

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Undergraduate Research Journal

### Title

Transborder Realities: Its Effect on Bordertown Students Pursuing a Higher Education

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9fb6q3r5>

### Journal

UC Riverside Undergraduate Research Journal, 16(1)

### Authors

Hernandez, Karla

Fornazzari, Alessandro

### Publication Date

2022

### DOI

10.5070/RJ516158749

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# Transborder Realities: Its Effect on Bordertown Students Pursuing a Higher Education

**Karla Hernandez**, *Department of Hispanic Studies*  
**Alessandro Fornazzari**, *Ph.D., Department of Hispanic Studies*

## ABSTRACT

In this research I dive into the testimonies of five border town students who live on the U.S.-Mexico border in the transborder community composed of sister-cities, Calexico, California, and Mexicali, Baja California Mexico. The goal of this study is to use testimonials to help us understand the flaws within the educational site of Calexico High school as well as the limitations it imposes on transborder or border town students. Transborder Realities is a new type of journalism focusing on the stories of individuals as a way to bring forward the realities of many. This study unveils the intersectionality between social class, residency, and economic status that lead to social hierarchies in school, creating a division between students of different backgrounds. Each of the participants share personal experiences that greatly impacted them academically as transborder students, encounters that have not only led to struggles with their language, mental health, and career and educational endeavors, but also pushed them in search of better opportunities. This study brings to light the reality of being a transborder student in this culturally rich community, what that entails, and the effects it had in their pursuit of a higher education. These testimonials help to reveal the stigma faced within the educational community of Calexico in hopes of decreasing the mistreatment of transborder students pursuing higher education in the United States.

**KEYWORDS:** Transborder, Education, Mexicali, Calexico, Cross-culture, Bordertown

## FACULTY MENTOR - Dr. Alessandro Fornazzari



**Dr. Alessandro Fornazzari** is an Associate Professor in the Hispanic Studies Department at UC Riverside. He works on Latin American literature and cultural studies; other interests include film (with a focus on the documentary form) and political economy. He received his Ph.D. from Duke University. Fornazzari's research has explored the post-dictatorial problems of memory and restitution in the Southern Cone and on theoretical and artistic reflections on neoliberalism, consumption, and debt.



**Karla Hernandez**

Karla Hernandez is a fourth-year Spanish Cultural Studies major. Under the guidance of Dr. Alessandro Fornazzari, she currently studies transborder relations on the U.S.-Mexico border and the effects that residing in the area has on students. With the funding provided from the UCR Chancellor's Research Fellowship, she completed her research titled Transborder Realities and presented it at the UCR Undergraduate Research Symposium. After graduating, Karla will be pursuing a PhD in Spanish with an interest in border studies.

# Transborder Realities: Its Effect on Bordertown Students Pursuing a Higher Education

“The first and the third world. The border. El bordo. Hell. The other part of the other side. The other side of the other side. The This side of the Other side. The happy world of disenchantment.”

-*Gore Capitalism* by Sayak Valencia

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THIS TRANSBORDER COMMUNITY LIKE?

*When coming to pursue my B.A. at the University of California Riverside, I was continuously asked where I am from. Such a simple question with so many answers. “Well,” I’d say, “I’m from Mexicali, but I went to school in Calexico.” They’d respond with “Oh, is that in Mexico?” I’d explain that I’m from a border town and that on one side of the border is the city of Mexicali where I resided, and that I would have to cross the border in order to attend school in Calexico, on the U.S. side. I would even explain the intentional play on words of these sister cities with the words California and Mexico, “You know Mexi-Cali and Cal-exico,” but they would end up saying “So you’re from Tijuana?” I would settle with that, since it would be easier than explaining the complexity of these little border towns on the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>1</sup>*

Mexicali, Baja California Mexico sits south of the border with approximately 1 million residents; a modern progressive city where the maquiladora business thrives (Almaraz, 2002). On the opposite side of the 27-foot border fence, made up of steel slats and barbed wire, is Calexico, California, a 98% Spanish-speaking community, home to 39,949 residents who are of predominantly Mexican or of Hispanic descent (U.S. Census Bureau). Calexico on the other hand, is a small town where agriculture and commerce thrive due to a great influx of workers and consumers coming from Mexico (Gutiérrez & Mabel, 2021). Within these sister cities there’s an abundance of

people crossing the border from Mexicali to Calexico to work, study, visit family, and shop. Likewise, people cross from Calexico to Mexicali to shop, visit family, as well as to purchase affordable medical services and pharmaceuticals. (Vega Briones, 2016). The relation between both cities can also be seen in their economies, where each depends on the other for their businesses and services to prosper (Gutiérrez & Mabel, 2021). Residents from either side of the border use their location to their advantage in the search of better opportunities and a more affordable life (Villarreal, 2016). Due to this close connection, I will use the term *Transborder* when discussing the border town communities of Calexico and Mexicali. I describe this area as a transborder community due to the manner in which both sister cities merge culturally, socially, and economically. The term borderlands could also represent this community; a *mezcla*<sup>2</sup> of being, neither fully of Mexico nor fully of the United States (Anzaldúa, 1987). I define transborder as the way in which the community is composed of an in-between borders of identities in terms of culture, linguistics, economy, etc., where everyone’s identities is a *mezcla* of both cities. Not only are transborder relations used for economic advantages, but also educational. Students along the U.S.-Mexico border cross the border to pursue a higher education or even a better education than the one they would receive in Mexico. I am one of these transborder students.

*I grew up in Mexicali, but crossed the border everyday to attend school in Calexico. Both my parents are Mexican citizens and residents who can’t legally reside in the U.S., so they decided that it would be in my and my older sister’s best interest to be born in the U.S.. My parents wanted us to be U.S. citizens so that we had access to many more opportunities through our dual-citizenship, which included attending school in the U.S.. My transborder experience is a reality for many others whose parents wanted the best possible education and*

<sup>1</sup> Italicized sections are my personal autobiographical experience.

<sup>2</sup> Spanish word for mix.

*opportunities for them.*

*My sister and I had the privilege of having our grandmother who lived in the U.S.. We were able to use her home address as our own for school documents which allowed us to have an education in Calexico, but that is not the case for many other students. Many students I went to school with came from Mexicali and had to find a loophole to this mandatory need of a U.S. home address in order to attend school. It is extremely common for non-resident students to use family or friend's addresses as their own in order to attend school in the U.S.. In extreme cases, parents would pay a monthly fee to known individuals who would allow them to use their home address as their child's own in school documents. Students in these situations would keep this quiet to avoid troubles in school.*

According to the U.S. Department of Education and Justice, students must furnish proof of residency within the district in order to attend school. Although using an address where a student is not residing is considered fraudulent, it is frequently done within Calexico. Staff from CHS are aware of this but will turn a blind eye when it comes to hearing students out on issues they encounter as transborder students (for example, tardiness and financial situations). In this article, we will dive into the experiences of five border town students who attended school at Calexico High School (CHS), the only public high school in the city of Calexico, California. These CHS alumni have different migratory, socio-economic, and residential backgrounds and share their experiences within the Calexico educational system as well as their academic journeys. The goal of *Transborder Realities* is to use these stories to show the limitations that Calexico High school imposes on transborder students in hopes of decreasing the maltreatment of transborder students trying to pursue higher education in the United States. This complicated existence is often simplified by politicians on both sides of the border. By giving these students room to speak, my study helps to restore their lived perspectives to an often fraught debate.

## METHODOLOGY

---

Due to the lack of research on transborder students within this location, I provide a window into their lives to bring exposure to the reality faced by many students of this transborder community on the U.S.-Mexico border. This is a type of new journalism in the style of Rodolfo Walsh and Elena Poniatowska, which focuses on the stories of individuals as a way to bring forward the realities of many. This approach is best suited for the testimony genre because it is “a genre defined by the work of personal witnessing on behalf of a collective struggling against injustice,” a pivotal goal of my research (McEnaney, 2020). I interviewed five transborder student alumni with different residential and socio-economic backgrounds, from either Calexico or Mexicali, who experienced injustices within the educational site of Calexico High school. I conducted an auto-ethnographic research which uses the testimony genre to provide a collective voice for students’ in this community. By focusing on the stories of these individuals, I hope to restore their voices in a discussion that often silences them. I welcomed these transborder students to share their first-hand experiences in order to explain the reality of residing in such a complex and culturally rich community. The names of the participants involved have been changed to respect their privacy. Being a part of this transborder community myself allows me to voice their lived realities, but to keep a consistent voice throughout the text, my personal experiences and anecdotes will be italicized. The focus of this research is to show the structural issues embedded within the educational institution in Calexico; therefore, all interviews were conducted in-person and participants were encouraged to confide and speak freely in order to make this research as raw and honest as possible.

## “MEXICALI KIDS” VS “CALEXICO KIDS”

---

When interviewing the Calexico alumni on their educational

# Transborder Realities: Its Effect on Bordertown Students Pursuing a Higher Education

experiences, two terms that were repeatedly used when referring to students who came from Mexicali and crossed the border for school and those who resided in Calexico, were “Mexicali kids” and “Calexico kids.” To better understand what each of these classifications entail, we will look at testimonials from three students with different residency backgrounds, all U.S. citizens, who attended school at Calexico High school. First we have Miguel and Gustavo, Mexicali residents who had to cross the border everyday in order to attend school, both considered “Mexicali kids.” Then we have Camila, a Calexico resident who can be considered a “Calexico kid.”

Being a “Mexicali kid” is much harder than many may think. A usual day for a “Mexicali kid” begins early in the morning at 4 or 5 A.M. with a seemingly normal morning routine where they get dressed, brush their teeth, and if they have time grab a bite for breakfast. Then at around 5:30 A.M. they head out to la linea, the U.S.-Mexico port of entry, where one can cross through the vehicle or pedestrian port of entry. “Mexicali kids” commonly cross through the pedestrian port of entry alone since most of their parents may not have papers, time, or a car to cross with them. At the *linea*, wait times range from 30 minutes to 2 or more hours. Upon arrival, students may see familiar faces of other students who are also crossing to get to school, but may also see a large number of field workers, mothers with babies, small children with their parents on their way to school, employees trying to get to their jobs, etc. A variety of different people all trying to get to the same place, across the dreadful *linea*.

## Miguel and Gustavo

“Mexicali kids” carry around a stigma of being lazy, dumb, and trouble-making, but Miguel and Gustavo are anything but that. Just like many other “Mexicali kids,” Miguel and Gustavo reject this unfair stigma placed upon them since their arrival to the U.S.. Miguel is currently a third year mechatronics engineering student at the California State

University, Chico, with a rather positive view of life, and Gustavo is a 22 year-old U.S. reserviced Marine. Miguel and Gustavo both resided in Mexicali throughout their educational journeys, and both managed to go to school in the U.S. with the help of friends or family who allowed them to rent their home addresses as their own for school documents.

I began the interviews by asking them to tell me about this transborder community. Miguel’s thoughts on the community are rather positive, “I really enjoy the community aspect, because it has opened many doors for people like me that have been raised in Mexico but can go to school in the United States.” He says that although crossing the border comes with an abundance of problems, one can achieve their goals and better themselves by crossing the border daily. Gustavo’s opinion is quite different, “When I cross to the U.S., I feel stressed, and when I go back to Mexicali, all that stress goes away.” This is something that myself and many other “Mexicali kids” relate to. It is tedious to cross the border and fulfill whatever affairs in the U.S., but being home in Mexicali feels like a breath of fresh air after the journey many of us endure to get to work or school. Gustavo even says that living a transborder lifestyle took a toll on his mental health, “It really does mess with my mental health because there’s so many things I stress about because I can’t get things done in Mexicali that I have to get done in Calexico.”

Miguel and Gustavo talk about the ways in which they adapted and managed their time in order to be able to live a transborder life. Gustavo tells us how his days would begin, “One port of entry opens up at 6 A.M., so what I would do to make sure I got to school on time, is wake up at 3 or 4 A.M., drive to the border and just sleep in my car and wait until the border opens up.” He mentions how this routine got so tedious that it unmotivated him to attend community college, and recalls his educational experience being negative due to the fact that he had to cross the border everyday for

school. Miguel's mornings were a bit different and began in Mexicali at 5 A.M. in order to make it to the pedestrian *linea*<sup>3</sup> on time, and school by 8 A.M. Not only did Miguel and many other students wait in line for hours, but once they finally crossed the border, they had to endure a 20 to 30 minute walk to school. Miguel also mentions "La Bestia," a train that goes through Mexico and the U.S. that when static, blocks ongoing traffic, guaranteeing a late arrival to school. Miguel wasn't fond of this train, but recalls finding a way around this issue. He explains that once the train was static, he could jump over or through the train and get across to the other side, allowing him and others to get to school on time. He says "There were times in which your legs would get full of oil from the train but at least you'd get to school on time." Miguel emphasized his priority of making it to school on time so that the school would not call the home phone number on record and bother his 'Tia.' Miguel adds that another worry of his with being late, was the school beginning to suspect that he was living in Mexico; thus, his priority was making it to school on time to avoid troubles. Miguel's after school journey back home was also tough. He recalls missing out on extra curriculars because he would have to be up extra early in order to participate in them, "I couldn't be a part of clubs because I would have to be up at 3 A.M. and sleep at 2 A.M. There wasn't enough time." The only club Miguel participated in was robotics, a club he enjoyed and was willing to make sacrifices for, which also allowed him to discover his career path of choice. Miguel would stay after school in robotics until around 7 or 8 P.M., and at times would have to endure a 3 hour walk back home. Miguel looks on the brighter side and states that although

the 3 hour walk back home was arduous, it allowed him to think about his future goals and would make the best of those very long 3 hours.

Miguel and Gustavo acknowledge that their experiences were not unique, and that if they were making 3 hours of line in the morning, it was because many other students were also on their way to school. Miguel mentions that at times he'd see a peer and would allow them to cut in line and vice versa, and that with his charisma, he befriended Custom Border Protection officers who would allow him to cut to the front of the line. He says that throughout those 5 years everyday was different yet the same. He would see the same people/community cross the border with him, which made him feel that in this experience he was never alone.

Miguel also recalls coming to school for the first time in the U.S. in the 8th grade, where his English abilities and class placements were determined by a newspaper. Miguel recalls this experience, "El único examen que requerí para entrar a middle school, fue leer un periódico. Me preguntaron '¿Qué tanto sabes del inglés?' Y el nivel para medir mi inglés fue leer un periódico. Lo leí en Inglés, y me dijeron 'Tú vas a ELA y estas van a ser tus clases.' A partir de ese momento, mis clases eran completamente en Inglés. Un periódico no define cómo iba a entender mis clases, y tuve que desempeñarme para entender bien mis clases en inglés y leer hasta que le agarre."<sup>4</sup> From word of mouth, this is a common way in which Calexico schools place non-native English speakers in their classes. Shockingly, a single short assessment based on a newspaper was the determining factor on a student's comprehension and ability with the

---

3 Spanish word for "line." Pedestrian line refers to the way in which crossing the border was done on foot rather than in a car.

4 The English translation of Miguel's testimonial states, "The only exam required to attend middle school was reading a newspaper. They asked me 'How much English do you know?' and the level to which my English was measured was reading a newspaper. I read it in English, and they said, 'Okay, you're going into ELA and these are your classes.' From that moment on, my classes were completely in English. A newspaper could not define how I would understand my classes, and I had to try

# Transborder Realities: Its Effect on Bordertown Students Pursuing a Higher Education

English language.

Miguel described the distinction between the Mexicali and Calexico kids in a way that many other “Mexicali kids” relate to. Miguel recalls taking his first AP class, but what he wasn’t expecting was in his words “A whole new world that I did not know due to the fact that I had regular classes. Y vaya sorpresa que me lleve.”<sup>5</sup> Miguel realized that within the AP classes were students that were much more entitled than him. He continues, “Ahi note que menospreciaban a mis amigos y a mi solo por ser conocidos como ‘Mexicali kids.’<sup>6</sup> This is a shared feeling from the “Mexicali kids” towards the “Calexico kids”, where “Mexicali kids” can’t comprehend where this entitlement from the “Calexico kids” comes from. Miguel points out how ignorant this entitlement is even though we are all the same, Mexican, and in his words “His own blood.”

## CAMILA

Now we have a common reality for many “Calexico kids” through Camila, a 21 year old nursing student at both Arizona Western College and Grand Canyon University, who resides in Calexico. Camila describes the transborder setting through instances in which she has seen both cities come together, “Both cities unite a lot. On the U.S. side, there’s a shopping outlet that holds events and concerts and our sister city Mexicali tends to watch on their side. Since the fence is a little see-through, Mexicali people can watch what’s going on our side. There’s times where there’s people on both sides of the fence listening to music or when they have family members that can’t cross you see them speaking through the fence. I also saw that there was a fire on the Mexicali side of the border and the Calexico fire department helped Mexicali firefighters spray down the fire,

<sup>5</sup> English translation of Miguel’s testimonial, “And what a surprise that was.”

<sup>6</sup> The English translation of Miguel’s testimonial states, “That’s when I noticed they belittled my friends and I solely because we were known as ‘Mexicali kids.’”

so I see a lot of unity.”

Camila is no stranger to the fact that many students cross the border to attend school in Calexico, but her thoughts regarding “Mexicali kids” were mostly negative, “With all these kids crossing the border you would sit there and think that if our school never allowed these kids to come, our school would have 100 kids because more than half the students were coming from Mexicali. They had a stigma that not everyone else had, that they were lower in test scores and less knowledgeable.” She notes that her educational experience was not very memorable due to the environment that the “Mexicali kids” created, “There’s a lot of people who aren’t from Calexico, so they don’t care. They come to our school and do whatever they want.... How they say it here, the ‘Mexicali kids’ are known for being bad and not caring about school. You were trying to go to school and have this high school experience and go to the sports games and nobody would show up because students are from Mexicali, they’re back home in Mexico.” Camila also sympathizes with the “Mexicali kids,” “I definitely felt bad for all the students that had to walk, especially here, we have summer year round so it’s very hot. You’d see kids of all ages walking to the border. Schools out and everyone’s headed walking to the border and still have to cross, wait for their parents, and adjust to whatever situation they’re in. I felt bad because I got to ride in the car with AC and go straight home. It took me 5 minutes to get home and for all these kids it would take them an hour or 2 to get home across the border. To know you’re gonna get home until hours later I bet sucks after having a full day at school.”

Camila’s experience at a school in a transborder community was very common amongst “Calexico kids.” “Calexico kids” can be more easily thought of as regular students in

California who just happen to have the benefit of residing next to Mexico. The students interviewed agree that there was a division between both groups, as well as a type of competitive and hostile environment between them. All three “Mexicali kids” interviewed recall instances where they experienced a variety of microaggressions from the “Calexico kids,” who had a sort of superiority complex due to the fact that they resided in Calexico. Micro-aggressions towards “Mexicali kids” included being called: beaners, paisa, tecolin, naco, etc., regardless if we were all Mexican. When looking at this division between both parties, I come to the conclusion that it ultimately comes down to the intersectionality of both socio-economic status and residency that causes this division to be reinforced. By intersectionality, I refer to Kimberle Crenshaw’s (2015) definition, “Intersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power” (Crenshaw, 2015). All in all, “Calexico kids” showcase that they are better than the “Mexicali kids” because they have access to U.S. resources, which may include a home and transportation, both commodities representing socio-economic status. “Calexico kids” identified as superior and held pride in the fact that they had access to a home and better life in the U.S., something the “Mexicali kids” didn’t have access to. These advantages lead to a sort of power relation between both groups, as well as the demeaning of “Mexicali kids.” All things considered, there’s a clear differentiation within both of these groups which to this day persists at CHS.

## EXPERIENCES IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF CALEXICO

---

When doing these interviews, I asked the participants to tell me about a positive or negative experience that they have had within the Calexico educational system, and not surprisingly, most could only recall negative experiences. Students agreed on the low quality of teaching from staff at

CHS and had negative anecdotes about school staff ranging from advisors, to teachers, to even principals. Camila expresses what it felt like to try and thrive academically in Calexico, “You do good here and they don’t care, but when one would do bad, teachers would say ‘I knew it’ because that’s what they expect out of us. It’s an ongoing cycle where the staff doesn’t care, so the kids don’t care, and since the kids don’t care, the staff cares even less.” A shared negative experience between students, was CHS’s push to solely apply to the community college in the valley, Imperial Valley College. Every student interviewed, including myself, were forced to apply to this community college, and when mentioning applying to other schools, they were discouraged. Valeria is a 4th year student at the University of California San Diego majoring in developmental psychology, and shares a negative experience with a member of the Talent Search Program, whose job is to encourage students to pursue a higher education. When receiving her acceptance letter, Valeria was torn on going to a UC or staying in Calexico, and because of this she sought advice from one of the Talent Search advisors. When telling her about her acceptance and indecisiveness on her next step, the advisor told Valeria to stay in Calexico, “Because ‘If you stay it’s easy. You can live with your parents and do volunteer work. When you graduate here you’re basically gonna get out with a job, but if you go to a UC or farther, you’re gonna struggle a lot because most institutions, especially this one, are research related, and you’re a psychology major’.... She said that if I attended that school and came back, I wouldn’t find a job here since I wouldn’t know anybody.”

*This is a common experience at CHS and I experienced something similar my junior year. I was called into my counselors office and he asked what school I wanted to attend after high school. I had a 3.5 GPA at the time which would allow me to apply to 4-year institutions, so I told him I was interested in UC’s. This counselor laughed and told me that with my “extremely low GPA” that was*



# Transborder Realities: Its Effect on Bordertown Students Pursuing a Higher Education

*impossible, and to just go to IVC. I was devastated and set on going to community college because of this; but thankfully, I attended a field trip to UCLA hosted by UCLA students who were also Imperial Valley alumni. This trip allowed me to understand that going to a 4-year institution was more than possible for me, and here I am about to graduate from a 4-year university 4 years later.*

CHS staff exclusively promoted attending Imperial Valley College, and kept students within an educational box which often led to us second guessing our decision to pursue a higher education. In the Calexico academic environment, staff would rather tell students what to do and where to go when choosing the next step in their educational endeavors, rather than presenting them with an array of different career choices and universities where their career paths could take place and allowing them to decide what to do based on the options out there. Calexico students weren't allowed to even fathom the idea of going to a 4-year institution, and instead were presented with an easier and more limiting option of attending community college. Although community college is not a bad path to take, when it comes to Imperial Valley College, it is a very limited one. With a limited number of Associate Degree areas of studies, IVC could be considered more of a stepping stone to furthering one's education. Students interviewed agree that IVC has a bad reputation in general where students who attend, take classes primarily for the large financial aid check they receive. There's also the San Diego State University Imperial Valley campus located in Calexico, where students can have dual enrollment in both IVC and SDSU and graduate with a B.A. The only downside is the limited majors available and the lack of STEM related majors. The lack of STEM related majors isn't abnormal, since STEM related career paths aren't common in the area, thus would not thrive.

## LANGUAGE IN CALEXICO

“The town's like a mirror twin of our own, With Spanish spoken everywhere just the same but English mostly missing till it pops up Like grains of sugar on a spicy pepper.”

*-They Call Me Guero: A Border Kids Poems, by David Bowles*

Calexico is a predominantly Spanish-speaking community where students and staff speak Spanish or understand it. Camila mentions the abnormality of not knowing how to speak Spanish in Calexico, “Everyone here is Hispanic, if you don't know Spanish here, even though we live in the U.S., people are like ‘What? You don't know Spanish?’” CHS staff is even praised for their bilingual abilities, although being a bilingual teacher in this community should be necessary in order to equally communicate with all students (Lockwood, 1996). Code-switching is also very common amongst this community, and is seen when one alternates between Spanish and English at the same time within a casual conversation. (Holguín, 2018) One would think that bilingualism within this community would be praised and welcomed; however, it is a shared experience for students to be told to not speak Spanish because “We are in the U.S.” Students with accents or mispronunciations, specifically “Mexicali kids,” were mocked and ridiculed by peers and staff, which often led to students becoming embarrassed when speaking English.

Majority of microaggressions were done between students, but also by staff in school. By microaggressions I refer to racial microaggressions which are “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color,” or in this case minorities being the “Mexicali kids,” since Calexico is predominantly

Mexican and fully a community of minorities and P.O.C. (Sue, 2007). I consider this a relational power dynamic in which we can see that within the same group of minorities, these students differentiate themselves through their abilities and pronunciations of the English language, and all become a part of these social hierarchies among themselves by doing so.

With that being said, Daniel's story is particularly adequate to explain the way in which Spanish is shamed at CHS. Daniel, a 21 year-old fourth year student majoring in structural engineering at the University of California San Diego, tells us: "During my senior year of high school, I was one of three people selected to audition to give the graduation speech at commencement. I decided to do my speech in Spanish because we live in a community where 99% is Hispanic or Mexican, where not even 50% of the people here speak English, so it would be ignorant to say it in English when majority of the public wasn't gonna be able to understand it." Daniel auditioned in front of 3 CHS staff, and states, "During my audition I instantly got a feeling that everyone was judging me, and at the end I got rejected and the other two who presented their speech in English got selected. After the audition, the only question asked by the staff members was why I decided to make my speech in Spanish, which was weird since the other auditions were quick with no questions asked. After that, I talked to one of the judges and she told me that I was a *chicalon*<sup>7</sup> and I should stick to what chicalones do, which is not pursue a higher education, since we 'chicalones' aren't able to fit into that environment." In a predominantly Spanish-speaking community where the Spanish language should be praised, it is instead ridiculed and shamed. The person who made this comment was the vice principal of the school, with a last name of Mexican origin whom we will call Mrs. X. It is incredible to think that one of our own would harass a student for the use of their native

<sup>7</sup> The word "chicalon" is a derogatory term for an unrefined Mexicali, Baja California Mexico resident. This word is not to be confused with the word "Chicano."

language.

Experiences with authoritative figures like these can have a detrimental effect on students' self-esteem, self-worth, and also follow them throughout their lives, something Daniel can tell us more about, "My last year in high school made me feel like I was not ready to go out into the world. During my transition to college it caused many problems. It lowered my self-esteem in regards to my language, caused me mental health problems, including depression and anxiety. Those comments still haunt me." Instances like these also make students feel unworthy, Daniel recalls how this incident made him feel embarrassed about his language during job interviews, "Everytime I tried to talk to professional people, I second guessed myself, my language, and everything I was going to say. I saw the employers and connected that professional image to Mrs. X and I thought I was gonna be judged on my language as well from them, which was thankfully not the case." Daniel's story shows the severity and impact that comments made by staff at CHS have on their students. If this happened to Daniel and went unnoticed, how many other students have endured similar experiences like this one?

## **CONCLUSION: WHAT DO STUDENTS TAKE FROM THESE EXPERIENCES?**

---

Transborder students can come to a collective agreement that living in a transborder community is culturally beneficial. Looking at the community as a whole led me to a deeper understanding of how socially knit these sister-cities are. There's a significant influence from both sides of the border to each other, and looking at the bigger picture, the relationship between them is incomparable. The play on words of both sister-cities' names couldn't be a more perfect way of representing the relationship between them. So when

# Transborder Realities: Its Effect on Bordertown Students Pursuing a Higher Education

finalizing interviews I asked everyone the same question: Would you return or raise your children in Calexico taking into consideration your educational upbringing here? To my surprise, every participant responded with a no. They all said that they enjoyed the close relation to their Mexican roots, but that due to their educational experience there, they would have to say no. Daniel states, “I would love that my kids have the cross-cultural or the Mexican culture involved in their lives; however, this would be a big no for me since I’ve been exposed to how corrupt and cruel the educational system here is. I don’t think I will ever come back to Calexico.” Miguel states, “Regresaría porque me gustaría que, si yo tuviera hijos, ellos realizaran que el mundo esta cabron y estuvo pesado este journey.”<sup>8</sup> Valeria shares a similar answer by saying, “The only reason why I would raise my kids here would be for them to experience what I did, which is to have their family close, but I would really raise them somewhere else.” Gustavo stands his ground saying, “No because I’ve lived here and I know the struggle. I want my kids to be successful, which is clearly not something they can acquire here.” Lastly Camila explains how she is torn in her decision but ultimately says, “No, but this is something I think about all the time. Your heart feels at home here, but you grew up here and saw how toxic this place was and how there’s no opportunities. I wish I could reside somewhere more beneficial to me.” Students choose not to return to Calexico due to negative educational experiences, but a positive aspect that comes from these negative experiences, is the desire for all these students to better themselves. The participants shared how these experiences make them never want to return to Calexico, which has helped them reach for the stars when it comes to their current academic and career paths. In a community where academic goals are limited and belittled, Calexico students choose to better themselves in order

to reject the stigmas that come with being a transborder student.

Reflecting on the methodology used in this study, I look at the individuals who participated in this research. A goal of mine was to not only include students who resided in Mexicali and went to school in the United States, but to present those who have resided in Calexico their whole life. By including students with different residential and socio-economic backgrounds, we can compare the educational experiences of both groups of students and acknowledge the major differences between their experiences at Calexico High school. The gaps of information regarding transborder students’ experiences in Calexico motivated me to show the reality of their lives and the obstacles they had to endure to get to where they are now. The lack of research on students in the area has, in a way, aided the persistence of negative treatment towards them. Therefore, I have presented their stories and voices as a way to unveil the negative treatment present within the educational community of Calexico, in hopes of validating their experiences and decreasing the mistreatment of transborder students trying to pursue a higher education.

To conclude, I return to the term transborder. This concept of being in-between borders is a foreign concept to many, but to us and many others, it is our reality. When thinking about this community I welcome you to reimagine that 27 foot fence made up of steel slats and barbed wire. For transborder students that fence is not a restriction, but rather an open door to many opportunities. This fence has large gaps in between itself, through which one can see right through either side. Each of these gaps allows a hand to touch a family member on the opposite side. A gap through which music from either side flows smoothly to the other. A gap through which opportunities flow through and allow

---

<sup>8</sup> English translation of Miguel’s testimonial: “I would return because I would like, if I had kids, for them to realize that the world is tough and that this journey was hard.”

---

us to become who we are. Gaps that allow both communities to merge culturally, socially, and even economically, rather than separating us. Gaps through which students have the opportunity to attend school on the other side of the border. We transborder students reached through those gaps. Rather than being blocked by barriers, we walked right through them and chose to sacrifice for an incredible result. Transborder students are living proof of surpassing any fence or border in our way in order to better ourselves.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

---

I would like to thank the funding provided by the Chancellor's Research Fellowship at the University of California Riverside. I wish to extend a special thanks to Dr. Alessandro Fornazzari for the guidance and mentorship throughout the entirety of this research project. I would also like to thank the five transborder students who participated and offered valuable data and experiences used in this project.

---

## REFERENCES

- Almaraz, Araceli. "Crecimiento y especialización de la industria maquiladora en Mexicali, Baja California, ante el proceso de globalización." *Globalización, trabajo y maquilas: las nuevas y viejas fronteras en México* (2002): 217-242.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The new mestiza. La frontera*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute. (1987).
- Collins, Kimberly. "Local Government Capacity in the US-Mexican Border: a comparative analysis of Calexico, California and Mexicali, Baja California." *NÓESIS. REVISTA DE CIENCIAS SOCIALES* 16, no. 31 (2007): 234-264.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Why intersectionality can't wait", *The Washington Post*, 24 September." (2015).
- Durazo, Norma Fimbres. "Capitalist Development and Population Growth in the County of Imperial, California, and Imperial-Mexicali Valleys: Development and Environment of the US-Mexican Border Region" (2004): 43.
- Falcón Orta, Vannessa, and Gerald Monk. "Creating Change in Higher Education Through Transfronterizx Student-led Grassroots Initiatives in the San Diego-Tijuana Border Region." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 36, no. 2 (2021): 281-300.
- Gutiérrez, Meneses, and Mitxy Mabel. "Mexico-US local transborder micro-business methods resisting border travel restrictions in 2020." *Latino Studies* 19, no. 3 (2021): 400-404.
- Gutiérrez, Manuel, Alejandro Sánchez-Atondo, Leonel García, Alejandro Mungaray-Moctezuma, and Julio Calderón. "Understanding cross-border mobility in medium-small Mexico-US Binational regions. Mexicali-Imperial Valley case study." *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives* 9 (2021): 100324.
- Holguín Mendoza, C. . "Sociolinguistic Capital and Fresa Identity Formations on the U.S.-Mexico Border/Capital sociolingüístico y formaciones de identidad fresa en la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos." *Frontera Norte*, 30(60): 5-30. (2018) DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17428/rfn.v30i60.1746>.
- Lockwood, Anne Turnbaugh. "Emphasis on equity: The Calexico school district's secondary-level strategies for Hispanic youth." *The United States Department of Education, Advances in Hispanic education* (1996): 1-15.
- McEnaney, Tom. "'Rigoberta's Listener': The Significance of Sound in Testimonio." *PMLA* 135, no. 2 (2020): 393-400.
- "Universidades En Mexicali Guía 2022." Mextudia, August 15, 2019. <https://mextudia.com/en-tu-ciudad/universidades-en-mexicali/>.
- "Número de Habitantes." Baja California. Accessed April 7, 2022. <http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/monografias/informacion/bc/poblacion/>.
- Sue, Derald Wing, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin. "Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice." *American psychologist* 62, no. 4 (2007): 271.
- "U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Calexico City, California." Accessed April 7, 2022. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/calexicocitycalifornia>.
- "Questions and Answers for School Districts and Parents." Home. US Department of Education (ED), January 10, 2020. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/qa-201101.html>.
- Valencia, Sayak. *Gore capitalism. Vol. 24*. MIT Press, 2018.
- Briones, Germán Vega. "Población commuter de la frontera norte: el caso de Mexicali-Calexico y Tijuana-San Diego." *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos* (2016): 207-238.
- Villarreal, Magdalena, and Lya Niño. "Financial practices on "the Borderlands"(La Línea) in times of crisis." *Human Organization* 75, no. 2 (2016): 151-158.