

On Border Identities: *Transfronterizo* Students in San Diego

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Abstract

This contribution focuses on *transfronterizo* students, who cross the Tijuana-San Diego border to attend private and public schools in San Diego (California). It analyzes how *transfronterizo* students construct their identity in daily interactions with Mexican and Anglo students at San Diegan schools. *Transfronterizo* students not only shape their social identities by ‘the crossing experience’, but also by the multiple interactions with diverse social networks on campus (e.g. *trollos*, *sociales*, *fresas*, *cholos*, *nacos*, *pochos*, *chicanos*, *Mexicanos*, *Mexicano Americanos*, *Tijuanenses*, and *Mexicanos* from the rancho, among others). Based on the transcriptions of 40 individually tape recorded interviews with border-crossing students collected by researchers from the *Transfronterizo* team, the paper documents the emergence of a transforming border identity that challenges exclusive ethnic and cultural identifications with either Mexican or Mexican-descent groups on the Southwest border of the United States.

Keywords: youth migration, transnational identity, crossing, border, language, education

‘For long before there were borders, there were crossers’ – Keep on Crossin’ Manifesto

Introduction

This contribution focuses on the sociocultural reality of *transfronterizo* students¹, who reside on both sides of the Tijuana-San Diego border region and cross one of the busiest terrestrial port of entry in the world to attend private and public schools in South San Diego County (California). According to the Community Foundation (ICF)², *transfronterizos* are part of the estimated 50,000 trans-border Mexican residents who cross the border every day for jobs, schools, housing, medical care, shopping, entertainment, or visits to family and friends. Currently, there are no official figures on the number of students that cross the Tijuana-San Diego border (Alonso 2005). Researchers have focused their attention on commuters or cross-border workers (Alegria 2002), as well as on *transfronterizo* families in Tijuana (Ojeda 1994), whose members are born, reside or work on either side of the Tijuana-San Diego border. However, the

transnational sociocultural reality of *transfronterizo* youth has not been specifically addressed in the literature.

The term *transfronterizo* emphasizes the continuous linguistic and cultural contact that border youth maintain as part of the multiple daily transactions across both sides of the Tijuana-San Diego border. Put on the spot by local newspapers because parents in South San Diego County complain that students from Tijuana claim fake addresses when registering for local schools or are allowed to turn in homework assignments in Spanish if they do not speak or write English (Zuñiga 2004), *transfronterizos* challenge immutable allegiances to either Mexican or Mexican American/Chicana-o social groups, blurring the boundaries between nationality, citizenship, language and social class. *Transfronterizos*' legal status as U.S. citizens, either by birth or naturalization,³ provides them with the territorial flexibility to reside on both sides of the Tijuana-San Diego border. The fluidity of languages and cultural milieus in which they are involved everyday highlight the influence of border crossing experiences in the construction of their identity. Particularly, border enforcement measures (Operation Gatekeeper 1994) and, more recently, U.S. immigration policies in the post 9/11 era (US-VISIT Program to Screen Foreigners 2003), have impacted the border-crossing reality of *transfronterizo* students to the extent that their ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities are questioned by border authorities when they cross from Tijuana to San Diego.

How do *transfronterizos* talk about their identity in relation to social groups at schools in San Diego?

This chapter focuses on the relationships that *transfronterizo* students build within the school environment. In particular, this study addresses the following question: How do *transfronterizos* talk about their identity in relation to social groups at schools in San Diego?

The chapter answers this question from an interdisciplinary perspective. It draws on border approaches that emphasizes the *political* power of borders, which separates real and concrete cultural realities for the people who live along them (Heyman 1994; Alvarez 1995; Michaelsen/Johnson 1997; Donnan/Wilson (vgl. 1994, 1999); Wilson/Donnan 1998; Vila (vgl. 2000, 2003). In addition, it takes into account recent studies of Latino youth culture, which highlight the physical and metaphorical borders surrounding "the spectrum of Mexicanness" (Bejerano 2005, S. 3) in the Southwest. Similarly, it takes into consideration immigrant youth studies that address globalization, identity formation and education in the United States (Rumbaut/Cornelius 1995; Portes 1996; Rumbaut/Portes 2001; Suárez-Orozco 2004).

Data consist of 40 individual 1-2 hours sociolinguistic interviews about *transfronterizos*' border crossing experiences collected by members of the research team during 2004-2006. Particularly, the chapter discusses how *transfronterizos* ascribe and resist membership in different social groups in San Diego schools and identify with a *Tijuanense* border-crossing identity that escape exclusive allegiances with either a Mexican or Mexican American identity. While distance from Anglo social groups such as cheerleaders, football players, skaters, punks, marigüanos (potters), góticos (goths), and hippies is indexed by language (English versus Spanish), resistance to be ascribed a particular Mexican identity has to do with the complex interrelationship between knowledge of Spanish, English proficiency, social class, citizenship, and national origin.

Transfronterizos achieve their identity in between the two ends of a Mexican identity continuum. On the one hand, they resist Mexican elite identities such as *sociales*, *fresas* and *trollos* (labels for upper-middle class Mexican youth), and on the other hand, they oppose Mexican American identities such as *cholos*, *pochos*, and *Chicanos* (labels for acculturated Mexican-descent youth in the U.S.) based on Spanish proficiency and national origin. Moreover, the association found by other researchers between generational status and ethnic labels for Mexican-descent youth in the Southwest (*Lamare* 1982; *Buriel* 1987), which suggests a stronger identification with Mexican identities in first generation youth as compared to Mexican American and Chicano ethnic identities of second and third generation Mexican-descent youth, are questioned in the case of *Transfronterizos*. Our sample includes both U.S.-born and Mexican-born youth, who live on the border and forge transnational identities “on the move” between two nation-states (*Goldin* 1999, S. 4).

Border Identities in the Southwest

Transfronterizos' identification with Mexico and the labels associated with being Mexican in the United States need to be understood within the historical context of Mexican-descent people in the Southwest, whose migration history dates back to the first decades of the 20th century with the first waves of Mexican immigrants between 1910 and 1930 (*Buriel* 1987; *Gutiérrez* in press). The term Mexican designates national origin fundamentally, but as researchers suggest, it is subjected to complex notions of race, ethnicity, language and nationality in the Southwest (*Campa* 1979; *Martínez* 1994; *Gutiérrez* 2006)⁴. For example, the term Mexican American includes people of Mexican-descent born in the United States, but it differentiates from the label Chicano/a in the lack of political connotation. For Mexican-descent people in the Southwest, Chicano/a signifies a militant identity that emerged in the wake of the Chicano movement in the 60s in California and remains present nowadays among the Mexican origin youth association MeCHa (Chicano Student Movement of Aztlan⁵). Two other terms are part of the availability of ethnic labels among *transfronterizo* students: *pochos* and *cholos*. The word *pochos* (translated as “faded” or “cut off”) signifies acculturated Mexican-descent people from California who have lost their language and traditions after the United States government took over the Spanish Southwest in 1846. Similarly, *cholos* designates people from Mexico “who were sent to California from Mexico because of their misdeeds” (*Campa* 1979, S. 5). Nowadays, these terms are re-signified in the Southwest on the basis of linguistic, national, or personal attributes connotations as our data shows in the next sections.

pochos
cholos

For this reason, as the anthropology of borders suggests, it is important to unmask the different realities of people living along different border environments in the Southwest (*Vila* 2000; 2003): Tijuana (Baja California)-San Diego (California), Nogales (Arizona)-Nogales (Sonora), El Paso (Texas)-Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua)-, and examine the political power of borders and the influ-

ence of nation-states policies upon the people who organize their lives in the borderlands⁶. More research is needed to fully “tease out the ways in which the myriad types of people in the borderlands negotiate life” (Alvarez 1995, S. 462).

For example, *Bejerano* (vgl. 2005, S. 20) in her ethnography of youth culture at a Southwestern high school maintains how necessary it is to include a border theoretical framework to analyze the implications that border life has on the ethnic identity of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American/Chicana-o youth cultures in the Southwest. In her opinion, “the lives of youths of Mexican descent represent a collage of conflicts, cultures, languages, celebration, locations, and ideologies that converge and diverge to form a crucial component of their persons: their ethnic, self, and border identities” (*Bejerano* 2005, S. 20). She argues for the negotiation of the “spectrum of Mexicanness” (vgl. 2005, S. 30) among Chicana-o/Mexican American and Mexican immigrant youth in their interactions with each other at school. However, her study does not include Mexican descent youth who are border-crossers. Contrary to *Bejerano*’s study, this research tackles the influence of physical border-crossing experiences in the formation of ethnic and cultural identities in the Southwest. It adds to the complexity of identity formation that *Bejerano* claims, the central role that national origin, social class and language play in *transfronterizos*’ ascription and rejection of different ethnic identities along the Mexicanness continuum that is negotiated with different social groups at schools in San Diego.

transfronterizo

Fresa
Social

trolo

Not only do *transfronterizo* students identify or distance themselves from ethnic labels associated to Mexican-descent people in the Southwest, but also from social class labels that designate Mexican youth on the border (*fresas, sociales, trolos*). *Fresa* (preppy) designates well-off youngsters from the Mexican elite. *Social* or Social in English (usually heard in plural as “the Socials”) is synonymous with *fresa*, and refers specifically to upper-middle class, brand-name youngsters who live in Tijuana and attend private and public schools in Tijuana and San Diego. *Social* and *fresa* also share lexical boundaries with *trolo*, a newly coined term from Tijuana, which for some of the interviewees has been recently incorporated to the Tijuana lexicon to refer to upper-class youth in Tijuana.

These social categories must be understood in relation to the notion of borderlands as sites and symbols of power, symbolic of the histories of nation-state building (*Donnan/Wilson* 1994, 1999; *Wilson/Donnan* 1998)⁷. In this sense, as these researchers agree, the people who inhabit them can undermine this power or challenge the immutability of the nation-state. Our data shows that *transfronterizos* find ways to destabilize the power of the border when, for example, they resist the questioning of their linguistic and national identity by border authorities. In these cases, *transfronterizos*’ ability to cross the Tijuana-San Diego border as American citizens while sharing ethnic rights as Mexican citizens (*Baladrán* 2006, S. 14), coupled with their knowledge of English becomes the main resistance strategy.

Finally, we can have a better understanding of who *transfronterizo* students are if we consider how globalization, understood as “a set of processes that tend to de-territorialize important economic, social, and cultural practices from their traditional boundaries in nation-states” (*Suárez-Orozco/Qin-Hilliard* 2004, S.

14) blurs the distinction between “ascribed” and “achieved” identities as possible terms to explain the adaptation of immigrant children in the U.S. (Suárez-Orozco 2004, S. 177). According to Suárez-Orozco, ascribed identities are those imposed either by coethnics to signal membership to that particular group or by members of the dominant culture to decide which group the individual belongs to. Achieved identities, on the other hand, refer to the individual’s sense of belonging to a group. Globalization allows immigrant youth to incorporate aspects of their bicultural experiences without having to choose between two cultures or giving up certain cultural characteristics to achieve others (Suárez-Orozco 2004, S. 192). Our data shows how *transfronterizos* accumulate cultural capital as border-crossers, which empower themselves across national, racial and class lines (Chávez Montaña 2006, S. 10).

Data

Data comes from transcriptions of 40 individually tape recorded sociolinguistic interviews about *transfronterizos*’ border crossing experiences. The group consisted of high school and college-age *transfronterizo* students (16 males and 24 females) who had crossed the Tijuana-San Diego border to attend public and private schools in San Diego. Males students comprised a group of 16 to 30 year-olds who had been crossing the border regularly, from on occasional weekends (3 of them) to a period of 16 years on a daily basis. Likewise, female students consisted of 15 to 30 year-old young adults who crossed the border regularly for two up to seventeen years. These students became *transfronterizos* due to family decisions offering them a better education in the U.S, motivated by their legal status as U.S. citizens (24 were born in the U.S), dual nationality (10 of them), or gained American citizenship by naturalization⁸ (6 of them). The majority of *transfronterizos* lived in San Diego at the time of the interview but crossing the San Diego-Tijuana border was part of their daily life, whether for entertainment, shopping, visits to family and relatives, dental and vision medical treatment, or in search of different services such as car mechanics, car-washes, and beauty salons among others. *Transfronterizos* had attended different private and public schools in South San Diego County and were familiar with the Mexican and U.S. educational systems. *Transfronterizo* identity was built upon the fluidity of border scenarios that were part of their everyday live. These included daily interactions in English and Spanish across the border (including code-switching and language varieties derived from a language contact situation, such as *Spanglish*) with members of different social groups. In the following pages, I focus on *transfronterizo* identity in relation to Anglo and Mexican-descent social groups at school.

Transfronterizo identity was built upon the fluidity of border scenarios that were part of their everyday live.

Analysis

Specifically, individuals' categorization of themselves and others in narratives is central to the analysis of identity in discourse

The analysis is based on *transfronterizo* students' social representations of themselves and the students they interacted with in the answers they gave about social networks at schools in San Diego. The interview as a speech genre allows individuals to express their opinion, evaluate the world they are asked about, and show affiliation or distance from the subjects and events they talk about. Interviews are "sites of struggle where individuals strive to construct representations of themselves" (Pomerantz 2000, S. 25). The answers *transfronterizos* gave about social groups at school consisted of descriptions, evaluations, and narratives related to specific incidents among social groups. Specifically, individuals' categorization of themselves and others in narratives is central to the analysis of identity in discourse (De Fina 2003, S. 140; Relaño Pastor and De Fina 2005). Identity is understood in this paper as "the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories" (Kroskrity 2000, S. 111).

The analysis of interviews shows that *transfronterizos* manifest their identity through categorization processes employed to label and evaluate their relationships with different social groups at schools in San Diego. Within school settings, labeling is "a socially significant and contested practice" (Eckert/McConnell-Ginet 1995, S. 470) among youth's ascription of different group memberships. Self-categorization and labeling of different social groups in schools in San Diego are fundamental to understand *transfronterizos*' ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities. In addition, "social relationships are an integral part of identity stories that work to introduce, close off, balance, and rebalance possible self-identifications" (Schiff 2003, S. 273).

In the following sections, I discuss the main findings of *transfronterizo* identity as expressed in interview answers. First, I discuss how *transfronterizo* identity falls along two extremes of what I call "a Mexican identity continuum", following Bejerano's definition of the "spectrum of Mexicanes" (2005, S. 30). On the one hand, these students fail to identify with upper-class Mexicans from Tijuana (*sociales, fresas, trolos*), who also cross the border to attend private schools in San Diego, and, on the other hand, they distance themselves from Mexican-descent groups in the U.S. (*cholos, pochos, and Chicanos*). Second, I argue that *transfronterizos* forge their identity as border-crossers and empower themselves with the accumulated cultural capital they share across Mexico and the United States.

Neither *Sociales* nor *Cholos*

Transfronterizos talked about their identity in relation to Anglo and Mexican social groups at school. Distance from Anglo groups, such as cheerleaders, football players, skaters, punks, *marigüanos* (potters), *góticos* (Goths), and hippies was based on language: knowledge of Spanish and degree of bilingualism

in the case of *transfronterizos* versus English monolingualism in the case of Anglo groups. On the contrary, self-identification and distance from different Mexican or Mexican-descent social groups responded to a more complex set of criteria.

Data from the interviews indicate that among social groups at schools, *sociales* and *cholos* represent two extremes of a Mexican identity continuum, both of which *transfronterizos* distance themselves from on the basis of social class, national origin and knowledge of Spanish. *Sociales* (socials) embody the Mexican side of the continuum consisting of upper-middle class youth from Tijuana who cross the border to attend private and public schools in San Diego, and speak Spanish among themselves. The term *social* shares its semantic domain with *fresa* and *trololo* to index social class and high socioeconomic status. *Cholos*, on the other hand, represent the Mexican American side of the “spectrum of Mexicanness” Bejerano (2005) refers to. That is, U.S.-born youngsters who are acculturated, speak more English than Spanish, show limited proficiency in Spanish or no proficiency, mix both languages and speak Spanglish. This term shares its semantic domain with the labels *Chicano* and *pocho* to index national origin, generation of Mexican-descent people in the U.S., and English/Spanish proficiency.

Transfronterizos agree that although *social*, *fresa* and *trololo* share the same semantic domain, there are differences in terms of dress code, social class, and economic capital. *Trololo* equals *social*, and *social* equals *fresa*, as one of the interviewees put it, but *sociales* are also “wannabe fresas” who pretend to come from affluent families in Tijuana, but cannot afford shopping at the expensive stores *fresas* go to in San Diego. Instead, they clothe their *fresa* identity at the discount clothing stores of San Diego shopping malls. Those who do not succeed in this attempt are labeled “nacos” (tacky), *nacos trololos* (tacky trololos) or *sociales nacos* (tacky socials) as Armando suggests:

nacos
nacos trololos
sociales nacos

Armando: *Sociales* were vain. They spoke according to them very *fresitas*, like rich kids. They considered themselves to be very rich and you would find them at the discount store looking for clothes. When they saw you they would hide as if they had seen the devil, like “¡Ah!” *Sociales* used to pretend all the time; they wanted to be *fresitas* but they weren’t. *Sociales* considered themselves very popular. I think *sociales* criticized everybody, “¡Oh! Your sneakers are very tacky”, or “you are not fashionable”. [Interview, Male #3. April, 2005]

Transfronterizos resist being ascribed a *social*, *fresa* or *trololo* identity, even though they also claim to be *Tijuanense* and Spanish speakers. In some cases, being from Tijuana shows solidarity and blurs social class boundaries in order to distance from Mexican Americans. Janet explains it in the following way:

Janet: There were the Mexican-descent football players but who were very acculturated, English spoke only, and I mean, they could not even say their names well in Spanish [...] and then there were the socials, the group of Mexicans who only spoke Spanish and were Mexican [from Tijuana]. And then the rest who spoke Spanish and who were normal. [Interview, Female #4. June 2005]

In this excerpt, Janet distinguishes among two types of Mexican students, those who speak Spanish, whether *sociales* or *normales*, and those who are acculturated and speak no word of Spanish. *Transfronterizos* use the labels of Mexican

Americans and Chicanos interchangeably to refer to U.S.-born Mexicans. They did not acknowledge the political implications of the label Chicano within the Chicano Movement of the 60s and 70s in California. Although they do not align with either a Mexican American or Chicano identity, they do not resist these labels as much as they oppose *cholo* and *pochos* ones, which are also associated with Mexican American identities.

Cholos
cholillos
cholitos
pochos

Cholos, cholillos, cholitos, and pochos are at the other end of the Mexican identity continuum. In *transfronterizos'* opinion, they represent the Mexican American side of the continuum associated to stereotypes of U.S.-born or raised Mexicans. *Transfronterizos* refuse to be ascribed a *cholo* identity because, in their opinion, *cholos* are born in the U.S. They are not true Mexicans. *Cholos* speak more English than Spanish, including Spanglish; they speak limited Spanish or "español mocho" (broken Spanish); and they are *pochos* who neither belong to the United States nor to Mexico. *Cholos* do not cross the border on a regular basis although they can live in Tijuana or Mexico city; they are troublemakers at school ("they are at odds with socials" – Interview, Female #4-). Notice *sociales* should change to socials. They do not know about what being Mexican is all about; they do not know Mexican history; they claim Mexican pride even though they left Mexico at a very young age or never visited the country; and they have no interest in learning:

María: *Cholitos*, like they are just at school, because the truth is that they have no desire to succeed, they are just there, that's it. A *cholo* has more to do with the physical appearance like I don't know, loose pants, shaved heads, excessive jewelry, flannel shirts, things like that. They are from here [U.S.], they are not from Tijuana, they are another group. [Interview, Female #3. June 2005]

norteños
pochados

María uses the Spanish diminutive -ito to mitigate the negative connotation of the word *cholo*, but detaches herself from them in terms of national origin (they are from the U.S.), and physical appearance. Social representations of *pochos* and by extension *cholos* and *Chicanos* have separated Mexican generations along the Río Bravo (*Valenzuela Arce* 2004, S. 126). Stereotypical social representations of *pochos* as Mexican traitors, who are from nowhere, do not speak Spanish and abandoned their Mexican roots, overlook the history of *norteños*, the inhabitants of the Mexican Northern border who were cut off from their own homeland by the U.S. government after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). As *Valenzuela Arce* (2004, S. 132) suggests, *norteños* and Chicanos were "*pochados*", literally cut off from Mexico and therefore lost their national identity. One of the interviewees pointed out that proximity to the border blurred *cholo*, *chicano* and *pochos* identities while at schools in Northern San Diego County, they were clearly differentiated from *sociales* or Mexicans who came straight from Tijuana. José introduces a narrative to exemplify his views about *cholos*:

José: *Cholos* or Mexican Americans from the north of the county who are born in the U.S. have no idea what being Mexican is all about. For them, being Mexican means wearing the big hat, the big belt, the boots, listening to rancheras in high volume, but I mean, ask them about being a Mexican citizen or about Mexican history, I mean, they know absolutely nothing, I mean they don't know grammar, nothing about Spanish, nothing, and you know they are the most critical ones, aren't they? I mean they thought

that because they were born in Mexico and left when they were one or two years old then they are true Mexicans. For example, I have a friend, I remember, that when we go to Tijuana he is all the time telling me about the gringo this or that, and 'I am so proud to be Mexican and not being an American citizen' and I asked him 'so, how old were you when you left Sinaloa?' He was born there in Culiacán, and he tells me 'when I was two' and I ask him 'And when was the last time you went back?' and he tells me, 'no, well I went there when I was eight or nine.' So, since he was two he has only visited a couple of times and now he is 26. And he is not the only one, the majority of Mexicans up North are like that, so they are all boasting about being Mexican but they are nothing and you cannot get along with them, I mean they speak more English than Spanish as well, the Spanish they know is very limited and sometimes you have to pay attention to how they are speaking, I mean, I cannot speak like that. I have to pay attention to what I am going to say because if not they are not going to understand me, so it is better if I speak English with them. If you want to see the big difference, simply in North County Mexicans are another story. Here it is more mixed, in the South, closer to the border, but you could see how those who hardly knew Spanish had their own group, and also the group straight from Tijuana, normally the socials. [Interview, Male #4. May 2005]

This narrative exemplifies how *transfronterizos* are aware of the linguistic and cultural reality of cholos, pochos and Chicanos in the U.S., and how, at the same time, they are very critical of who should count as truly Mexican. Mexican Americans who do not speak Spanish may "act Mexican" in intragroup interactions but cannot be "straight out" Mexicans if they do not speak Spanish. Contrary to *transfronterizos*, Mexican Americans and Chicanos are not border-crossers. Chicanos, as researchers suggest, have historically been considered a hybrid identity in the Southwest, who proclaim a *mestizo* heritage (Indian and European Spanish), working-class origins, Mexican roots, and English monolingualism as the children of bilingual second-generation Mexican Americans in the United States (Gutiérrez in press).

mestizo heritage

Only one of the interviewees claimed overtly to have a pocho identity, which she regarded as something advantageous and the result of living in the borderlands. Her self-identification as "*pocha fronteriza*" (border *pocha*) distances herself from Chicanos who live far from the border and assert to be "more Mexican than Mexicans." In the following excerpt, Helena refers to her experience as a college student at a university in Orange County (California), with Mexican Americans/Chicanos who keep strong cultural and ethnic ties with Mexico:

pocha fronteriza

Helena: At the university I went to there were only Asians and there were few, really few Mexicans. The only Mexicans that I met, the closest Mexicans, were from Santa Ana, and like, they were more Chicanos, I mean, than Mexicans. But there were many that were really stuck to their culture, more the ones I used to hang out with. What is more, I became more Mexican being over there, I mean, in the cultural sense, than living on the border, like well, because I learnt to play in a band over there, I used to go to the Mexican cultural center over there and everybody was like superb identical to Mexicans, they used to spend time in Mexico, they took trips over there and all that. So, like it took me a little to relax because even though we are Mexicans we were very different culturally, I mean I was from the border and like, they were very, very, very Mexicans in the middle of the United States, right? [Interview, Female #7. July 2005]

Helena acknowledges the difference between U.S.-born Mexicans and Mexicans who live at the border. Her interactions with Chicanos who emphasize strong alliances with Mexico make her question the degree of her "Mexicanness" along

the continuum. She detaches culturally from Chicanos who live north of the border by asserting her border-dweller status. Helena was born in San Diego and crossed the Tijuana-San Diego border for 17 years. She self-identifies as *pocha* and finds no contradiction between being Mexican and *pocha* on the border. Being from the border allows her to shift her cultural and linguistic alliances. She can be a nationalist Mexican, a Spanish-speaking Hispanic, and a “*pocha fronteriza*” (border *pocha*) altogether, as the result of having grown up in the Tijuana-San Diego border:

“Hey! I am from the border and I can speak *pocho* if I want.”

Helena: I was the most *pocha* of all and I really lived in Mexico, none of them lived in Mexico, and they spoke a better Spanish, I mean, they did more Mexican things than any other, and like, I used to arrive as a *pocha*, playing electronic music in the car, I mean (laughs) and I lived here at that time, so it is a little funny. In high-school there were only Americans, I mean from San Diego, and the only five Mexicans there, we were from Tijuana, and like, we used to take turns [crossing in a van], we used to go all together. And the truth is, I am superb nationalistic and I like being Mexican and being a Spanish-speaking Hispanic and have a culture that lives the language and nationality, I mean, I like it, don’t I? And I also like that I am *fronteriza*, so I can have the luxury of “Hey! I am from the border and I can speak *pocho* if I want.” [Interview, Female #7. July 2005]

transcultural identity

In this instance, Helena’s fluidity of linguistic and cultural experiences across the border is part of her “transcultural identity” (Suárez-Orozco 2004, S. 192), which makes compatible being an ethnic Mexican, having Mexican nationality, and claiming a *pocho* linguistic identity as part of living on the borderlands. Helena’s compromise as Mexican, *pocha*, and border-crosser demonstrates the complexity of Mexicanness along a continuum that *transfronterizos* mainly define in terms of language and social class. Contrary to Helena’s self-identification as a “*pocha fronteriza*”, most of *transfronterizo* students share rigid categories about what it means to be Mexican on the border: true Mexicans speak Spanish; if they do not speak it well they are *pochos*; *cholos* and Chicanos do not know what being Mexican is about; *sociales*, *fresas*, and *trololos* are from Tijuana and speak Spanish at school. The questions that still remain are: *What kind of identity do transfronterizos align with? Where do they feel they belong? How do border-crossing experiences transform them?*

Border-crossing identities

“You have the best part of Tijuana in San Diego. That’s right, I mean once you cross the border you see what you deserve and not what you have.” [Interview, Male #7. July 2005]

As I have pointed out, the *transfronterizo* students interviewed do not align themselves with a *social* or *cholo* identity or are proud of being *pochos*, with the exception of Helena. On the contrary, they claim a Tijuana identity characterized by border-crossing experiences. For these students there may be *sociales*, *fresas*, *trololos*, *cholos*, *chicanos* and *pochos* at school, but there are also normal Mexicans from Tijuana, a big group of Tijuana who are not *sociales* or *fresas*, who do not pretend to have money or are concerned about physical appearance, and cross the border to get a better education in San Diego schools:

Janet: There were the socials, the socials *fresas*, and then there were the others. The others were basically Anglo people whom we did not interact with. And then there was the big group of us, people who came from Tijuana everyday, so there was a big community, and we also helped each other from time to time. [Interview, Female #4. June 2005]

Transfronterizos distinguish between *sociales*, who cross the border by car and can afford the *Sentri* (Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection) pass, and the big group of *Tijuanenses* who usually take the bus to get to the border, cross on foot and use the trolley to get to school in San Diego. Being from Tijuana does not necessarily imply being *social* and crossing the border by car. However, whether *transfronterizos* cross on foot, in private cars or carpool with others, they agree that 9/11 has worsened their border crossing experiences. Consequently, their U.S. citizenship is often questioned when they cross the border and are more frequently subjected to racial profiling and discrimination on the part of border officers. Antonio explained it with the following narrative:

Antonio: I hate when I cross the border and they ask me ‘do you claim to be a U.S. citizen when you were born in Tijuana?’ I show them my ID, they’re like ‘where were you born?’ I am like ‘Tijuana’ but they first ask me ‘what’s your citizenship?’ and I say ‘I’m a U.S. citizen’ and they ask ‘where were you born?’ and I say ‘I was born in Tijuana’ and they would say ‘so do you claim to be U.S. citizen when you were born in another country?’ ... I had actually an officer ask me that question, and I was going to be like really anal about it or like really pissed off but I said, ‘If you are aware there is also a process called naturalization, officer, so you can become a U.S. citizen when you were born in another country’ and he got mad at me he said “Are you trying to be all smart with me?” and I said ‘No Sir, I am just trying to be correct’ and the officer looked at me and he said ‘Okay, go ahead’ ... but I was really pissed because he said it as if I was ignorant, you know, when I’ve been living in this country for more than nine years, and I probably know better U.S. history than Mr. Martinez, which was his name, you know it’s like, it’s funny to see like Mexican Mexicans, or Latino officers when they’re asking you all these questions, you know, it’s funny, it’s ridiculous, I really don’t see the whole mentality of the Mexicanos trying to join immigration. [Interview, Male #2. May 2005]

The boundaries between language, social class, ethnicity, immigration status and national origin among groups of Mexican students at San Diegan schools become undistinguishable under the political power of the border. Being born in Tijuana and a U.S. citizen by the process of naturalization while negotiating to cross the border in English with Latino/Mexican descent border authorities exemplifies how border crossing experiences transform *transfronterizos*’ identity. The semiotics of *transfronterizos*’ identity consists of a camouflage of linguistic, ethnic, racial, geographic, and appearance indexical signs, among others, that they learn to juggle when they cross the border:

Interviewer: Do you speak Spanish or English with the officers when you cross the border and why?

Angel: Well, I speak Spanish, and I’ll tell you why, because when I spoke English, there was like a certain doubt, I don’t understand why, don’t ask me why, but uh when I speak Spanish, and I just say “I’m going to Viejas casino”, they’re like “Oh, OK”. In Spanish uh, it’s like uh no questions asked, let’s go, and that’s what you want, you just want to cross the border.

Interviewer: Do you think it's possible to fool the border officials if your English is good enough?

Angel: Oh, yeah, definitely, there're a lot of friends of mine that just cross by saying, uh 'I'm U.S. citizen' (pause) 'Oh really, where you're from?' 'San Diego' so they speak perfect English.

Interviewer: How good does your English has to be to fool them?

Angel: Good enough that you don't doubt on yourself when you speak it. Good enough as you feel comfortable because they smell the doubt in a second.

Interviewer: Is English good enough or do you have to look a certain way?

Angel: I think it's uh, yeah, if your skin is less brown, if it's more white, then you have it easier, or more chance of crossing without any problem, but uh it applies to different officers sometimes.

Interviewer: What about the way they dress?

Angel: They way they dress, yeah if it's good, well when you see a Mexican dressed with flaking pants, flaking clothes, obviously they are American, or they have the papers to live over there, but when you see a Mexican with tight clothes and he says he's American, he isn't American, believe me. [Interview, Male #7. July 2005]

Transfronterizos' ability to choose among an array of identity repertoires due to the multiple linguistic and cultural experiences as border-crossers undermines the political power of the border, and strengthens their trans-national, trans-cultural identities.

As this excerpt exemplifies, *transfronterizos'* ability to choose among an array of identity repertoires due to the multiple linguistic and cultural experiences as border-crossers undermines the political power of the border and strengthens their trans-national, trans-cultural identities. The cultural capital they accumulate in terms of bilingual skills, the knowledge of two sociocultural realities as well as their educational experiences across the border allow them to move at ease both in Mexico and the United States.

Conclusion

This contribution has discussed how *transfronterizo* students from Tijuana talk about who they are in relation to other social groups at school. Data from the interviews suggest that *transfronterizo* students craft their identity across two worlds that are fluid and interchangeable due to the continuous border-crossing experiences. Contrary to the identity challenges of second-generation immigrants in the United States, whose sense of belonging may be lost between the "here" and "there", the "everywhere" and "nowhere," as *Suárez-Orozco* (2004, S. 176) suggests, *transfronterizos* find a sense of belonging in crossing as a way of life. The interview excerpts indicate that *transfronterizos* are able to transfer their bilingualism and biculturalism across borders.

Transfronterizos find a sense of belonging in crossing as a way of life.

The social relationships they establish at schools with other groups of Mexican students reaffirm the boundaries of their ethnic and cultural identities. As *Schiff* (2003, S. 301) argues, "social relationships form the plotline of identity-talk". *Transfronterizos'* identity-talk shows alliances with Mexican Tijuana youth who cross the border to study in San Diego, a number that is not represented in governmental documents and has not been teased out yet. Within this group *transfronterizos* distance themselves from upper-class *Tijuanenses* or *fre-*

sas and *sociales* or “wannabe *fresas*”. Similarly, they define themselves against *Mexican Americans*, *Chicanos*, *Cholos*, and *Pochos* by reaffirming their Spanish fluency and border-crossing experiences.

In addition, the ability to cross the border everyday diffuses assumptions about the identification between Mexican identity and generational status, which would decrease in Mexican-descent immigrants from one generation to the next (Buriel 1987, S. 147). *Transfronterizos* differ from first-generation Mexican immigrant students in the United States who do not cross the border and do not share their bilingual proficiency and biculturalism. Moreover, they distinguish themselves from second-generation Mexican American youngsters who are born in the United States and eventually lose their Spanish proficiency or find it difficult to maintain their bilingualism due to societal pressures, as it is the case of Latino communities in the U.S. (Zentella 1997). Additionally, *transfronterizos* differ from other Tijuanses who do not cross the border or remain monolingual Spanish-speakers. Although these results need to be complemented with future ethnographic research in San Diegan schools and naturalistic data of *transfronterizos*' interactions with different social groups, excerpts from the interviews demonstrate that *transfronterizos* are not trapped between “*acá or allá*” (here or there). They are from *acá y allá*, actively transcending borders and *fronteras*.

Notes

- 1 Data and results presented in this chapter are part of the research project *TRANSFRONTERIZOS REMAPPING THE BORDER: LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND IDEOLOGY AMONG TIJUANA STUDENTS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY*, granted by UC MEXUS COLLABORATIVE GRANTS and CONACYT (2004-2006), and co-directed by Professor Ana Celia Zentella, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego (UCSD), and Dr. Guillermo Alonso Meneses, Department of Cultural Studies, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), Tijuana (Mexico). I was a member of the research team during my postdoctoral stay at the University of California, San Diego (2003-2005). I thank members of the research team for their valuable feedback and support during the writing process of this chapter. Any mistakes in this chapter remain my own.
- 2 For more information visit the International Community Foundation webpage at: <http://www.icfdn.org>. These figures are also corroborated by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE): www.ice.gov.
- 3 According to the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), a child who is regularly residing in the United States can become a citizen of the United States if he or she is under 18 years of age, and is in legal and physical custody of a parent who is a U.S. citizen. Other requirements include: an ability to read, write, and speak English; a knowledge and understanding of U.S. history and government; good moral character; attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution; and, favorable disposition toward the United States. For more information about the naturalization process in the United States, visit the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at: <http://www.uscis.gov/>
- 4 For a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be Latino/a in the United States, including the Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano-a experience, see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (1998). *The Latino Condition. A Critical Reader*. New York: New York University Press.

- 5 Aztlán is the Nahuatl term that Aztecs gave in the 14th century to today's Southwestern states in the U.S. Today, it remains a symbol of colonial injustice for the Chicano movement in the United States.
- 6 For a discussion on the relationship between border theory, culture and the nation-state, including the nuances of border terminology, see Lugo in Michaelsen and Johnson (1997).
- 7 According to Donna and Wilson, borders have three elements: "the legal borderline" that separates and joins states, "the physical structures of the state" that demarcates and protects borderline, and "frontiers" or territorial zones within which people negotiate their membership to the nation-state (Wilson & Donna 1998: 9). The authors refer to both an anthropology of borders and anthropology of frontiers as a way to emphasize the political power that borders exert in communities living in the borderlands.
- 8 See note 3.

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