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Abstract

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**Municipal Annexation and Metropolitan
Colonialism at the Nation's Fringe:
San Ysidro, San Diego and the U-S///Mexico Border**

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This paper reviews and challenges current Urban Studies literature on annexation, suburbanization, and segregation. Specifically, it investigates the economic and political forces that led to boundary changes in San Ysidro, California. Prior scholarship on municipal annexations has focused primarily on the procedural mechanics and local dynamics that inform municipal boundary changes. This paper argues that this approach is “too local,” and suggests that global capital flows and forces play a powerful role in municipal annexations. Through a world-systems lens and a legal history of cities, this paper also provides a framework for rethinking municipal annexations as reenactments of colonial enterprises at a metropolitan scale and considers the implications this framework has on ongoing debates about citizenship.

Urbanism, as a general phenomenon, should not be viewed as the history of particular cities, but as the history of the systems of cities within, between, and around which the surplus circulates . . .

-David Harvey (1973, 250)

Cities accumulate and retain wealth, control and power because of what flows through them, rather than what they statistically contain.

-Jonathan Beaverstock, *et al* (2000, 123)

Introduction

As a broad overview of annexation, suburbanization, and segregation literatures, this paper argues that the two dominant logics of municipal annexation—economic and political—do not fully account for municipal annexation disputes. Through considering how the community of San Ysidro, California¹ was annexed to the City of San Diego, I challenge the established literature’s myopic focus on procedural mechanics and purely local dynamics and provide a framework for the rethinking of municipal annexations as reenactments of colonial enterprises at a metropolitan scale.

Specifically, I make three arguments about the structural location and function of the community of San Ysidro in relation to the City of San Diego and the U-S///Mexico² border.

First, I argue that current literature is “too local” and suggest that global capital flows and forces

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¹ In 1957, the City of San Diego annexed the South Bay area consisting of the communities of Palm City, Otay, and San Ysidro. This paper focuses on San Ysidro, as it is the site of an international port of entry.

² The usage of this inscription for what is commonly referred as the U.S.-Mexico border is a twofold attempt to politically intervene in the discursive hegemony of both U.S.-Mexico Border Studies discourse *and* its critiques. First, the dash between the letters ‘U’ and ‘S’ is meant to disrupt the ‘hidden transcript’ that monologically silences dissent and implies a timeless permanence and unity vis-à-vis the term ‘United States’ and its abbreviation. Secondly, it is an attempt to visually voice (protest of) the “triple fence strategy” now in effect in numerous parts of the border via Operation Gatekeeper, while simultaneously acknowledging what Mike Davis and Alessandra Moctezuma term “the third border.” For Davis and Moctezuma, the first border is the one created through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The second border is the inland border checkpoints, initiated by the Border Patrol as a “second line of defense.” Lastly, the emergence of private gated communities “create[s] a third border distant from, but complimentary to, the first and second borders” (See Davis and Moctezuma 1999; and Palafox 2001). In addition, vigilante groups currently patrolling the southern border accentuate the reality of multiple borders.

are equally pertinent to assessing the motivations that drive municipal annexations. I argue that San Ysidro exemplifies the ways in which cities effectuate “spatial-juridical fixes”³ to (re)open markets and extend their economic reach and power within a global system of cities.

Second, through a world-systems analysis, I argue that municipal annexations can be understood as reenactments of colonial enterprises on a smaller scale. Specifically, I attempt to show that the usurping of land and the expansion of social and political boundaries is often premised on colonial logics which assume that annexed territories lack the capacity for self-government. This form of metropolitan colonialism carries significant implications for both urban and national body politics and provides fruitful ground for creative intervention in ongoing debates about citizenship.

Third, through a legal history of cities, I trace the failure of modern liberal discourse to address the fact that cities occupy a unique space in-between the ideal autonomous individual and the sovereign state. Today, cities are “creatures of the state,” even if they predate their respective “creator state.” This paradoxical configuration, referred to in law as Dillon’s Principle, leaves cities in limbo—not quite individual and not quite state. This paradox, I argue, results in a creative disjunction that allows us to rearticulate competing notions of citizenship and the kind of claims that citizens of cities make on the state.

Producing a Racialized “Urban Crisis:” Suburbanization and Segregation

Central to the study of spatial contestation and current literature on cities are concerns over growth, sprawl, white flight, the relationship of suburbs to old city centers, and (re)development. This section provides a brief history of the historical and demographic changes

³ On spatial-temporal fixes see David Harvey (2003, 87-89, 115-124).

that prompted annexations in the United States and considers the interrelationship between segregation, suburbanization, and (municipal) annexation.

The Entangled Histories of Suburbanization and White Flight

Annexation and boundary changes must be understood in light of the political, historical, and demographic changes that gave rise to suburban spaces. Robert Beauregard argues that the industrial revolution saw the expansion of fringe communities and the beginning of “white flight” (2003, 12-16, 123). Predominantly poor migrants began to move into cities while a growing white middle-class responded to the perceived moral decay and social problems of the city by moving out and forming suburbs. Beauregard notes that this shift gave birth to an “anti-urban” bias among the growing United States’ populace.

When suburban communities became well established, many central cities attempted to annex them. Between 1890-1920 annexation attempts were common as cities struggled to obtain centralized, bureaucratized control over surrounding areas (Mollenkopf 1983, 37). However, many suburban communities resisted annexation. Myron Orfield writes that “by the turn of the century, there was growing opposition . . .” to annexation attempts (2002, 134). The new suburbs began to undertake what Nancy Burns (1994) calls *defensive incorporations*. In order to “protect” their newly formed communities from annexation by the older city centers they had abandoned, suburban voters put political pressure on state legislators to curtail liberal annexation laws and liberalize incorporation procedures.

While annexations nearly stopped after the 1920s, they returned with the sprawl that accompanied the post-World War II period. According to Mollenkopf, annexations were an “unintended consequence” of the New Deal programs of the 1930’s, the development of highways, and the growth of defense industries located in the suburbs (1983, 58-59, 119-121). Meanwhile, federal urban development programs such as the 1934 Housing Act, which increased

both public housing and loan availability to homeowners, intensified existing racial and economic disparities. Specifically, the “young, second generation, urban working-class who had made the New Deal possible” bought homes in the suburbs while “Black immigrants from the South” were relegated to central city housing projects (Ibid., 73). Over time, Fair Deal administrators ignored the needs of Black occupants and neglected the projects. The “dilapidated” housing projects were then showcased as further evidence of the very decline that prompted suburban flight.

The demographic shifts spurred by suburbanization left central cities with a fleeting tax base and set the stage for another wave of annexations in the 1950’s. According to 1960 Census data, 2,425 municipalities with a population over 2,500 experienced annexations between 1950 and 1960. California, with 188 annexations, had the third highest number of annexations in the nation, trailing only Illinois with 190 annexations and Texas with 215 annexations. Together, California and Texas accounted for 34.3% of all individuals incorporated into new municipalities during the decade.⁴

According to Beauregard, by the early 1960’s, the predominantly white “powerful suburban ring[s]” that were sprouting at the fringe of “increasingly darkened” central cities began to look like a “suburban noose” (2003, 98). While central cities remained predominantly ‘minority,’ the suburbs were populated by mostly white residents. This racialized landscape created the conditions that produced the so-called “urban crisis” in the United States. As the civil rights movement waned, Black urban residents, many of whom lived under the rule of predominantly white administrative bodies, began to seek “liberation” from what they articulated as “internal colonialism.”⁵

⁴ All above figures are from “An Information Paper” written by the *United States Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations*, Washington 25, D.C. (October 12, 1961), np. The report is itself a compilation of summary information of the individual State reports that appeared in Table 9 of Series PC(1), “Number of Inhabitants,” 1960 Census of Population.

⁵ See Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton. 1969. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. New York: Penguin Books.

“Suffocation” by white flight, unemployment, underemployment, inadequate housing, poor public services, police brutality, and general political disenfranchisement eventually led to the uprisings of the Black Power struggles of the 1960’s and 1970’s. As discontent grew, white middle class residents once again went packing to the suburbs out of fear of racial revolt. Ironically, many suburban residents failed to recognize that they were complicit in creating and perpetuating existing inequalities. Nonetheless, suburbanization marched on, and by the 1970’s “exclusionary and discriminatory incorporation practices . . . [and] ‘municipal boundaries, increasingly served to separate races and income classes’” (Miller, quoted in Mollenkopf, 1983, 37). The suburban exodus spelled trouble for cities facing decreased tax revenues and increased demand for services for poor black and other ‘minority’ residents.

Suburbanization, incorporation, and annexation continued to be a dominant form of growth in the 1960’s and 1970’s. However, these later annexations took a different shape. While previous annexation disputes were dominated by concerns over city revenue, taxation, city services, and “decline,” annexations in the 1970’s were initiated in response to political concerns over increasingly Black control of cities in the Northeast and South and growing Mexican/Black control of cities in the Southwest.

Segregation: Race, Poverty and/or Culture?

Racialized spatial exclusion, or segregation, is deeply intertwined with the history of urban development and land use in the United States. This section examines race in the context of literature on urban development.

In his seminal text, *The Contested City*, John Mollenkopf notes that in the United States “urban development issues have been a primary, if not exclusive, factor in our national political development” (1983, 11). However, the urban and political development of the U.S. have been marred by multiple forms of segregation. Early Jim Crow laws designating *de jure* separation

and spatialized containment (ghettos, barrios, reservations, etc.) characterized much of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Today, *de facto* segregation lives on through fortified enclaves, gated communities, and surveillance that functions to maintain segregated spaces of leisure.⁶ As Manuel Castells recently noted: “Segregation happens both by location in different places and by security control of certain spaces open only to the elite” (2002, 348). Although manifestations of segregation have differed over the years, actors in suburbanization and municipal boundary changes have often been complicit with and/or benefited from exclusions.

The body of literature addressing classical forms of segregation is quite extensive. However, it is the work of the Chicago School (e.g. Ernest Burgess, Robert Park, Louis Wirth) that first laid the ground work for theorizing about urban segregation through ecological models (Susser 2002, 4). Specifically, the work of the Chicago School outlines a model of cities organized functionally in concentric circles relative to their productive necessities.

Two classic works, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* (1945) and Edward Banfield’s *The Unheavenly City* (1968) build on this tradition and take it in a new direction. Drake and Cayton engage the theme of the “dual city”—a city that includes spaces of wealth, as well as those marked by poverty—to critique the concentration of racialized poverty in the urban ghettos of Chicago (see esp. chapter eight). Alternatively, Banfield argues that segregation today is the result of economic rather than racial factors. He maintains that racial prejudice has ended and economic matters dominate current issues of inequality.

⁶ On fortified enclaves, see Teresa Caldeira. 1999. “Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation.” In *Cities and Citizenship*, edited by James Holston, 114-138. Durham: Duke University Press. On gated communities and spaces of surveillance, see Davis and Moctezuma (1999, 7-12) and Mike Davis (1992). “Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space.” In *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, edited by Michael Sorkin, 154-180. New York: Hill & Wang. See also Don Mitchell. 2003. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York: The Guilford Press.

While Banfield does not explicitly deny that the history of the United States is replete with racial prejudice and economic subjugation, he attempts to sever ‘historical’ causes from ‘continuing’ causes and assumes no link between the two (1968, 70). Asserting that inequality and poverty in the present have more to do with low-income work and unemployment, inexpensive housing costs in the “ghetto,” and self-determined choices to live in segregated residential spaces, he disconnects history from a presumed independent “present.” The economic rationalization offered by Banfield—that Blacks are but the “most recent unskilled and hence relatively low-income *migrants* to reach the city from a *backward* rural area” (Ibid., 68)—upholds ideological constructions of rural/urban binaries and rests upon an immigrant analogy. In other words, Banfield argues that Blacks should be seen simply as a new *migrant* group that will, over time, lift itself up and escape both poverty and the “ghetto.”

By rhetorically reconstructing and reframing the legacy of slavery in terms of “rural to urban migration” (with all its problematic precepts), Banfield misconstrues the extent to which segregation is attributed to racial and colonial factors, and reformulates the particular racial character of segregated urban spaces in service of a presumed “urban crisis.” While Banfield’s conclusion—“ghettos” are constituted by poverty and “class culture”—seems to refute the idea of “ghettos” as necessarily Black, the effects, premises, and motivations of Banfield’s theory appear to be racially charged and resemble a spatialized hybrid of the much refuted “Culture of Poverty” thesis. Banfield’s logic is also reflected in Peter Jargowsky and M. J. Bane’s (1991) reductionist account of economically determined segregation as constitutive of ghettos.

In contrast to Banfield and the work of Jargowsky and Bane, Loic Wacquant (1997) problematizes the connotative effects that follow from equating the language of “ghetto” with Black communities. Specifically, Wacquant critically considers how language *discursively* perpetuates the idea of an “urban/racial crisis.” In his view, the three authors dismiss the

continuing significance of race in the intersection of poverty and segregation. While Wacquant fails to explain the concomitant role that race plays in the historical development of white flight and suburbanization, his analysis challenges the implied social disorganization and exoticization of the “ghetto” in the work of many social scientists writing about urban spaces (1997, 341-342). In doing so, Wacquant pushes us to think beyond the key conceptual and theoretical devices used by social scientists to perpetuate a myopic and often Eurocentric view of society, poverty, segregation, and ‘the urban condition.’

The Logics of Annexations: Race, Global Capital Flows, and Border Cities

When new suburban communities advance across the landscape, municipal boundaries often change. While suburban growth can take the form of new incorporations, boundary changes are most often the result of annexations. Since annexation laws are established by state statute, no two states provide for precisely the same procedures. While cities often fight to integrate undeveloped land or existing unincorporated communities, annexations vary widely both within and among cities and are frequently a volatile local issue.

In this section, I briefly address classificatory debates and the contested economic and political logics of annexation. I then turn to the annexation of San Ysidro to assess the challenge this case poses to established literature and to reconsider how municipal governance is structured in border communities.

Classifications Schemes and the Contested Logics of Municipal Annexations

Research on municipal annexations is wide-ranging and varied. Scholars have adopted diverging approaches to studying municipal annexations, including classification systems, quantitative analyses, and specific case studies. In an oft-cited “detailed legal treatise,” Frank Sengstock classifies municipal annexations based on a five-part scheme he developed according

to whom holds “final decision-making authority” in an annexation attempt (Palmer and Lindsey 2001, 61). Sengstock’s classification system is still used by most scholars today and includes the following paraphrased categories:

1. Popular Determination: citizen control over the process (petition, voting)
2. Municipal Determination: unilateral authority resting with the city
3. Legislative Determination: annexations by legislative act
4. Quasi-legislative (or administrative) Determination: commission-determined
5. Judicial Determination: city, citizen or legislative control, with court approval (Sengstock 1960)

While scholars and practitioners have long argued about various approaches to annexation, with varying conclusions, a complementary body of literature has focused on providing empirical support for Sengstock’s classificatory scheme. For example, Thomas Dye (1964) and Raymond Wheeler (1965), analyze factors contributing to differences in annexation rates. Dye finds that “the ease or difficulty of annexation procedures . . . does not appear to be predictive of annexation activity” (1964, 445). He argues instead that “older” cities were less likely to annex than “newer” cities. Newer cities here, implies a bias for cities in the West. Wheeler additionally finds that annexation was less likely when the “social distance” was significant (i.e., differences in socioeconomic characteristics between the city and the territory being annexed) (1965, 355). This too, was a point of contention in the San Ysidro case.

In a different set of findings that may seem counterintuitive, Thomas Galloway and John Landis find that “popular determination” *decreases* the likelihood of annexation (1986, 41-43). On the other hand, they also find that provisions to initiate annexation by ordinance, by petition of property owners, and by referendum of only those electors in the annexing city facilitates annexation (Ibid.). This means that requirements for public hearings, for approval by “quasi-legislative” or administrative commissions, and for referenda by electors in the target areas to be annexed deter annexation. Annexation, according to Galloway and Landis, is more likely to occur in states that do not require the participation or consent of those being annexed and is less

likely to occur in those states that do (Ibid, 43).⁷ These findings are counterintuitive in the sense that participation of those affected would seem to affect the results more. A possible explanation for the counterintuitive conclusions of Galloway and Landis may lie in the work of Richard Feiock and Jered Carr (2000).

Assessing different forms of local boundary change (annexation, consolidation, incorporation, etc.) with a theory of “collective action”—which stipulates the existence of “free-riders” who rely on the actions of others—Feiock and Carr (2000, 4-5) argue that boundary changes become difficult to enact, both because of the limited number of players, as well as because of the different procedural issues that govern changes at the level of the state. Feiock and Carr argue: “The need to act collectively to alter boundaries means that those groups better able to organize and sustain these actions will be favored in the process. Thus, local boundaries will be more often drawn in ways that these advantaged groups prefer” (Ibid.). Similarly, this logic could be extended to argue that the oppositional response—that of promoting a contrary form of boundary change or a continuation of the status quo—experiences a complementary *disadvantage* where action taken against the initially suggested changes is not necessarily indicative of the overall sentiment of the residents of the target area in question, as they too become “free-riders.” Additionally, the political and socio-economic realities of racialized communities exacerbate the situation. For example, the electoral power of Black, Latina/o and immigrant communities is eroded by the disenfranchisement of felons, which disproportionately affects African American and Latino populations. Issues of immigration status also play a role, as was the case when San Diego’s annexed the South Bay in 1957.

While Nancy Burns (1994) first articulated the idea of “defensive incorporation”—where unincorporated areas become their own cities to avoid annexation into existing surrounding

⁷ This conclusion again marks a big difference with the San Ysidro example, as we will see below.

cities—Feiock and Carr have recently presented a complementary notion of “offensive annexation.” Offensive annexation happens when “cities aggressively annex areas with minimal constraints on incorporation in order to pre-empt future incorporation efforts” by unincorporated areas (1996, 10). As issues related to sprawl and the revitalization of central cities persist, the role of annexation will continue to be debated. Moreover, where race and low-income residents are involved, the debates are likely to be hotly contested.

In the following sub-sections I present brief synopses of what I term the “Economic Logics” (or rationales) and the “Political Logics” (or rationales) of municipal annexation. These are not meant as analyses, per se, but as brief sketches of the arguments surrounding annexation.

Economic Logics of Annexation

Literature about annexation and its proponents often argues that changes to the economy, caused first by industrialization and then the post-industrial shift to a service economy, have resulted in an increase in the percentage people of color (immigrant and native, usually poorer) in central cities. In response, more economically stable white residents have moved to the outlining fringes, leaving cities with less tax-based revenue and more expenses to pay for services to poorer residents. On the other hand, residents who move out of city jurisdictions, evade taxation but often still make use of city services. Proponents of annexations, therefore, argue that annexations are needed to make unincorporated areas pay for city services they receive. In contrast, opponents frame their arguments in terms of overextended city services and fiscal responsibility. They argue that cities would be spreading themselves too thin and would not be able to provide necessary services to outlying communities.

While Feiock and Carr’s notion of “offensive annexations” may shed light on some annexation attempts, offensive or pre-emptive annexations have not always proved fruitful. For example, in Detroit, according to Orfield, ambitious annexation campaigns were unsuccessful

and only served to exacerbate existing problems (2002, 134). There is widespread agreement among scholars that Nancy Burns' notion of "defensive incorporation" speaks to situations where those in the outlying areas are affluent white middle class suburbanites who oppose annexation. However, it is less clear what the dynamics are when the target area is not the subject of "defensive incorporation" or is not predominantly white and middle/upper class.

Economic reasons given for opposing annexation have ranged from defensive incorporations to simple desires for autonomy. In some annexation struggles, target area residents have explicitly articulated their opposition to annexation as a matter of (internal) colonialism.⁸ Yet, some residents also fear that the lower taxes—often promised by annexation proponents with supportive projections from City and County Auditors' Office reports—will not materialize, and taxes will actually increase. In some cases, target area residents also fear they will end up paying for services they do not receive because of the extensive territory cities cover, making certain services unattainable to all residents within the proposed boundary-changed area. This was the case in San Diego, where some South Bay residents opposed annexation in the 1950's fearing that their tax dollars would be used to subsidize redevelopment efforts (ongoing at the time) of world-renowned Balboa Park (Kaye 1957, A19). The Park was near the City's northern extremities, too far for many South Bay residents to benefit from or enjoy.

Political Logics of Annexation

Despite the fact that *most* academic work on municipal boundary change, aside from the classificatory debates cited above, focuses on the economic aspects and fiscal impacts of annexations, there is a growing body of literature focusing on the political dynamics of municipal annexations. Much of this latter literature critiques the dominate role economic logic

⁸ For example, see Becky Gillette. 1998. "Annexation or occupation: It's all a matter of perspective." *The Mississippi Business Journal* 20:27 (July 6): 12; see also, Charles Connerly. 1999. "'One Great City' Or Colonial Economy?: Explaining Birmingham's Annexation Struggles, 1945-1990." *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 26, no. 1 (November): 44-73.

plays in the discourse surrounding annexation. Significantly, this literature highlights the role race and racially charged motivations play in some annexations, even when the motivations for annexation are framed in seemingly benign (in most cases) economic terms. A look at the racial (and colonial) subtexts in municipal annexation discourse reveals a complex and gloomy picture.

Numerous cases of annexation (most notably Richmond, Virginia and Houston and San Antonio, Texas) have involved predominantly white residents, often with business ties to the area, pushing for annexation of surrounding areas that are inhabited usually by (predominantly, if not entirely) white residents.⁹ Such efforts have been indirect if not explicit attempts to dilute the growing black or Latino vote in urban areas. In Richmond, as well as in Birmingham, Alabama, advocates couched their support for annexation in an argument of “status” among cities, pushing for a “Greater Richmond” and a “Greater Birmingham” (Moeser and Dennis 1982, 5; Connerly 1999, 52) that would otherwise be overshadowed by the growing surrounding suburbs. The numbers, however, elucidate a different picture. In Richmond, for example, fearing a majority Black city and Black control of the “capital of the Confederacy,” the annexation of neighboring Chesterfield “enabled 47,000 people (97 percent of whom were white) to become city residents and participate in the 1970 councilmanic election which was less than a year away” (Moeser and Dennis 1982, 7-8). Another case involved a town in Alabama where the City’s white residents made use of rarely used *de*-annexation procedures. While the city had previously been in the shape of a square, predominantly white residents, claiming to want an octagon-shaped city, voted to reduce politico-juridical boundaries by *de*-annexing portions of the city. Citing preference for one geometric shape over another, the *de*-annexed outlying areas included most of the cities

⁹ See John V. Moeser and Rutledge M. Dennis. 1982. *The Politics of Annexation: Oligarchic Power in a Southern City*. Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing, especially the Introduction.

black population.¹⁰ With such images, it is not difficult to discern if and how race played a factor in the (de)annexation.

Municipal Annexation and Racial Contestation

“[S]eparating race from poverty and white flight” is a difficult task because they are discursively and historically entangled (Beauregard 2003, 155). “Race,” Beauregard notes, is “increasingly the glue that bound together all *perceived* problems of the declining cities,” particularly poverty and crime (Ibid., my emphasis). Therefore, with the consistent exception of affluent white communities engaged in defensive incorporation efforts—a codified racial dynamic of its own—opposition to annexation has largely stemmed from ‘minorities’ who seek to preserve their voting strength, resist their perceived criminalization (Musso 2001, 148),¹¹ and in some instances, articulate their opposition to a presumed “colonial” situation.

Andrew Austin directly addressed the continuing significance of race when he stated: “annexation alters the composition of the city, and thus the balance of power . . . in other words, annexation allows current decisive voters to influence the *identity* of the decisive voter in the future by the strategic addition of new voters” (1999, 501-502, my emphasis). While annexation discourse is usually framed in economic terms, and while “political” decisions often carry fiscal implications, one must be able to discern the economic from the economically codified, as therein lies a narrative of race and power. While in actuality, it is very difficult to disentangle economic factors from political and/or racial determinants, in practice they are much simpler to distinguish *if* one approaches annexation looking and thinking beyond economic factors. Austin further concludes: “The results reveal a connection between annexation and migration.” While such a connection is often tied to “migration of the poor into the cities . . . the results show that

¹⁰ This striking reference is from Brett W. Berri. 1989. “Annexation and Municipal Voting Rights.” *Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law* Vol. 35:237-248, cited in D. Andrew Austin. 1999. “Politics vs Economics: Evidence from Municipal Annexation.” *Journal of Urban Economics* Vol. 45: pp. 501-532, pp. 505, fn. 9.

¹¹ Juliet Ann Musso notes common approval of annexations by target area residents with promised “police protection” increase.

racial motivations matter . . .” (Ibid.). Austin’s findings underscore the need for broad analyses encompassing economic *and* political motivations, factors, and outcomes of annexations which clearly affect the identity of the constitutive memberships of cities and claims to its rights, services, and protections.

San Ysidro: “*Is that in Mexico?!?*”— A Case Study in Annexation

The economic and political logics of municipal annexations are manifested not just *at the fringe* of cities (i.e., suburbs), but also *at the fringe* of the nation (border cities). As such, it is my contention that the economic and political factors at play in the case of San Ysidro follow a seemingly “irrational” and contradictory logic when weighed against other annexations. I argue that, as a border city, control over the Port of Entry and the related capital that flows *through* San Ysidro were the *motivating* factors in the annexation, rather than what or who was “contained” in/by the annexed neighborhood.

The Significance of Border Cities

I look at border cities for two reasons. First, there is an operative dialectic between the local dynamics of cities (residents, economy, political culture, etc.) and the circulation of capital (goods, services, and products) that “flow through them” (Ortíz-González 2004). Second, as representatives of the limits (edge, frontier, border, etc.) of the nation, border cities serve the dual purpose of ensuring the security of the nation and negotiating human exchange. As Susan Mains argues, “while immigration concerns are made more concrete by focusing on physical sites of border crossing, [borders] are frequently signifiers for much broader, wide-ranging, and punitive efforts to police national identity” (2002, 211). These conflicting interests mean that the local interests of border cities intersect with, and at times are undermined by, national interests and the

public's investment in a presumably united, authentic, and untainted national body politic. In other words, border cities serves dual and contradictory purposes. While they must serve the social function of 'securing the border' from 'the foreign,' they must also be flexible enough to allow entry to a sufficient amount of "foreigners" to meet production and consumption demands.

San Ysidro and San Diego: Water, Annexation and Control of the U-S///Mexico Border

In order to understand why the annexation of San Ysidro does not adhere to the traditional political or economic logics of annexation, it is necessary to understand the history of San Ysidro, San Diego, and the broader region.

San Ysidro is the site of one the world's busiest Port of Entry and shares a relationship with both the U-S///Mexico border and the City of San Diego some 20 miles to the north. While San Ysidro was once an unincorporated neighborhood, growth in San Diego and debates over water services led to the annexation of San Ysidro and the surrounding South Bay area. What is unique about the San Ysidro/San Diego annexation, I argue, is that it was a political struggle over *control* of a Port of Entry (the border). In other words, the City of San Diego wanted to annex San Ysidro in order to cement its status, wealth, and power as an important node in a global network of cities and to lay claim to the border and the capital that flowed through it. While San Ysidro has close cultural, economic, and often familial ties to Tijuana, Baja California in Mexico, it is politically and jurisdictionally a part of the City of San Diego. Nonetheless, the predominantly working-class Mexican residents of San Ysidro have historically been neglected by San Diego historians and politicians alike.¹²

The City of San Diego was incorporated in 1850 and adopted its current City Charter in 1931. The Charter allowed business leaders to make use of at-large elections to install a strong

¹² In 1982, five students at San Diego State University undertook a research project on the history of San Ysidro. The resulting book of essays provides a good starting point for future work on San Ysidro. See Griswold del Castillo, ed. (1983).

city manager who supported their agenda (Stone, Price, and Stone 1939; Mott 1932).¹³ As the new and weakened city council shifted their loyalties from voters to the city establishment, working-class and “minority” voters were effectively and intentionally disenfranchised and the business elite came to dominate elections and city politics generally (Bridges 1997, 35, 169). After World War II, San Diego began to grow rapidly as massive federal spending in both military and social programs brought new taxes and citizens to the city. Anthony Corso (1983) maintains that much like other Sunbelt cities, San Diego implemented ambitious, unplanned annexation programs that resulted in uneven residential sprawl and strengthened the pro-growth business community. As cities expanded through annexation, the local tax burden for services grew apace, and water in particular became a scarce resource. It is in this context that South Bay annexations were attempted, contested, and eventually accomplished.

Since at least the 1930’s, San Diego had been at the mercy of outside forces for essential services such as water, power, and transportation. In May 1944, San Diego metropolitan area voters approved by a margin of fifteen-to-one a proposition to create the San Diego County Water District. According to its Charter, the new entity had the power to annex itself to the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (MWD) in order to access more water. By the end of 1944, drought and population growth had exhausted most of the city reservoirs’ reserves (Shragge 2003). The City of San Diego then purchased the Otay River water system, one of the sources of water for the South Bay.

City officials reasoned that the purchase of the Otay River water system gave San Diego a stake in the South’s Bay’s unincorporated lands. However, the South Bay was not “contiguous” to city limits so a direct land connection was needed. To remedy this problem, San

¹³ The City Charter of 1931 is still in place and, amidst fiscal uncertainty and near bankruptcy the most recent mayoral elections resulted in the shifting of power from the City Manager to the Mayor.

Diego moved to annex more of the South Bay, including San Ysidro, through a series of contested legal maneuvers. Pourade provide an extensive account of the annexation dispute:

. . . There were conflicting claims to land under the bay, [so] a compromise was reached. Coronado agreed to let San Diego have a 600-foot wide corridor in exchange for Glorietta Bay... Later, San Diego surrendered half the corridor to National City, under a threat of legal action. [...]

In 1956 San Diego moved to annex a large area of the South Bay but met resistance from . . . Imperial Beach . . . [who] incorporated as a separate-city. San Diego tried again, with the hope of . . . reaching clear to the International Border.

Chula Vista was joined by Imperial Beach in seeking to prevent the annexation by challenging the legality of the corridor, but the filing of suits was not sanctioned in 1958 by the State's Attorney General, Edmund G. Brown, as required by court decision. South Bay voters [finally] approved annexation . . . on July 16, 1957 (1977, 218-219).

The eventual annexation of San Ysidro was accomplished through a process known as strip annexation. As a result, the 300-foot wide corridor that connects San Ysidro to San Diego is actually a strip of land underwater, *within* the Coronado Bay. While strip annexations are illegal in some states, they are legally recognized in California.¹⁴

Most accounts treat the annexation of the South Bay and San Ysidro as the result of a quest for water. However, San Diego had its own water shortages that continued through the early 1960's. In 1962, the Metropolitan Water District released a booklet titled *Water for People*. The booklet compared Southern California's "thirst" to the Romans and Babylonians and noted that both the ancient civilizations and San Diego relied upon infrastructural advances such as aqueducts to bring water from "great distances" (cited in Pourade 1977, 203-204). This language suggests that San Diego leaders recognized that the city was as a node within a network of cities and acknowledged the need for water and sophisticated infrastructural planning (Graham and Simon 2001, 58-60). In other words, while it was claimed that San Ysidro and the South Bay needed water, the City of San Diego was also in need of water.

¹⁴ In Texas, after some cities attempted to extend their boundaries by annexing strips as narrow as 10 feet, the minimum was increased to 1,000 feet. Yet, in California, strip annexations such as the San Diego/South Bay and the Los Angeles/San Pedro corridors remain intact. "Interim Report," *Texas Senate Interim Committee on Annexation*, 76th Legislature (October 1998), (accessed on December 3, 2004), http://www.senate.state.tx.us/75r/senate/commit/archive/IC/N_4_-_N_4

Ironically, most historians view San Diego's efforts to annex San Ysidro as a result of the *South Bay's need* for water services. As a result, Richard Pourade's suggestion that one "thirsty" municipality with its own Water District was seeking annexation into a larger, *presumably thirstier*, municipality, seems contradictory. However, both popular and academic accounts of the San Ysidro annexation rely upon this "need for water services" narrative.¹⁵

* * *

One account, Margaret Ann Baker's master's thesis (1980), draws on the internal colonial model to suggest that San Ysidro is structurally located as a "metropolitan colony" to San Diego. While Baker elucidates a "colonial dynamic" she fails to critically explore the crucial series of boundary changes that precipitated the relationship. According to Baker, San Ysidro "*gave up* its autonomous past . . . and *opted* to become the official conduit of human exchange between Tijuana and San Diego" (1980, 36-37, my emphasis). Baker suggests that San Ysidro, and the South Bay generally, threw itself into the arms of San Diego, a thirsty lover in need of quenching satisfaction (Christman 2001, 34). The assumption treats annexation as a "marriage" between two cities, implying it was mutual and uncontested. While Baker is correct that water was an important issue in the annexation, her account fails to acknowledge that control over the border and an interest in the economic development of additional harbor space played a significant role.

San Diego was seeking to make full use of the Coronado Bay in order to rival harbors in San Pedro in the north and Ensenada in the South. As Pourade explains, San Diego "had met frustrations in the matter of commercial expansion" as there "was only so much waterfront within the jurisdiction of the City" (1977, 211). As a result, there was intense contestation over

¹⁵ For example, Donald Kurtz' anthropological study simply assumes an eternal relationship between San Ysidro and San Diego, with annexation as a passing mention to situate the "poverty habitat" (1973, 7-8). See also, "South Bay Annexation Vote Today" *San Diego Union* (July 16, 1957): A1; and, "South Bay Approves Annexation to City" *San Diego* (July 17, 1957): A13.

the remaining shoreline. Discussions about unification of the political and economic jurisdiction of the Coronado Bay were ongoing, so when some area citizens petitioned for annexation, the City had an excuse to extend its boundaries to the border while subsuming more harbor space. While San Diego had a clear economic interest in expanding markets into Tijuana and in gaining access to San Ysidro's bi-national retail and money exchange businesses (Musbach 1980, 3-5), control over the border also had larger implications for the securing of the nation's social body.

"Moral" issues came to the fore with the postwar return of soldiers to San Diego (historically a military town) and the economic and population boom in Tijuana. City officials began to argue that "good American boys" were being exposed to alleged "indecent" south of the border (*San Diego Union*, July 14, 1957).¹⁶ As officials in San Diego debated annexation, Congressman Bob Wilson "introduced a new measure aimed at keeping teenagers out of trouble in Mexican border towns . . ." (Ibid.). The goal was to make sure that American juveniles would not be exposed to "vice" conditions if they crossed the border into Mexico. While the extent and motivations of these concerns are debatable, the implications are clear.

As the work of Victor Ortíz-González elucidates, border cities like San Ysidro face unique issues and disadvantages. Ortíz-González argues that in many border cities "local considerations . . . are pervasively subordinated to the nonlocal" (2004, xxiv), in this case policing of a presumably pure national identity. The on-going plan to create a bi-national mall, "*Gateway of the Americas*," provides further example of the global economic character and "nonlocal" motivations and implications behind the San Ysidro annexation.¹⁷ When it is finished, the mall will be half in San Ysidro and half in Tijuana, Mexico and will be joined by a

¹⁶ This argument paralleled arguments made in the annexation of San Pedro by the City of Los Angeles. During that annexation debate the San Pedro Woman's Club expressed similar concerns over drinking and prostitution in their port city to argue for the additional police resources that the City of Los Angeles would bring to San Pedro (Christman 2001, 37).

¹⁷ Similar interests in capitalizing on the entirety of Coronado Bay as a "Gateway" to the Pacific (and Asian markets) had led Boundaries Commission surveyors to propose the current national boundaries south of the City of San Diego over a century ago (Terrazas 2001, 166-167).

“walking” Port of Entry *inside* the shopping center.¹⁸ By annexing San Ysidro, the City of San Diego effectively gained access to the international capital flows at the U-S///Mexico border.

The argument that the interests of San Ysidro have been subordinated to the “nonlocal” takes on added significance due to the fact that San Ysidro has no direct land connection to the San Diego city center. The strip annexation left San Ysidro restrictively connected to the ‘premium’ infrastructure networks (the border and the ports), yet selectively “switched-off” and on to meet its function “in the service of somewhere else,” in this case the needs of San Diego and Tijuana (Graham and Simon 2001, 15; Ortiz-Gonzalez 2004, xxiv). As a result, issues of representation for South Bay residents in the City Council would remain unresolved for eight years (Baker 1980, 46). In other words, San Ysidro is not only a “conduit of human exchange” as envisioned by Baker, but a type of “dual colony” that holds economic, political, and structural disadvantages in relation to *both* the U-S///Mexico border and San Diego.

Invisibility in “America’s Finest City:” Colonial Logics in the Annexation of San Ysidro

The annexation of San Ysidro does not adhere to either the political or the economic logics of annexation. San Ysidro residents did not increase San Diego’s tax base, nor dilute its “darkening” voting power. Instead, the annexation added “poorer” residents and contributed to a “darkening” of the community.

From the perspective of San Ysidro residents, few of the benefits and services imagined by annexation proponents ever materialized. The predominantly Mexican community did not increase its political strength or autonomy, and it took nearly five years for the “first drops of City water . . . to reach San Ysidro” (Baker 1980, 46). Likewise, the early services San Diego provided San Ysidro were aimed at securing the border rather than at aiding San Ysidro

¹⁸ While the San Ysidro portion of the mall is finished, the Tijuana portion has been temporarily stalled due to political wrangling on both sides of the border. The mall is the subject of one of my dissertation chapters.

residents. The first action San Diego undertook after annexation was to deploy police officers to the border for a 24-hour watch (*San Diego Union*, July 18, 1967, A29).

A look at the final vote on the annexation shows that South Bay voters were divided on the issue. While the overall South Bay vote was 804 to 575, in San Ysidro, the vote distribution was more evenly divided at 369-327 (*San Diego Union*, July 17, 1967, A13). What do these numbers indicate? How has San Ysidro fared today? How are we to make sense of the annexation of a predominantly working-class and minority community?

While the annexation of San Ysidro was expressly over water, social issues related to the border played an important role. Economically, the annexation of San Ysidro resembled Feiock and Carr's (1996) "offensive annexation" in the context of globalization. Socially, the annexation served as a signifier for the policing of perceived moral and social boundaries (Mains 2002). In other words, municipal boundaries at the nation's fringe determine not only who governs and who is governed in a politico-juridical sense, but distinguish the "we" from the "they" in the broader national imaginary.

While San Ysidro is a predominantly Mexican community at the fringe of the United States, in the public imaginary (of San Diego and otherwise) it is a *part of Mexico*. It has been spatially racialized through both politico-juridical (San Diego and United States) and socially produced boundaries. Urban segregation in San Ysidro has come not in the form of a "city of walls" but in the form of a city between freeways. These socially constructed borders have led to the de facto erasure of San Ysidro. Fodor's Travel guide has omitted San Ysidro from its map, citing Tijuana as 23 miles south of San Diego. Likewise, the Official City of San Diego webpage has omitted the annexation of San Ysidro from its timeline. As a result, when a resident says she/he is from San Ysidro, a common response is: "Is that in Mexico?!" Associating San Ysidro with Mexico implicitly reaffirms the disappearance of San Ysidro in

relation to the City of San Diego. Furthermore, given Mexico's politico-structural location in the world-system, 'relocating' San Ysidro in Mexico further erases it in the American imaginary.

The annexation of San Ysidro and the South Bay demonstrate that existing annexation literature is too mechanical (i.e., procedural) and "local" or uni-scalar. As Beaverstock, *et al* reminds us, cities are as important for "what flows through" them as for "what they statistically contain" (2000, 123). As such, there is a need for a multi-scalar (local, state, national and global) analysis of annexations that considers global political and capital flows.

Epistemological (Dis)Entangling and the Quest for Visibility

In order to critically understand how the history of politico-juridical boundaries intersects with competing notions of citizenship, it is helpful to consider Gerald Frug's work on the legal construction of cities. In *City Making*, Frug aptly refers to a paradox of pre-existing cities' confrontation with the emergence of the modern nation-state and the *subsequent* need to reconcile such discrepancy to suit modernist conceptions of individuals as autonomous subjects and states as sovereign equivalents.¹⁹ He also illuminates how for centuries cities were viewed "as created not by state governments but by their members—created, in other words, to pursue the interests of the people who live within them rather than those of the state" (1999, 5). Current law, however, differs significantly. Drawing from Goerke, Frug argues that "with the development of modern political thought, . . . '[the] Sovereignty of the State and the Sovereignty of the Individual' became "the two central axioms from which theories of social structure [proceeded], and whose relationship to one another [was] the focus of all theoretical controversy" (Ibid., 31). In this configuration, cities exist in a liminal position as "subjugated subjects"—part ruler, part ruled. As a consequence, the current legal doctrine, referred to

¹⁹ For an excellent consideration of the legal history of cities, see Frug (1999), especially chapter two.

commonly as Dillon's Principle, maintains that cities are "creatures of the state" regardless of historical record (i.e., which came first, city or State?) (Ibid., 45-48). In other words, while citizens are empowered to dictate the course of cities, that power is limited and delineated by the State. While this understanding most directly impacts cities which antedate their respective nation state, it also impacts cities where the historically recorded "creator-state" is different from its current "*creator-state*" (an obvious paradox already).

In a related argument, Anthony King maintains that urbanization is an internal process of Modernity necessarily constituted by colonial logics. He argues that urbanization occurs through the creation of territorial centers that manage the extraction and consumption of surplus in surrounding fringe areas (1990, 3-7, 13-15). Because both the legal history of cities and boundary changes is complicated, in the United States, and in California in particular, it is important to consider the local circumstances that led to the creation of a municipality before considering subsequent manifestations of growth (industrialization, urbanization, and suburbanization). Specifically, it is important to address the debate over reconciling the preexistence of cities with the later modern nation-states and concerns over the governance and disciplining of subjects and their claims vis-à-vis the reach of the State.

King further notes that the study of urbanism requires a study of systems of cities as connected to one another in the world-system. Such an analysis exposes a colonial enterprise of sorts, paralleling the modus operandi of classic colonialism—albeit at a different scale—with its own internal logic and ideological justifications (1990, 68-77). This approach exposes the idea of *terra nullius*—the ideological justification for colonization of land, resources, and subjects based upon the assumption that land was uninhabited and people could not govern themselves.

Today, *terra nullius* has been reproduced at the scale of the urban.²⁰ As such, it follows that boundary changes in the “world urban system” not only set the context in which political subjects act, but also reasonably include elements and dynamics akin to colonial expansion and racial subjugation. The belief San Ysidro was unable to govern itself informed the annexation.

San Diego, California and the U-S///Mexico Border Reconsidered

World-systems analysts have long maintained that there is a need to “unthink” the disciplinary and national divisions that structure ‘society’ and the production of knowledge. From such perspective, the episodic emphasis of historians and the compartmentalized (usually local or ‘national’) studies of society in the social sciences fail to grasp the interlocking complexity of ‘society’ that constitutes its own historical system or “world-system” (Wallerstein 2005, 4-8). Furthermore, the current historical system relies upon structures and divisions of knowledge and social relations constituted through the colonization of the Americas (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2000). Therefore, in order to clarify the place of San Ysidro, a world-systems lens that takes as its unit of analysis the current historical system and its politico-juridical structures over an extended period of time (i.e., the *longue durée*) is needed.

To understand the *annexation* of San Ysidro, it is, therefore, helpful to highlight how the boundary changes that eventually lead to California statehood can be understood within a broader world system. The territorial entity now known as California, originally home to the Karuk and Tolowa in the north and Kumeyaay bands in the south (among others), was colonized by a series of Spanish settlements, Catholic Missions, and military presidios. These settlements, epistemologically entangled with the modernizing impetus of urbanization in the *longue durée*,

²⁰ For an example of the terra nullius assumption see Schweikart (1999), 186; see also Smith (1996), for a similar dynamic. In a similar vein, David Harvey’s recent work engages the concept of *terra nullius*, albeit from an epistemically complicit point of departure, in his notion of “accumulation by dispossession.” Harvey’s neo-Marxist, yet developmentalist articulation of *ongoing* forms of “primitive” accumulation fails to problematize the “primitive” precept in the Marxist formulation of primitive accumulation. Instead, Harvey arbitrarily rearticulates it as a matter of general dispossession (i.e., non-racialized) without interrogating the “primitive” and its historically colonial and racializing implications.

included Charters that declared the territories to be under the *jurisdiction* of the Spanish Crown.²¹ These same Charters were later recognized by the next politico-juridical entities to take possession of the territories—first Mexico (1821-1848) upon its “colonial independence,”²² and then the United States (1848-present). While some previous territorial units were reorganized after 1848, they were not dissolved. Eventually, the territory that became California entered the union, or was “created” according to Dillon’s Principle, through newly formed juridical entities. It was in this context that California was admitted in 1850 as a state into the country of the United States.

The City of San Diego, first established in its present location by the Spanish in 1602, was similarly “incorporated” under a new system of governance in 1850. While San Diego was nearly 250 years old at the time, according to Dillon’s Principle, it became a “creature of a state” which had only existed for only 75 years.²³ The history of San Ysidro, founded in 1906, thus became entangled with and distorted by its relationship to San Diego and the U-S//Mexico border. Its current multi-scalar place as a particular type of node — a “border” city, within a global network of cities bound together by the flow of capital in the busiest Port of Entry in the world — has made San Ysidro largely invisible vis-à-vis the City of San Diego. Furthermore, given Mexico’s politico-structural location in the world system, ‘relocating’ San Ysidro in Mexico places San Ysidro at a unique disadvantage in the global system of cities and highlights the colonial situation of San Ysidro in relation to San Diego and the U-S//Mexico border.

²¹ The notion of ‘jurisdiction’ is itself important as it is derived from Western understandings of sovereignty and governance that differed significantly from relations of governance and territory of peoples in this continent prior to 1492.

²² Articulating a notion of “coloniality of power” Anibal Quijano differentiates “colonial independence” from independence with decolonization (following Fanon) to suggest ideologies of ‘national identity,’ ‘independence,’ ‘development,’ and ‘progress’ are implicated in the epistemological underpinnings of modernity so as to obscure the continuities of “colonial situations” that persist despite “formal” independence. For more on such distinctions see Quijano (1991; 2000) and Mignolo (2000) who outlines the overlapping layers of modernity when he speaks of the “modern/colonial” as two inextricable sides of the same coin.

²³ See “Timeline of San Diego History,” *San Diego Historical Society* <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/timeline/timeline.htm> [December 1, 2004].

Conclusion

This paper provides an overview of the processes and policies of municipal annexation and challenges established literature on the subject. We have seen that current scholarship on municipal annexation generally assumes a political or economic justification for annexation. I have used the example of San Ysidro to demonstrate that this approach is “too local” and suggest that issues of race and global capital flows play a powerful and underappreciated role in some annexations. It is my hope that this paper provides an analytical framework for understanding how the geographical and structural location of border cities (in relation to the U-S///Mexico border) affects (dis)enfranchisement of residents in a globalized economy and elucidates a new framework for thinking about municipal annexations as forms of metropolitan colonialism.

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