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‘It's like the border is in your head’:

Stories from Transborder Students in the U.S.-Mexico Border

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in

Latin American and Iberian Studies

by

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March 2023

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January 2023

‘It's like the border is in your head’:
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Emma Laura Zamora Garcia

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ABSTRACT

‘It's like the border is in your head’:

Stories from Transborder Students in the U.S.-Mexico Border.

by

Emma Laura Zamora Garcia

This project studies communities of former transborder students, all U.S. citizens born in the United States, who lived in Mexico and crossed the U.S.-Mexico border to pursue their K-12 education in *el norte*. The individuals in my study are not alone or unique. It is estimated that around 39,599 transborder students regularly cross the border to attend middle and high schools across California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Transborder students live in Mexico, but possess documentation that allows them to commute between the United States and Mexico. In oral interviews, these students have identified the reasons or motivations for their commute. They include, family reunification, affordable housing, scarce educational opportunities in Mexico, and a desire to receive a bilingual education for better work opportunities on both sides of the border. The project looks at the personal and structural factors that make (or made) the experience of crossing the border difficult for some transborder students and straightforward for others.

This project works to answer the following questions: What is the push and pull factors that motivated transborder students to begin commuting for school? When did it become difficult to cross the border? What were transborder students’ experiences when interacting with border patrol agents at the port of entry? To what extent do experiences of crossing the border resemble what women of color theorize as a “third space”? What was the

nature of the relationships between the transborder students and their U.S.-based educators? How can educators be more conscious of the experiences of transborder students/students of mixed-status families and what can the teachers do to create a more welcoming classroom environment? To answer the central questions of this study, this work relies on a set of 10-15 interviews of former transborder students, U.S. citizens, of all genders, between the ages of 18 and 30, who spent at least a year during their K-12 schooling, crossing the border to go to school in the United States. The first-person narratives reveal the personal and emotional toll as well as the joys and everyday triumphs of successfully navigating transnational political boundaries in the transborder students' effort to access the educational opportunities afforded to them as U.S. citizens.

The final goal of this study is to provide educators, K-12 staff, and members of the local communities, who interact with transborder students, with resources and recommendations on how to best support this population.

PREFACE

Origins of Study: The Open Wound

“The U.S-Mexican border es una *herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”

- Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 1987.

In the fall of 2003, after living in the United States for three years, my mother was deported and forced to move back to Mexico. My mom and I were both undocumented at the time, but she sacrificed herself, and argued I was too young to be deported. Fortunately, my mother’s love for me won the day and I was allowed to stay, but she, sadly, was detained and relocated to Tijuana, Baja California. When the incident occurred, my parents had already built a life for themselves in San Diego, but now they had to decide how they were going to keep their family together. In the previous year, my two-year-old brother had been diagnosed with autism, and my parents had to decide whether it would be better for him to receive health care in the United States or be close to his mother in Mexico. I, however, had been in elementary school for a few years and gotten used to my routine. My dad had dreamt of his daughter going to college, since he had to drop out to support his family at a young age, and he believed I would receive the best education in the United States. In the end, my parents decided that my baby brother would be better off with his mother in Tijuana, and that I should continue my education in San Diego.

I spent the next decade crossing the border twice a week to be with my family while also pursuing my education. During the week, I stayed with my father in San Diego, going to school during the day, and going to work with him in the evening. On the weekends and

during school breaks, we would cross the border into Tijuana, and spend time with my mom and younger brother. Our hope was that eventually we would find a way for my mother to be able to legally cross into the U.S. and be reunited with her family, but we had no luck. When I was in high school my mom became ill and decided to move back to her hometown of Michoacan, Mexico, with my younger brother. She had given up hope as immigration legislation allowing for U.S. residency became more complicated and our neighborhood in Tijuana became more dangerous. My father and I still crossed a few times a month to visit family and take care of our old home, but, when my brother and I left, we eventually stopped crossing. My dad became busy at work and I moved off to college. I spent my first few young adult years wanting to forget how much I had spent waiting. Not just waiting in line to cross the border, but waiting for a change in legislation or another false lead in my mother's pardon case, which would allow her to return to the United States to file for residency. I buried my emotions and hoped to never revisit the experiences of my childhood.

Life took a turn the fall quarter of my senior year in college, when my father was hospitalized after almost being killed by a distracted driver on his way to work. I was the only able-bodied family member with legal documentation, that is, U.S. citizenship, so I was made responsible for my family's well-being. I rushed out in the middle of final exams week and took a train from San Luis Obispo to San Diego. I spent a month crossing the border everyday to take care of my dad, find a lawyer to help him get reparations, take care of my younger brother, and help my mother get a humanitarian visa. I remember interacting with doctors, lawyers, and border agents and being dismissed or even ridiculed because my voice was weak. In the process, I was actively reliving all those years of border crossing. I felt heartbroken and completely powerless.

Time passed and my father healed, but I was filled with anger and I remember asking myself, “What was this all for?” All those years of separation had taken more from my family than we had accomplished. I had this overwhelming need to find answers. I started to realize that this border crossing experience that I had tried to bury was present in multiple aspects of my life. In order to move forward, I had to recognize how much of an impact this commute—and all the trauma included--had on my family and upbringing.

Growing up I did not know of any other children who crossed the border in the same way that I did, so I decided to seek community. I put out an ad on Twitter, a popular social media outlet, to connect with other people who spent their childhood crossing the border. I received a lot of attention over the span of a few days, and multiple people reached out to me. I spent weeks meeting up for coffee and connecting with people. We discussed an array of topics from the long commute times to the type of breakfast we would buy from street vendors while waiting in line in the morning. I came to find out that there were plenty of people who commuted for years, but who had stayed silent about their living situation. The people I spoke to claimed they were afraid that they would be punished at school or be treated differently than their peers for living in Mexico. These students often suffered in silence, either because of the strain of waiting to cross the border for hours or due to the pain of the deportation of a loved one. I decided then I wanted to carry out a project to help break that silence amongst transborder students.

Many transborder students stayed silent about their experiences when they were children in order to survive, but now that time has passed, an opportunity has opened to reflect on how the border impacted their past, present, and future lives. I spent a lot of my childhood feeling isolated and guilty, as if I had put myself in this position. While conducting

research for this project, I realized that the pain and suffering that came from crossing the border did not stem from the individual failures of our families to solve their legal and economic issues. Rather, our struggles were a product of structural violence. I wanted to explore this further. In addition, I wanted to show the different ways that these transborder students, like myself, overcame the state violence and helped build communities across borders. I wanted to contextualize these experiences historically and culturally.

I share my story in this thesis because I feel it is important to disclose that this project is deeply personal. While I do understand the criticism that I am too close to the issue or too involved to have “objectivity,” I believe that personal history is an alternative and subjective way of knowing. Writing this thesis was difficult. I relived a lot of my past while listening to these students’ stories, but I can guarantee that all the passion and love I have for this community is reflected in this project. Lastly, neither my experience nor the experiences of the ten students in this study represent all transborder students, but I am hoping that aspects of their stories resonate with others who might still be in the process of commuting between nations.

“It’s like the border is in your head”

Carlos, a transborder student, was raised in Washington state, but he had moved to Calexico, California, a twin city with Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, at the age of fourteen after both his parents, who were undocumented, were deported to Mexico. Carlos’s parents let them choose whether they wanted to move to Mexico with them or stay in the U.S., as they did not want their children to be denied opportunities because they had been deported. Carlos and his siblings were all U.S. citizens so they had the ability to cross the U.S.-Mexico borders freely if they wanted to do so. Because the siblings did not see a life for themselves in Mexico and wanted to continue pursuing their education in the United States, they opted to stay in the United States. Thankfully, they met a nice woman in Calexico who empathized with the family’s separation and allowed Carlos and his siblings to move in with her so they would have a place to sleep during the week and on weekends, they could travel home to be with their family. Carlos continued this routine for a few years but a near death experience made his family reconsider living apart.

During his junior year of high school, while visiting his family in Mexico, Carlos felt a tight chest pain. Not wanting to lose any time, his brother rushed him to the hospital where a specialist urged him to cross over to Calexico for special medical attention. Since their parents could not cross into the United States, Carlos’s brother had to act as his guardian and cross over with him. Carlos remembers looking at his parent’s and seeing the look of fear on their faces, as their youngest son was dying. All his parents could do was wait. Carlos’s brother had to carry him through the pedestrian line where an ambulance was waiting to take them to the hospital. Once they arrived at the hospital, Carlos’s condition worsened and he had to be transported by helicopter to a larger hospital, specifically Children Rady’s Hospital

in San Diego. Given the circumstances, Carlos's brother was left alone to wait to hear back from the doctors. Carlos remembers being alone at three in the morning and desperately needing his parents to be by his side. Carlos luckily survived but was diagnosed with a serious heart condition that he had to treat for years.

Carlos's experience with family separation in the U.S.-Mexico border is representative of the difficulties that mixed-status families, that is, households in which members hold different legal statuses as documented, undocumented, permanent resident, and/or U.S. citizen, face during major life events. Because of immigration restrictions at the border, mixed-status families living on both sides of the border feel the impact of the separation during milestones like graduations or weddings, when members cannot cross the border. What is worse, they are not able to be present physically when faced with family difficulties like visiting a sick relative or attending the funeral of a loved one. Carlos looks back at this experience as a reminder of how heartbreaking it was to be separated from his family.

The traumatic event led him to move back to Mexicali to be close to his family. He realized he would rather commute for school every day than remain apart from his family. Carlos believes that, if it were not for the border, his family would have had a much easier life or at least a less burdensome experience. The absence of his parents required Carlos and his siblings to become parentified. Parentification is when a child is forced to take on the role of an adult whether that be emotionally or financially.¹ This is a role that many transborder students embody due to the economic and immigration hardships their parents undergo.

¹ Lisa M. Hooper et al., "Parentification," *Models of Psychopathology*, (September 2013) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-8081-5_3.

Transborder students, children essentially, have to build their personal routines to cross the border every morning and evening, and sometimes have to travel without the supervision of their parents. Many U.S.-based children of working class parents do experience having to get themselves ready in the morning and ride public transportation or prepare for a long commute to school and must fend for themselves when they get home, a phenomenon known as ‘latch-key kids.’ However, the students who live in Mexico have to deal with traveling across two nations and one of the most fortified political borders in the world. Even students who crossed with family members had to deal with issues normally assigned to adults, such as preparing to interact with state officials and navigating border surveillance systems, amongst many other personal challenges. Carlos mentions how much easier it would be if he did not have to cross so often and how much he would have preferred to be close to his family every day. Instead, he had to sacrifice his time with his parents, and act as a parent for himself and his siblings.

Indeed, Carlos and his two older siblings were required to take on the role of adults in the absence of their parents. Carlos’s sister, for instance, was the oldest so she was often the one who was in charge of finding living accommodations in the United States and ensuring her brothers were on time to school. Carlos’s brother was a senior in high school when he rushed Carlos to the hospital. His brother had to essentially act as his guardian. Significantly, attending to Carlos's emergency caused him to miss college application deadlines. In short, all three siblings had to learn how to navigate an arduous commute, manage their studies, and learn how to stay connected to their parents. The experience of transborder students is one of constant sacrifice and hardship. Indeed, they are sacrificing their time, their money, and sometimes even their health in order to achieve their desired futures.

During our conversation, Carlos explained to me that even though it has been years since he stopped crossing, he felt this part of his life still affected him. The commute was a core part of his teenage years and it shaped his perspective on multiple aspects of his life, including his personal politics and identity. Carlos formed new relationships across the border, including with the woman, who took him and his siblings in, and who he now considers his second mom or “stepmom.” He feels that his experience crossing the border over multiple years as a child informs how he navigates the world now as an adult. Carlos describes this feeling as a perpetual connection to the border. “It’s like the border is in your head,” he says. His statement is representative of the long-term physical and psychological impacts of interacting with the U.S.-Mexico border. In pursuing their education, young transborder students must deal with family deportation, separation, financial challenges, and insecurity, arguably, a tall order for any person.

Background

This project examines and analyzes the lives of *transfronterizo*/transborder students, students who navigate borders and have the experience of having lived, studied, and/or worked on both sides of the border.² According to *National Geographic*, about 100,000 people cross the U.S.-Mexico border everyday at the San Ysidro-Tijuana port of entry, while 50,000 cross the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez entry, and another 78,000 cross the Calexico-Mexicali entry.³ One of the largest populations of transborder individuals are students. As of

² Estefania Castañeda Perez, “Transborder (in)Securities: Transborder Commuters’ Perceptions of U.S. Customs and Border Protection Policing at the Mexico–U.S. Border,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 10, no. 1 (February 2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2020.1748066>.

³ Nina Stochlic, “In Tijuana, a Photographer Makes Portraits of Migrants and Locals.” *National Geographic: Culture*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/in-tijuana-a-photographer-makes-portraits-of-migrants-and-locals-feature>.

2015, it was estimated that around 39,599 transborder students regularly crossed from Mexico to attend school across California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.⁴ These transborder students live in Mexico, but possess legal documentation that allows them to commute between the two countries. While some people cross the border to visit family or go shopping on a weekly or monthly basis, people like Carlos, who cross frequently, must deal with the uncertainty, risk, and danger of being able to cross on a daily basis.⁵ This project will explore the personal and structural factors that make the experience of crossing the border not only precarious **but also violent, physically, mentally, and emotionally**. Despite those circumstances, transborder students and their families have found ways to build their lives across two nations.

While commuting can be taxing, physically and mentally, these students were motivated to do so due to family separation, availability of affordable housing, scarce educational opportunities in Mexico, and a desire to receive a bilingual education for better employment opportunities.⁶ Beyond descriptive accounts of their experiences, however, we have little details or insights on the impact of the daily transnational movement on young people and their families. To understand their journeys and family dynamics more deeply, this study explores how this experience affects their day-to-day lives and what it means to their future outlook.

⁴ Pedro Orraca, David Rocha, and Eunice Vargas, “Cross-Border School Enrollment: Associated Factors in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands,” *The Social Science Journal* 54, no. 4 (January 2017): 389-402, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2017.07.008>.

⁵ Estefanía Castañeda Pérez, and Isaac Félix, “¿Algo Que Declarar? Student Surveillance, Policing, and Belonging at the México-U.S. Border.” The Latinx Project at NYU, October 20, 2020, <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervencions/algo-que-declarar-student-surveillance-policing-and-belonging-at-the-mxico-us-border>.

⁶ Edmund T. Hamann, Víctor Zúñiga, and Juan Sánchez García, “Where Should My Child Go to School? Parent and Child Considerations in Binational Families,” *Parenting from Afar: The Reconfiguration of the Family Across Distance*, (March 25, 2019), <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/311/>.

This research project will work to answer the following questions: What are the push and pull factors that motivate transborder students to begin commuting for school? When does it become difficult to cross the border? What are transborder students' experiences when interacting with representatives of the state, such as border patrol agents? And, how does that compare to their experiences with their interactions with U.S. educators? To what extent do experiences of crossing the border and living between two worlds or nation-states resemble what women of color theorize as a "third space"? How can educators be more conscious of the experiences of transborder students/students of mixed-status families and what can they do to create a more welcoming classroom environment? The final goal of this study is to provide educators and supporters, who interact with transborder students, recommendations on how to best support this population.

Sources and Methodology

To answer the central questions of this study, this work relies on a set of 10 semi-structured oral interviews of transborder students, U.S. citizens, of all genders between the ages of 18 and 30, who spent at least a year during their K-12 schooling, crossing the border to go to school in the United States. The IRB approved interviews were conducted through in-person and online meetings that lasted between forty minutes to an hour and a half. They consisted of eleven questions and follow-up questions, as needed, that covered topics such as the student's experiences with family separation, financial challenges, police harassment, and insecurity. Participants were given the option to skip questions and edit their responses if they felt uncomfortable or changed their mind about how much information they wanted to provide.

The interviews were later transcribed verbatim and organized as case studies of individual students and along salient themes. Since most of the participants in this study live in mixed-status families, they often spoke about the experiences of their undocumented family members. For this reason, pseudonyms were used for every participant and the characters in their stories. In addition to pseudonyms, the interview questions did not pry on the method or type of documentation these students and their families utilize to cross the border. Rather, they focused on their motivations for commuting and their perceptions on their experience.

Irving Seidman explains that qualitative interviews are significant, for they “provide access to the context of people’s behavior.”⁷ Interviews are not just a recollection of facts or series of stories, rather they include the interviewees' understandings and perceptions of the events they are recounting. They allow interviewees to explain the world through their own eyes, revealing the impacts of living through major historical events at an individual level. This research project will emulate the emerging field of mobilities research, that is, “attuned to the ways that different kinds of mobility and changes in mobility affect social relations...rather than just asking how and why people move, mobilities research is interested in how mobility feels.”⁸ This theory is not meant to just study how transborder students cross and why, but it also considers the emotions that are evoked when crossing the border before, during and after. Since the students are reflecting on events that occurred in their childhood, there lies the possibility that they do not remember all the details perfectly. The interviews

⁷ Irving Seidman, “Why Interview?,” in *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2006), 9-10.

⁸ Brendan H. O'Connor, “Cross-Border Mobility and Critical Cosmopolitanism among South Texas University Students,” *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 120, no. 5 (May 2018), 5-7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812000501>.

will ask students to recall their commutes to the best of their memory, but the primary focus will be on understanding how their commute across nations made them feel. I am interested in what aspects of their commute as children stuck with these individuals years later as adults, and what that tells us about interacting with the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in the long-term. The interviews will not only detail the day to day challenging encounters that transborder students face, but they will enhance our understanding of the physical and psychological impacts of interacting with the U.S.-Mexico border.

Lastly, I wanted to further acknowledge my position in the study of transborder communities and how it affected the process of interviewing. Some of the primary reasons transborder students did not speak on their experience was because they felt people who had not lived through their experience could not fully comprehend their motivations and struggles, so approaching the interviews as an insider was necessary in the scouting process. I put out an advertisement searching for students to participate in this study and spread it through social media and word of mouth. This often resulted in students, colleagues, and friends recommending me to students they thought fit the description of a transborder student. They reached out to me because I was a friend of a friend. Additionally, I had some students who reached out to me following my class presentations and guest lectures at my university. I argue the students in the study felt more inclined to participate with someone from within their community because they needed someone who was sensitive and empathetic to their life experiences and someone they could trust to keep their personal information confidential.

This approach resulted in having student participants who were around the average college age when they had enrolled in the university and who already had some sort of

connection to spaces that encouraged the advancement of first-generation students and immigrant groups in the United States. For example, students who were recommended to reach out after one of my lectures might have already been interested in ethnic studies. While this is something to keep in mind throughout the study, I believe that these connections in the community set a foundation of trust prior to the interviews beginning. The interviews often felt as if we were having a conversation or catching up with a friend, rather than creating content. The interviews exposed a range in emotions in both the participants and myself. We laughed, cried, ranted, reflected, and everything in between. Neither my experience nor the experiences of the ten students in this study represent all transborder students, but I am hoping that aspects of their (our) stories resonate with other students who might still be in the process of commuting between nations and/or processing the impact of that commute.

Contribution to the Literature

This project builds on the work of scholars of the U.S.-Mexico border region and transborder communities. Most notably, Sergio Chavez's *Border Lives* (2016) details how individuals use their social remittances to construct their lives across the U.S.-Mexican border. Chavez conducted extensive ethnographic work, and became involved in his participants' routine to the point that he became a transborder worker himself in the process. Chavez described this ethnographic process as essential to his work, "...that is what ethnography is meant to be, to put yourself in the shoes of your participants." Chavez's position as a professor helped establish credibility and trust amongst the participants in his study. I followed Dr. Chavez's personal recommendations to carry out oral interviews with individuals who I had built a relationship with throughout the research process. His advice on how to form an interview as a semi-formal conversation were helpful in making participants

feel comfortable in sharing their stories, while also maintaining boundaries to protect the interviewee.

Chavez argues that not only are individuals being affected by the border and border policies, but transborder individuals are also learning and affecting how the border functions. As he describes, “The shift from a fluid border did not end cross-border migration but instead reinvented cross-border practices.”⁹ In addition, Chavez argues that in order to understand the lives of those affected by the border, we must first understand the creation of the physical border, the policies surrounding it, and those who uphold those policies. This includes both border agents and border crossers. This project follows Chavez’s structure by looking at the immigration and economic policies that shaped the border between 1980 and 2010, in order to understand the motivations that might have led transborder families to cross during this time period.

Furthermore, this project was influenced by transborder scholars such as Estefania Castañeda-Perez, Isaac Felix, and Miguel Avalos, that look at different forms of violence that border crossers experience as a result of the increase in militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border following decades of anti-immigration legislation.¹⁰ These scholars look at the border

⁹ Sergio Chavez. *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 26.

¹⁰ Recommended Reading: Estefania, Castaneda-Perez, “Transborder (in)Securities: Transborder Commuters’ Perceptions of U.S. Customs and Border Protection Policing at the Mexico–U.S. Border.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 10, no. 1, (February 7, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2020.1748066>; Estefania Castaneda-Perez and Isaac Félix. “¿Algo Que Declarar? Student Surveillance, Policing, and Belonging at the México-U.S. Border.” The Latinx Project at NYU, October 20, 2020, <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervencions/algo-que-declarar-student-surveillance-policing-and-belonging-at-the-mxico-us-border>; Miguel A. Avalos, “Border Regimes and Temporal Sequestration: An Autoethnography of Waiting.” *The Sociological Review* 70, no. 1 (October 4, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/003802612111048884>

practices that transborder students and workers perform not just as a form of survival but of resistance. This includes finding methods to protect themselves from confrontations with border agents, tactics to cross the port of entry as quickly as possible, or even finding ways to pass the time while waiting in line. As these transborder scholars discuss, many aspects of the transborder commute have been normalized by border crossers themselves, such as long wait times, skipping meals, and missing out on life events. I agree with these scholars that these sacrifices students make for their future are in fact violent, and I want to look at the memory of these transborder students' experiences. My work adds to the literature by looking at the point of view of individuals who crossed the border as children and are now looking back at their experiences in their adulthood. The majority of these students have not crossed the border as frequently in years, and this position could allow them to reflect on aspects of their experience they might not have had the opportunity to as they were occupied with completing their commute and pursuing their education. In addition, many transborder scholars speak on the overwhelming silence on transborder experiences within schools, I believe these interviews are a step towards breaking this silence.

Living in a “Third Space”

Through the research, I have found many parallels between the language used in interviews of transborder students and what Tejana queer author Gloria Anzaldua theorizes as *Nepantilism*. *Nepantilism* is a Nahuatl term that means “torn between ways.”¹¹ This state of being caught between two worlds, Anzaldua writes, creates a “shock culture, a border culture, a third country, and a closed country.”¹² Transborder students are individuals who

¹¹ Gloria Anzaldua. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2007.

¹² Anzaldua, 11.

are constantly navigating third spaces, that is, the in-between space where the United States and Mexico overlap, whether they do so physically, culturally, or linguistically. Throughout the student testimonies, there were multiple examples of students experiencing friction between how they viewed themselves and how they were perceived by their communities and officials of the state. For instance, they were often questioned about their authenticity as cultural citizens of the United States by border agents, while in school they were asked to prove their academic abilities and linguistic skills as U.S. students. Even amongst their own families and friends, they were questioned on the strength of their relationship to their Mexican culture. This project explores how transborder students make sense of these interactions and how it affects their perception of themselves, that is, their identity, in relation to the multiple spaces they traverse.

Historical Context: Transborder Movements Amidst Economic Contraction and Immigration Restrictions in Mexico and the United States.

The economic shifts in the Mexican and U.S. economies, as well as changes in immigration legislation enacted between the late 1980s and late 2000s, have transformed transborder work and as a result have increased transborder schooling practices.¹³ In other words, as more people of working age are forced to cross to *el norte* for labor and living wages, more of them are likely to bring their children with them and to send them to school in the United States. According to researchers, nearly one out of two (43.8%) transborder

¹³ Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, "Introduction, Chapter 3," in *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in the Area of Economic Integration* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 1-52; M. A. Villarreal, *The Mexican Economy after the Global Financial Crisis*, Defense Technical Information Center (Library of Congress Washington D.C. Congressional Research Service, September 9, 2010), 1-20.

students live with a cross-border worker.¹⁴ Cross-border workers, in turn, set the precedent for transborder students to begin the trek of crossing everyday for their schooling. Many of these students are familiar with the experience of crossing the border, as they have followed their parents who have already spent years commuting for work. While there exist transborder commuters that cross consistently because they have the economic resources and connections to do so, such as government officials or wealthy Americans who own land in Mexico, the students in this study came from working class backgrounds and crossed out of necessity. In order to understand the motivations behind why these families took on this commute, it is necessary to first understand the state of the economy that these students grew up in that compelled them to make such choices.

In the late twentieth century, transborder work increased significantly following the devaluation of the Mexican peso in 1994 and, again, in 2008.¹⁵ On January 1, 1994, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, representing Mexico, signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) along with the United States and Canada, with the purpose of promoting trade and reducing tariffs on imported and exported goods.¹⁶ President Salinas expected this signed agreement to bring Mexico into “the First World” and into an era of economic prosperity.¹⁷ Within the borderlands’ economy, the free trade accord led to an increase in work in industries like the maquiladora industry, transportation and warehouse industry, agricultural industries, and other sectors involved with trade. Salinas’s vision was

¹⁴ Pedro Orraca, David Rocha, and Eunice Vargas, “Cross-Border School Enrollment: Associated Factors in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands,” *The Social Science Journal* 54, no. 4 (January 2017): 389-402, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2017.07.008>.

¹⁵ Sergio Chávez, *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-4.

¹⁶ Maxwell A. Cameron and Brian W. Tomlin, “Introduction,” in *The Making of NAFTA: How the Deal Was Done* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1-30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

short lived, however, as Mexico started to appear as a high risk investment because of multiple tumultuous events, including the EZLN's (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) declaration of war on the Mexican government and the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio. These major events along with the general political instability and rising drug trafficking that Mexico was undergoing, made foreign investors, including the United States, wary of trading with Mexico. Following the decrease in trade, Mexico suffered a sudden 15% devaluation of the peso in December of 1994.¹⁸ Additionally, the rate of unemployment in Mexico rose from 3.8% to 5.4%.¹⁹ The devaluation of the currency took Mexico years to recover. This scarcity of jobs led to increased movement of people to el norte seeking employment in the United States. While some people immigrated and settled in the north permanently, those living in the borderlands made transborder commute a viable and long-term option.²⁰

Transborder work and movement was again shaken in 2008, with the stock market crash and housing crisis in the United States. Mexico's economy relied heavily on its trade with the United States, so the financial crisis north of the border became Mexico's crisis as well.²¹ Mexico had made an effort to further privatize the economy and lessen government restrictions on trade in the last decade, but the measures were not enough to protect the

¹⁸ Stepheny Griffith-Jones, "La Crisis Del Peso Mexicano," *Revista de la CEPAL* (CEPAL, December 1996), 154, https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/12041/1/060151170_es.pdf.

¹⁹ "Unemployment, Total (% of Total Labor Force) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Mexico," International Labor Organization, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=MX>.

²⁰ Sergio Chávez, *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-10.

²¹ M. A. Villarreal, *The Mexican Economy after the Global Financial Crisis*, *Defense Technical Information Center* (Library of Congress Washington D.C. Congressional Research Service, September 9, 2010), 1-20, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA529130>.

country from the sudden effects of the fluctuation in the U.S. economy.²² The peso devalued 25%²³ once again in December of 2008 and the rate of unemployment rose in Mexico from 4.4% in 1994 to 7.1% in 1995.²⁴ The sudden economic changes in 2008, and those earlier in 1994, led many families, on both sides of the border, to work in and around the border to ensure their livelihood.²⁵ In response, in 2008, some Americans moved to Mexico, while working across the border in the United States as a viable option considering the limited housing opportunities. In Mexico, in turn, the rise of unemployment led to more people seeking employment across the border, despite the diminishing options.

In addition to confronting severe economic challenges at the border in the last three decades, people residing in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have also faced harsh U.S. immigration laws that have manufactured, as noted earlier, one of the most militarized border zones in the world. The beginning of the retrenchment of immigration policies was with the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, which allowed undocumented people seeking residence in the U.S. an opportunity to request amnesty and receive residency and, eventually, citizenship.²⁶ IRCA made special provisions allowing farmworkers—many of them former Braceros—the opportunity to become citizens, if they could prove they had lived

²² M. A. Villarreal, *The Mexican Economy after the Global Financial Crisis*, Defense Technical Information Center (Library of Congress Washington D.C. Congressional Research Service, September 9, 2010), 1-20, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA529130>.

²³ N.U. CEPAL Supsede de Mexico, “México: Evolución Económica Durante 2008 y Perspectivas Para 2009,” Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL, September 2009), <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/25891-mexico-evolucion-economica-durante-2008-perspectivas-2009>, 4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ R. L. Feltman, *I live here but work there: Insights on Transborder Labour Movements*. *Asper Review of International Business and Trade Law* 8, no. 1 (January 2008): 2-8, <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/asperreview/index.php/asperreview/article/view/200>

²⁶ Sergio Chavez. *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 26.

three months or 90 days continuously in the United States. Along with a path to citizenship, IRCA allowed for massive spending for increasing enforcement at the border, including the hiring of thousands of more border agents and physical reinforcements of border structures, among other provisions.²⁷ Despite the temporary decrease in border crossings as a result of IRCA in the late 1980s, by the early 1990s, rates of unsanctioned immigration had surpassed levels seen prior to the passage of amnesty in 1986.²⁸ Worsening economic conditions in Latin America and the anticipation of another “amnesty” motivated many to try their luck in the United States, regardless of the increased risks.

Increased rates of immigration and growing fears over the “browning of America,” in turn, led to some of the harshest measures yet to be enacted in the United States. On September 17th of 1994, President Clinton called for Operation Gatekeeper, which increased Customs and Border Protection’s (CBP) budget from \$1.6 billion allocated in 1993 to \$4.3 billion.²⁹ CBP also implemented the strategy of “prevention through deterrence” which blocked some of the well known routes migrants used to cross the border and “funneled” them, instead, into the most dangerous sectors of terrain along the U.S.-Mexico border, leading to the deaths of thousands of migrants, including men, women, and children.³⁰

²⁷ “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act 1996,” Immigration History, October 3, 2019, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/1996-illegal-immigration-reform-and-immigrant-responsibility-act/>.

²⁸ Prior to the operation, the U.S.-Mexico border employed 980 border patrol agents, placed 448 underground sensors, and had one border patrol agent standing for every 1.1 miles. Following the measure, the numbers jumped to 2,264 border agents employed, along with 1214 sensors installed, and one agent for every 1,000 feet.

²⁹ Micheal Huspek, “Production of State, Capital, and Citizenry: The Case of Operation Gatekeeper,” JSTOR: Social Justice 28, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768075>.

³⁰ Melissa Landeros, “Prevention-by-Deterrence Policies Have Counterintuitive Relationship to Migrant Death Crisis,” Global Migration Center, April 10, 2020, <https://globalmigration.ucdavis.edu/prevention-deterrence-policies-have-counterintuitive-relationship-migrant-death-crisis/>; Margaret Edwards, “The Understandings and Human Cost of ‘Prevention through Deterrence,’ as seen amongst advocates in the United States and Mexico,” SIT Digital Collections, May 2019, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4120&context=isp_collection, 6-7.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, in turn, led to the establishment of multiple new law enforcement programs that would protect the nation from terrorism, especially airports and borders. The changes included the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which included the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and an overall increase in funds for national security.^{31,32}

Another drastic change was the new role of state and local police departments in working with federal immigration authorities, specifically, CBP, in enforcing laws not only at the border but also within the United States. These changes in the expansion in enforcement led to an increase of apprehensions and deportations, separating many mixed-status families with both undocumented and U.S. citizens members. Under the program of “Secure Communities,” enacted during President George Bush’s administration and revived and expanded during President Barack Obama’s administration, undocumented individuals could now be deported if they were caught driving without a license, using public services without an official social security number in their place of employment, or could even be detained while walking down the street. Between the years of 2001 to 2011, particularly during President Barack Obama’s administration, the government carried out 2.3 million deportations, leading many to call President Obama “deporter-in-chief.”³³

³¹ “Overview of INS History,” USCIS History Office and Library, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/fact-sheets/INSHistory.pdf>, 11.

³² Prior to the creation of DHS, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was awarded a \$4.3 billion budget in the year 2000. By 2006, 3 years into the creation of DHS, the budget for programs within DHS amounted to \$12.5 billion a year.

³³ “Immigration Enforcement Since 9/11: A Reality Check,” Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/260/>.

The decade following the 9/11 attacks, journalists and scholars started to notice an increase in families adopting transborder lifestyles in their attempt to survive and thrive in the borderlands.³⁴ Between the years of 2000 and 2010, the number of Mexican women having children in the United States³⁵ as well as the number of U.S. citizens living in Mexico increased.³⁶ Mexican women who had visas or means to travel began to give birth in the U.S. to ensure their children had U.S. citizenship.³⁷ This would set up their children for the future by allowing them to have mobility between the two nations and expand their options for education and employment. By the early 2000s, the practice of transborder schooling became common practice found in border towns. According to David Rocha and Eunice Vargas's "Cross-Border School Enrolment," 81% of cross-border students reported being U.S. born, and 15.7% of them had lived in the U.S. permanently at one point in their lives.³⁸ As citizens, these students had the right to attend school in the United States, but the parents had the final say in their children's next steps.

The parents of these U.S-born Mexican-American children were confronted with multiple dilemmas: Is it worth staying with my family in the United States if I might be deported? Is it smarter and more cost efficient to move my family to Mexico? If we move to

³⁴ R. L. Feltman, *I live here but work there: Insights on Transborder Labour Movements*. *Asper Review of International Business and Trade Law* 8, no. 1 (January 2008): 2-8, <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/asperreview/index.php/asperreview/article/view/200>

³⁵ Eunice D. Vargas Valle and Marie-Laure Coubès, "Working and Giving Birth in the United States: Changing Strategies of Transborder Life in the North of Mexico," *Frontera Norte* 29, no. 57 (June 2017), http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S0187-73722017000100057&script=sci_arttext#B31.

³⁶ Claudia Masferrer, Erin R Hamilton, and Nicole Denier, "Half a Million American Minors Now Live in Mexico," *The Conversation: Politics and Society*, accessed June 2021, <https://theconversation.com/half-a-million-american-minors-now-live-in-mexico-119057>.

³⁷ Eunice D. Vargas Valle and Marie-Laure Coubès, "Working and Giving Birth in the United States."

³⁸ Orraca, Pedro, David Rocha, and Eunice Vargas, "Cross-Border School Enrollment: Associated Factors in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands," *The Social Science Journal* 54, no. 4 (January 2017): 389-402, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2017.07.008>.

Mexico or stay in the United States, where should my child go to school? Humann, Zuniga, and Garcia interviewed Mexican parents with U.S. born children as part of their study on “parenting from afar.”³⁹ Through their conversations they found that the rise in deportations following 9/11 made many Mexican immigrant parents reconsider moving back to Mexico. Conversely, some Mexican parents feared for their safety in Mexico, given the rising drug trafficking-related violence, and preferred their children be safe in the United States. Even so, these families found themselves exposed to new forms of violence in the United States, such as gang and gun violence in their schools and neighborhoods.

A common conflict the researchers found amongst mixed-status families was choosing between either keeping their family safe and united on one side of the border or allowing their children to seek better educational opportunities and upward mobility by crossing back and forth across the border.⁴⁰ Some parents ended up moving their entire family back to Mexico following the economic disaster and immigration legislation changes, while others chose to continue allowing their children to build their lives across the border, traversing two nation states.

El Tiempo es Oro: Sacrificing Time

Transborder students go to great lengths in order to achieve their educational goals, but it often comes at the cost of their time and their health and wellbeing. In the interviews, students mentioned having to deal with long wait times, waking up at dawn, eating irregular meals, taking multiple forms of public transportation, and being exposed to extreme weather

³⁹ Edmund T. Hamann, Víctor Zúñiga, and Juan Sánchez García, “Where Should My Child Go to School? Parent and Child Considerations in Binational Families,” *Parenting from Afar: The Reconfiguration of the Family Across Distance*, (March 25, 2019), <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/311/>.

⁴⁰ Edmund T. Hamann, Víctor Zúñiga, and Juan Sánchez García, “Where Should My Child Go to School? Parent and Child Considerations in Binational Families,” *Parenting from Afar: The Reconfiguration of the Family Across Distance*, (March 25, 2019), <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/311/>.

and toxic fumes while waiting at the border. All the factors these students undergo, such as losing sleep, skipping meals, being exposed to heat and pollution, and losing time with one's loved ones, are, I argue, a form of violence. While there exist methods that Customs and Border Protection can carry out to reduce the large effects of crossing the border, the border is designed to be difficult and discourage people from crossing frequently. The transborder students' narratives reveal the different ways in which interacting with the border is not only physically harmful but also emotionally draining.

Sometime in the mid to late 1990s, the mother of Rafael, a transborder student interviewed for this study, gave birth to all three of her children in the U.S. in order to give her sons more opportunities for education and work. Rafael's parents had struggled finding stable work throughout their lives, and wanted their three children to have more economic opportunities than they had growing up in Mexico. Additionally, Rafael's father was a resident in the U.S. and he wanted to eventually bring his wife and children with him. In 2010, Rafael, then twelve years old, started traversing the U.S.-Mexico border at the Tijuana-San Ysidro crossing every day to go to school. Rafael's parents feared the effects of the 2008 economic crisis would continue for many years to come, so they felt this was the right time for their children to become accustomed to traveling to the U.S.

To get to school on time, Rafael would wake up at 2:30 in the morning to prepare to catch a ride with his dad who started work around six in the morning. Rafael maintained this routine for about a year with hopes of moving to San Diego with his dad in the next few years. That dream dissipated, however, when his parents separated and his father moved to el norte, and the brothers stayed behind with their mother in Tijuana. Rafael's mother had no plans on moving to the United States, as she felt her home was in Tijuana. Undeterred to

reach their destination and achieve their goal for more opportunities, it was then that the siblings began to cross the border through the pedestrian line by themselves.

With a new routine, Rafael began to wake up at three in the morning to reach his destination on time. After getting up, he put water on to boil for his coffee, and made himself a quick *quesadilla* to accompany his *cafecito*. Rafael's *cafecito* and *quesadilla* were important to his morning routine and he never missed it. He stuck to his ritual, he said, because the familiar food brought him comfort and because the breakfasts at school were unappetizing. He would finish getting himself ready in less than half an hour and then he would head out and catch a taxi. Rafael would arrive at the Tijuana-San Ysidro border at 4:15 a.m. and would cross around 4:35 a.m. Rafael's travels would not end there.

Around 4:40 a.m., Rafael and his brothers would get on one of the trolleys in San Ysidro and ride for forty minutes into downtown San Diego. They would then take a second trolley in the direction towards their school. Given their mutual exhaustion, Rafael and his brothers would take turns sleeping on the trolley on alternating days, but sometimes when Rafael was traveling alone he would sneak in a quick nap and hope he would wake up on time. The brothers often did not have a lot of pocket change with them other than a few dollars, but when they did have some money, they would buy some chips or a drink and split it amongst them. From their trolley stop, Rafael and his brothers would walk 15 minutes and arrive at school around 6:15 in the morning. The three brothers would then usually wait in the gym until school started at 7:30.

Despite the daily grind of the commute, Rafael was a dedicated student. His favorite subjects in school were math and science and he was good at them. The teachers failed to encourage his talents, however. They would often scold Rafael when he finished his

classwork quickly, in about 20 minutes, and spent the rest of the time talking with and, often, distracting his classmates. Rather than give him more work, the teachers tried to keep him quiet. But when he was told to quiet down, he would start the homework for the following day and usually finish before the class was over. Rafael's talent for math was evident when he became the first student in his high school to pass the AP (Advanced Placement) Calculus exam. The strong support from his AP Calculus teacher and his curiosity for math led him to apply to physics and engineering programs for college.

School came easy to him, except for English and History. Rafael had a hard time his first few years in San Diego because he had not yet learned much English. Luckily most of his teachers and classmates spoke Spanish, so he would only speak English when it was absolutely necessary. A few of his classmates would sometimes make comments about his less-than-perfect English, but he chose to ignore them. Instead, he would show appreciation for his classmates that would take the time to help him practice his language skills.

As soon as school ended at 3 pm, Rafael would repeat his long trek home, taking the two trolleys and a taxi to their households in Tijuana. During the years that his father was unemployed, Rafael would come home from school and help his dad prepare *nopales* (cactus leaves) for sale and, eventually, consumption. They would strip the nopales of their spikes, being careful not to get injured from the sharp thorns, dice them, and, finally, bag them to sell. Once finished, they would eat, relax, and prepare for the next day by going to bed early, usually 9 p.m., to get as much sleep as possible, before he had to wake up again in six hours to replay the routine.

Despite his lengthy commute and need to come home at a reasonable hour, Rafael wanted to join school clubs and afterschool programs, but his parents would not let him due

to the little time he spent at home with the family. Once, he mentioned to his mom that he wanted to be involved within ASB, the Associated Student Body, working with the student council. His mom got upset and told him, “Oh, you already have a bunch of things you need to do when you get home and you're still trying to [become the] ASB treasurer?!”

Disappointed, he gave up that dream. As Rafael noted, one of the most difficult aspects of his schooling living situation was the feeling of missing out on a fun or active high school experience.

Rafael’s routine demonstrates the extensive lengths that transborder students take to pursue their educational goals. What is more, about half of transborder students live with a transborder worker, often this is a parent or parents who work in low paid, service jobs in metropolitan areas.⁴¹ Transborder scholars have noted that in times of economic hardship—both in Mexico and the United States—transborder work tends to increase, serving as a coping mechanism to help make ends meet and for daily survival.⁴² Despite the increase in the number of border crossings, the focus on improving the port of entry has been on surveillance rather than the efficiency of crossing safely and quickly. The emphasis on surveillance results in long wait times, anywhere from 20 minutes to 4 or more hours. The long wait times are a failure from part of U.S. politicians in factoring border fluctuations with the shifts in industry. Consequently, transborder individuals like Rafael and his dad have to develop elaborate routines to navigate the challenges with crossing.

⁴¹ Pedro Orraca, David Rocha, and Eunice Vargas, “Cross-Border School Enrollment: Associated Factors in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands,” *The Social Science Journal* 54, no. 4 (January 2017): 389-402, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sosci.2017.07.008>.

⁴² Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, “Introduction, Chapter 3,” in *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in the Area of Economic Integration* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 1-52; M. A. Villarreal, *The Mexican Economy after the Global Financial Crisis*, *Defense Technical Information Center* (Library of Congress Washington D.C. Congressional Research Service, September 9, 2010), 1-20.

Miguel Avalos, transborder scholar and former transborder student, describes how the routine took over his day in his autoethnography about his years crossing the San Ysidro border. “The SYPOE’s (San Ysidro Port of Entry) temporal uncertainty meant that my family and I always prioritized our commutes in our daily schedules.”⁴³ Avalos's statement embodies the sacrifices that transborder students make with their time. Simple privileges like sitting down to eat breakfast, hanging out with friends after school, or spending quality time with one’s family, are pushed aside to accommodate the fluctuation of the border. This relates to Rafael’s experience of being unable to join school clubs and organizations, because staying after school meant he would not get home before night time. Rafael followed up by stating how important it was for him, later in life, to be involved in college, because he was denied the opportunity to build community in high school when he was a teenager.

Other students in this study mirror Rafael’s feelings of missing out on experiences due to the burdens of their commute. A transborder student, Lorena, for instance, recalls missing after school events, such as open house, because her parents had to head back to Tijuana as soon as possible. Angel, for example, another student, mentioned that his parents often would not let him and his siblings go on the computer or communicate with family members over the phone, because they had very little time to complete their house chores and their dad would often be frustrated with them because they arrived late due to the traffic they encountered during their commute. Valentina, who experienced a similar situation, talks about lost time at the border but also missed experience, due to the fact that her father could not cross into the United States.. Her family has missed out on being together for multiple

⁴³ Miguel A. Avalos, “Border Regimes and Temporal Sequestration: An Autoethnography of Waiting,” *The Sociological Review* 70, no. 1 (October 4, 2021): 124-139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261211048884>

milestones including her high school and college graduations. For individuals who deal with family separation they are not only losing time waiting at the border but also bypassing special moments with their loved ones as well.

Hagar Kotef theorizes this idea of losing time as punishment, as has been the case in the history of Palestinians affected by the Israeli-Palestinian border:

This system prevents —or at least severely hinders— what many see as mundane, daily life: going to work, attending a relative’s wedding, shopping at the market, or going to school. All are simple routines for most people, but they are denied to most Palestinians or are purchased with the cost of valuable time; time that is robbed, as Amira Hass puts it, and ‘cannot ever be returned.’⁴⁴

Kotef theorizes that restriction of time and movement are in fact a restriction of freedom. Not only are border crossers being restricted physically, but they are sacrificing their personal time to navigate a violent border. Migel Avalos builds on Kotef’s theories to argue that the wait times in the U.S.-Mexico border are a form of temporal sequestration.⁴⁵ The U.S. immigration system has historically used waiting as a form of deterrent. Most notably, in the 1990s, CBP’s strategy of prevention through deterrence blocked some of the well known routes migrants used to cross the border and “funneled” them, instead, into the most dangerous sectors of terrain along the U.S.-Mexico border.⁴⁶ Since the implementation of prevention through deterrence in 1994, over 10,000 migrant deaths have been reported.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Hagar Kotef, “Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility,” in *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 22-23.

⁴⁵ Miguel A. Avalos, “Border Regimes and Temporal Sequestration: An Autoethnography of Waiting,” *The Sociological Review* 70, no. 1 (October 4, 2021): 124-139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261211048884>

⁴⁶ Melissa Landeros, “Prevention-by-Deterrence Policies Have Counterintuitive Relationship to Migrant Death Crisis,” Global Migration Center, April 10, 2020, <https://globalmigration.ucdavis.edu/prevention-deterrence-policies-have-counterintuitive-relationship-migrant-death-crisis>.

⁴⁷ Margaret Edwards, “The Understandings and Human Cost of ‘Prevention through Deterrence,’ as seen amongst advocates in the United States and Mexico,” SIT Digital Collections, May 2019, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4120&context=isp_collection, 6-7.

This tactic was meant to discourage people from crossing into the United States. Migration did not decrease, instead the process of crossing became increasingly and intentionally more dangerous. Border scholars like Avalos, have expanded the definition on what constitutes deterrence. Deterrence is not just physical but also psychological. The deterrent of an individual's desires for the future, whether it is asylum or the ability to get to school on time, is also a method of enforcing a border regime.

Prevention through deterrence is not only a failed tactic but also a method of structural violence that shifts the responsibility to migrants. Kelly Lytle Hernandez describes this change. "Border Patrol officers had given up their brutality, but the body count of migrants paying the penalty of death while trying to evade apprehension for illegal immigration continued."⁴⁸ Instead of viewing the death of migrants in the Sonoran desert or the detention of Central American and Mexican children as a result of decades of political violence or economic distress, the responsibility is now placed on the individuals and their families for exposing themselves to a dangerous journey. This absolves those that uphold border policies from the violence that border crossers experience.

I argue that the strategy of prevention through deterrence is being replicated at the ports of entry. By forcing people to wait hours to cross, border officials work to discourage individuals from seeking entry to the United States. CBP has the ability to lessen wait times by expanding its staff, opening up more ports of entry during peak hours, and reforming their interrogation process. The changes implemented in the U.S.-Mexico border following the

⁴⁸ Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 132.

creation of programs like Domestic Homeland Security and Customs and Border Patrol proved the U.S. federal government has the budget and ability to alter border processes from one day to another. The resources to make crossing easier are available, however, the restrictions at the border are intentional methods of discouraging people in the borderlands from crossing frequently and with ease.⁴⁹ People in the borderlands who used to cross to stay connected to their communities are now reluctant to cross due to extensive wait times and overwhelming encounters with law enforcement.

Additionally, as wait times have become longer in the last twenty years, one of the main concerns for residents in the borderlands is dealing with the impact of air pollution. The gasses and fumes emitted from the vehicles expose border crossers to significant amounts of chemicals such as carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, and benzene.⁵⁰ The long-term exposure to these chemicals have proven to cause individuals to develop asthma and heart conditions amongst many other diseases.⁵¹ Transborder individuals will spend hours sitting in slow traffic being exposed to this pollution over the span of years. Border crossers are paying not only to enter into the U.S. with their time, as Kotef mentions, but also with their health and wellbeing. This is a structural failure, yet transborder students are often put into question for choosing to cross the border. Transborder students are often asked questions such as:

⁴⁹ Jessica Bolter and Muzaffar Chishti, “Two Decades after 9/11, National Security Focus Still Dominates U.S. Immigration System,” Migration Policy Institute, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/two-decades-after-sept-11-immigration-national-security>.

⁵⁰ Penelope J.E. Quintana et al., “Traffic-related air pollution in the community of San Ysidro, CA, in relation to northbound vehicle wait times at the US–Mexico border Port of Entry,” *Atmospheric Environment* 88, (May 2014): 8-31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.atmosenv.2014.01.009>.

⁵¹ Vulnerable populations such as pregnant women, children, and immunocompromised individuals are especially at risk of developing illnesses. Children are at risk of developing asthma, leukemia, and having underdeveloped lungs. Pregnant women are at risk of giving birth preterm and having children with low birth rates. Those with pre-existing conditions such as heart or lung problems have shown an increase in symptoms after exposure to fumes.

“Why don’t you just get a house in the U.S.?” “Why don’t you just stay in Mexico?” The individual student is made responsible for taking on the arduous commute. Rarely are the circumstances of limited educational and employment opportunities in Mexico as well as the effects of an era of mass deportation pointed as the cause of these extreme conditions and their need to risk their health and lives for a better future.

Crossing a Line: Adverse Interactions with Border Agents

Guadalupe, a transborder student, was deep asleep when suddenly she felt her upper body tremble and a bright light pressed against her face. She woke up startled and saw a border agent towering over her, asking questions. Prior to being woken up harshly, the agent had asked Guadalupe’s mother why her daughter was not identifying herself, and she responded, “She is sleeping.” Rather than ask her mother to wake her up, the border agent took it upon himself to walk over and reach in to wake her up. He shook her and immediately asked her to identify herself. “Hey, hey, hey, what’s your name? Can you confirm your name?” he yelled. “Guadalupe,” she responded. Satisfied, the border agent let them pass. Shaken, but determined, Guadalupe and her mother continued with their commute.

Guadalupe and her mother’s experience demonstrates that part of the daily routine of crossing the border includes learning the tactics to help you pass as quickly and safely as possible. For parents crossing with their children one aspect of the routine is making sure their children are awake and responsive before they reach the front of the line. A common parable many transborder children hear growing up is the story of a little Mexican girl who was kidnapped at a grocery store in Mexico and later that day found dead in the passenger

seat of a car in the U.S.-Mexico border.⁵² The kidnappers had opened her up and hid drugs in her body in place of her organs and then sewn her back up. Their plan was to pass her off as their daughter who was sleeping from a long journey.⁵³ Growing up in Tijuana, I often heard this story from anxious señoras who would warn my parents about crossing the border. Sometimes the story included a little girl, other times a newborn baby with drugs in her diaper.⁵⁴ These types of political myths frequently circulated during the war on terror, an anti-terrorist campaign launched by the U.S. government following the September 11th attacks in 2001. These stories were exceptional, but they were passed around as warnings of how even civilians not involved in the drug war and drug trade could easily fall victim to its violence. These stories would provide moral justification for increasing military and law enforcement spending, as well as give these agents of the state more liberty in how they interact with civilians. Patting down a baby or young child is no longer out of line, if the border agent argues there is a precedent for children being used as drug mules. The child is no longer seen as a child, but a potential accessory or even accomplice to a crime.

Once border agents heard of this strategy of using children to smuggle drugs, they started making sure kids who were asleep were in fact awake and alive. Additionally, border agents will often ask the parent of the child to wake them up, so that the officer can verify that the documentation they hold is theirs. This seems like a reasonable preventative measure, but what happens when border agents take the measure as an excuse to be invasive,

⁵² This story was common in Mexico, but was in fact an event that was reported in the Gulf of United Arab Emirates. The story was reproduced many times and “la frontera” must have been assumed to be the U.S.-Mexico border.

⁵³ Brian Whitaker, “Girl Killed to Act as Drug Mule in Gulf,” *The Guardian*, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/may/10/brianwhitaker>.

⁵⁴ Jodi Wilgoren, “Babies Used in Drug Ring, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/15/us/babies-used-in-drug-ring-officials-say.html>.

like in Gudalupe's case? Due to the high activity at the border, "CBP officers are given ample discretionary powers to determine an individual's admissibility based on behavioral and physical attributes."⁵⁵ Even if Gudalupe's mom had complained or filed a report, the border agent could easily have justified his behavior by stating he was protecting the border from drugs and human trafficking.

Gudalupe was less than ten years old when she crossed the U.S.-Mexico border, so many of her memories of the day to day checkpoints are a bit limited. She explains that most of her interactions were fairly decent and just seemed like standard procedure, but this specific interaction stuck out to her:

I mean, I was asleep, I wake up and I just see a man looking at me with a light you don't expect that so I did freak out a bit but I did give him my name and I did confirm whatever information he was asking me...aside from that, I-I can't remember, too well if there were...any of those similar interactions, but that's one that stayed with me ever since then.

Guadalupe's story is an example of how border agents can take the law into their own hands, often through the use of intimidation and harassment and sheer violence. Things that are innocent, like a child catching up on sleep, become a cause for investigation. The agent had the option to ask Gudalupe's mother to wake her up or call her name out, but he intentionally chose not to. There was a consensus amongst the participants in this study that while the checkpoints are a hassle and waiting in line can be excruciating, most days the interactions at the port of entry are standard routine. But it is those traumatic moments that stay ingrained, even years after the transborder students stop crossing.

An Open Wound: "Ritualized Violence" at the Border and Family Separation

⁵⁵Estefanía Castaneda-Perez, and Isaac Félix. "¿Algo Que Declarar? Student Surveillance, Policing, and Belonging at the México-U.S. Border." The Latinx Project at NYU. The Latinx Project at NYU, October 20, 2020.

Transborder students experienced multiple forms of violence in their interactions with the border patrol and border military at the ports of entry. In the span of a decade, the students in this study witnessed the U.S.-Mexico border being transformed into the most militarized border in the world. The measures taken as a result of acts of terrorism in September of 2001 severely impacted the everyday procedures in the U.S.-Mexico border.⁵⁶ As Estefanía Castañeda Pérez and Isaac Félix have written, “the War on Terror was not just fought overseas—it served as an ideological framework to pass some of the most draconian immigration enforcement policies, criminalizing migrants and treating the border as a perpetual warzone.”⁵⁷ The state’s efforts to prevent terrorism resulted in an increase in daily surveillance including at U.S. airports and border entries.

The stories of students in this study demonstrate how these changes in border procedures exposed them to what Cynthia Bejarano describes as “ritualized violence.” Bejarano refers to the process at the checkpoint that often leads to the border agent asking probing questions surrounding citizenship status, the inspection of one’s personal belongings, and a general invasion of privacy.⁵⁸ Similar to the long wait times that students endure, this seemingly innocuous “Q &A” has become something they are used to, but that does not mean it is normal or lawful. Many citizens, including participants in this study, are not aware that border agents are not supposed to ask questions such as, “Where are you going?”

⁵⁶ Gary Robbins, “How the 9/11 Attacks Changed Life in San Diego.” San Diego Union-Tribune, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-how-911-changed-san-diego-2010sep11-htmlstory.html>

⁵⁷ Estefanía Castañeda Pérez and Isaac Félix, “¿Algo Que Declarar? Student Surveillance, Policing, and Belonging at the México-U.S. Border,” The Latinx Project at NYU (New York University, June 24, 2021), <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervencions/algo-que-declarar-student-surveillance-policing-and-belonging-at-the-mxico-us-border>.

⁵⁸ Cynthia Bejarano, “Border Rootedness as Transformative Resistance: Youth Overcoming Violence and Inspection in a US–Mexico Border Region,” *Children's Geographies* 8, no. 4 (2010): 391-399, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2010.511004>.

“Where do you live?” “Where do you go to school?” The main function at the checkpoint is to verify the documentation of border crossers. Border agents are not meant to ask personal and invasive questions or search through your belongings without probable cause.⁵⁹

However, at the port of entry probable cause is loosely defined. For example, if an agent asked you where you are going and you say “Fresno,” and they ask you again and you say “Reedley, Fresno,” an agent might question why you changed your response. In this way the border agents create probable cause. For border crossers, these interactions can trigger stress or anxiety and lead them to err on their answers or make them question their knowledge of simple questions, such as the name of the city they work or live in.

As I argue, these invasive practices become part of a “ritual” that is deemed a standard procedure, but is in fact a form of violence. Overtime, for transborder individuals this daily violence becomes exhausting, as exemplified by the students’ narratives at the heart of this study, including that of Valentina. Since the age of ten, Valentina has been crossing the border. At that time, her father was deported, leaving her parents with the difficult decision of where to settle their lives, given their divided family. They decided that the best option would be for their family to all stay together in Tijuana, while allowing their children to continue their education in the U.S. by crossing the border on a daily basis. Despite the daily trek, Valentina finished her elementary schooling as well as her college education. Valentina has over a decade of experience at the border. Not surprisingly, this commute is still something that brings her immense pain. In describing her experience, Valentina does not hold back about her views about the border:

⁵⁹ “Know Your Rights with Border Patrol ,” ACLU of Arizona, accessed November 18, 2022, https://www.acluaz.org/sites/default/files/field_documents/aclu_border_rights.pdf.

So I hate the border. (pause) I'm gonna start off by saying that I...the—the depiction the, how militarized it is how... it's not—I mean the border at least for myself has never been a safe space. EVER. (pause)

I—I am always anxious, I'm anxious all the time. It doesn't matter if I'm not, like, I'm not hiding anything. And like, I know, I have—all my rights! Whether you know, I'm driving my car or cross by foot, like I'm a US citizen. Like, the anxiety and the stress that like accumulates in my body as I'm either walking through those gates...they check your documents once again..And then you have to take off all of your belongings, have them go through a screen. So it's like it's not just you walking freely into the country, you quote unquote, “are from,” ... It's just like emotion after emotion after emotion until I walk out those gates. And I'm by the trolley where, like, I let out a breath. I'm just like, "Okay, I did it." I was like, "Okay, I did it."

Valentina did not end there. Rather, she continued describing her encounters with border agents and the overwhelming sense of power—physical, mental, and legal—they wielded over her. Valentina started to raise her voice in this point in the interview out of frustration of what she has experienced:

Like, I feel like at any point, they could do whatever they want. And I just have to go along with it. Because, um, I think I'm too scared sometimes, like, I am going to be honest, like, I'm too scared to even say anything. Like, if they asked me, like, I'll just answer...me knowing that they can't ask me that. But just to get them off my backs and to move from that space, I'll just comply. And it's sad because, like, you know, like, we shouldn't stay quiet when we know what they're doing isn't right. But it's also very intimidating because, like, the power they exercise like— I don't know, to what extent they'll use it.

So I think as I have crossed the border and I see all these border patrols not only is there anxiety and stress, but it's also the anger, anger of...Because of you, I'm here, and because of you, my family can't be together in the way we want to be together. Because of you. My dad has missed out on so many milestones. And it's because of you that when I think about like, marrying or like doing stuff like that, like I'm just like, Well, what about my dad, you know, or what about like, all these other people who like can't get visas or something just to come into a country where they [the government] pick and choose who they want to be of aid to.

This part of the interview was heartbreaking to hear about the overwhelming physical and mental toll that the checkpoint takes on Valentina. The wait times alone can cause transborder students to feel restless, but crossing the border can also cause feelings of

extreme stress, anxiety, anger, and even loss. Valentina's description of her feelings while crossing demonstrate how physically and psychologically damaging years and years of crossing can be on a person. Valentina's expression embodies the feelings of loss that come with experiencing the deportation of a loved one. Multiple students in this study have endured family separation. Valentina mentions how she thinks about her father every time she encounters an agent of the state. For transborder students who are taking on the commute due to family deportation, interacting with state officials can be a reminder of the trauma they experienced and continue to experience from their family separation. As Valentina mentions, it's not just the thought of the past but also the moments her dad will miss out on in the future. As mentioned earlier, Valentina is paying to pursue her education by sacrificing time with her family. Simple joys like having her father at her graduation or at her wedding are robbed from her or made exponentially more complicated to achieve. Valentina, like many U.S. born children with deported parents, felt that, as a U.S. citizen, she should have the right to be with her family as she desires.

Often, in cases of deportation, the U.S legal system takes little consideration for the long-term affects the individual's deportation will have on any children, whether U.S. citizens or Mexican nationals. Indeed, having children that are citizens does not always help a parent's deportation case, as judges will often argue that such children's legal status is sufficient to provide them a life in the U.S. They do not, however, dwell on the specifics of how to raise children outside or beyond national boundaries. By emphasizing that children's legal benefits are not taken away, they are not being punished for their parent's unlawful status. This response is practical, but it is a complete legal failure and fiction. By deporting a

child's parent, you are in fact punishing the child, as children do not live by their citizenship status alone.

Children with immigrant parents, regardless of their documentation, are negatively affected by the structures that oppress their parents. Nina Rabin argues these children endure what she calls "secondary enforcement."⁶⁰ The separation and/or fear of deportation causes trauma and deep psychological and physical effects. Furthermore, following the deportation of their parents, the children of immigrants may face poverty, crime, separation from their culture, and even dysfunctional family dynamics. In addition, the children of immigrants experience what Rabin calls "legal liminality," meaning they are constantly in transition.⁶¹ They have legal status but their proximity to their undocumented family members limits their access to being full "American" whether that be economically, politically, or culturally. Family separation denies these students their desired childhoods and limits the quality time they can spend with their parents, among many other aspects of their young lives.

The experience of these transborder students is further complicated as they have access to transnational mobility yet they face many constraints in their commute. These students are privileged in the sense that they hold documentation that some of their family members do not or have been barred from obtaining. Nevertheless; the treatment they receive at the border checkpoint demonstrates that documentation is not enough to ensure they are respected as citizens. As families are separated at the border, their rights to family life and household stability are not respected.

⁶⁰ Nina Rabin, "Understanding Secondary Immigration Enforcement: Immigrant Youth and Family Separation in a Border County," *Journal of Law & Education* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 1-40, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2992713>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Citizens but not Americans: Crossing the Border while Mexican

The interactions with border agents reflect a larger history of the exclusion of Mexican-Americans in the United States, and they affect how transborder students view their position in the United States. The exclusion of Mexican-Americans has historical origins in the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico border following the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848, in which Mexico ceded more than half of its territory to the U.S.. Mexican citizens in newly established U.S. territories were considered “white by law” but in most interactions were considered non-white due to linguistic and cultural differences. Legally the position of Mexican-Americans as white or non-white shifted on a case by case basis. For example, in a court of law where a Mexican-American individual was on trial, an all Anglo-American jury would be considered a jury of their peers. During the Mexican Repatriation, agents of the state rounded up over 2 million Mexican people in trains that deported them into central Mexico. The agents did not check documentation and relied on racial profiling, resulting in the deportation of over 1.2 million people of Mexican-Americans.⁶² This event indicated that anyone who looked ethnically Mexican, even if they were born and raised in the United States, was not recognized as a full citizen. In the early 1900s, the tracking system of the “Mexican Schools” was a prime example of how linguistic differences led to the exclusion. It was legal to segregate Mexican children under the justification that their inability to learn or speak what was considered “proper English” disqualified them from attending the regular school.

⁶² Between 1929 and 1939 President Herbert Hoover, among other officials, called for Mexican Repatriation. He signed off on this strategy with the claim that immigrants were the main cause for severe unemployment during the Great Depression. Agents put the individuals they captured on a train that sent them into central Mexico, so they could not return.

The exclusion of Mexican-Americans has taken on many other cultural and legal forms throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, and the effects of this rejection often stands out in the youth of the era. From the pachucos of the 1930s to the cholos of the early 2000s, Mexican-Americans have been told directly or indirectly that they are un-American. I argue that this dynamic of white by law but non-white through culture and language is replicated in the interactions between Mexican-Americans with law enforcement, particularly border agents.

Nilda Flores-Gonzalez carried out ethnographies of millennial latinos in the Chicago Metropolitan area, and a common theme that appeared in their interviews was how their identity played a role in how law enforcement interacted with them.⁶³ Millennial latinos were at times asked to prove that they were in fact American citizens, such as being asked to show their ID card or passport. Even with their documentation present, some individuals were asked if their documentation was real. This implied that the officer was more likely to believe that the individual falsified their documents, than someone who is racially non-white is American. She argues that regardless of documentation status, Latinos in the United States are not fully recognized as American. Transborder students in this study reported having similar interactions while crossing into the port of entry.

Transborder students not only face the violent disruption of family life on a daily basis but also the constant questioning of their identity and belonging as “true” U.S. citizens. Border agents constantly test the young people’s authenticity as “Americans” by quizzing them on their proficiency of English and knowledge of introductory U.S. history and culture.

⁶³ Nilda Flores-González, *Citizens but Not Americans: Race and Belonging among Latino Millennials* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 44-50.

Students recalled that, in their commute, they encountered border agents who demanded that they recite the pledge of allegiance or verify the documentation's legitimacy by providing additional verifications. Apparently, because they didn't fit the criteria of what a red-blooded American should look like (i.e., blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned) and, instead, had dark racial and ethnic features, these students were accused of providing false documentation and trying to pass illegally.

Carlos, a transborder student, mentioned that most of his interactions with border patrol have been standard but one particular encounter with an agent, who intended to outsmart Carlos and catch him in a lie, left Carlos reeling and angry:

I mean, one time we're crossing the border, then I don't know why, but he (a border agent) was asking us about the holidays like, Oh, 'What does July 4th mean?' We were like, 'Well, Independence Day' and like, 'What about Memorial Day? I just found that kind of weird because like, was he asking us... to prove our citizenship? You know, 'I can tell you way more things about America than I bet you can!'

Transborder students like Carlos are not only aware of the ways border agents try to trip them up but also of the importance of having their documentation in order and ready at the checkpoint. They sometimes even carry additional documents in case any logistical issues arise with the standard records that are required.⁶⁴ These types of documents can include verification of their school enrollment or an extra passport. Questioning the legitimacy of a border crosser's documentation is meant to make the individual feel as if they are committing fraud of some kind, even though they have gone through the "proper" channels to be able to navigate the border checkpoints. They—agents and transborder crossers—know the process of obtaining a passport requires proof of citizenship, a social security number, ID card, a

⁶⁴ CBBC. "Kids Who Cross Trump's Border Wall Every Day for School." YouTube: Newsround, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://youtu.be/Skl92vQ2SKE>.

verified picture, and the payment of fees.⁶⁵ Plus, border agents have the added benefit of multiple surveillance technology systems that are readily available to prove (or disprove) the legitimacy of an individual's documents if there is suspicion of fraud.

This type of questioning is not only unnecessary and time consuming but also leads individuals to experience cognitive dissonance surrounding their value in the country they grew up in. Carlos explained to me that his frustration at the border was deeper than simply producing the proper document. Rather, it was the constant need to prove himself as a lawful entrant and worthy of crossing. Carlos had always worked so hard to be a good student, especially in his history classes. Carlos, like all the students in this study, are high achieving individuals and model members of their communities. Many of the participants in this project explained to me that they felt the need to be good students because they and their families were sacrificing so much for them to attend school and they did not want to squander that opportunity. As Daniela, another student, summarizes well, "I'm sacrificing a lot of my time, I might as well pay attention." These students are exceptional, because they have had to be. However, what is considered "doing everything right" still does not prevent them from being discriminated against and accused of fraud.

Given the daily questioning of his identity, whether a U.S. citizen or Mexican national, Carlos made it clear during his interview that he did not wish to identify with any particular label such as Mexican, American, or even Mexican-American. This is not because he did not have any connection to the countries he frequents or his family history, but rather he did not like being identified in one way. As he noted, Carlos had worked to make himself

⁶⁵ "Getting or Renewing a U.S. Passport," USAGov: Passport and International Travel, accessed June 2022, <https://www.usa.gov/passport#item-34912>.

stand out in so many ways, by being a good student and good son, but at the moment of his crossing, he was reduced to his ethnicity and all the stereotypes that this border agent had formulated.

Castaneda-Perez's research of the perceptions on border patrol agents determines that "(a) individuals with higher levels of education; (b) current students; and (c) fluent English speakers; are more likely to hold more negative perceptions of border enforcement."⁶⁶ In addition, transborder students who are U.S. citizens are more likely to report negative perceptions, compared to more vulnerable groups, such as transborder workers who hold visas. Having a history of dealing with border patrol has two main effects on transborder students: it motivates them to pursue political involvement in their communities but it also causes feelings of exclusion amongst students. Castaneda-Perez argues, "Individuals with English proficiency have more sense of entitlement due to their cultural and social capital, and many hold more negative perceptions of border enforcement." These students feel entitled, not in the sense that they inherently deserve special treatment, instead they feel they have the right as U.S. citizens to not be questioned on their legitimacy.

Another aspect to consider is how many transborder students grew up watching their parents cross for work, and have built up resentment over how their parents were treated by border agents and the state more generally. While transborder workers also stand up for themselves, they are less inclined than those who remain in their countries of origin because they are often in a vulnerable position.⁶⁷ For many working class transborder crossers, who

⁶⁶ Pérez, Estefania Castañeda. "Transborder (in)Securities: Transborder Commuters' Perceptions of U.S. Customs and Border Protection Policing at the Mexico–U.S. Border." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 10, no. 1, (February 7, 2019): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2020.1748066>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

are crossing out of necessity, they cannot risk being late to work. As Angel mentions, “...losing time from work meant losing money, which meant losing food. So we couldn't, we couldn't do anything.” Many students in this study described feeling anger while their parents and guardians were harassed by border agents, but not being able to act on those feelings because they were young and needed to ensure they arrived home safely. Transborder students have added negative feelings towards border agents, because their parents were not able to advocate for themselves.

For some transborder students, these wounds are not just their own, they are intergenerational.

“Bad Hombres”: Confrontations with Latinx Border Agents

One of the most recurring sentiments from transborder students in this study was the distrust and frustration towards Latinx border agents, predominantly towards agents of Mexican descent, who were seen as particularly violent in their interactions with the transborder students. When asked about their interactions with border agents and border military, half of the participants in this study mentioned that they perceived Latinx border agents to be the individuals who were the harshest in enforcing border protocol. They described them as being the most invasive when it came to questioning at the checkpoint and the ones who were more likely to send you into secondary inspection for even closer scrutiny.

To navigate an inhospitable zone, border crossers often develop strategies to help them cross skilfully and successfully. Among them is memorizing particular patterns at the checkpoint, including any racial and gender differences amongst agents and how that affects

their experience at the checkpoint.⁶⁸ As Sergio Chavez has found in his research, border crossers take great pains to avoid immigration officials of Mexican descent, as they were perceived as the “greatest boundary enforcers.”⁶⁹ Alejandra, a 25-year-old worker in Chavez’s study and who crossed every weekend, lists the different types of border agents she had encountered, in order from least to most difficult. “One’s dream is to get a rookie immigration official, a younger white official, an Asian official, a Mexican official, and lastly a woman.”⁷⁰ A common perception amongst border crossers, is that the border agents who hold marginalized identities are more likely to create a hostile environment at the checkpoint and send them to secondary inspection, which involves closer scrutiny and full inspection to determine admissibility. The participants who described having negative perceptions of Latinx border agents had similar observations and often expressed that they felt these agents “had something to prove” to their white, non-Latinx peers as well as their supervisors. As the border crossers described it, Latinx border agents made sure to prove their loyalty to the state, the U.S. government, rather than to any other entity, and to do so by going above and beyond the call of duty in enforcing immigration policies and practices. Transborder crossers did not come up with these ideas or perceptions overnight. But, rather, after years of interacting with border agents at different levels.

Transborder student Noemi exemplifies how these interactions become exhaustive through recounting her childhood as one of trauma and violent experiences at the hands of the border patrol. Growing up, Noemi frequently crossed the U.S.-Mexico border at the

⁶⁸ Sergio Chavez. *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 97-98.

⁶⁹ Chavez, *Border Lives*, 100.

⁷⁰ Chavez, *Border Lives*, 101.

Calexico-Mexicali checkpoint, and lived in a border town where border agents frequented. One day, while Noemi's father was on his motorcycle, he was struck by a border agent and was pinned by the car and dragged for a few feet. Though he survived the accident, he was in the hospital for months after experiencing organ failure and receiving hip replacement surgery. Years later, as she explained, her dad still had to walk with a cane and he had to endure multiple chronic health issues as a result of the accident. Ten years old at the time of the incident, Noemi remembers her dad's long and arduous struggle to recover. For Noemi and her family, this negative interaction with border patrol was not only traumatizing but physically scarring. Noemi believes that this accident was where her distrust for border patrol began.

Following the accident, Noemi started to pick up on the racial and gender differences amongst border agents by observing how they treated her family members. During winter break of the same year her father was injured, Noemi crossed everyday to go to work with her aunt in Calexico. She recalls she got stopped multiple times by the same Latinx officer and every time for different reasons. The main issue was her birth certificate. He claimed it was not enough evidence and she needed to get a U.S. passport immediately. Noemi and her aunt explained that a passport takes weeks to get and they needed to cross into Calexico immediately. The officer let them go, but he continued to stop and harass them anytime he could. All the other officers let them pass with ease, but this Hispanic officer seemed to have a vendetta against Noemi and her aunt.

The following day, when Noemi again crossed into California, he stopped her and asked what was in her aunt's backpack, which Naomi carried with her. She responded, "I don't know if it's her backpack, I haven't opened it." The agent went on to accuse Noemi's

aunt of hiding drugs in the backpack, “What do you know if your aunt put drugs in here, and like you would have gotten in trouble, and then you would have gone to jail.” This was a very angering and confusing thing to hear as a young child, for she held her aunt in high esteem and never considered drugs as part of their everyday reality. Recounting the incident, Noemi became heated in remembering the agent and his actions, pointing out how much more trouble Hispanic officers—rather than white or Black officers—have given her:

...And also the Hispanic ones. Way bigger dicks than like, white ones. I swear to God, I don't know if they feel like they have something to prove. Whenever I get a white guy, I think, ‘Okay, we're gonna be fine. He's gonna be chill. Maybe he will be a little standoffish...not mean but like, very direct.’ You get someone Hispanic and I'm like, ‘I'm suffering today.’ Because he is going to ask me 500 different questions. He's gonna be like, ‘Why are you here?’ ‘Where are you going to school?’ Blah, blah, blah. I know, I'm gonna get interrogated, like I committed some fucking crime. And I'm like, bro, You're supposed to be the chill one! Why are you the worst one out of every one?!?

I had this one guy fucking ask me who my doctor who birthed me was. What? ‘Do you think I'm studying my birth certificate or something?’ I was like, 10 at the time, but yeah, I'm looking back and I'm like, ‘Do you think I was sitting at home studying my fucking birth certificate?’

Noemi's experience with this border agent is an example of how transborder students can be criminalized at such a young age. Noemi became a target for a border agent when she was only ten years old, and it is an experience that still makes her upset a decade later.

Noemi's story shows how these perceptions of border agents do not form because of one or two bad experiences. Most of the students in this study, like Noemi, grew up at the border.

In fact, the majority of transborder students start crossing in elementary school and carry out

their education into middle school and high school.⁷¹ The resentment towards border agents came from years of interactions, not from one or two or even three crossings.

To Noemi, the attitudes of and often violent treatment from Hispanic border agents felt like a betrayal from someone from her own community. This is a common sentiment amongst the students who discussed Hispanic/Latinx border agents, they expected them to have more sympathy or understanding of the struggles of Latinx people and people affected by immigration processes. Especially since many of these border agents live in border towns where Latinx people are the majority, and some even have family members who migrated to the United States. The idea that Latinx border agents are cultural traitors is a common narrative that has been spread amongst Chicax communities in the last half of the century. Greg Prieto carried out ethnographies in which he recorded the perceptions on Latinx border agents amongst predominantly Mexican communities. Many of the responses from participants viewed these agents as “traitors,” “sell outs,” or people “keeping down the race.”⁷² These labels are meant to shame Latinx border agents for working for an institution that actively hurts people from their communities of origin. Students in this study mentioned how disappointed they were that people who live and work in large immigrant communities, like Calexico or San Ysidro, or people who are descended from immigrant families, would work for immigration services.

However, one student in this study brought up the fact that most of his bad interactions were with Hispanic agents, because he lived in Calexico where they are the

⁷¹ Pedro Orracca, David Rocha, and Eunice Vargas, “Cross-Border School Enrolment: Associated Factors in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands,” *The Social Science Journal* 54, no. 4 (January 2017): 389-402, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2017.07.008>.

⁷² Greg Prieto, “‘Traitors’ to Race, ‘Traitors’ to Nation: Latina/O Immigration Enforcement Agents, Identification and the Racial State,” *Latino Studies* 13, no. 4 (2015): 501-505, <https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2015.42>.

majority. Other students had neutral experiences with Hispanic and all border agents in general. The students' testimonies brought up a few relevant questions: Are Hispanic/Latinx border agents harsher than their white counterparts, or are they just overrepresented in a workforce people do not expect them to be working in? Do Mexican border crossers expect more solidarity from people from their own community, and therefore their behavior sticks out to them more?

The Customs and Border Patrol agency has become overrepresented by Latinx officers, with nearly 50% of the department being of Latin American descent.⁷³ This increase in Latinx border agents in the last 50 years has left many researchers to investigate their motivations for joining organizations that target members of their communities. Researchers have found that while many of these agents do have linguistic and cultural distance from Latinx communities, many of them join due to economic self-interests.⁷⁴ Agents justify their position by making statements along the lines of, "It's just a job." Many of them would explain how labor opportunities in the borderlands were limited, and they viewed working for CBP as a "good government job." In fact, some Latinx border agents claim that their connection to their culture has helped them interact with people at the border more humanely.⁷⁵

While many Mexican American individuals might join CBP due to scarce employment opportunities along the northern side of the U.S.-Mexico border, which is

⁷³ David Cortez. "Latinxs in La Migra: Why They Join and Why It Matters." *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (September 2021): 688–702, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920933674>.

⁷⁴ Cesar C. Garcia Hernandez, "La Migra in the Mirror, Immigration Enforcement and Racial Profiling on the Texas Border" 23, no. 1, (January 1st, 2020): 167-196, <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp/vol23/iss1/6>.

⁷⁵ Greg Prieto, "'Traitors' to Race, 'Traitors' to Nation: Latina/O Immigration Enforcement Agents, Identification and the Racial State," *Latino Studies* 13, no. 4 (2015): 501-505, <https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2015.42>.

generally more impoverished than other zones of the United States, this does not necessarily deter or excuse agents from reinforcing nativism or xenophobia. Further interviews with Mexican border patrol revealed the agents often detach themselves from Mexican nationals and immigrants to carry out their duties. They often used language like “they” and “these people” to describe Mexican people. Greg Prieto explains the culture in which the border agents must operate of one in which agents who show sympathy for migrants are labeled as sympathizing with criminals⁷⁶ Even if a border agent comes into their role without developed prejudices on border crossers, the culture amongst agents has proven to encourage a “them vs. us” mentality, as the border has been often described and seen as a “cat and mouse” game.

Al Mal Tiempo, Buena Cara: Overcoming Violence at the Border

Guadalupe, a transborder student who crossed the border for years, recalls that, for her daily trek, her mom would wake up at three in the morning to make breakfast and pack lunches for both of them. Around 4 a.m., her mom would then wake up Guadalupe and get her ready for school. She would then wrap her daughter in a warm blanket and tell her to sleep in the car so she could have enough energy for the day. Though crossing the border was an endless and tiresome routine, Guadalupe remembers those years and the time with her mom as a time of love and endearment. While they were in line, Guadalupe recalled,

She would entertain me by telling me jokes and storytelling. I would tell her, ‘Oh, Ma cuentame una historia!’ She would also tell stories of her childhood, or she would just tell me about a movie she might have watched long ago. She would describe it to me in a way that actually, I considered great storytelling.

⁷⁶ Greg Prieto, “‘Traitors’ to Race, ‘Traitors’ to Nation: Latina/O Immigration Enforcement Agents, Identification and the Racial State,” *Latino Studies* 13, no. 4 (2015): 501-505, <https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2015.42>.

One time she realized she had gone through all her stories, so she had to make up a story on the spot. I never picked up on it, because she did such a great job at telling me. She always made a joke where she would say, 'Oh, I ran out of stories to tell you because you're always asking me.' So she did sometimes run out of things to say after waiting in line for so many hours, but she always found a way. I feel like during that time, we really bonded a lot because we would spend so much time in the car. And so I remember those moments that she'd do her best to kill time.

Despite the many hours, the time seemed to slip away with her mother at her side.

Once Guadalupe and her mother had crossed the border, they would go to her school to have her join a program before school. Sometimes if they had time before that, the mother and daughter would take a nap in the car. Most times, her mother dropped her off so she could make it on time to work in San Diego at 8 a.m. Years later Guadalupe came to find out the extent of her mother's sacrifices. A Spanish-English translator, Guadalupe's mother would often work overtime, late into the night, getting very few hours of sleep or no sleep at all before they had to leave for their daily commute. Guadalupe recalls her mother's actions with admiration,

And these are things that our parents don't tell us right? The little sacrifices that they make. And so looking back to it now, it made me realize how challenging this commuting was for her. And she did her best to not show it.

Given the pressures of the daily commute, Guadalupe's mother had limited time to partake in activities like taking her daughter to the park or watching television. However, she found a way to bond with her daughter through storytelling. The storytelling made their wait time seem shorter and it is a memory that Guadalupe now holds dear to her heart. Guadalupe's anecdote of her mom illustrates the sacrifices that migrant and immigrant parents make to provide their children with safety and stability under difficult economic circumstances and sometimes even violent environments. We see this with the stories of migrant parents who wrap their children to sleep to deter them from viewing the horrors of crossing the border. Or

the children of street vendors who carve out play time while they attend to their business. The parents of transborder students are not able to control the wait times or the interactions with border agents but they do what they can to ensure their children are well rested and entertained so they feel the burden of crossing as little as possible.

In the interviews, transborder students often brought up the fact that their parents were the ones who made the decision for them to commute across the border to go to school. As such, they had no other choice than to find ways to adapt. Students viewed their parent's decision to have their family commute as a major sacrifice that their parents were making, and as a result they went along with it believing it was what was best for their education and livelihood. Students often emphasized that their commute was something that was normal to them or a situation they were used to doing on a daily basis. As Angel explains:

It was something that was like, perceived, it coincided with normalcy, just because it was the way of living at that point. And we had no other choice, it's what we needed to do to survive. So it just became a point of like, you gotta do what you got to do... And it's just life and you're gonna have to deal with it.

Despite their statements to the contrary, the students know that their commute was not normal or part of most childhoods whether in Mexico or the United States. Nevertheless; they worked to establish routines that would provide them as much stability and normalcy as possible. The students and their families adopted tactics to pass the time and make it through their routines in order to achieve their desired futures. Estefania Castañeda-Perez, a transborder activist, held a discussion on her instagram account, @transborderjustice, where she argued that small acts that students viewed as “adaptation” are in fact acts of resistance:

Adaption assumes that we navigate personal spaces without ever questioning the existence of borders or routine state violence. In a space that is meant to break you, in a space with so much uncertainty, reclaim agency through small actions that are

actually forms of resistance. Central happiness and joy, not adoption and normalization.⁷⁷

Castañeda-Perez goes on to explain that the acts of resistance include listening to music or podcasts, calling loved ones, and/or playing games, all of which allow them to take back their time and space. A space that is meant to intimidate and deter transborder commuters from crossing frequently, can become more comfortable through the connections we make to our communities.

Guadalupe's story exemplifies how transborder individuals work to reclaim their time by shifting their focus on the relationships they maintained across borders. Guadalupe looks back at her time at the border as a testament to the love and sacrifice her mother made for her to obtain her education. This time in her life is especially important to her as she graduated from the university and is moving on to graduate school. Another student, Daniela, described her experience of bonding with other transborder students who traveled with them home to Mexicali. Time would pass by as they delved into their conversations and even cracked jokes about border patrol agents. Similarly, Juan, also a transborder student, mentions appreciating the relationships he made with the street vendors his mom would buy food from in the morning. He interacted with the vendors so often that they would recognize his name, car, and food order. Juan describes these interactions fondly, and he hopes his children could one day build similar relationships.

It is these relationships and narrative of resilience and resistance that give transborder individuals the tools and motivation to continue pursuing their education. The activities we partake in during our commute are not simple distractions, they are in fact what give border

⁷⁷ Castaneda Perez, Estefania. *@Transborderjustice Instagram Infographic*. November 23, 2020. Photograph.

crossers the strength to continue crossing the border over and over again, despite the violent nature of the system.

Cetta Mainwaring argues that political discourse on immigrants in the United States often portrays migrants in one of two ways: as villains or victims. They are either coming into a new country as “thieves of jobs and opportunities,” or they are defenseless victims of an unfair system that pushed them to where they are. As discussed, transborder individuals often take on their commute because of the limited educational and economic opportunities around them, however; at the end of the day it is their decision how they carry out this commute. Transborder individuals are exposed to violence that could be easily avoided through changes in border procedures and policy. The violence they experience is unnecessary and undeserved, but it's important to acknowledge how migrants crossing the border are also shaping movement at the border.

Sergio Chavez agrees and claims that the border is a social construct, therefore, it is something that can constantly be remade. Not just by those who create and uphold policy, but by those who cross the border and learn how it functions. Transborder individuals become experts on how to lessen the effect of the constraints they encounter while crossing. Chavez claims: “When migrants return from the United States, they return out only with US dollars but also with information. With each migration experience, migrants develop knowledge about advantageous strategies and tactics.”⁷⁸ This knowledge is what border scholars have coined as social remittances, “the ideas, behaviors, and social capital” that are passed

⁷⁸ Sergio Chavez, *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 98.

between receiving and sending communities.⁷⁹ Some of these remittances included: memorizing the best and worst times of day to cross the border, picking up on traffic trends to pick the most efficient lanes, and learning when to mention their status as a student to advance their place in line.

Transborder individuals are not just wasting their time spending so many hours and days of their lives at the border. Rather, as these narratives attest, they are actively learning and applying their knowledge to help pass and lessen their wait time. As shown by the stories of students in this project, border commuters use their connections to their communities to not just survive but to improve their experiences. For example, many transborder students start their day by checking social media or radio stations where people report on the wait times at the border and which port of entry in their area has more traffic. People in the community leave messages such as, “Car accident on the ready lane,” or, “Avoid booth 26 at San Ysidro Peatonal.” Avalos describes this act as a community effort, “This shared experience catalyzed ‘digital transborder kinships’ or temporally-bound socialites rooted in relational care, advocacy, and knowledge production.”⁸⁰

Many of the people posting on these groups are complete strangers, but they report back with information in hopes it will help someone else in the community out in the same way a previous post might have helped them. People who cross the border frequently might be more inclined to feel this shared responsibility to help each other through difficult circumstances based on the simple feeling of: “I’ve been there before.” Similarly, Alex

⁷⁹ Peggy Levitt, “The Transnational Villagers,” in *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 10-11.

⁸⁰ Miguel A. Avalos and Ghassan Moussawi, “(Re)Framing the Emerging Mobility Regime at the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Covid-19, Temporality, and Racial Capitalism,” *Mobilities*, (July 29, 2022): 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2109986>.

described how he joined a carpool with other transborder students, in which their parents would switch off being the driver. This allowed for the students to not only secure a ride, but it provided their families with more flexibility in their schedules. Daniela mentioned that she and her siblings built a rapport with other commuters who crossed through the pedestrian lane. When Daniela was running particularly late, she would ask some of the crossers if they could let her cut in line in front of them. Half the time the other crossers would agree, because they knew they were students trying to get to school on time. The port of entries can be a hostile environment, but the small acts of resistance and community care help these students move forward.

Much of the critical border literature describes migrants interacting with border processes as expressing feelings of “wasted time” or “being stuck.” This applies to migrants waiting for an immigration hearing or a student waiting for hours in the pedestrian line. Waiting feels passive in the moment, especially if one’s desired future seems out of reach. Transborder communities have exemplified how waiting can be active and agentic.⁸¹ Transborder individuals actively work to make their commute as enjoyable or bearable as possible. In addition, they are actively collecting knowledge on their surroundings to use to their advantage and building relationships across borders.

Silence as Violence

Previous literature on the educational experiences of transborder students have reported students being ostracized by their teachers and peers.⁸² These students recall being

⁸¹ Rebecca Rotter. Waiting in the asylum determination process: Just an empty interlude?,” SAGE Journals: Time & Society 25, no. 1, (November 25, 2015): 80–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X15613654>

⁸² Vanessa Falcón Orta et al., “An Intersectional Multicultural Approach to Advising and Counseling Transborder Mexican-American Men in the Community College,” *New Directions for Student Services* 2018, no.164 (January 2018): 73-83, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20285>.

treated differently due to their language barriers, ties to Mexico, and commute, especially when it interfered with their performance at school. For these reasons, transborder students often keep their commute a secret, and suffer in silence when their commute affects their performance at school. Transborder students fear that if they speak of their experiences they will be kicked out of school, punished for living outside the school district, have their documentation taken away, or in general be treated differently than their peers. The students in this study had similar concerns, but they added that they did not want to have to explain their entire life story to a stranger in their place of comfort.

The students were cautious of who they confided in at school. Half the students in this study never told their teachers or peers about their commute. The other half who did disclose to their schools of their situation, received mixed reactions. Many times people were unfamiliar with cross-border commuting, so they either moved on or asked questions that demonstrated they had little understanding about immigration processes and border dynamics. For example, Carlos remembers telling his middle school teacher about his commute. The teacher replied, “Why don’t you just get a house in the U.S.?” Carlos laughs looking back at this interaction because he was only thirteen years old. How could he possibly ‘get a house’? Another concern a few students had was avoiding being viewed as a charity case. Valentina mentions feeling uncomfortable when her family members would look at her with pity, “Oh...los hijos de tu hija, cruzan la frontera..pobrecitos.” She did not like this type of reaction, so she decided to keep it quiet from her teachers and friends at school. While many times these reactions were well-intentioned, they highlighted how few people understood their experience.

Some transborder students had teachers who would show little to no sympathy to their situation and would punish or single them out. This was the case for Angel and his two siblings who had the task of crossing the border on their own every morning. Angel started commuting to school in San Diego with his two younger siblings after their father had been deported. Angel remembers waking up at 3 in the morning and not only having to get himself ready but having to chase after his siblings to get up and get ready for school. Sometimes their parents would drive them to the border but they did not have the time or access to cross and drop them off at school.

Getting all three siblings to the border on time was difficult and the long wait times often made them late for school. Angel remembers getting punished so much that sometimes he and his sibling would rather ditch the first period or hide in the bathroom until the second period, just to avoid a reprimand. Angel's mother made it clear that their living situation needed to stay secret. "Don't ever say we live in Tijuana you can never tell anyone," she said, "no matter how late you are." The three siblings feared their parents would be punished for sending their kids to a school outside their district, so they accepted their detention and stayed quiet.

One day Angel's siblings were fed up with the amount of write ups and detention they received, so they decided to confide in a school staff member about their commute. They did this with the hopes they might receive some sympathy for their tardiness. The siblings got together and told the woman at the front desk about their living situation and she was not pleased.

So we ended up telling her like, 'We don't want to be late like we have no choice.' Even then there was no sympathy extended. She was like, 'I live in TJ too, but I'm still here!' And we looked at her, and we were like, 'But you have SENTRI [Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection, a rapid pass system for

individuals], there's a difference...we don't have SENTRI.' And she was like, 'I'm sorry, I don't want to give it [detention] to you, but I have to.'

This interaction with a school administrator parallels some of the experiences of transborder students' confrontations with Latinx border agents. Angel and his siblings were hoping that by reaching out to a member of the community they would receive some form of allyship, but instead their experience was further minimized. Having a community member who is supposed to understand your struggle at a deeper level, diminish your experience, adds insult to injury. The administrator used the age-old argument of, "If I can do it, you can do it too." Angel even points out in this interaction that the administrator has the financial resources to cross the border with more ease with her SENTRI card, while he and his siblings had to figure out their commute on their own. The administrator failed to consider the other factors in Angel's life, such as poverty and lack of parental involvement, that made his commute more difficult. Throughout the years, Angel and his siblings opened up to a few other teachers and word went around about their situation, but there was little to no improvement on their treatment. When Angel did go into the classroom or he was able to sneak in without going to the office he was often singled out by his teachers. He recalls a specific teacher who would make him the center of attention every morning he was late:

So once we entered school, this happened every single day, where teachers would make fun of us, humiliate or dehumanize us in front of our peers, and would say things like, 'Well, congratulations, sleeping beauty, really glad you can make it' or like, 'Wow, you actually made it to class today.'

Teachers knew of my siblings' living situation and instead of being understanding they made sure to weaponize it against my younger siblings too. And so that really broke my self esteem and my brothers too. So yeah, that was when I remember in high school, and that's when I was like, 'I want to get the fuck out of here!' Like, I don't want to ever live this life again.

One of the first suggestions students are given when they are being bullied or having a difficult time is to reach out to their teachers for help, but what should students do when the teachers are the ones that are bullying them? A place that for many students with difficult home lives is a comfort zone, for Angel and his siblings, this was a place in which the trauma they experienced at the border was replicated through their teachers and administrators. These students are sacrificing multiple aspects of their personal life, and many times exposing themselves to state violence on a daily basis, in order to pursue their education, but their efforts are not being recognized by their educators. As mentioned before, the students in this study are all high achieving individuals who want to pursue higher education. Angel and his siblings were all college bound from a young age and constantly excelled academically, but their teachers focused on their tardiness. Transborder students are making their education the main focus in their young lives, yet some of their educators only center on their faults.

In a study on transborder Mexican American men in a community college, Falcon Orta and her colleagues parallel the interactions between transborder students and border patrol and their relationships with their school teachers. She argues that teachers also play a role in policing students, “Authority figures such as CBP officers, educators, and school administrators, put into question their crossing and residential legitimacy, identity, and allegiance.”⁸³ At the border they are questioned about their citizenship and in their schools they are questioned for their academic capabilities. This can be comparably damaging to the self-confidence of transborder students. Angel expresses that one of the things he wanted most was to be seen by his teachers. Instead of viewing his tardiness as an issue of time

⁸³ Vanessa Falcón Orta et al., “An Intersectional Multicultural Approach to Advising and Counseling Transborder Mexican-American Men in the Community College,” *New Directions for Student Services* 2018, no. 164 (January 2018): 73-83, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20285>.

management, he wanted them to see the obstacles he had to overcome to make it to school in the first place. Instead he had to swallow his pride and view him and his siblings being ridiculed for being late.

Another aspect that made the school experience for transborder students difficult was having to be silent about their experiences. For students from mixed-status families, especially undocumented students, there has existed an understanding that while they are legally able to attend school their status should be kept secret. This dynamic stems from the supreme court case *Plyler vs. Doe* (1981) that ruled, "...states cannot constitutionally deny students a free public education on account of their immigration status."⁸⁴ This allowed for children who were undocumented to attend public school for their K-12 education; however, multiple researchers found that administrators, teachers, parents and students followed a "don't ask, don't tell" policy in which the legal status of school children and their families was to be kept silent.⁸⁵ In the workplace, having conversations about undocumented students and legal processes were deemed highly controversial, even for teachers who have a large population of students who are affected by immigration in their classes. As a result, conversations on how to best support these students were not included in educational workshops. By making the status of students invisible, the struggles that came with being undocumented or having undocumented parents were not registered by administrators and educators. As Jeffries and Debach argue, this silence comes at a price to the quality of

⁸⁴ Supreme Court Of The United States, "U.S. Reports: Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202." Library of Congress, accessed June 2022, www.loc.gov/item/usrep457202/.

⁸⁵ Ariana Mangual Figueroa, "Speech or Silence: Undocumented Students' Decisions to Disclose or Disguise Their Citizenship Status in School," *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 3 (January 2017): 485-523, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217693937>.; Julián Jefferies and Dafney Blanca Dabach, "Breaking the Silence: Facing Undocumented Issues in Teacher Practice.," *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*, (November 30, 2013), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1059225>.

education of the student and their feeling of belonging in school, “circle of silence . . . limits the kind of services that administrators can render to this highly vulnerable population.”⁸⁶

Transborder students, who come from mixed-status families or have a complicated home life, do not always receive the proper resources to alleviate the stress of their commute and or living situation. Because these students cannot speak of their experiences without risking being punished, and the fact that many of them were young children at the time they crossed, they are unable to vocalize their specific needs. Because their position as border crossers affected their schooling, not being able to present that aspect of their experience, prevents teachers from being able to see the full extent of the student’s difficulties. As Falcon describes, “failure to acknowledge transborder students’ multiple intersecting identities may perpetuate the marginalization of this student population.” For example, an issue students reported having was figuring out how to properly fill out their college applications and their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms. How do you fill out the FAFSA forms when your parents live in Mexico? What do you put down, if they do not have a social security number? Out of fear that they might be punished, they go on and try to fill out the forms on their own. This leads to them either struggling or filling out the forms incorrectly. This might be a small issue that can easily be fixed, but the difficulty comes with these students feeling like they do not have an ally in their classroom.

Again, these students deal with major life challenges such as family separation or harassment at the border. It is impossible for teachers to anticipate every possible need of each student, but they are capable of creating an environment in which students who are affected by immigration processes, feel comfortable asking their teachers for help. For

⁸⁶ Jefferies and Dabach, 291.

Angel, rather than explaining to teachers how his father's deportation was severely impacting his schooling, he accepted being labeled as a careless student. It was not easy, but it was easier than pleading with teachers to empathize with him. If Angel had found an educator or supporter that he confided in, he could have received resources like counseling services or had his detentions waived.

Often when I have lectures about the stories of transborder students, a common reaction I receive from students that live near the border, is something along the lines of, "I live in San Diego, how did I not know about this?" Students mention feeling guilty for not being well-versed in an issue surrounding immigration in their communities. I often ask these students, "Who benefits from this silence?" The silence surrounding the violence endured by mixed-status families is a method in which that structural oppression can continue to go uninterrupted.

"I Believe in You": Positive Experiences with Educators

Contrary to some of the past literature, multiple students in this study described having positive experiences with their teachers and professors. Transborder students are cautious of who they reveal their living situation to, but the interviews revealed that overtime the students found a few allies that helped them thrive and encouraged them to attend and finish university. It was pleasantly surprising to hear that Rafael had multiple allies throughout middle school and high school. His AP Calculus teacher, Mr. Fernandez, had the biggest impact on him and encouraged him to pursue a degree in physics. Rafael highlighted a moment when Mr. Fernandez lent him a T-81 calculator so he could practice for the AP Calculus exam, with the condition he would return it at the end of the year. When Rafael came back to return the calculator to him, Mr. Martinez told him, "'Oh keep it, I know you're

gonna need it in college.” This meant a lot to Rafael because at the time these calculators were around \$200 and his family could not easily afford one. Rafael also remembers his Spanish teacher, Mr. Martinez, who knew about Rafael’s living situation. Not only did he provide Rafael with a space where he could comfortably speak Spanish and also share about his life in Tijuana without judgment. Since Mr. Martinez knew Rafael’s family was in Mexico and could not help him move, he offered to drive him to the central coast and move him into his new dorm. While he did not take him up on his offer, Mr. Martinez let Rafael know he was on his side.

Lastly, Rafael recalled an instance where one of his teachers stood up for him when his peers were making fun of him. Rafael often fell asleep in his classes after he was done with his work, but his teachers knew he had a long morning commute.

I mean, this one time, I remember... I fell asleep in class, and everyone was making fun of me. And then my teacher was like, ‘Don't make fun of him! He's like working like 10 times harder than like, every single one of you. He naps and he's still getting the highest grade in the class.’ And then like, everyone just stopped making fun of me.

Rafael talked extensively about the positive experiences that his teachers had on him in the long-term and on his career objectives. Mr. Fernandez, for example, encouraged his interest in math and science, which led him to becoming a physics major in college and becoming an engineer in the present day. In a similar way, Mr. Martinez’s constant support and offer to help him move into college meant so much to Rafael. Knowing that someone was so invested in his future, gave him the confidence to succeed in beginning his college career. I choose to highlight these accounts not to devalue the experiences of the transborder students in this and previous studies, rather to showcase positive examples of how teachers can be allies to students who cross the border frequently. Being a transborder student can be

exhausting and isolating as seen throughout this study. It is important to highlight the efforts from the student's allies.

Rafael's positive stories about his teachers was a silver lining amongst the many struggles that transborder students disclosed. At the same time, it was proof that a little bit of allyship coming from an educator can make an impact. Rafael's teachers did go above and beyond, but at the end of the day it was knowing he had an ally that gave him confidence. As mentioned before, the struggles of transborder students often go unsupported because they do not feel comfortable opening up or feel they will be misunderstood. For teachers that might not know a lot about transborder communities, it is important to understand that transborder students do not expect their teachers to solve their problems for them, rather they just want someone to listen to their concerns and build a space where they can be themselves without fear of being judged or punished. The students want a safe space to decompress from the stressful and sometimes even traumatic commute that they experience everyday.

There's Dreams on this Side, Too!

“The power of border kids is that they can see both sides of the artificial lines we draw in this world. Standing in the middle, ‘a foot on either bank,’ They are not deceived by the rhetoric.”

-David Bowles, *The Power of Border Kids*, 2022.

Alex, a transborder student, had a different experience from other students in this study, because his mother was previously a transborder student. Alex's mother would cross from Tijuana into San Diego throughout her young life, where she finished high school and eventually college. In contrast, Alex's father was a strong patriotic man and saw no point in moving to the United States. The family decided that their three sons would benefit from going to school in the United States, but they would continue to live in Mexico. While they

wanted to provide their children with more employment opportunities as adults, they wanted them to be connected to their family and culture as well. Alex finished his K-12 education in Chula Vista and then went on to college in the central coast, and now works as an industrial engineer in San Diego. His brothers also ended up moving to the United States and stopped crossing as they developed their careers. After Alex's father passed away, his mother ended up moving out of Tijuana to San Diego with her children. Overall, Alex's family stopped crossing so frequently, but they still found ways to cross for their own enjoyment rather than out of necessity. Alex's family had built a transborder lifestyle across generations, and Alex continues this legacy by crossing the border to build his relationship with his girlfriend who lives in Tijuana.

Alex met his girlfriend, Yadira, through Facebook over a year ago. They kept scheduling dates and canceling them to the point where Alex had to ask Yadira, "*No me pelas?* (You're not interested in me?)" After that, they finally met up after a few months of back and forth, and have been dating for almost a year. Now Alex crosses at least once a week, if not more, just like when he was a teenager. Alex recognizes that starting to cross the border again has been difficult, but it has also been wonderful to be able to connect to his community in Tijuana again. Not only has he fallen in love, but he has reconnected to his culture by practicing his Spanish skills and visiting new spots on date night. Alex discussed the uncanny experience of crossing the border, after spending years waiting to stop. I asked him what the future held for him and whether it would be in the United States. or Mexico, he explained: "It would be nice to settle down the latter part of my life in Mexico being that the first part of my life was also in Mexico so kind of going back to my roots basically..." Alex still envisions a future for himself connected to his community in Tijuana.

Finally, I asked Alex about his future and he explained what he wished outsiders understood about his experience:

How much it affects your life and your perspectives. What we believe, what we choose to do, how we act. To my friends who were too scared to go to TJ, I want them to know that Mexico it's not what you see in the news every day, there's normal people living there... We have goals and ambitions in the U.S. too.

Alex is grateful for his experience crossing the border, despite the difficulties, because it helped him build his career and build a new perspective on his culture and the politics of immigration. I want to emphasize that for most students, while their relationship to the border is complicated, many still have a love and connection to their communities in Mexico. Even though they have built their lives in the United States as adults, they still consider Mexico their home. Many if not all of the participants still have family members living in Mexico, and some are still crossing the border to finish their studies in higher education. Despite the odds, transborder students are motivated by their love for their communities. Their journeys to the U.S.-Mexico Border have influenced multiple aspects of their adult lives, including their educational, professional, and even romantic lives. They do not wish to cut their ties with the U.S., they simply want to be understood.

Toward the end of the interviews, I asked the students in this study to answer the following question: "What is something you wish others understood about people who cross the U.S.-Mexico border as 'commuters'?" They responded thoughtfully.

Juan: It's something you're never going to fully understand unless you go through it...It's not an easy life. So for one, there's some people that don't even make the decision to do that. It's made for them, which is usually like kids, right? On the other hand, even for the adult who does make that decision for themselves, it's not an easy one, right? Like, I'm sure. I'm sure people don't want to make their life harder on their own... you do it out of necessity. If people understood that there'd be a better understanding of what others experience.

Angel: The first thing is that it's not our choice. For the most part, it's not our choice, and it never was. And to that it's hard for students like us to fit in to find a place of belonging, to find a sense of community, because we're constantly being judged on both sides of the border. That's not easy.

Noemi: Being separated...It can be a little isolating, because I feel like, no one really understands the experience unless you grew up around other people who were doing it all the time...You're in a lot of different situations where like, you have to learn how to deal with, at a way younger age than others, to have to learn how to deal with like police and like kind of the military dealing with compared to like other people who don't cross the border as much.

Valentina: Yeah, it's the best of both worlds, you know, being able to move between San Diego and Tijuana, but it's also draining...I've had moments where I had a traumatic experience and I had to regroup before going into school. Getting into school mode can be very easy, but doing that often can be very damaging...So I think just having empathy and being open minded and understanding towards your students who have to navigate that.

Daniela: I wish to people understood the culture shocks that we go through from going to one side to the other, it's very different, I feel it's like two different worlds, even though it's just land divided by one giant fence...sometimes, people, you know...They're really insensitive to these situations...And like you just happen to be born somewhere, you have no control over that. Like I wish, people could understand that a little better.

Guadalupe: I think first and foremost, recognize that everyone's experience is very different...I never found anyone that was having to commute the way that my mom and I were commuting...I recognized that I did have a different experience and other students which sometimes would make me feel a bit isolated in that process, um, because I felt like nobody really understood my experience. So with that in mind, I--I just feel like it would be nice for people to just understand that experiences vary from person to person.

Carlos: I guess I would like people to realize and understand, they're (transborder students) making an effort to come to school, you know? So let's try not to bash students for it or make them feel stupid... because like, we're making the effort to cross the border every day.

Alex: How much it affects your life and your perspectives. What we believe, what we choose to do, how we act. To my friends who were too scared to go to TJ, I want them to know that Mexico it's not what you see in the news every day, there's normal people living there... We have goals and ambitions in the U.S. too.

Rafael: Just that it doesn't make us any different— I will say that I have had no bad experiences at all. None.

Lorena: It's hard. It's stressful and it gets to the point it'll make you want to quit but you just have to be strong and keep going because you're doing this for a reason, a good reason.

Amongst the ten students, four main themes emerged from their responses: the transborder commute to school is done out of necessity rather than choice; the commute itself is physically exhausting; people outside of the community should empathize more with transborder students; and, this experience of living across borders is one that has brought these students a new perspective. While most educators and supporters with whom transborder students interact do not hold the solution to every immigration and policy problem in their hands, many transborder students simply want to have their life experience acknowledged. Transborder students want people to acknowledge the immense efforts they are putting into achieving their personal, academic, and professional goals. In addition, they just want a supportive space where they can destress from the struggles they encounter due to their commute, and that might look different for each student. I would specifically encourage educators, in areas where many transborder students exist, to get to know more about how, why, and what led their students to commute. We should not just look at what transborder students can learn from us or provide for us, but we should also look at what we can learn from them.

Sue G. Kasun’s work outlines the ways of knowing that transnational families develop through their journeys crossing the border, and how this affects the knowledge transnational students bring into the classroom. Kasun builds on Gloria Anzaldua’s concept of *conocimiento* that was described as, “... an awareness, the awareness of *facultad* ⁸⁷ that sees through all human acts whether of the individual mind and spirit or of the collective, social body. The work of *conocimiento*—consciousness work—connects the inner life of the mind and spirit to the outer worlds of action.”⁸⁸ Kasun applies this to transnational children who navigate multiple communities and spaces in both the United States and Mexico, and found they demonstrated three forms of *conocimiento*. The first being “*conocimiento* that was situated in chained knowing,” which meant transnational families have connections to the border that are not only physical but emotional, regardless of where they are. The second being “*sobrevivencia* (survivalist) knowing,” that referred to the persistence through difficult life challenges, propelled by an underdog mentality and the use of social remittances such as using bilingualism to stay connected to multiple communities. Lastly, “*Nepantlera* (in-between) knowing,” where individuals existed amongst multiple spaces, interacted with different languages, and held multiple identities.

As demonstrated through the negative experiences of transborder students in this study and throughout the literature, “...*transfronterizo* youth in the US and abroad are marked

⁸⁷ Anzaldua describes *facultad* as, “the capacity to’ see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to’ see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant “sensing,” a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning.. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is,. behind which feelings reside/hide.”

⁸⁸ G. Sue Kasun, “Transnational Mexican Origin Families’ Ways of Knowing: A Framework toward Bridging Understandings in U.S. Schools,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 49, no. 2, (May 4, 2016): 129-139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.1086243>.

by media and nativists as having characteristics to be tamed, rather than assets to be cultivated.”⁸⁹ Transborder students are expected to conform at their school or place of work in the United States, but instead of these students conforming they should be able to express all the areas of knowledge that they have obtained from their experiences. Transborder students exist in what Gloria Anzaldua considers an “in-between” space in which the contact of two cultures gives rise to a third space or third culture. Rather than see this space as disadvantageous, this space should be used as a site of power. Transborder students have demonstrated to hold multiple forms of knowing, as demonstrated by the stories of the students in this study. For example, observing border crossing trends to lessen their waiting time, code-switching as a method to communicate with agents of the state and educators, finding ways to pass the time while in line, and using their connections to their communities to achieve their goals. Transborder students are not just simple observers but they have a level of understanding about the world around them: As O’Connor writes about cross-border students in South Texas, “Students were able to comprehend how their everyday experiences were enmeshed in broader systems of power relations and large-scale sociopolitical developments [which was] *critical*, because this cosmopolitan vision allowed the participants to see and criticize the limitations of one-sided perspectives in both countries.”⁹⁰ As these ten young people’s experiences—and that of their families and communities—teach us, transborder life is not just a practice, but a unique perspective that has the power to transform how we see them, ourselves, and one another working for a more just and humane society.

⁸⁹ María E. Fránquiz, María G. Leija, Cinthia S. Salinas, “Challenging Damaging Ideologies: Are Dual Language Education Practices Addressing Learners’ Linguistic Rights?” *Theory Into Practice* 58, no. 2 (January 2019): 134-144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1569379>.

⁹⁰ Brendan O’Connor, “Cross-Border Mobility and Critical Cosmopolitanism among South Texas University Students.” *Teachers College Record* 120, no. 5 (May 1, 2018): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812000501>.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

1. State your age and current occupation.
2. To the best of your memory, how often did you cross the U.S. Mexico border?
3. What was the reason or motivation for crossing the border as a 'commuter'? Who or what was involved in the decision making?
4. Tell me about your immediate family. Who's included? Where are they located?
5. At the time that you crossed the border, did your family or family members cross with you? If they did not, what was their attitude towards your border commute?
6. Describe a typical day at the border for you. What was your routine like on days where you crossed the U.S.-Mexico border?
7. How did you interact with the border patrol and/or military at the border?
8. Describe a typical day at school for you. What was your routine?
9. Did your teachers know about your living situation? If they did, how did they react?
10. Did your peers know about your living situation? What did they think?
11. What language do you speak most/feel most comfortable speaking at home? What about outside your home?
12. What is something you wish others understood about people who cross the U.S.-Mexico border as 'commuters'?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add that I didn't ask?