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Identity Negotiations of a Mexican Transnational in the Rio Grande Valley: Crossing the Border Daily



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Abstract

This narrative case study examines the cultural affiliations of one transnational US-born Mexican American college student, and her various intersecting veins of identity. The aim was to capture the bordered existence in the many criteria of her being. Her linguistic identity, pop culture identity, spiritual identity, as well as her general cultural affiliations are examined as intersecting rays of influence. Utilizing Anzaldúa's (2012) bordered identity as theoretical grounding for her partitioned selves, along with Bakhtin's (1986) notion of cultural and linguistic dialogue, we analyzed the complexities in this one bicultural, bilingual young woman venturing into adulthood. This study sheds light on the experiences and identifications of transnational young people living on the US-Mexico border. In particular, the participant seemed to continuously challenge fixed notions of identity, which contest current academic labels and frameworks that scholars have used to examine the identity of transnational students.

Keywords: transnationalism, intersectionality, bordered identity, Mexican American.

Introduction

"I don't really have an American side," Alejandra (pseudonym) replied.

We had asked this Mexican American young woman if she felt more Mexican or more American, because for the past semester, we had been conducting interviews pertaining to her cultural and

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linguistic identification. This study seeks to showcase the dialogic relationship and lived complexities, both cultural, linguistic, and political, of what Tessman (2016) refers to as *transfronterizo* individuals who fluidly move between and across the US-Mexico boundary with cultural positionings in both locales. This case study provides a first-hand perspective of the lived realities of such an existence, giving this theoretical identity breath and lived existence.

Alejandra was at the time a US-born third-year education major with most of her family across the border from her south Texas public university. As the oldest child in her family, she had unique responsibilities that marked her as being between many different worlds, which is a common phenomenon among Mexican immigrant youth (Orellana, 2009). She was 20 years old and had lived on her own in the US since starting college three years ago, while her family resided across the border in Valle Hermoso, Mexico, a municipality in the northeastern agricultural region of the border state of Tamaulipas. On weekends, sometimes she made the trek back to her family's home through Matamoros and into "The Beautiful Valley," the literal English translation of Valle Hermoso. Since the start of pandemic, however, she had been participating in remote learning via Zoom from her home in Mexico.

There has been a lot of attention in recent years to the movement of people into the US from Mexico, as migrants make the harrowing journey north across the border, risking their lives and fortunes (e.g., Kamarck & Stenglein, 2019). Yet, in the context of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, folks are often transnational, scurrying across the border their entire adult lives, at times daily for work, education, or to visit relatives. As a native of the Rio Grande Valley, Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) described the locale as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a state of constant transition" (p. 3). This transitional transactional space characterized a heterogeneous culture that had elements of both Texas and northern Mexico.

Despite the fluid sense of belonging that exists here, "border anxiety has bred attempts to militarize the border, enforce immigration policy, and police the boundaries of US identity" (Cisneros, 2014, p. 2). Thus, residents of this locale often live disconnected existences between borders, both physical and psychological, that demarcate this in-between space. It seems that people who resided in this locale for centuries were now rebranded as unwelcome trespassers due to political and ideological hegemony and colonialization. Different from earlier times, when Mexican communities on both sides of the border lived and worked together as one, anti-migrant and xenophobic discourses and policies have gradually hardened the interaction between communities along the Tamaulipan/Texan border.

It is in this geographical space that Alejandra and many of her peers cross national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries regularly in their daily lives. They traverse the physical border partitioned with guard stations, fences, walls, and the Rio Grande, which in certain spots during periods of drought is nothing more than a ravenous brook. She, like many of our other Mexican students, take pride in their heritage cultures, teaching the first author more Mexican Spanish, like the slang *que padre* for "cool", and sharing with us food from home, like *tamales* wrapped in green plantain leaves and homemade *tacos de tripitas* doused with onions and cilantro at our pre-pandemic end-of-the-semester celebration potluck.

Along with these Mexican elements were other US identity components, such as fluency in US English, awareness of US pop culture, and intimate understanding of US politics and the US psyche. Many spent their days commuting back and forth between Matamoros, Reynosa, or Valle Hermoso, and the US regions of the Rio Grande Valley in southern Texas. This geographical fluidity lends to a psychologically dialogic existence, where there was an "interaction of several unmerged consciousnesses...replaced by an interrelationship of ideas, thoughts, and attitudes gravitating toward a single consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 9).

Literature Review

Alejandra's transnationalism is common among students of her generation in Mexican border towns and is characterized by a transience across political national borders. Yet, there also exists a disjunctive educational experience for these individuals, as the Mexican and US educational systems do not share much overlap. In Tessman's (2016) work, she identified students who live in Mexico and traverse the border for school regularly as *transfronterizos*. Often with both parents residing in Mexico, these *transfronterizos* tend to experience two cultural and linguistic realities: one in their English-speaking White context of their formal schooling and the other after school in line with their Latino heritage, including conversing in the Spanish language. They hold tenuous memberships in both cultures, as they lack full language proficiencies and cultural memberships in either national context.

De la Piedra and Araujo (2012) also studied the *transfronterizo* identity, defining the existence as being "from *acá y allá*" (p. 214), here *and* there, instead of "trapped between *acá o allá*" (p. 214), here *or* there. There is then a simultaneity of being, linguistically, culturally, politically, and even socially, with friends and family on both sides of the border. The internal contradictions and tensions of living on the border cause these individuals to exist in a state of *nepantla* or an interstitial existence "living within and among multiple worlds" (p. 216).

Transnational students, however, need to be distinguished from students who have simply migrated from another country. These students "face a distinctively different challenge than immigrant students because transnational students must become increasingly skilled in the languages, cultures, and curriculum and instructional approaches of two or more nations" (Skerrett, 2020, p. 500). This disjunctive double-voicedness nurtures complexity in how such individuals experience the world and name it. In a comprehensive literature review, Allison Skerrett (2020) articulated the need for a transnational literacy education program, in which diverse perspectives are intentionally included in the instruction. The first dimension is teachers "inquiring with their students into students' social, cultural, and educational experiences in one or more countries" (p. 503), where they cocreate learning and the curriculum together. Next, teachers need to cater and adapt their instruction specifically to their transnational students. Third, teachers need to document and share their transnational students' academic development and ongoing needs with educational partners. Although, as with any literature review, these represent the findings of others, whose research goals may have been different than those Skerrett identified, and thus could have skewed their merit for inclusion in her paper. In addition, because she had to compile different researchers using different methodologies of distinct contexts, the studies may have very scant relatability with each other.

In Kasun's (2015) research, she studied transnationalism "in terms of how families negotiate language, identity, and large, global political and economic conditions" (p. 279). In other words, she examined both the personal dimensions and the societal components affected by transnationalism. Drawing on Anzaldúa's (2002) notion of *conocimiento*, or "knowledge" *and* "skill", she highlights a collective way of knowing that synthesizes postcolonial and critical theories in advocating a heritage way of furthering knowledge.

Konrad (2014) studied the bordered identity in his paper on the Canada-US borderlands. He posits the diminishing of borders due to globalization, while simultaneously, there has been a new cultural geography with more defined and partitioned rigid boundaries. The over-determination "of American identity has reinforced the line between communities at the border and contributed discontinuity to communities across the border" (p. 53). In Vasquez's (2010) research, identity along the US-Mexico border is examined via interviews with 29 third-generation Mexican Americans living on the border.

She found both forced and enforced racial identities reinforcing both gendered stereotypes (e.g., Mexican American women as exotic and men as criminals), a tendency to distance from new arrivals, and colorism (e.g., dark skin = criminal).

In Ott and Keeling's (2012) study, they describe the tenuous notion of self and belonging along the border. They assert that in "the iterative practices of maintaining borders between inside and outside (Self and Other), there is simultaneously a desire for and fear of border crossings. This ambivalence fuels the inevitable anxiety surrounding borders" (p. 183, parenthetical in original). This simultaneity also impels both assumption and rejection of cultural selves, in different situations and varying contexts. There may be a narrative of individuals who reside on the border as existing "in an ambiguous state between the sepia-toned lawlessness of Mexico and the blue-toned legal institutions of the United States" (p. 193). People who reside in and along the US-Mexico border found fluid and at times dichotomous conflictual identities, many of which are ascribed by the dominant culture.

For the present study, we wondered about our participant's own positionality linguistically, culturally, and socially, in this complex, dialogic space, as a young woman on the verge of full independence, and how she conceived of herself and her changing world in this complex age of globalism, activism, and tribalism. Although Alejandra's family lived in Mexico and she identified as more Mexican than American, Alejandra was born in the US and spent a considerable portion of her childhood in the US. As a result, she spoke English without a Spanish accent and seemed to understand the US psyche about the world. In this study, we asked how she experienced and felt about the various cultures in her life and how did her various identities and positionalities intersect in this one individual (Núñez, 2014). Many scholars have posited theories of dialogic, hybrid cultural identities (e.g., Bakhtin, 1984; Bhabha, 1990; Vertovec, 2001). Having lived extensively in both Mexico and the US, she straddles dual senses of reality. In a sense, transnationalism can be defined as "bipolar landscapes and localized identities" (Vertovec, 2001, p. 574), as well as "multi-local affiliations" (p. 574). In actuality, although hybridity and cross-cultural influence can be discerned, there is also the bordering of identities, as "a way of balancing, of mitigating duality" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 19).

Indeed, one does not need to forgo one's heritage culture to understand another, as Bakhtin (1986) states "[t]here exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy idea that in order to better understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own" (p. 6). In the study of the complexities of cultures, he writes that "we have frequently forgotten that the boundaries of these areas are not absolute... and we have not taken into account that the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas" (p. 2). It is in these hybrid intersections of cultures that deserve our attention. Such an interaction between cultural affiliations can be described by Bakhtin (1984) as "a discourse and counter-discourse, which instead of following one after another and being uttered by two different mouths, are superimposed one on the other and merge into a *single* utterance from a *single* mouth" (p. 209). One individual possesses and manifests these separate beings. Bakhtinian dialogism thus views identities as simultaneous and mutually influential. Indeed, there is prioritization of the existence of another consciousness, as when the "other's voice is limited, passive... there is no depth or productivity (creative, enriching) to the interrelations between the voices" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 111).

In essence, *transfronterizo* individuals exist in an "*intersticio*" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 20), or the "spaces between the different worlds [they] inhabited" (p. 20), both politically, psychologically, and socioeconomically. As they traverse the border between and across these two cultural and linguistic locales between places like Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas and Valle Hermoso, their perspectives about the world may vacillate and mirror their fluid cultural identities. With the pervasiveness of digital media and pop culture, they may also exist on the border between two

culturally constructed worlds. This “borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 25).

Even though some may claim to not have an American side, they are apt to speak English, be well-versed in US television and movies on Netflix, and are often treated like an outsider in both contexts. Indeed, one’s culture can be the most salient aspect of our being, bestowing “the version of reality that it communicates [with d]ominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable” verities (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 38).

Such people living in in-between spaces may view themselves and their disparate realities as harboring a mutuality; a culturally dialogic reality. “It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 19), for their bilingual, bicultural consciousnesses are how they wade between their two worlds, living in an interstitial cultural, linguistic, and political space. And, in their multivoiced, or heteroglossic, linguistic worlds (Bakhtin, 1981), their racial and ethnic “identity is twin skin to [their] linguistic identity” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 81). There is dialogic tension between their worlds, but also a type of unique synthesis nurtured by the bordered region they inhabit, consisting of linguistic, cultural, political, and psychological push and pulls.

Methods

After IRB approval (IRB 19-0592), we conducted a narrative inquiry of this third-year US-born Mexican American university student from Valle Hermoso, Mexico to understand how she positioned herself linguistically and culturally (Murray, 2009). This type of research prioritizes the stories of the participant, and “involves eliciting and documenting these stories” (p. 46). After recording her stories, they were “interpreted in view of the literature in the field, and this process yields implications for practice, future research or theory building” (p. 46). Unlike other qualitative methods, such as case studies and ethnographic work, in narrative inquiries meaning is made through the narratives of the participant’s lives, as his or her stories form the basis of the data. Additionally, case studies analyze one or a few participants within one context in depth, while narrative inquiry explores how the participant is positioned in various contexts throughout her or his life (Sunday, Ramungondo, & Kathard, 2020).

We had originally conducted interviews with three transnational participants who traversed the US-Mexico border regularly for school, but the other two participants withdrew midway through the study without explanations. Narrative inquiry involves intensive conversations with participants, eliciting the ways they construct their world etched from the stories that scaffold their lived experiences (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Their lives told through their voice, through the tint of their own subjectivities provide the richness and vitality for the data. Through viewing the data through the lens of theory, that data then becomes meaningful additions to the extant scholarship.

Participant

Alejandra was 20 years old at the time of the study and was in the second semester of her junior year of college. She had been living on her own in this Texas-Mexico border town, which housed a state university. She was born in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas before spending most of her early childhood in Mexico. She came to the US for elementary and middle school but returned to Valle Hermoso for high school. She is the oldest child in her family, with one younger sister and one younger brother.

Alejandra had been living on her own in Texas since the start of college, majoring in Education. Last year, her sister came to her school and moved in with her, and Alejandra functioned almost as a second mother to her younger sister while here in the States. She also worked at the Career Center on campus

while carrying a full load of classes. Perhaps as a result, she displayed a mature, professional disposition during our interviews usually amidst a busy weekly schedule.

Data Collection

The first author spent the spring semester of 2020 conducting five semi-structured hour-long interviews with our participant. Flyan (2005) defined semi-structured interviews as ones where researchers have “a set of questions to ask and a good idea of what topics will be covered – but the conversations are free to vary” (p. 65). We met via Zoom, where the first author audio recorded conversations and transcribed them immediately after our interviews with the assistance of the second author so he would remember the nuances of the conversations. The participant had been a former student of the first author, wherein they had informal conversations, from which he determined her to be a suitable participant, as a US-born Mexican American student who attended university in Texas, but who also had a permanent residence in Mexico with her family.

We followed an interview protocol for the first interview which ascertained the participant’s cultural identification and activities, and subsequent interviews spawned from prior conversations (Refer to Appendix 1). The first and second authors would read through the transcripts of previous sessions, and note themes or areas in need of elaboration, and make subsequent interview protocols. The recorded interviews as well as the transcriptions were saved with password encryption on the first author’s laptop.

Data Analysis

We followed transcription protocols when transcribing our interviews (Clark, Birkhead, Fernandez, & Egger, 2017). We used this procedure to ground our analysis, for “the transformation of an interview into a transcript ready for analysis establishes a foundation for rigor in the rest of the research process” (p. 1751). We adhered to transcription conventions and recorded our conversations verbatim. We then coded utilizing Atlas.ti software the four transcripts totaling 36 pages for salient themes. Some themes were developed pretranscription according to the literature review, and others grew from the transcription process itself.

In analyzing the data, we identified the themes of Family, Culture, Language, Gender, Age, School, Religion, and Pop Culture. Specific to this study, these dimensions were given localized nuances, such as Mexican Family elements, Mexican/US/additional cultural influences, American English and Spanish languages, and so on. These facets of the codes were derived from the data garnered from Alejandra. These seven major themes were consistently identified in each of the interviews, and the content of interviews determined the profundity and depth of these issues. For example, she made cursory mention of her relatives who lived in Texas in the first interview but went on to characterize them in much greater detail in the second. In identifying and organizing the data thus, we could tease out pertinent sections of her speech which corresponded to and supported the different themes.

Subjectivity Statement

As an Asian American adult male, I, the first author, crossed multiple identities in studying our participant. Despite my extensive study of the Mexican American identity for my doctoral dissertation research and present study in the context of south Texas, I do not have firsthand experience of being Mexican American as a Chinese American. In discussing her time as a student in China, I felt a connection in terms of feeling like an outsider, but also different, because I also felt like an insider of

this space (Kusow, 2003). I also do not know what it is like to traverse international borders weekly to commute between school and home. Although I am aware of many of the popular cultural references she made, I am not as invested in the youth culture, and thus most likely do not feel the same way about these artifacts. Also, as an ethnic and cultural minority in the US, I have been intentional in not allowing my own biases and preconceptions about being a minority in this majority context influence the direction and interpretation of my research.

David, the second author of this paper is a Mexican (trans)national. Although he was raised and educated in central Mexico, he left his home country looking for better academic opportunities more than a decade ago. As in Alejandra's case, it was difficult for David to (re)adapt to Mexican standards once he completed his postgraduate education in the US. While in Mexico, David was usually ostracized because of his affinity to US professional procedures. While in the US, he has also been discriminated because of his (trans)national origin—for example, he recalls being labeled as a “hyper-Mexican” by a Mexican American scholar. David resides in Brownsville but his family lives in Mexico, for which he crosses the border frequently to visit. Because David considers himself a Mexican (trans)national, he has focused his research on understanding the factors that affect the reincorporation of transnational pre-service teachers into the Mexican education system. In many ways, Alejandra's experiences are familiar to David.

The Borderlands: Rio Grande Valley and Tamaulipas

We both live and work in the borderlands. From our classroom windows, we see the border patrol monitoring the Rio Grande/Bravo and the US-Mexican border. As a part of a borderland community, we talk with members of the Customs and Border patrol members every day: we interact with them at the community swimming pool, at the *taquerías*, the coffee shops. The streets of our city are usually crowded with *trailas* (trailers) carrying and bringing transnational products. And it is not unusual for us to receive emails from students who will be late to class because the line to cross the border is too slow. Our experience in the borderlands has also shaped our subjectivity when interpreting Alejandra's perspectives. While we are both relatively new to the Rio Grande Valley and bring distinct subjectivities, we both experience the complexities of the borderlands every day.

Results

What we found through this study was a young girl who intimately understood both the US and Mexican cultures, having spent considerable amounts of time in both locales. Through her own admission, however, she claimed she felt more Mexican. For example, she told us when first asked about her cultural allegiance, “I definitely feel more attached to that (Mexican) side of me. I don't really have any American side, so. I'm not really attached to that, no.” Even though she spoke native-like English and knew US culture intimately, she self-identified as more Mexican without any “Americanness.” However, we saw a much more complex cultural identity prompted by transactions with multiple cultures beyond the generic Mexican culture.

Cultural Positioning

Although Alejandra was born in south Texas, she spent most of her early childhood in Valle Hermoso. When she told the first author the name of the setting of her youth, he was enchanted by such a poetic name. She, however, had a less glowing assessment: “It's not really a city. It's not really beautiful. And, it's not really a valley. I don't know why they call it that” (Interview, March 24, 2020).

So, he then asked about what she did like about her hometown:

Mostly, it's the food. The tacos. There's a movie theater we have here. We also have this pizza place. That's mostly it, the food. There's not really much to see. The tacos in Brownsville are not the same. Not even the ones in Matamoros. The meat...I don't know, just how they make them. The flavor, and how they make the tortilla. The meat's beef. It's just plain, but the sauce that they put on is just different. I mean, there's really not much to do here. I really just like staying at home, like being with my family. We eat out. We make carne asada. That's basically what we always do (Interview, March 24, 2020).

She attended to the distinct culinary tradition of her hometown, while remarking on the lack of things to do in that locale as well. Alejandra's depiction of food and Mexican identity aligns with former research about *transfronterizo* identity in other regions of the US and Mexican border, such as El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (Mandujano Salazar, 2021). Mexican food, and particularly the use of certain ingredients along with their traditional preparation, are valued by *transfronterizos* as part of the Mexican identity.

We wondered about a typical meal at her home. She told the first author what her family regularly eats:

We made *tamales* and then we also made, we call them *picaditas*. Do you know what a *sope* is? We made those Sunday. We make something called *tortillas Españolas*. And *molletes*. We make it with just the bread, black beans, and cheese. And we make *pico de gallo*. Usually, I make it. We add olive oil and salt and pepper, besides the tomato and all that. When my dad wants the sauce to be very spicy, he makes it in that (the *molcajete*). My grandfather always makes things with that, the *molcajete*. For my birthday, they'll probably just make *carne asada* and some banana pie. (Interview, April 13, 2020)

Her meals with family are specific Mexican dishes, such as *tamales*, *tortillas*, and *carne asada*, along with Mexican cooking styles, as in grinding fresh ingredients in the stone mortar and pestle of the *molcajete* to make sauces from scratch.

Despite claiming that she had no American side, she spoke English fluently, was privy to US cultural nuances, like the distinctions in cultural acceptance across different regions across the nation and had attended school in the US from second grade until high school. In fact, she often felt different culturally while in Mexico with her family and her friends who had remained in Mexico their entire lives. Still, the culture of the Rio Grande Valley, where she had spent most of her time while in the US, is heavily influenced by Mexico, with towns and roads in Spanish, plenty of Mexican restaurants, as well as Mexican style homes and buildings occupied predominantly by people of Mexican heritage.

When asked if she felt different culturally in the US, she replied, "I don't think so. Maybe it's because we're in the Valley. It's mostly Mexican American culture, like Mexicans together. But, I feel like if I did move like from the border then I'd probably feel more different" (Interview, March 20, 2020). She was aware of the uniqueness of the region, in its heavy influence from Mexican culture, giving it a homogeneous feel.

In fact, she could make such a judgment because she had been to many places with more diversity, such as Dallas, Austin, and outside of Texas to locations like New York City. She especially liked "The

Big Apple”, stating, “I liked New York. I mean, I want to go live there. I was mostly in Manhattan. We went to Brooklyn for one day. I felt like it was so diverse, and so active. I like that. I was thinking maybe teaching over there like for a year for the experience” (Interview, March 20, 2020).

There was a sense of homogeneity in terms of culture in her present location, which contrasted starkly with more diverse places in the US, like New York City or even Dallas. She preferred the more eclectic, more vibrant setting of New York, which offered a definite change of pace. So, some cultural and linguistic shifts were also not marked with a political boundary and permitted fluid crossings. In Mexico, she has also been to places like the Yucatan to visit Chichen Itza and to the capital of Mexico City, places with cultures and languages distinct from both Valle Hermoso and the Rio Grande Valley.

As another layer of contrast, Alejandra had even ventured abroad to China for a summer when in high school. She said of her experiences there, “I feel like just going to China, it just changes your whole perspective. It was crazy how everyone was asking for pictures and everything, and how they saw us as special or different. And *we* saw them as someone special to us” (Interview, March 12, 2020). She was aware of the reciprocal reactions during this cultural encounter, as she felt exoticized during her time there, just as she exoticized the people and culture in China.

We asked her why she decided to go to China, and she told the first author: “That was really my dad. He’s more open-minded. Like, he saw how big of an opportunity that was going to be. My dad’s all about that. He likes to take all the opportunities that you can. I was already learning Chinese in high school, and they had that program where you could go to China as well” (Interview, April 22, 2020). It seemed her father desired for her to see and learn more about the world, to take every opportunity to broaden her global perspective.

In her life, she expressed varying degrees of cultural belonging. She described her cultural memberships in a conversation, “I’m so used to being in the Valley where *everyone’s* Mexican. And then over there [in cities like San Antonio, Texas] it’s so different. But, then in China, I feel like they just saw us as exotic. Like they didn’t look down at us or anything. They just saw us as different” (Interview, April 22, 2020).

She felt the Rio Grande Valley region as mostly “Mexican,” where the people are nearly all of Mexican heritage. Elsewhere in Texas, the demographics, as well as the culture, “is so different” for her. During her time in New York and China, there were still other levels of distinction. Unlike many of her classmates, Alejandra’s cultural experiences are quite diverse, having been immersed in so many different cultural and linguistic contexts, in having felt so much like an outsider. Most of her peers had been accustomed to being the majority culture, and whose only contact with foreign cultures was with instructors of other backgrounds, and classmates from all over the world who came to study abroad in this region of the US.

Alejandra’s cultural positioning and always-evolving identity contributes to current literature by providing new layers of analysis to research about transfronterizo (i.e., Tessman, 2016; de la Piedra & Araujo, 2012) or transnationality (Kasun, 2015; Skerret, 2020). In fact, based on her narrative, it was difficult for us to find clear boundaries between these two concepts. In the case of Alejandra, her local *transfronterizmo* transcends transnational boundaries, which suggests a dynamic cultural positioning in which the “borderlands” do not only limit physical or psychological spaces (Anzaldúa, 2012). Instead, the continuous reformulation of herself—as person, member of always-changing cultural communities, and the “never-absolute” conception (Bakhtin, 1984) of her identity—emphasizes the flexibility in her cultural-self.

Language Dynamism

Her cultural identification and language proficiency overlapped per our coding. Her two languages co-existed in her, and she alternated between English and Spanish in her engagements with her world. Given that she spent much of her life in Mexico, where she spent most of her childhood, Spanish was now her most proficient language. She told the first author that Spanish was her preferred mode of communication: “I do feel more comfortable in Spanish. Like, I can speak English, but if I know they can speak Spanish, I’m going to start speaking Spanish” (Interview, April 1, 2020).

She said when asked about how others in Mexico perceived her English ability: “They saw me as if I felt I was more than them just ‘cuz I knew English. ‘Cuz here in Mexico, they have English classes, and I would always get 100, and they would say, ‘Oh it’s just ‘cuz you know English.’ And I would be like, ‘I mean, *yeah*.’ I’m not going to pretend not to know English” (Interview, April 13, 2020).

English was certainly a prominent vernacular in her linguistic repertoire (meaning that she navigated life and negotiated meaning regularly using this language), and her English literacy ability was at the collegiate level. When asked about how she leveraged her two languages, she divulged, “Usually I’m thinking in Spanish. I have to consciously make that shift and then talk in English. Yeah, I just have to switch the focus to English” (Interview, April 1, 2020).

Indeed, Alejandra alternated between a very specific dialect of Spanish and is immersed in an idiosyncratic English context. In fact, the Spanish language is extremely nuanced (Martínez-Celdrán, Fernández-Planas, & Carrera-Sabaté, 2003), manifesting as distinct variations across the disparate regions of Spain to the various Spanish-speaking territories globally. The dialect spoken in Valle Hermoso is characterized by vowel weakening, vowel closing, and the occasional shift from the vowel *e* to the vowel *i* (Walsh, 2008). The little *mestizaje*, or mixture of Spaniards and indigenous populations, that occurred in Northern Mexico led to the almost total extermination of natives in El Nuevo Santander (current Tamaulipas) and Texas (Castañeda, 2010) during the last five centuries. However, about a hundred or so inhabitants of Valle Hermoso still speak the indigenous language of Coahuilteco given a small fraction of the local population identifies with their pre-Colombian heritage (INEGI, 2021).

This was the specific language context into which Alejandra was born, and where she first learned to depict her world. She liked using slang with her friends, like *carnal* for her “best friend” and when someone is in your business, she used the term, *metiche* for him or her. As another example, the phrase *qué padre* or *qué chido* were common sayings for “cool.” These idiosyncrasies for naming her world created a particular social climate, constructed by these context-specific slang.

Yet, as she matured, she was also immersed in the English language of Rio Grande Valley region of southern Texas (Anderson-Mejías, 2005), and even listened to the Korean spoken in the Korean dramas popular amongst Mexican and Mexican American youths in this geographical context. For instance, from watching such shows, she has even learned specific phrases like *hajima!* meaning “stop it!” and *janganhai?* or “are you kidding me?” Additionally, having studied in China, she was also immersed in the Mandarin context of Beijing and Shanghai, though she admitted that she did not recall much of that specific language.

Even as she now sought an education degree from a US institution of higher education, being prepared to instruct English-language arts to elementary students, her world was simultaneously

composed of the rich languages and dialects that have converged on the border region of South Texas. The heteroglossic collision of languages forms the medium within which she has engaged her life, alternating between Spanish and English (and to a lesser degree with Korean), her lived reality was a double-voiced duet of languages, with the injection of a minority language in a different dominant language context (Bakhtin, 1981).

Each language also carried different traditions and semiosis, different semantics and tones. For instance, when we asked her about what was unique about the language from her home region, she divulged: “Maybe they use a lot of different words, like instead of *carro* or *camioneta*, as in truck or car, they use *mueble* because that word means kind of like a couch” (Interview, March 24, 2020). So, she noted the distinct ways her community labels and connects ideas, linking automobiles with furniture. The term *mueble* for cars is more common in rural regions of northern Mexico (Coronado, 2003), as in a predominantly agricultural region like Valle Hermoso.

Thus, the language of her home was not only distinct from the US context, but also from other parts of Mexico. She revealed when we asked when she ever spoke Spanish: “At home, it’s what I speak with my family. All my friends speak Spanish, so I don’t really use English as much as Spanish except for school. My dad made me read a lot in Spanish so that I could stay up to speed in Spanish, but I don’t remember liking any of them” (April 1, 2020).

The Spanish language had an intimate, familial feel, the source of her most primal memories. The language was the language of her social communication, while English was seldom used “except for school.” Even, in the context of South Texas, she utilized Spanish with most of the customers and co-workers at her part-time on-campus job and with her friends and roommates. Yet, her literary inclinations were more in line with English-speaking texts more so than those Spanish ones, given she had had most of her formal education in the States. For example, Alejandra’s favorite book was *And Then There Were None*, a mystery title by Agatha Christie.

Even though her father suggested many Spanish works, like *Don Quixote* and *El Cid*, Alejandra was more inclined to read in English. She told me:

Ever since I started reading in English in elementary, I just feel more comfortable reading in English. I find it harder to concentrate and to really grasp what the book is saying in Spanish. I feel it’s because that’s how I learned to read, like in elementary, in English, in English, in English (Interview, April 13, 2020).

It seemed that English had become her most comfortable and effective conduit for literacy, even though her father tried to maintain her Spanish literacy as well. However, for youths like Alejandra who navigate and belong to two languages and cultures, their interactions with literacy nurture both frames of understanding. In fact, research on the literacy practices of *transfronterizos* “reveal that students recontextualized both print and digital literacies from one side of the border to the other” (de la Piedra & Araujo, 2012, p. 227). Current literature has emphasized that translanguaging, or using all semantic resources for the creation and recognition of meaning is a common in current research in language education. Alejandra’s literacy practices open new areas of discussion as in terms of the way literacy, as a goal-oriented activity, shows that transnational institutions (such as schools) can have a more lasting impact in the reading practices of students, regardless of the family influence or literacy practices they have at home. While US institutions and ideologies appear to have lasting impacts amongst transnational returnee students (Zhou, 2021, 2022; Martínez-Prieto, 2023), the literacy practices of Alejandra are inclined to perpetuate English (and not Spanish) as a language for science and academic discussions.

Music versus Cultural Reduction

On some occasions prior to the pandemic, however, Alejandra would socialize with her friends at places around the city both in Texas and Mexico:

We usually just play music and talk. We would usually eat like carne asada or something, and plan to go to a club maybe. But, not anymore. Reggaeton, is what we like to dance to. It's very big in the Latin community. Other singers that used to sing different genres and that, now they're singing Reggaeton, because that's what everyone likes now. You have to do that to stay relevant, I guess. [giggles] I also like J Balvin" (Interview, April 13, 2020).

Reggaeton music, as indicated by Alejandra, is popular with Latin American communities across the US, especially amongst young people (Kattari, 2009). Her gustatory and dancing affinities were also in line with her heritage culture. She listened to Mexican rock music, with *Maná* being her favorite band. In fact, she began to gravitate to this group in middle school in the US, when her biology teacher revealed that he listened to *Maná's* music to learn Spanish. Many of her Mexican American peers in the Rio Grande Valley, however, were more inclined to *corrido*, which are short ballads composed of nine stanzas of four lines each. This type of music, which was generated during the Mexican revolution of independence (1810–1821) and became popular during the Mexican revolution (1910–1917), is currently created to “illustrate the struggles of indigenous people, Mestizos, and the poor throughout Mexico and along the US-Mexico border” (de los Rios, 2018, p. 456).

As far as television shows, when she was younger, she was very much into *Rebelde*, a Mexican soap opera adapted for the youth audience. She described *Rebelde* and her other television preferences:

It was kind of a telenovela, but for teens and stuff. There was also *Alebrijes y Rebujos*. There *are* some Mexican cartoons. *Alebrijes* is like this spirit. OK, so it's this figure that represents imaginary animals. It's like in very vivid colors and everything. So, it's a spirit that's supposed to protect you. It's mostly about *Día de los Muertos*. So, it has a lot to do with that. And, for Mexican cartoons, well, I like *Dora*, but I don't think it was Mexican. Yeah, I watched it when I was small. There was *EL Chavo del Ocho*. It's not a cartoon, but a kid show, and, it's played by adults acting as kids. All the cartoons kids watched were mostly American just translated into Spanish. (Interview, April 22, 2020)

Alejandra's *transfronterizo* identity also relates to TV shows she would watch when growing up in Valle Hermoso. In this sense, she recalled watching soap operas created by Mexico City-based *Televisa*, the most influential broadcaster in Latin America, along with *Dora the Explorer* and other American cartoons which were translated into Spanish. These days, she also likes to watch other shows on television, specifically Korean dramas, or “K-dramas”, like *Squid Game* on Netflix. This type of entertainment has found worldwide appeal, but most particularly for youths in the border regions of South Texas (Han, 2019) and northern Mexico due, in part, to the recent influence of a large influx of Korean immigrants to the metropolitan region of Monterrey, which is roughly 300 kms away from Valle Hermoso.

When she watched this type of entertainment, her family and friends could sometimes respond with condescension. She told the first author, “Like, they wouldn't watch anything with only Asian people. Like when I watch my Korean dramas, they're like, ‘Oh my God, you're watching Chinos.’ Like everyone they see as Asian, they call Chinese. They don't really see the difference, like Koreans,

Chinese, or Japanese. They don't really care about it" (Interview, April 22, 2020). Parts of her cultural context was not as open-minded or worldly as she and tended to generalize and look down on Asian and other non-White cultures. At the same time, her father's more progressive, worldly views, encouraged her to experience these novel outside cultures.

Alejandra's experiences, in our perspective, suggest a change of narrative in the conception of borderlands/*transfronterizo*/transnational populations, at least in terms of current research. In this regard, perhaps because of the theoretical frameworks scholars have used (i.e., Anzaldúa's borderlands), current scholarships appear to position borderlands populations as victims of subjugation within repressive systems in racial, linguistic, or educational terms (i.e., Kasun & Mora Pablo, 2022). However, as per Alejandra's experience, her borderlands community (meaning her family and friends) appear to discriminate against other cultures (such as Asian ones) by not acknowledging their cultural differences and, instead, labeling under the same monolithic label.

Religion versus Spirituality

Another salient trait of her heritage community was its spirituality. Her home region was spiritually Catholic, and many folks, including her mother, were devout believers. For instance, when we asked about the faith of her community:

It's mainly like Catholic. There's two main churches here, two Catholic churches. There's one designated to one half of Valle Hermoso, and then there's another one designated to the other half. Most of us go to one called *Guadalupe*, named after the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. So, we go to that one. *Everyone* knows everyone here in Valle Hermoso. They can judge you. Everyone knows the priest. He's come to our house for dinner and stuff. I mean, he's nice and everything, but they're super religious. My mom watches religious videos all day. *All day*. I think especially right now with the whole coronavirus thing. My siblings and I are not that religious. But, we still go to church. Well, not right now. We watch it on TV, 'cuz they cancelled in-person mass. But, we used to go to church like *every* Sunday. There was no way around it. We can't say no or anything (Interview, April 22, 2020).

Alejandra's narration of the religious affiliation of Valle Hermoso aligns with data of the last National Census (INEGI, 2021) where around 70% of residents in Valle Hermoso were Catholic, 17% were Protestant, with the remaining non-affiliated

That pious faith sometimes clashed with the scientific precautions surrounding mitigating the pandemic. In fact, Alejandra felt frustrated by the conflicts between her own family's faith and scientific recommendations. For instance, she told the first author when we asked about the faith of her hometown:

'Cuz here they're very religious, here in Valle Hermoso. I know my mom's friends and all that, they're like brainwashing her. "You know what? As long as you cover yourself in God's glory or whatever. He'll take us when He's going to take us. We don't have to be taking all these precautions." They're all thinking like that and it's really annoying. Like, I understand if they want to have faith, but you can't be that blind to what's happening. (April 22, 2020)

Alejandra possessed a more practical take on her spirituality and was intent on not letting it "blind" her to the reality of what was happening.

Especially since the pandemic ravaged the world, folks' faiths have played a larger role in our lives. But, sometimes, that faith can be at odds with taking necessary health precautions, as mass religious congregations have continued to fuel new cases across the US and abroad (Conger, Healy, & Tompkins, 2020). Alejandra's own spirituality differed from that of her mother and other more devout followers in her community. She preferred to take more precautions and follow scientific recommendations.

Alejandra's case in the borderlands/*transfronterizo* spaces appears to align with current findings in terms of the development of spirituality and religiosity amongst transnational populations. Spirituality, in this regard, has been related to the dignification and comfort of their transnational experiences (Gómez Carrillo, 2012). In general, although current research has highlighted the importance of spirituality amongst transnational populations to function as an identity affirmation (Martínez-Prieto, in press), Alejandra's case seems to be more aligned to current research about Mexican national youth and their vision of spirituality (Yañez-Castillo *et al.*, 2018), in which Mexican national youth appears to embrace spirituality instead of religiosity. Different from the other themes examined previously in this article, in which her conception is rather associated to transnational or *transfronterizo* practices, Alejandra's conceptions of spirituality appear to be more in line with Mexican national practices among university students.

Discussion

The current analysis of Alejandra's experiences contributes to current discussions of transnational/*transfronterizo*/borderlands individuals at different levels. For example, examining her experience was challenging as it does not clearly fit into the clear-cut classifications that current research has suggested. In fact, we found her perspectives dynamic and not fixed. That is, we noticed she was constantly challenging previous assumptions about her as she was engaged in a dialogic give-and-take in her identification with each (Bakhtin, 1986). What we found from interviewing, observing, and spending time with her was a young girl who did not let space constrain her being because she developed a more meta-perspective of cultures and frames of reference. Perhaps due to her bilingualism, biculturalism, and *transfronterizo*/transnational identity, she was able to index herself as part of a borderlands community. However, either because of her personal experience in different parts of the world, or because the constant change that transnational communities experience, Alejandra seemed to continuously challenge fixed notions of identity.

We found that Alejandra was simultaneously immersed yet disparate from her heritage culture. In other words, she was constantly challenging, yet accepting, her identity as a member of Valle Hermoso or the Rio Grande Valley and, at the same time, she would "other" herself to explain her transnational perspective *vis-à-vis* other *transfronterizos*, like her. In this regard, while former studies have used dichotomies to explain the situation of transnational/transfronterizos—that is, Mexican nationals vs. transnationals (Zhou, 2022), Chicanos versus Mexicans/Anglos (Petrón, 2003)—Alejandra utilized both her *transfronterizo* and transnational perspectives to make sense of her surrounding realities. We found that her transnationality, rather than her *transfronterizo* identity, was salient for her in terms of her cultural affiliations, her understanding of the discriminatory practices of borderlands communities, and her differentiation between the spiritual practices versus her own spiritual development. Nonetheless, as in the case of her literacy practices, we found that Alejandra, despite her critical stances, is not really aware of the ideological impact that US schools have had on her literacy practices. While we have previously analyzed the unawareness of transnationals in terms of the ideologies promoted in US schools (Martínez-Prieto, 2023), we suggest that the literacy practices of transnational/*transfronterizos* should be further analyzed.

Beyond mere bordered identity (Anzaldúa, 2012), or even a transnational existence (Walsh, 2008), Alejandra held a meta-identity that gazed on each side of herself both as an insider of that culture and

as an outsider simultaneously. Bakhtin (1986) contended how “outsiderness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly” (p. 7). Her ability to assume that foreignness in various cultural and linguistic contexts bestowed her with a keener sense of these places. In fact, as with her experiences in larger Texan cities and New York City, this shift to foreignness did not always come with a national border.

Thus, she integrated multiple perspectives that coalesced in our conversations. The heteroglossia of not only her language repertoire, but also her cultural awareness and affiliations, linked her multiple selves in a dialogic simultaneity. With such multivoicedness that chorused her existence, Alejandra engaged with an ever more diverse world that conjoined previously distant cultures and realities (Figure 1). From her self-identification, it seemed that Alejandra saw herself as only Mexican. But, from her voice, we heard distinct elements of multiple cultures. Perhaps she represented how youths in the 21st century have come to identify. No longer are they bound by strict national identities, or even fixed labels such as “transnational” or *transfronterizo*. Instead, Alejandra’s identities consist of heterogenous facets of different parts of distinct cultures. She liked Mexican food and family, while preferring the inclusiveness and science of the US, while also empathizing with foreign cultures, like Korean and Chinese. She is culturally a hybrid transnational student, geographically *transfronteriza*, and linguistically heteroglossic.

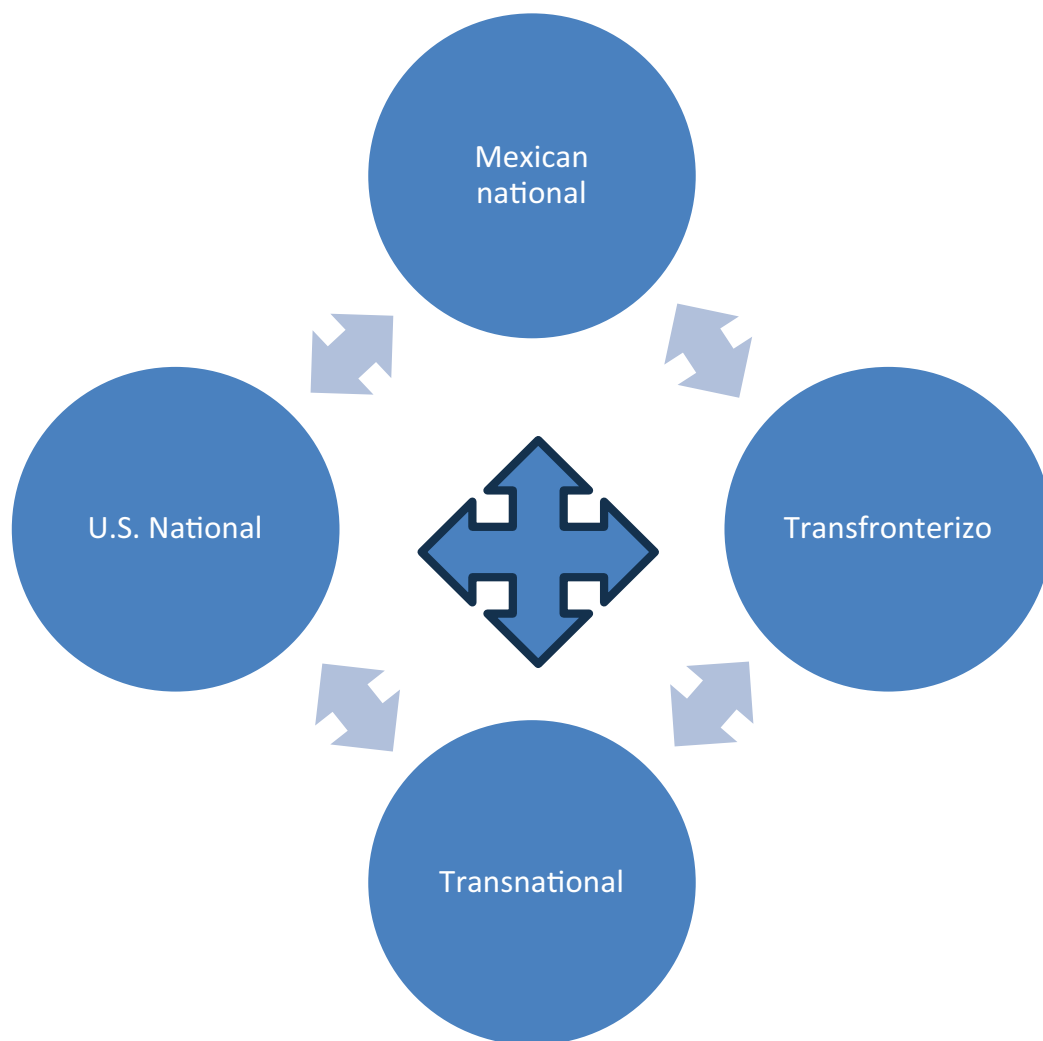


Figure 1 *Alejandra's dynamic identity.*
Alejandra's fluid identity according to the themes discussed.

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**Appendix 1: Second Interview Protocol which Grew from
Themes Elicited from First Interview**

1. Can you talk more about your cousins in Texas? How do you get along together? Do they see you as Mexican or Mexican American? How often do you see them? What do their parents do?
2. Which family member(s) are you closest with in Mexico? Why? What is one memory with that person?
3. You said you never felt different in the US because the Valley is a lot like Mexico. But you also say you want to move to New York one day, which is very different from Mexico. Explain.
4. What is your favorite part about school in the US? You say you are better at ELA more than math and science. Do you keep a journal or write daily? What are your favorite books in Spanish or English?
5. Can you talk more about the food in Valle Hermoso? Is there a dish that your grandparents or parents cook when everyone gets together? Does your mom or grandma try to teach you to cook? What's your favorite food to eat with friends? Where?
6. What do you think about as you journey to and from Mexico and the US? Is there a ritual or particular thought pattern you undertake? Where do you stop? Did your parents or siblings go with you the first time?
7. What is your favorite book in Spanish? What about in English? Where and when do you read? When did you start reading English? Who are your favorite authors? Do you do any digital reading?
8. When you write in English, do you translate the words from Spanish first? Where and when do you write? What kinds of writing do you do: nonfiction, fiction, free-writing, poetry, etc.? Can you read some of your writing next week?