

Researcher studies the borders between nations and aspirations

April 21 2015, by Coleen L. Geraghty

Millions do it every year. Travel between San Diego and Tijuana is routine for border residents, but David Carruthers contends that crossing the border is more than just a physical journey.

A political science professor at San Diego State University, Carruthers is co-author of a book-in-progress about how borders produce and reinforce cultural, economic, even psychological differences. He and fellow poli sci professor Kristen Maher are researching San Diego's unequal, often uneasy, relationship with its southern neighbor.

"Kristen and I are interested in the border as a place that legitimizes differences and inequalities," Carruthers said. "For many San Diegans, the experience of Tijuana is filtered through the lens of an iconic border fence. We were struck by how this perception differs from our own experiences in the city given the art and creativity coming out of Tijuana. The disjuncture was the genesis of the book."

A fluent Spanish speaker, Carruthers studied for a year at the Universidad de Guanajuato, Mexico. His research has focused on agriculture, indigenous issues and environmental injustices in Latin America. At SDSU, he serves as undergraduate adviser for the Latin American studies major and co-director of the sustainability program.

Carruthers admits to a fascination with borders—not just between countries, but also between rich and poor, privileged and oppressed, the natural world and the built environment. And that led to collaboration

with Maher on the border closest to home.

"I guess I'm a Tijuanaologist," Carruthers said, using a term coined by Mexican writer Heriberto Yépez to describe scholars obsessed with understanding the city.

One chapter of the upcoming book examines the parallel histories of San Diego and TJ. Over the last century, tourism and commercial interests promoted the region alternately as the gateway to Latin America, an exotic binational vacation paradise and an economic powerhouse. But a hardened post-9/11 mentality and a violent drug war changed everything.

Federal legislation authorized construction of a secure fence along the U.S.-Mexico border, making the practical matter of crossing it more unwieldy, and the psychological divide more pronounced. Another book chapter, which looks at Tijuana-focused stories published in the San Diego Union Tribune from 2000 to 2010, finds a heavy emphasis on crime, [border](#) enforcement and immigration.

Consequently, transit from San Diego declined, enabling Tijuana's local entrepreneurs and community activists to reclaim the dying tourism districts and "reimagine" their city, Carruthers said.

"They like the idea that tourists will eventually return, not because TJ is close to San Diego and easy and cheap, but because it's a creative place with great food, wine and art—a place that is maturing on its own terms."

Provided by South Dakota State University

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