

Book Review

Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana

By Sergio Chávez

Oxford University Press. 2016. 224 pp. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer: Asad L. Asad, *Harvard University*

Sergio Chávez's *Border Lives* arrives in the thick of heated debates over immigration to the United States. While most contemporary political discussions of immigration bifurcate immigrants into simple "legal" and "illegal" categories (Donato and Armenta 2011), Chávez's work complicates these groupings by documenting the experiences of "border commuters," Mexican residents who regularly navigate back and forth across the Mexico-US border for work. Although some border commuters enter the United States with work authorization, others may do so with a tourist visa or border-crossing card (BCC) and without formal work authorization. These migrants, who live in Mexico but work in the United States, are often overlooked in the policy debates over immigration. Chávez's book thus illuminates how federal immigration policy is often disconnected from the everyday reality of cross-border flows.

Set in Tijuana, Mexico, a border city within walking distance of neighboring San Diego County, California, Chávez's study draws on rich ethnographic and interview data among border commuters. Through interviews with 118 commuters and 40 non-commuters he met over the course of his study, he uncovers the everyday experiences of commuters and how they contrast with those of non-commuters. In particular, he explores how commuters, many of whom have left their rural communities of origin and settled in bustling Tijuana, "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" (2). Chávez's analysis highlights how different cohorts of commuters exhibit agency against the backdrop of an ever-restrictive set of immigration policies enabling or constraining their cross-border movements.

To contextualize how immigration policy has impacted border commuters' experiences, Chávez classifies his respondents into four cohorts that correspond to milestones in the historical evolution of Mexico-US migration flows (c.f. Garip 2012, 2016). The first consists of those migrants who crossed into the United States from 1942 to 1964, known as the Bracero period. These individuals mobilized in response to the eponymous program that brought 4.6 million

braceros, or laborers, to the United States for short-term farm work. The second cohort emerges after the guest-worker program ended abruptly in 1964. During this Open Border period that lasted until 1985, undocumented immigration from Mexico continued at the behest of US-based agriculturalists who required migrant labor to meet production demands. As the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States grew during this period, so too did the American public's desire to regulate these flows. The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed in 1986, and it granted amnesty to 2.3 million undocumented immigrants from Mexico living in the United States while also increasing the regulation of the country's southern border. This so-called Post-IRCA period, constituting the third cohort, spanned from 1987 to 1993. Finally, and since the implementation of important free-trade agreements in the 1990s, a fourth cohort has appeared. Unlike their counterparts, however, migrants in this Post-Operation Gatekeeper period have had to confront unprecedented immigration enforcement as they attempt to cross the Mexico-US border for work, including fencing, increased patrols, and additional port inspectors.

The literature on international migration regularly underscores the structural impediments to individuals' lawful migration from Mexico to the United States. Indeed, a complex and often-contradictory system of immigration policies has made it increasingly difficult for Mexican labor migrants to enter the United States for brief periods (see [Waters and Pineau 2015](#)), even though that had been their preference before the proliferation of border security ([Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016](#)). Chávez recognizes these realities, revealing how immigration policy is repeatedly out of touch with individuals' desire for short-term labor migration. He outlines how distinct policy contexts have produced striking differences in migrants' access to myriad legal documents—green cards, work visas, and labor contracts—necessary for lawful employment in the United States, both within and between migrant cohorts. In so doing, *Border Lives* sketches out in intimate detail the negative consequences of extant immigration policies for individuals' livelihoods.

Yet, rather than maintain a singular focus on how social structure overwhelms migrants, Chávez reveals how migrants strategize to overcome the constraints to their economic well-being. For example, some respondents in the earliest cohort took advantage of their long-term employment over the course of the Bracero Program to secure green cards that allowed them to work in the United States and live in Mexico even after the binational agreement had ended; others who did not or could not legalize leveraged their long-standing ties to reputable US-based agriculturalists to enter the country without authorization but with tacit support from Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) officers who looked the other way. When heightened border enforcement increased the risks to undocumented immigration during the Post-Operation Gatekeeper period, migrants developed new strategies. For those eligible for a BCC, granted to Mexicans with substantial land or business holdings and with financial resources to pay for travel to the United States, they crossed into the country under the pretense of shopping or visiting relatives, all the while intending to work. They deflected CBP agents' suspicions by not carrying or wearing any markers of

employment (e.g., job uniforms) while crossing, relying instead on friends with work authorization to shuttle these items. For those without access to any legal documents, undocumented immigration—facilitated by social ties with knowledge or funding useful for entering the country clandestinely (see Garip and Asad 2015, 2016)—was the path forward. Additional strategies are enumerated throughout the book.

Border Lives offers a compelling account of commuters' agency in the face of pervasive constraints to labor migration to the United States. But there is a risk of overemphasizing individuals' agency in some aspects of Chávez's argument. First, in scrutinizing what made some migrants "unsuccessful"—that is, unable to secure livelihoods in either the United States or Mexico—explanations often centered on individual culpability rather than the structural constraints that led individuals to their respective predicaments. Greater specificity about what constitutes agency, as well as the situations under which it is enabled or constrained in light of structural hurdles, might have facilitated a more nuanced explanation of unsuccessful attempts to secure economic self-sufficiency. Second, the focus on migrants' agency vis-à-vis heightened border security often blurred into a critique of the immigration officials whose job it is to enforce these policies, rather than simply the policies themselves. Additional data on the perspectives of the CBP agents, and how they make sense of their charge in relation to the seeming inevitability of undocumented immigration, might have yielded a more balanced account of the processes governing the lives of border commuters.

In spite of these limitations, Chávez's book is a valuable contribution to the literature on international migration. A thorough, well-documented account of how different cohorts of migrants navigate shifting immigration policies, *Border Lives* is likely to inspire additional accounts of how migrants of different legal statuses, who by their classification face distinct policy contexts, interpret and overcome the constraints they face.

References

- Donato, Katharine M., and Amada Armenta. 2011. "What We Know about Unauthorized Migration." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:529–43.
- Garip, Filiz. 2012. "Discovering Diverse Mechanisms of Migration: The Mexico–US Stream 1970–2000." *Population and Development Review* 38(3):393–433.
- _____. 2016. *On the Move: The Changing Dynamics of Mexico-U.S. Migration*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Garip, Filiz, and Asad L. Asad. 2015. "Migrant Networks." In Scott, R. A. and S. M. Kosslyn (eds.), *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 1–13. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- _____. 2016. "Network Effects in Mexico-US Migration: Disentangling the Underlying Social Mechanisms." *American Behavioral Scientist*. doi:0002764216643131.
- Massey, Douglas S., Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren. 2016. "Why Border Enforcement Backfired." *American Journal of Sociology* 121(5):1557–600.
- Waters, Mary C., and Marisa Gerstein Pineau, eds. 2015. "The Integration of Immigrants into American Society." Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. doi: 10.17226/21746.