

The Sociology of Trouble in Chicano Deviate Life
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A Mexican American family on this side of the U.S.-
Mexico border at the Pacific Ocean end

A Culture of Chicano Border Logic

A fictional case study in the sociology of deviant behavior under the general rubric of *historias verdaderas mentiras auténticas*—true stories and authentic lies.

Who is ever to really know at what moment one will make the wrong decision; at least wrong in the eyes of the law, in my case federal law? I did not get up one morning and say, “I am going to break the law today.” Nothing I was ever charged for was premeditated; by most levels of assessment I am not a bad person, not even close. Federal Judge Anthony Schwartz said my problem was that I had “poor judgment based on Chicano border logic.” The examples that follow helped me come to a new understanding for a logic I used in daily life that in reality was my sociology of trouble(s).

Being raised along the U.S.–Mexico border has caused confusion not only in my morality but in how I respond or not respond to especially unexpected legal situations. For example, throughout my childhood, my family, from “Shell Town” a.k.a. Chicano Park near downtown San Diego, would meet up with family from Tijuana (in Baja California Norte) where the international border line is today, but there was no wall, no fence, no guards, just a beach.

All we knew was that we gathered there not only to frolic in the waves, sand and sun, but also to harvest abalone the size of your hand, like you do not see today. There was something very special, very Chicano about eating fresh abalone on the beach, mixed with salsa on a homemade flour tortilla. While at the beach there was absolutely no discussion about which country we were in, whether or not we were “illegal” or trespassing: our Chicano border logic saw it as a non-issue.

I spent my childhood in that area for years, comfortably scuba diving at night under massive kelp beds for abalone and raiding lobster traps. One day I discovered that it was a felony to steal lobster just as it is to steal a man’s horse, at least that’s the warning the sheriff gave us one night while we were making our

way back to the beach with a gunny sack full of good-sized lobsters. I think he didn't arrest us because we gave him a dozen abalone and half a dozen lobsters.

As a teenager, we visited relatives in South Texas (Kingsville and Edinberg) and on hot days we swam in the Rio Grande River all day every day alongside dozens of other people. There were no fences, no Border Patrol or talk about which country we were in.

Once while swimming and dodging debris, the current took us in a different direction than it had years before and my grandmother pointed out that it was due to global warming; she said this well before Al Gore brought it to the world's attention. She observed that every few years the river would decide which country it wanted to flow in and out of, so just like the waters we swam in at Tijuana and San Diego, we did not make a distinction about any political line of demarcation (border) and neither did the abalone, crawfish or longostinos (little lobsters).

It depended on the path of the Rio Grande River each year as to where the U.S.–Mexico border was and this became the Chicano border logic I applied for the rest of my life, hence, all of life really depends on the situation. One thing for sure was that if the river was on my right I knew I was on the U.S. side of the border—this was Chicano border logic at work. You might say it was the unspeakable truth. Everyone knew these things because it was part of our culture and how we were raised along la frontera.

Another example of Chicano border logic falls within the realm of what I call “creative deviance.” For instance, when my grandfather and younger brother were teenagers and were picking vegetables in Tucson, Arizona, one year, the local community hospital burned to the ground. The following

weekend an article came out in the local newspaper stating that if you were born in that hospital you needed to stop by the mayor's office to obtain a new birth certificate because all of the files had gone up in smoke.

Using his own Chicano border logic, my grandfather saw this as a once in a life-time opportunity so he and his brother (who were not U.S. citizens) lined-up, were granted birth certificates and as a direct result became instant U.S. citizens. My grandfather didn't see this as breaking a federal law or anything of the sort. He was a hard-working, honest, loving, trustful person who loved to read John Steinbeck in French for Pete's sake and he saw this situation as applying appropriate judgment.

What I am about to tell you I haven't told anyone in many years; it certainly fits within the concept of Chicano border logic. The first time I went to prison I was absolutely innocent and placed in a precarious position. You see, I was making minimum wage at Jerome's Furniture Store in Southeast San Diego, an old-school well-established, family owned place.

With a recommendation from Police Chief Bill Kohlander (whom I got to know rather well as a kid roaming the streets of downtown San Diego), old man Rodney Jerome was kind enough to give me a job delivering furniture even with one felony under my belt. It didn't take me long to figure out that I couldn't support two kids, a wife, rent and a car payment so I started selling drugs to the people where I was delivering furniture to on my route.

It was a fairly easy thing to do. First, I acquired drugs from the guy I was buying drugs from and then I would offer drugs to the people I came in contact with. I could see signs of drug use upon entering people's homes. It was convenient for me to

deliver drugs while on my route because my service area was not that large so out of convenience my drug route grew rapidly.

It didn't take long for me to make \$10,000, \$15,000 to \$20,000 per month in cash. It was really easy work; my biggest problem was where to stash my cash. Using Chicano border logic friends told me I should place the money in the Bank of America on Cesar Chavez Boulevard so as to earn interest, so I did.

What no one advised me on, however, was the fact that banks are required to notify the FBI every time there is a deposit and/or withdrawal of \$5,000 or more; this was the advice missing from our Chicano border logic that got me into trouble, *que la chihuahua!*

To make a long story short, the FBI had been recording all of my \$5,000 deposits for over 8 months. This being the case, I was called in for initial questioning. They sat me down on an old scratched-up grey and green metal chair in the middle of an empty jail cell just like in the movies. The floor had the self-same grey color as the chair, I would call it a U.S. Navy grey; the floor looked like it had been painted a dozen times.

The first thing the FBI agent said was, "We know your wife does not work and that you have two children, a nice rental home and a brand new red mustang, so how are you able to pay for all those things on your hourly salary?" In one question, my entire life flashed before me, all at once I realized I was going to lose everything. They had me by the huevos, I didn't know what to say. I thought about saying "I want to speak to my attorney" just like they do in the movies at Cinema Mejicano in National City, I was rendered speechless, so I didn't say a thing.

After a long minute of silence I heard police chief's Kohlander's voice just outside the door so I blurted out "Chief

Kohlander! Chief Kohlander!” and his face suddenly appeared in the small box-like frame in the grey door. As he swung the door open I could smell his after shave lotion, Old Spice, in contrast to the smell of the fresh black hair dye that had burnt his scalp. He wore a black and white Burberry coat and placed his hand with the little finger ring on my shoulder. In an emotionless manner, he looked straight at me but addressed the agents. After only a few seconds of conversation he left and the FBI agent said, “You are free to go, you don’t need an attorney for now there is no bail, and you better not leave town.” I figured the police chief came to my defense because prior to being elected chief he worked with my mother selling men’s clothes at Farley’s Clothiers located at 5th and Broadway and he had a crush on her.

I was so frazzled with the whole ordeal that I took the next day off from work, I figure I lost about \$1500 dollars that day from drug deals. I had to make up the bad day by having a good day so I bought my wife some flowers at the mercado on San Ysidro Boulevard across from the fire department next to where the old-school Chicana Rita Hayworth got her start.

I decided to BBQ cabrito (baby goat) for my family. While arranging the mesquite wood out of the corner of my eye I could see a half dozen black unmarked black SUVs, just like in the movies making their way down the middle of Border Park just behind my house. I thought this was highly unusual especially since the San Diego City Council had just created a policy that U.S. Immigration officials would no longer drive through the middle of the park in search of undocumented people because they had recently run over and killed my friend Art.

As my suspicion grew, the SUVs were headed directly for my house, picking up both dust and speed. Then it occurred to

me that they were FBI agents and that's how they were able to drive across the park. I thought, I am such a pendejo I didn't bother to get rid of the drugs in my house nor the cash (approximately \$50,000). Before I could throw the cabrito on the fire I found myself jumping the side fence, running for my red mustang and skidding out down the road in the opposite direction. I yelled back at the house "Honey I gotta go!" and she replied with "You gotta go? You gotta go right now?" I said "Yes, Honey I gotta go right now!" And she said "Right now?" and I said "Right now!" and she said "Right now, right now?" Hijole and I said "Yes, right now, right now!" Now that's some serious Chicano border logic. My grandmother taught us that when she said, "Right now right now!" we better get moving.

My red mustang was suped-up. I knew the back roads and I figured I should head for Tijuana where I could seek refuge with Tía who lived next to the television towers for Channel 6. I was driving so fast I couldn't figure out if the FBI agents could see my car or if they knew it was me. And then suddenly as if out of know where a sleek black helicopter flew overhead, just like in the movies, and an agent was yelling something down to me like "Stop, you must stop, you are surrounded!" Well the voice was loud but I didn't see any other vehicles around so in making my way towards the border I took a chance and swung left to power up Wing Hill where a single engine plane had crashed some 25 years prior and they used the wing of the plane as some sort of statue. As I got closer to the airplane wing stuck in the ground, I knew I was blocked in, the helicopter landed, I jumped out of my mustang and started running up the hill and an FBI agent jumped from the helicopter chasing me up the hill, I ducked in order to dodge the helicopter blade but I could tell the agent wasn't thinking about it, so as I turned to tell him to look out for

the blade it whacked him good on the right side of his head, literally taking off about one third of his head.

At that I raced back down the hill to help him and was surrounded by agents who took me in. I was charged with two felonies: one as a drug dealer and one for assaulting an FBI agent, go figure, I never laid a hand on the agent, if anything I was simply trying to help him. The way I saw it I should have only been charged for not cooking-up tripitas to go with the cabrito. It wasn't my fault the FBI agent was a pendejo, he lived you know, but they charged me—man that wasn't right.

My attorney, who reminded me of Joe Pesci's portrayal in the movie, "My Cousin Vinney," said we should accept the two felony charges as a strategy and it worked. I took the plea bargain and "Joe Pesci" go me off on gross negligence on behalf of the FBI.

I wrote a letter to Federal Judge Anthony Schwartz that included just about everything I wrote above. I recall standing in front of him and handing him my letter and as he read each paragraph he looked up at me just like in the movies, when he was done reading my letter he looked up and said my problem was that I had "poor judgment based on Chicano border logic."

Dr. Armando Arias, a dedicated contributor to *Somos en escrito*, who writes under the general rubric of *historias verdaderas mentiras auténticas—true stories and authentic lies*. He has found this the most effective manner to convey his stories. Copyright © Arts and Sciences World Press, 2017.