

SERGIO CHÁVEZ

Fronterizos,  
Transnational Migrants,  
and Commuters  
in Tijuana

# BORDER LIVES



Border Lives



# Border Lives

*Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants,  
and Commuters in Tijuana*

SERGIO CHÁVEZ

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Chávez, Sergio R., author.

Border lives : fronterizos, transnational migrants, and commuters in Tijuana / Sergio Chavez.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-938057-2 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-19-938058-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Tijuana (Baja California, Mexico)—Emigration and immigration—Social aspects. 2. San Diego (Calif.)—Emigration and immigration—Social aspects. 3. Immigrants—Mexico—Baja California (Peninsula)—Social conditions. 4. Mexican-American Border Region—Social conditions. 5. Mexican-American Border Region—Economic conditions. 6. Transnationalism. I. Title.

JV7409.Z6T5534 2016

305.9'0691097223—dc23

2015027797

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed by Sheridan, USA

*In memory of my abuelitos, José Refugio Chávez Lara (1923–1991)  
and Isidro Ramírez Ramos (1919–2007), both ex-braceros from  
Las Jícamas, Guanajuato, and my abuelitas,  
Guadalupe Pantoja Zavala and Paulina Ramírez Lara.  
For my parents, Trinidad and Aurelia Chávez.*



## CONTENTS

*Figures and Tables* ix

*Acknowledgments* xi

CHAPTER 1	Crafting Border Livelihoods	1
CHAPTER 2	The Occupational Careers of Ex-Braceros	28
CHAPTER 3	Becoming a Border Commuter	61
CHAPTER 4	Strategies for Crossing the Border through (Non)inspection	92
CHAPTER 5	Border Networks	123
CHAPTER 6	Conclusion: Lessons from Tijuana	152
	Epilogue: Border Lives a Decade Later	164
	<i>Appendix: Methodological Reflection</i>	177
	<i>Notes</i>	185
	<i>Index</i>	201





## FIGURES AND TABLES

### Figure

- 3.1 Number of visas issued by US consulates for selected years 65

### Tables

- 1.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of border commuters  
and noncommuters 18
- 1.2 Border-commuter demographics by cohort 19
- 2.1 Hourly wage rates for agricultural workers in the borderlands  
(1981) 54



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As a first-generation college student, I grew up with limited resources, which made college especially challenging and often a very lonely place. However, I was blessed with having a strong social support system of people who cared about me and wanted to see me succeed at every stage of the way. Despite all of the obstacles that I faced, I believe that it was worth it, not just because I was able to eventually become a professor but because I have met some wonderful people whom I would not have otherwise met. My life would have been very different had I decided to become an automobile mechanic and remained in the Salinas Valley, which was what I wanted to pursue before I decided to enroll in Hartnell Community College. Let me thank and introduce you to all those wonderful people who helped to cultivate the scholar that I am today.

I want to start by thanking Max J. Pfeffer, David Brown, and María Cristina García, who all played an integral role in my early development as a migration scholar. Whenever I encountered roadblocks in graduate school, Angela Gonzales always made time to meet with me, whether it be over coffee or lunch. Becky Márquez provided important emotional support and believed in the project from its very early stages. While in Tijuana, the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California provided workspace during my field research. I would like to also thank Elizabeth Maier from El Colegio de La Frontera Norte (Colef) and Ariel Mojica (El Colegio de Michoacán), who sparked and nurtured my love for “lo fronterizo.” I also thank Magalí Muría for being a great friend and colleague and adopting me into her family. Finally, I would like to thank Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo who first inspired me to become an ethnographer through her own research with people from the

Solomon Islands. I am also really grateful that she was willing to write letters of recommendation at every stage in my academic career that ultimately made it possible to write this book.

I thank places that provided much-needed nourishment during my stay in Tijuana, including: Panadería La Sonrisa, Casa del Mole (the one in Colonia Libertad), Paletería Michoacana, Tacos El Ruso and Tacos La Glorietta in El Soler, Tacos Chávez, Yogurt Place in Playas, Tortillería Grano de Oro and “el paisa,” who sells coconuts in Mercado Hidalgo, and the one street vendor who sold the best burritos for only \$1.00 each in La Revu out of a styrofoam cooler. Additionally, I thank all of the hard-working taxi and bus drivers who moved to Tijuana to provide better futures for their families, who took care of me and made me feel at home through my conversations with them while I was away from my family.

I never would be where I am today had it not been for the generous funding that I have received, including the Ford Foundation, which provided generous support to help me finish coursework and the fieldwork. Finally, the Woodrow Wilson National Foundation Career Enhancement Fellowship for 2013 allowed me to complete the book by giving me the time. As a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Carolina Population Center and the Sociology Department, I met many great colleagues who were influential in the early stages of the book. I want to thank Jackie Hagan and Ted Mouw for forcing me to work on my book even when I wanted to work on other projects. I would also like to thank Liana Richardson and Heather Edelblute who provided much-needed emotion work during the early writing stages.

I will forever be grateful to my colleagues at the Sociology Department at Rice University, who provided an environment that allowed me to grow as an independent scholar. I am especially thankful to Elizabeth Long and Elaine Howard Ecklund for reading the first draft of the book and encouraging me to publish it. Sarah Damaske, thank you for encouraging me to consider Oxford University Press. I also want to thank my awesome colleagues Jenifer Bratter, Rachel Kimbro, Ruth López Turley, Justin Denney, Bridget Gorman, Steve Murdock, Steve Klineberg, and Michael Emerson. Most importantly, I am grateful to the Culture Writing Group, which comprises Elizabeth Long, Robin Paige, Erin Cech, and myself. They read multiple drafts of my chapters and provided very constructive feedback on everything from honing my argument to expanding the implications of the study to larger sociological issues. I would also like to thank Claire Altman for forcing me to finish the last round of reviews and my undergraduate students who helped me on this project, including Lilly Yu, Rocio

Rosa-Lebrón (especially her work on the index), Tyler Woods, and graduate students Elizabeth Korver-Glenn, Irina Chukhray, MacKenzie Brewer, Laura Freeman, and Ellen Whitehead, who helped edit various sections of the book. I also thank Juan Manuel Avalos González and Maribel Campos Muñuzuri, who helped to conduct in-depth interviews, and Gretchen Rivero, who helped transcribe them. One person whom I cannot forget because he has helped to provide so much research assistance over the years is “el famoso” Erick Zamora Mendoza; gracias amigo.

I would also like to thank Rubén Hernández-León for inviting me to give a talk at UCLA’s International Migration seminar that ultimately helped provide the much-needed push to complete the final book. I would like to especially thank James Cook, editor at Oxford University Press, for taking a chance on my book and providing much-needed guidance during the entire process. He was an incredible editor and I plan on working with him in the near future. I thank Amy Klopfenstein, editorial assistant at OUP, for helping move the book forward in the production process. I also thank Jessica Cobb, who made many of the stories in the book come alive and who helped me to strengthen the argument. Finally, I especially want to thank the anonymous reviewers at OUP for taking time to review my book and provide constructive feedback that ultimately made the book much stronger. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to review my manuscript.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my family, Trinidad and Aurelia (a.k.a. Cleme) and my siblings, Angélica, Trinidad, Adriana, and Christopher, for being supportive of me throughout my life. I thank my parents for teaching me about the power of stories, something that I hope to teach to our new third-generation family members: Abriel Chávez, Evan and Elise Villegas. I could not have completed the book had it not been for Robin Paige, who not only spent an enormous time listening to and helping me formulate my argument but also did a lot of emotion work during the difficult writing times. You are the best. And to Abriel for waiting until the book was done before you decided to arrive.

Despite the vast array of social and financial support that I received, any final errors are strictly my own doing. I hope that by producing the scholarship that I have produced and, I have repaid some of the generosity for those who gave it to me.



MAP 1 Map of the US-Mexico borderlands

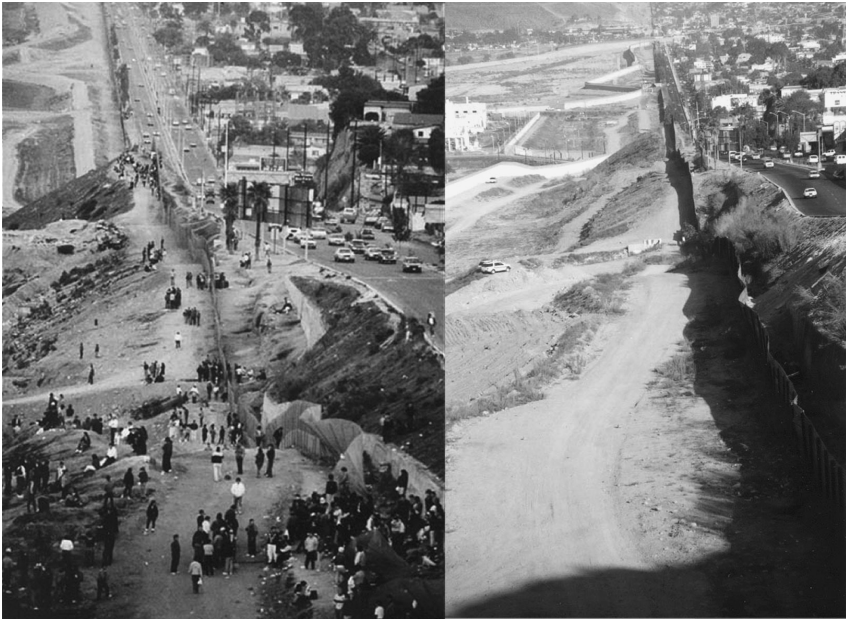


FIGURE 0.1 The San Ysidro–Tijuana border, before and after Operation Gatekeeper.

Left: People crossing clandestinely through Tijuana in 1991, about one mile west of the port of entry in San Ysidro, California. People on the left side of the fence are hanging around on the US side and waiting for the opportune time to cross when the Border Patrol does not detect them. Right: The identical location, taken in 1999 after the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper, shows how increased border enforcement curtailed clandestine crossings. (Courtesy of the US Border Patrol)



FIGURE 0.2 Border commuters crossing into Tijuana, 2013.

Tijuana residents returning from shopping and working in the United States. (Author's collection)





Border Lives



## CHAPTER 1 | Crafting Border Livelihoods

RAMÓN'S LIFE IS A border life. In 1968, at the age of eighteen, Ramón García left the small community of Jocotepec, Jalisco, because he had trouble finding work.<sup>1</sup> He went to the rapidly growing border city of Tijuana and never returned to his hometown. Soon after arriving in Tijuana, he found construction work at the home of a radio station owner who later hired him as an office assistant. This job provided Ramón with the stable employment he needed to apply for a Border Crossing Card (BCC), a permit that allows residents of border communities to legally cross to the United States to shop or visit family. In 1982, when the peso plummeted and he lost his job, Ramón used his BCC to work in Los Angeles at a distribution warehouse under the pretense of crossing to shop. Ramón spent the workweek in Los Angeles and returned to Tijuana every Friday night to spend time with his wife and their four children.

During one of his crossings, Ramón was involved in a verbal altercation with an immigration official who had mistreated an elderly border crosser. When Ramón questioned the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agent, the angry agent confiscated Ramón's BCC, leaving him unable to cross into Los Angeles. A few days later, Ramón returned to the San Ysidro port of entry and with the help of several family members, he jumped the fence. He boarded a Mexican bus line and moved to Los Angeles. Fortuitously, Ramón's border crossing took place just before the enactment of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which granted legal residency to almost three million formerly unauthorized immigrants. A few years after obtaining his Green Card through IRCA, Ramón returned to Tijuana, where he settled permanently and became a

daily border commuter. For the past seventeen years, Ramón has crossed into San Diego each day to work in construction, returning to Tijuana at the end of the workday.

Over the course of his life, Ramón has crossed numerous internal and international boundaries to secure a livelihood for himself and his family. Life histories like Ramón's are common in Mexican border cities. Previous migration and border scholars have long noted the distinct migration and labor market practices of border residents in comparison to their rural unauthorized Mexican counterparts.<sup>2</sup> *Border Lives* describes the strategies that people like Ramón employ to navigate the US-Mexico border and reveals the resources that US border and immigration policy offers to borderland residents that they utilize to construct their livelihoods. The book follows the lives of Tijuana residents as they establish roots in the borderlands, find work in the United States and Mexico, develop family and friendship ties that aid in the settlement process, and cross the border using legal and extralegal means across distinct historical periods.

The book is filled with the narratives of people who migrate to craft livelihood strategies in Tijuana, the United States, or both in an era of globalization and increased border enforcement. The border presents challenges to people on a daily basis but it also provides economic opportunities that extend beyond the confines of the nation-state. As large-scale historical and contemporary political-economic changes alter the structures and opportunities, border residents must adapt their livelihoods to survive. In particular, the book focuses on border residents' adaptation at a time when the political economy of the Mexico-US border was undergoing major changes, including: the displacement of peasants from Mexico's countryside that pushed men into the Bracero Program then to the borderlands; the Mexican economic crisis of the 1980s that created further unauthorized migration and led to the enactment of IRCA in 1986; and the contemporary era of escalating border policing and immigration restrictions through Operation Gatekeeper in 1994 that attempted to curtail unauthorized migration into the United States. In addition to looking at these immigration and border policy changes, the book also follows the working lives of migrants during a historical period of precarious employment in the United States, characterized by the rise in nonstandard work practices such as subcontracting, part-time work, and informal work arrangements, that have forced migrants and their families to find creative ways to survive in an increasingly globalized world marked by rising social and economic inequalities.<sup>3</sup>

## Unpacking Agency

*Border Lives* also engages with a fundamental sociological question regarding border residents: do they exercise agency, living on their own terms? Or are they merely products of social, political, and economic structures? In the case of unauthorized immigrants, these questions are difficult to answer. Their legal status renders them vulnerable in the labor market, limiting their power and resources to make choices. But sociologists agree that although structures constrain human action they also “make possible a whole range of choices in everyday life.”<sup>4</sup> That is, though political-economic structures constrain human action, they also provide new courses of action that people may take to live according to their needs and desires. By examining the strategies that people such as Ramón employ to cross the border, find work, and settle in the borderlands across time and space, this book provides a nuanced picture of how people reproduce social structure and challenge—successfully and unsuccessfully—the very system which restricts their mobility and livelihood options. While the book focuses on the lives of savvy border residents who were able to turn the border into a source of opportunity, it also documents the tremendous toll that these strategies exact on the everyday lives of border residents. The life stories in this book highlight border residents’ actions and choices in the face of the considerable obstacles posed by restrictive border enforcement and immigration policies intended to limit workers’ mobility in a region long known for cross-border trade. Their actions must be investigated ethnographically, by describing people’s everyday lived experiences, and historically, to capture how those lived experiences change as people navigate the shifting context of the border.

Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische assert the need to study “historical changes in agentic orientations” to show how “actors formulate new temporally constructed understandings of their own abilities to engage in individual and collective change, as well as how these micro level processes intersect with longer-term social, political and economic trajectories.”<sup>5</sup> What better way to understand these processes than by studying the ultimate structural constraint on opportunity, choice, and social action: the physical border? A focus on the border reveals that structures are not always “virtual,” existing only as traces of memory “orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents” as Anthony Giddens describes them.<sup>6</sup> Rather, as William Sewell points out, material resources like factories and land are also resources that define possibilities for human agency.<sup>7</sup> This book focuses on both physical and symbolic changes in the structure

of the border and the immigration policies that separate Mexico and the United States to examine related changes in people's livelihood strategies as the physical and symbolic border itself changes. By studying agency and structure at the US-Mexico border, I am able to examine changes not only in human action but also in border residents' goals and desires. By describing the strategies that people employ to navigate the US-Mexico border, I reveal the resources that US economic and integration policy offer to borderland residents that they may utilize to construct their livelihoods.

## Theorizing the Border

Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan argue that "the anthropological study of the everyday lives of border communities is simultaneously the study of the daily life of the state, whose agents there must take an active role in the implementation of policy and the intrusion of the state's structures into its people's lives."<sup>8</sup> A study about the border must then take into consideration how the border has been refashioned on a continual basis as a result of the efforts by lawmakers and law enforcers to regulate the political economy of the borderlands region. According to the historian George Sánchez, during the early part of the twentieth century, the border in El Paso–Juárez was continually remade by the US and Mexican governments to "suit the new and social economic realities of the region."<sup>9</sup> For example, the expansion of Mexican railroad lines helped to facilitate the mobility of Mexicans first to northern Mexican cities and eventually into Los Angeles and other southwest destinations. Furthermore, Sánchez argues that US immigration officials in the early 1900s did little to regulate the entry of Mexicans so as to not disrupt the flow of migrant labor into the US economy. The constant crossing of the border by Mexicans helped recreate the border on a continual basis and forced crossers to reinvent their strategies for gaining access to US labor markets.

In the contemporary period, Peter Andreas describes the theatrics of boundary enforcement at the US-Mexico border in an era of globalization marked by economic integration and market changes. He argues that border policing has been "less about achieving the stated instrumental goal of deterring illegal border crossers and more about politically recrafting the image of the border and symbolically reaffirming the state's territorial authority."<sup>10</sup> In fact, he asserts that unauthorized crossings have long been an integral part of the border and US-Mexico migration, yet the labeling of unauthorized immigration as a social problem only recently emerged as