and violent. For
instance, the Raramuri can have an unexpected death as a result of fights or drunk driving
accidents. If there is no one to mourn or care for their burial, often they do not receive the
extensive funeral ceremonies. Mestizos experience the same risks, but almost always have numerous family members close by who are able to care for their burial. The construction of the other is affected by the different processes which take place after death. The impact of a proper burial with ceremonies, as opposed to just burying someone to get the body out of the way results, in a symbolic division between the groups. This is illustrated in the story recounted by a man. He casually mentioned to a friend how the bodies of deceased indigenous men were treated and provided a glimpse into this conception of the other as uncivilized. “Over there they buried two inditos.” “Why outside of the cemetery?” “It’s because they were both drunk and got killed by a farming machine on accident, so the people that found them picked them up on the spot brought them over and buried them right away the same day.” “Just like that they brought them over?” “Yeah, it was quick.” “Wow, they were brave to pick up dead bodies because you can get sick from that.” The influence of this boundary is felt even at the time of death because two people can be anonymously placed in a grave quickly, with relatively little scandal, largely due to the fact that they were indigenous. This stands in contrast to the extensive ceremonies for mestizo deaths based largely around family and friends organizing themselves. If similar bonds do not exist for a deceased Raramuri person, since many are migrants to the area and all of their family may not be with them, they are more likely to be treated in the manner exemplified by the previous example.

Some Raramuri are able to cross this boundary and be accepted as trustworthy and more civilized, but they would need to change some of their behavior and settle down in the community. As a result, the mestizos prejudice would weaken when it comes to those individuals. The group would continue to be placed in a certain category, but individual
agency would provide liberation from the stigma. For instance, a Raramuri man needing a small loan displayed his ability to transcend past the boundary which would identified him as inherently bad, and be accepted as trustworthy, in the eyes of the mestizo who had previously mentioned that the Raramuri were “inherently bad”. His method of asking for money provides an example as to how an individual can be treated with more trust by demonstrating a civilized manner of living and consequently, he can approach with more confidence to ask for a loan. The Raramuri man arrived with his wife to a mestizo’s home and parked outside. I was at the home enjoying some food, and they sent me to ask them what they wanted. I approached and said, “Hello.” Inside the truck there was a man and two women with two more girls in the back. He asked, “Who are you? I haven’t met you.” I replied, “I am Alejandro, I barely arrived, I have about one month here.” I had seen him before when he had stopped by to buy frozen treats. I expected him to ask me where I was coming from or the usual questions people raised, but surprisingly he goes straight on to say, “Lend me 50 cash” I asked, “What?” He repeated, “Throw me 50 cash, I will pay it back later.” I paused and said, “Wait for me, let me ask.” I passed on the message to the mestizo in the house and he told me to ask a mestiza in the kitchen for the money, and he explained why he was so willing to lend the money, “Because….he will pay it back.” After no one could come up with the money, I decided to provide it, and they reassured me it was okay to do it because, “He is trustworthy.” I go to the Raramuri man and give him the money, informing him that, “the mestizo inside the house is letting you borrow it.” He says, “Okay, I will have it back to you by this Saturday, if not Sunday. I will pay you back, thank you.” In a unexpected surprise his wife also leaned forward to thank me loudly. She was completely breaking out of the character of a serious and extremely shy Raramuri woman. I was taken aback due to the fact
that a Raramuri woman had not acknowledged me for the month I had been there, until this moment. Sure enough he paid me back the next day after a night of drinking. Those who make a transition are welcomed without hesitation by the mestizos and they are viewed more like “one of us.” The boundary is a symbolic one. To cross it he does not need to completely reject his Raramuri roots, but simply act like a “decent” person, by repaying debts, planning for the future, and in a way by being predictable.

He was given the seal of approval even though his ethnic group is labeled at times as savage, barbaric and so on. Additionally, it was obvious he would be using the money to drink, and party. Knowing how people perceive their drinking habits as out of control, it was a big risk to lend money for that purpose, because it reduced the likelihood of being paid back. I was reassured my money would be paid back because he was not grouped in with the stereotypical uncivilized indigenous person. By building a shared understanding, had transcended past the boundary which would have prevented him from interacting with me with enough confidence to bluntly ask me, a northerner and a new mestizo, for money. He was different. He was viewed as a good guy who was working regularly and helping his father pay for necessities, unlike other family members who wanted to use the money to party and live in the moment. These relatives who lived in the government housing, engaging in “inappropriate” behaviors, and not investing in more contemporary lifestyle within the community, may not be as “decent” as this Raramuri man. For example, he would party, but still pay his bills, which meets one of the mestizo standards of proper behavior. David approved of him, because he lived a proper, stable life, and he was finding common ground with mestizos. A few others have been noted to make even more of a transition, settling down with a mestizo husband or wife and absorbing the living style, fashion and other
aspects of the mestizo life. A young Raramuri woman was raised in the community and grew up to marry a mestizo. She now has a mestizo child and raises the baby in the mestizo lifestyle. She herself can be seen driving a large truck, wearing contemporary clothes, and has permanently settled down in the community. By now any outsider who meets her would consider her a mestiza, the transition past the symbolic boundary has placed her within the mestizo group. However, like others in her situation, she can still hold connections to her Raramuri culture and people, creating a link across the boundary.

The few Raramuri who permanently settle down in La Puerta, embed themselves into community relations, intermarry with mestizos, and have their own mestizo children. Those who have decided to transition, instead of remaining only within their Raramuri group, appear to acquire a stronger position within the mestizo group. Some may choose to transition, others may just be socialized into one of the two groups. For example, one Raramuri man who had a Raramuri and a mestizo parent explained that he spent much of his youth away from his Raramuri mother and that side of the family, interacting mostly with mestizos. “And I well, I, the truth I, since I was very little was going from here to there. I was almost never with my mom. I came here every week only to take my mom a little errand....and I just grew up and was going from here to there and I was never with my people. The same with my aunt I just came to visit just in times when I wanted too.” His life experience brought him into constant contact with mestizos because he did not spend his time at his mother’s home since it separated him from the Raramuri group. He still has strong ties with them, but also has a strong position in the space between both groups. The few Raramuri who settled down in the community to raise their family will inevitably spend more time with mestizos who become their close neighbors. Another Raramuri man obtained a
permanent job within a small factory, purchased a truck, and settled down in a home near the heart of La Puerta. His situation is in contrast to the Raramuri who want to maintain only strong ties with their community and don’t desire to cross the boundary, preferring to protect their ethnic autonomy and not immerse into the mestizo lifestyle. The implication of this transition means those who settle down break through the ethnic boundary established around what is considered civilized.

The stereotypes regarding Raramuri do not change, rather these individuals are simply liberated from the stigma. Indeed these “exceptions” may further enhance the image of most Raramuri as uncivilized. The boundary impacts the treatment of people since Raramuri are largely categorized as less civilized. The symbolic boundary provides explanations for much of their poverty and difficult experiences. However, the mestizo feelings of apprehensiveness and evasiveness in the presence of the indigenous other are alleviated when familiar lifestyles are shared. For a traditional indigenous person to be seen as a “civilized” mestizo/a, he or she has to participate in important events such as catholic ceremonies, political campaigns, and accept many of the contemporary styles and technologies. This individual also has to have shared understandings with a group that fosters a sense of unity. The woman and men who most consistently interacted with mestizos as equals, such as the man who asked for a money loan, entered the mestizo ethnic boundary while still holding a place within the Raramuri ethnic boundary. The movement demonstrates the permeability of the boundary.

However there are also instances when mestizos cross into the Raramuri world such as during moments of despair. When an ailing man needed medical help beyond the treatment he was receiving at a hospital, the family wanted to take him deep into the Sierra
Madre where they hoped to find a Raramuri man who could cure him. They were well aware that the medicinal man was Raramuri and did not have state of the art medical equipment; instead, he would be using traditional medicine. As one woman explained it, “They are going to try to take him deep into the Sierra to an indito curandero (healer) who they say lives there in a cave. He is known to be good at curing people, but nobody can bring him out because he won’t leave, you have to go to him. Hopefully he can do something for him because the treatments aren’t working.” The boundary was crossed in the other direction, bringing mestizos closer to the “uncivilized” world of the traditional Raramuri. The action was justified by the dire circumstances in order to navigate around the conflicting ideas held about the Raramuri. This transition was extraordinary and temporary, however, and the usual medical treatment would be utilized for future necessities.

A close inspection of the data demonstrated that the mestizos break many of their own standards upholding the ideal “civilized” person. They can be spotted urinating in the street, harassing each other, and abusing animals, among other rough acts. For example, the bread delivery man was driving from store to store dropping off his merchandise. I was told to find him and tell him to arrive at one of the stores that needed bread. I approached him as he was walking to the passenger side of his truck. Once I was close I greeted him and then realized he was urinating right there in the street in front of the store. I passed along the message, and then went to tell my friend what had occurred. She just laughed and brushed off the incident, not considering the man to be any less civilized, just gross. Regardless of those behaviors, mestizos are not perceived as crossing back and forth from “civilized” to “uncivilized.” The momentary breaking of social rules is considered a temporary fault and not a permanent definition of the individual’s nature. The inherent nature is attributed from
birth to both sides, and only stable behavior in one direction will permit a permanent passage through this boundary.

On a final note, the role of religion was complicated. Every single person living in La Puerta was religious in one way or another and to different extents. For instance, every household I visited had religious material displayed and church ceremonies were required as part of the school graduation. One could not go through a day without seeing a cross or hearing a prayer. The regular church attendance was usually composed of mestizos. A nearby town holds a sacred church in which a large wooden Jesus on a cross, believed to perform miracles, and is said to date back hundreds of years to the arrival of some of the first Spanish priests to the area. The interesting fact is that those priests would have been the ones bringing Catholicism to the ancestors of the Raramuri. A story that was recounted to me states that a battle broke out between the colonizers and the indigenous people, forcing the Spanish to escape and leave the large cross behind. It was later found and said to hold miraculous elements. At times this church and cross now draw thousands of people and is a common place for people to pray for help.

The Raramuri have a religion of their own which encompasses pre-Hispanic and more contemporary Catholic features. In La Puerta and the surrounding towns they do not have any religious edifice or symbol. Although this religious factor would appear to have the capability of forming a firm division between the groups, in actuality it was only mentioned once as a difference between the two groups, and never seemed to have an actual influence on interactions. Even during discussions about the different natures of Raramuri and mestizos, religion was not put forth to explain or understand the natures. The one time it was mentioned was during a conversation with three mestizos. One of them said, “They do not
know religion either, they do not have any right?” His friend answered, “I don't know, they can’t be seen doing anything, they just kill some animals like once a year for their god.” This lack of understanding creates a weak boundary based around insufficient information. Some Raramuri individuals however participate in church ceremonies and religious festivals, the contemporary aspects of their religion allowing them to accommodate into many parts of Catholicism. Religion influences all facets of the community’s life.

The Raramuri and mestizos of La Puerta are both Mexicans living under dire conditions in a secluded location with the same goal of surviving and striving one day at a time. In spite of this, they have not merged together in their daily relations and interactions. Instead of weakening over time, ethnicity has continued to be an important factor. Even if the groups do not have leaders espousing one group’s superiority or flags to wave in defiance of each other, the underlying influence of ethnic difference is evident. Ethnic identity motivates them to interact and live in different ways, leading to a creation of barriers against full integration and absorption of one group into the other, or a creation of a new group from aspects of both sides. One united group is not present, because as one person put it, “You can’t deny your roots.” And those roots run deep. However, based on the playfulness of children and their disregard for the distinctions between them, there seems to be a blurring of divisions between, “uno” (us), and “ellos” (them).

Limitations of the Study

A few factors hindered the data collection process. First, the rainy season did not arrive on time preventing much of the field work from being started. Everyone eagerly awaited the water, but there were only quick downpours, not enough to get the process going and limiting the amount of interaction which would have occurred out in the fields. Secondly,
there were four deaths within and outside the community which affected a large portion of
the residents. These deaths were spaced out over a period of days and weeks. The deeply
religious community holds nine days of mourning which need to be respected. I did not feel
comfortable questioning people or making overt observations during these unfortunate
periods. I would have to focus on people not directly impacted in order to allow those
affected to have their privacy. Any social events were usually halted or postponed in order to
respect the passing of the individuals. People made strong efforts to be quiet by not playing
music or holding celebrations since it would be disrespectful. Third, I was obviously
identified as a young man very early on and it caused a dilemma with finding female
participants. I was constantly asked about possible love interests and it dramatically limited
the amount of interactions I could have with women without gossip arising. Finally, there
was a bureaucratic hurdle I needed to overcome that placed my research at risk and caused a
lot of confusion. My research was not approved because of a claim that I would be in danger
within the country and could not receive insurance from the school. This left me in a state of
uncertainty and confusion in regards to collecting data, with no idea how I should inform
community members I was conducting research which had not been approved. It made me
extremely hesitant to talk to community members and interview them. However, the chair of
my thesis committee provided the necessary information to explain my situation and that I
would not be in any danger. The research was eventually approved and I was allowed to
continue collecting data.

Implications of the Findings

This ethnographic research study has illuminated the nature of the interactions
between mestizos and Raramuri in La Puerta and concluded that they are intricately
dependent upon boundaries. Ethnic identities and boundaries modify interactions to impact the working relationship, but stability is maintained by an understanding of ethnic differences and how they should be dealt with. This results in a routine life with patterns of exchanges rarely being broken. This relationship is efficient and stable, and the people do not feel the need to intervene and change it. This community has achieved a sort of effortless equilibrium in which most situations have rules of conduct and scripts regulating behavior. The format of quick daily interactions usually follows along the lines of a simple greeting, a quick comment, and a goodbye. This script is repeated to near mechanical precision without having the ethnic identity of the individuals taken into account. This reveals that once a consistent pattern is established in a community and boundaries are constructed, they can be stable and firm without any individual or groups strategic efforts at maintaining them. Overall the ethnic boundaries appear to be maintaining a constant buffer zone between the groups.

The data, I argue, demonstrates ethnic identities and boundaries between the groups revolving around specific themes constructing social boundaries and symbolic boundaries. These boundaries are based on residency patterns, unequal distribution of resources, language, clothing, and behavioral perceptions attributed to ethnicity because they constrain and influence people to be more like “one of us” or “one of them.” All these themes provide a description of the unique interactional dynamics within La Puerta amongst Raramuri and mestizos. Ethnicity can be associated with more than a person’s cultural emblems, therefore, the themes that emerge demonstrate that boundary construction is an active process in opposition to the other. The interactions are built upon these dimensions, each infusing itself into the moment of contact. The interactional dynamics of this community are affected by the
strength or importance given to a person’s identity and the firmness of the boundaries constructed around their ethnicity.

The study has demonstrated that the momentary importance given to ethnic factors does change the dynamic of interaction. Even if the relevance of ethnicity seems insignificant, its influence can be large. In circumstances when a person’s identity is relevant and the firmness of boundaries are increased, the interactional dynamics change to take on different forms. People can become evasive, completely avoid contact, or extremely friendly, and as a result, sustain the symbiosis between the groups. The ethnic themes which affect the interactions allow them to be consistent and predictable, but also active and fluid. The individual has enough agency to completely break through all the boundaries, but the groups will remain intact and provide the social nourishment of new members. This allows them to live side by side, relatively conflict free, but also to maintain a certain distance in order to work around their differences.

These findings also provided new insight into mestizo and indigenous relations. First they displayed that mestizo and indigenous groups can share common struggles and hardship. Instead of turning on each other they can work together to help one another. This is unlike other locations where conflict, tension, or paternalism arose as a result of the boundaries (Martinez-Nov 2006). Working relationships between mestizo and indigenous groups that share a small territory are possible. However, the process of boundary crossing to transition from one lifestyle to another did appear to be predominantly only in one direction, from indigenous to mestizo, substantiating the claims of other researchers. Similar to the findings of other studies the movement from indigenous to mestizo is perceived as progress. Second, the fact that the two groups have not merged demonstrates the importance of ethnicity and
It is still relevant for the ethnic bodies to protect group members and maintain their own culture. The existence of a division in a small intimate community exemplifies the strength of boundaries and the symbolic and physical devices used to define them. This finding can be useful in understanding future boundary dynamics in cities and more developed countries where some believe distinctions between groups will decrease.

Although the boundaries appear stable, there are various factors which may serve to weaken boundaries, not only in La Puerta, but in other similar communities throughout Mexico, even if only temporarily. First, community members can put aside all their differences to feel the same experiences and work toward a common goal in a form of united solidarity. The solidarity is exhibited during interactions where there can be immediate unity under difficult circumstances. Illustrations of this point range from an unfortunate funeral ceremony to a large school celebration. These events can bring people from both sides together and completely erase boundaries.

Secondly, the boundary was weakened by their similarity and dependence on each other, which brings them together, instead of forcing them to compete or try to gain control of one another. I believe the two groups are more similar than is evident. The proposed divergence in behavior or style of living are actually not far apart. The similarity between them weakens ethnic boundaries on a regular basis. Both groups are impoverished with only a minority of people obtaining large wealth. It is difficult to construct a definite hierarchy based on small differences in access to resources. Moreover the mestizo prejudicial ideas about the Raramuri are relatively sturdy, leading to beliefs about differences, but the actual behavior is quite similar and gives them the ability to find common ground. Although the mestizo stereotypes cannot be backed up with strong data in areas such as drinking or the
essential qualities of the groups, to community members the differences may be large. A case in point would be drinking rates. When mestizos drink they seem to consume nearly to the same extent as their Raramuri counterparts and can also do inappropriate things while drunk, but the mestizos do not seem find the similarity. Furthermore, the nature of the Raramuri has not revealed itself to be more savage. Both sides have individuals who break the rules of common decency and act in ways that are considered crude, and both groups take part in their share of violence. These differences are weak, due to the similar behavior of both groups, whereas their bonds are stronger and more important. Preventing a permanent or solid division from being created because it would be based on weak notions, unlike the long lasting hierarchies developed in other places. Regardless of the evidence, the mestizo stereotypes imply otherwise and the people do believe in differences between them, even though their behavior may be similar. These factors may provide answers for the relative peace between the groups, demonstrating that multiple boundaries can exist, both social and symbolic constructions, and not all have to be problematic. A boundary binding groups together can at times supersede a boundary dividing them.

Nevertheless, there are also situations in which the boundaries are not transcended. Based on the data the most consistent and obvious segregation of the two groups arose every Sunday. During the course of these weekly outings the influence of most of the themes came into play. For example, the effects of drinking, the people’s perceived nature, material possessions and social networks combined to make the separation blatant and very firm. People sought out their close friends, stayed with each other to drink, kept a safe distance from others to avoid conflict and utilized their phones and trucks to entertain themselves. The boundary was constructed repeatedly and in the same manner, ensuring that the groups as a
whole would not merge at any point during the Sunday festivities. The Sunday gatherings symbolized a repetitive ritual which, unlike those that bonded the people, defined the distinctions between the groups. This consistency meant that every Sunday the boundary was reinforced once again and both groups knew it would happen. This possibly demonstrates that a boundary can be constructed for a temporary time frame to divide groups, and then subsequently removed, only to be re-established once again at the appropriate hour or in specific context if both sides seemingly agree upon its meaning.

When everything is taken into account, the symbiosis is maintained because everyone in the community has been well socialized into the world they inhabit and the boundaries themselves are not chaotic. Celebrations, political events, and life changing moments, all bring about a break in the regular routine, but the people know how to adapt to the moment and interact with each other to allow these events to run smoothly alongside a distinct ethnic group. Conflict is prevented by accepting the differences between the groups instead of making efforts to change the other. It seems to be a “live and let live” atmosphere. Each group has standards for how people should behave or how they are expected to behave, and the proper methods to negotiate through different scenarios. The effective socialization of community members permits them to understand one another’s habits and not attempt to change them, instead opting to live with them because they do not dramatically hinder one another’s way of life.

Another possible explanation for this symbiosis may be the existence of a broad space between the group boundaries, like a bubble in the middle, where they can meet each other based on all the shared values and behaviors, just short of entering into the other group’s boundary. Instead of viewing the boundary as creating two dichotomous categories, this
space allows for all community members to be united into one symbolic group without losing their ethnic distinction. This midpoint may also be possible due to the factors which weaken the differences, nurturing a common ground to meet as equals. This would be a space in the boundary which does not merely define insiders and outsiders, but is capable of being accessed by all who understand the values and beliefs of the community. I, for instance, do not live and work in the community like the mestizos and Raramuri. I would find accessing this middle ground to be difficult, having to remain within the mestizo boundary only to momentarily create connections with others. However, the rest of the community in La Puerta seemed to easily access this middle space to interact with each other. This space between the boundaries may be what allowed previously mentioned prejudicial individuals to form good relationships with the people they held negative ideas about.

Areas for Future Research

Although future unity and complete homogenization is conceivable, the other direction is also a possibility. According to Nagel (2001), there are conditions which have been found to lead to ethnic conflict. Two of them may someday be relevant to the town; when there is increased competition for land, resources and jobs, and during times of high migration where large number of ethnic migrants arrive and begin changing the host society. Neither of these circumstances have taken place in La Puerta, but it would be interesting to find in future research if their ethnic identities become a more important topic of conversation in the community, and if boundaries become conflictual when the factors of competition and increased migration become relevant to daily life. For instance, if Raramuri numbers decreased in La Puerta how would the community define proper behavior? How would mestizos define their drinking habits as normal and their behavior as civilized, with no
one to compare themselves with? Additionally, with an increasing number of Raramuri children attending mestizo schools, purchasing cell phones, and wearing contemporary clothes, how will they construct boundaries to protect their group in the coming decades? These issues may arise someday but, for now the relationship is stable, the ethnic boundaries have not become conflictual. The community continues to progress and survive in their rural location, while most interactions keep flowing smoothly.
REFERENCES


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