GLOBALIZATION AND MEXICAN IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN THE US-MEXICO BORDER

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by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents Amado and Isabel Cortez for their unconditional love and support for my educational goals despite their lack of formal education.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Globalization and Immigrant Youth in the U.S.-Mexico Border
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This study examines how globalization affects immigrant youth in the Imperial and Mexicali Valleys with regards to their educational and occupational choices. The U.S.-Mexico border region is the subject of many studies; however, very few focus on the spatiality of globalization and its impact on young people. This study about the geographies of border youth is positioned within a theoretical framework informed by Gloria Anzaldúa’s border theory and Juan Poblete’s innovative transnational border perspectives. Through qualitative methodologies like interviews and focus groups, high school, and preparatoria/secundaria students on both sides of the border were asked questions related to globalization in the U.S.-Mexico border region. Young people’s distinct insights about the socio-economic spatial dynamics of the US-Mexico border add a unique perspective to border scholarship and to globalization studies. The study seeks to answer research questions about young people’s occupational and educational choices; whether globalization in the border hinders or enhances their future well-being; and how globalization impacts them on their respective side of the border. The results demonstrate different levels of awareness about globalization. Students in Mexico expressed a high degree of awareness because they have direct contact with globalization due to the large presence of international maquiladoras and American multinational businesses. On the U.S. side students demonstrated a lower level of awareness about globalization but they indicated a higher level of preparation to participate in the occupations that the global economy requires. Young people on both sides demonstrate through their diverse transnational/transborder experiences a sophisticated level of engagement with globalization but the impacts were different in each side of the border. Young people in Mexico expressed more negative side effects of globalization and expressed more concern about globalization’s impact on their future than their U.S. counterparts. Lastly, it was found that young people’s level of mobility across borders varies due to multiple social and economic factors including the immigration experiences they or their families have experienced.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

As a person who was born and raised at the U.S.-Mexico border I am amazed at the huge disparities on either side. As a young man, before I came to the United States, I gazed beyond the fence separating the two countries and wondered why el otro lado, the “other side,” was so much richer. At one point I lived two blocks from a street that ran alongside the border fence. I spent a lot of time in that section of my neighborhood for two main reasons. One reason was that the street was one of the favorite places for my friends and me to hang out; not because it was better, since it was a dirt street like all of the other streets but because it was right next to the border fence. With our childish ingenuity we were able to create sizable holes in the barbed wire fence that permitted us to squeeze through into the green grassy lawns of the golf course on the other side; we did this so we could play a more civilized game of futbol than the usual one we played on the dirt street in Mexico. Once on the U.S. side of the fence we could always tell when the migra (border patrol) was coming because in the distance you could see the columns of dust created by their vehicles. This permitted us plenty of time to quickly crawl through the holes back into Mexico. The other reason we liked that street was to exercise our entrepreneurial skills. As a result, my friends and I got a glimpse of the economic advantages on the other side. In the open range of a golf course balls inevitably would end up over the fence and land on the street in the Mexican side. We collected these balls and for a quarter a piece we sold them back to the American golfers.

These experiences taught me two lessons: that the grass is greener on the other side, as it was literally, and that better economic opportunities to make life more comfortable existed over the fence. I was one of the few fortunate enough to get legal documents to emigrate to the U.S. and to experience the better economic opportunities afforded by the richest country on the planet. Today, thousands of young people at the U.S. border are facing
that fence wondering and asking themselves the same questions I asked years ago. With this thesis I ask young people on the border some of the questions I had at the time. I want these young people to articulate what they think are the reasons for these disparities. Moreover, the teacher in me wants to take it to the next level and explore their level of knowledge about the global context of the border and how they think they can thrive in this environment so they may achieve a higher standard of living. I argue that at a fundamental level the border is of little consequence to young people seeking economic improvements. Transnational and global transformations force young people to adjust by moving where opportunities lie, notwithstanding the border fence. Young people in the United States have some freedom to move, but the mobility of young people in Mexico remains restricted by the legal and physical space of an international border. The consequences of these spatial inequalities result in uneven impact on young people of the border.

### 1.2 BACKGROUND

With this thesis I document the voices of young people (13-18 years old) at the U.S.-Mexico border. I asked young people from the Imperial and Mexicali Valleys questions about their educational and occupational aspirations in the context of global economic transformations on the U.S.-Mexico border resulting from activities such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). I also seek to understand the level of knowledge these young people have about the local economic, social and educational impacts of these global transformations.

As a result of global restructuring and economic transformations, young people face challenges without parallel anywhere else in the world. Many low-income, transnational children, who are legal residents or American citizens and whose families were forced to return to Mexicali, cross the border daily to attend school in Calexico, California. On the other hand, young lower, to middle income class residents of Mexicali limit their choices to work or go to school only in Mexicali and are often forced to drop out of school to help in their parents’ work. These are immigrant children who move to wherever better economic opportunities exist on either side of the border. They constantly move north or south of the border region based on the economic situation their parents face as global forces shift the
economic landscape. These are some of the daily experiences for young people living on the border separating the Imperial and Mexicali Valleys.

On both sides of the border, the economic environment has changed radically in the past few decades. On the U.S. side, manufacturing and farm jobs used to provide a good living for immigrants. Most jobs in the industrial sector did not require a high level of education or academic competence in English. But those jobs have disappeared. In Mexico NAFTA has brought new occupational opportunities that in some ways mirror those of earlier years in the U.S., without the high wages of American workers. These are mostly assembly jobs available in new maquiladoras that are labor intensive and require low-skills. The low wages that the workers earn do not afford them a middle class lifestyle. It is apparent in both countries that the new economy requires workers with more than basic skills: employees must be able to think critically and engage in group decision-making, to communicate effectively orally and in writing, and to adapt to changing conditions by learning new skills. A larger proportion of jobs in this global economy require the kind of educational preparation that has traditionally been provided to only the academically high ranked students (Garcia 1996).

The economy of the border region is intertwined with the global market-place. Workers who can interact easily with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are prized. Businessmen and women working on the border have known this fact as a matter of regular practice even before NAFTA and the increased integration of the U.S.-Mexico border with the global economy. After NAFTA it has become even more important for young people to be prepared for employment in a more ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse occupational environment than in the past and they must also master the higher critical thinking skills that knowledge based global society demands.

1.3 THE MEXICALI/IMPERIAL VALLEYS’ GEOGRAPHY

The Imperial Valley (the terms “Imperial Valley” and “Imperial County” are used synonymously) is a region of southeastern California roughly located between the Colorado River and the Salton Sea - California largest saltwater lake. Some of the major population centers are Brawley, Calexico and the county seat El Centro. According to the 2010 U.S.
Census Bureau there are 174,528 residents in Imperial County and the Imperial Valley (U.S.CensusBureau 2010). On the Mexico side of the border is the city of Mexicali and the Mexicali valley. This is the seat of the Mexicali municipality as well as the capital of Baja California, the northernmost state in Mexico. According to a 2010 census, the city’s urban center has a population of 689,775 while the entire municipio (including many rural areas surrounding the city) has 956,826 inhabitants(INEGI 2010). The population grew due to the number of maquiladoras in the area and migrational aspects like seasonal labor and the constant in-and-out flow of immigrants to the U.S. or to the northern border of Mexico; today it has remained steady due to the economic recession and harsher immigration enforcement in the U.S.

The Mexicali-Imperial Valley region provides an ideal context to study the impact of globalization on young people on both sides of the border. On the U.S. side demographic data for the region indicates an increase in the Latino population from 72.4 % in 2000 to 80.4% in 2010 (U.S.CensusBureau 2010). The educational attainment for adults over 25 years old has remained low when compared to national and state figures. The poverty levels for the general population have remained high; the rates were 22.6% in 2000 and they currently stand at approximately 21.4%. his rate is high when compared to the state of California rate which stands at 13.7% (U.S.CensusBureau 2010). However, the poverty rate for children under 18 yrs. of age, while declining, is still among the highest rates in the country and in California: from 28.7 % in 2000 28.3% in 2010 (U.S.CensusBureau 2010, U.S.CensusBureau 2009). The county ranks 58th out of 58 counties with an unemployment rate of 28.5% (DOT 2011) compared with an unadjusted 11.5 % for California and 8.4 for the entire country (Briceno 2012).

On the Mexico side, the Mexicali Valley is characterized by a combination of high cross-border population mobility, inadequate oversight of environmental standards, an international border economy that has not effectively helped the area prosper, and a weak binational health and human services infrastructure (Padilla and Argilagos 2008). In the face of severe poverty, inadequate sanitary services, and substandard housing, children and families are at high risk of contracting tuberculosis and other preventable, infectious diseases (Padilla and Argilagos 2008). The marginalization index calculated by the Consejo Nacional
de Población (CONAPO) (National Population Council) in Mexico is a composite index that describes housing conditions, income, illiteracy and other indicators of poverty. A higher marginalization rate shows that a majority of the population lacks employment, social services, and other benefits (Anzaldo and Prado 2007). For example 8% of Mexicali residents have no drainage; and despite a desert region with high summer temperatures about 4.5% does not have a refrigerator in the household; 4% of the population in Mexicali does not have running water; and 1.5% does not have electricity (INEGI 2010). Despite marginalization rates that are lower for the border region of Baja California when compared with the rest of the country, there are pockets of poverty in the state that rank among the tenth most marginalized regions of the thirty-two states of Mexico (Anderson and Gerber 2008). These figures present one image of a population settled in large, developing cities, and another of rural areas where life is similar to poor communities in southern Mexico. A third image is that of a mobile population that is an intrinsic part of the region and whose risks, difficulties, and desperation are reflected in their everyday lives (Anzaldo and Prado 2007). The description aptly fits the Mexicali Valley, with its rural and urban landscapes and with a mobile population of people coming either from the interior of Mexico and staying permanently or those who are passing through on their way to the U.S.
Figure 1. Mexicali and Imperial Valleys’ place in North America

Figure 2. Map of the Mexicali and Imperial Valleys and San Diego/Tijuana region
Figure 3. Map of municipio of Mexicali urban region contrasted with Imperial County rural setting

1.4 Research Questions

To formulate my research questions I argue that the border is of little consequence to young people seeking economic improvements. Young people of the border are transnational, and global transformations force them to adjust by moving where opportunities lie, notwithstanding the border fence. However, young people of the United States and their counterparts in Mexico have unequal opportunities to act transnationally in order to fulfill their educational and occupational goals. Thus globalization on the border creates spatial inequalities that affect young people unevenly. As a result, young people in Mexico are more aware of consequences of globalization than their American counterparts. In order to test this argument the following main research question is posited: In the border region of the Imperial and Mexicali Valleys, how do the forces of globalization such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), affect the aspirations of young people with respect to schooling and work? By asking young people directly, I seek answers for the following sub-questions:
1. What educational and occupational options are available for young people in the border region to pursue the lifestyle they desire for their future?
2. How do young people see globalization manifested in their daily lives?
3. Does the condition of the border economy created by globalization hinder or enhance the future occupations of young people? Does it affect young people on both sides of the border equally?
4. How is a young person’s transnationalism influenced by globalization at the border?

Results from focus groups and open-ended interviews of young people from both sides of the border are analyzed in order to test the accuracy of my argument. This analysis is grounded on extensive literature of children’s geographies and geographies of globalization and framed in a conceptual framework of the border and NAFTA.

Chapter 2 is divided into four main sections. It begins with a review of the literature on the geographies of globalization that sets the spatial stage for the thesis; the multiple definitions of globalization offered by geographers are reviewed and contextualized. The next section provides a theoretical approach to the study of the border offered by Juan Poblete (2006) that focuses on aspects dealing with families and young people. Additionally, Gloria Anzaldúa’s border theories allow us to look at the physical and psychological borders that the U.S.-Mexico international border creates for its residents. Furthermore, her theories allow for an interrogation of the issues raised by these borders with a spatial/postcolonial lens. The third section focuses on NAFTA and its impact on the border economy 15 years after its implementation. And lastly, but very importantly, a thorough review of the literature on children geographies is provided, with a particular focus on immigrant youth and globalization.

Chapter 3 details the methodology used to explore the research questions. First, it details the research design used, for example in selecting locations, recruitment techniques and other logistics needed to implement the study; much of this section is a brief summary of the steps needed to gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Next is a description of the methods used to gather the data that inform the research questions from the focus groups and open-ended interviews. Focus groups of ten students were used to discuss the larger
themes in a broader context and open-ended interviews asked participants more individual questions about their specific experiences related to occupational and educational aspirations. Lastly, an analysis of the data gathered from transcriptions of the interviews is provided. The themes resulting are presented and discussed as they relate to answering the research questions.

Chapter 4 provides a presentation of the findings and how they answer the research questions. Comparisons of the results from both sides of the border are examined and conclusions are drawn about their significance. Chapter 5 ends with a summary of the findings and results. A summary of conclusions and recommendations resulting from the study is provided with emphasis on further research and plans to disseminate the results with young people on both sides of the border. Plans for a bi-national effort involving the student participants are also discussed.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 GLOBALIZATION AND GEOGRAPHY

“Globalization” is a term used extensively today; it is virtually everywhere. It is one of the most used, misused, and confusing words of modern times. The current explosion of interest in “globalization” reflects the pervasive feeling that something fundamental is happening in the world; that there are many “big issues” that are somehow interconnected (Dicken 2007). Yet the lack of a precise definition puts globalization in danger of becoming, if it has not already, the cliché of our times. This is a big idea that seems to encompass everything from global financial markets to the internet, but which delivers very little substance to help understand the contemporary human condition (Held et al. 1999).

Globalization is a contested term and it means quite different things in different contexts. People hold radically different definitions of the term and as a result experts talk past each other as they debate their explanations. Due to the contested nature of the concept scholars make widely varying assessments of the scale of globalization. One side of the spectrum claims that we already live in a fully globalized world while, on the opposite side, skeptics deny that any globalization has occurred. As for the impacts of globalization on people some scholars link the notion to progress, prosperity and peace while others associate it with deprivation, disaster and doom (Scholte 2000). Given these multiple and overlapping discourses, it is not surprising that no single definition exists and furthermore it is difficult to agree on any given definition. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, I don’t plan to provide an all-encompassing definition of globalization; rather I will provide various assessments from different scholars on the current impacts of global globalization as it relates to some of the themes about globalization that I explore with young people in the U.S. Mexico border.

In their book, Global Transformations, Held et. al. (1999, 2) suggest that:
“Globalization may be thought of initially as the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual.”

Held et al. (1999) distinguish three broad schools of thought: the hyperglobalizers who define a new era in which peoples everywhere are subject to the disciplines of the global marketplace; the sceptics who argue that globalization is a myth which conceals the reality of an international economy segmented into three regional blocs where national governments remain strong; and the tranformationalists who conceive globalization as historically unprecedented such that states and societies across the globe are experiencing profound changes (Held et al. 1999, 2). According to Waters (2001, 5) the best way to define globalization may be to specify where the process of globalization may end; that is, what a fully globalized world will look like. In a globalized world Waters suggests, there will be a single society and culture occupying the planet with no central government or tight set of cultural preferences and prescriptions; in a globalized world territoriality will disappear as an organizing principle for social and cultural life; there will be no borders and spatial boundaries. Thus Waters (2001, 5) definition of globalization is as follows:

“A social process in which the constraints of geography on economic, political, social and cultural arrangements recede, in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding and in which people act accordingly.”

A globalized world as described by Waters may not describe our present situation but we may be living in a globalizing world where processes appear to be taking us closer to this kind of situation.

There are different forms of globalization- economic, political, cultural and social. In this study the primary focus is on economic factors, although these are difficult to differentiate from other aspects of globalization since they all are deeply embedded with each other (Dicken 2004). Geography is engaged with the globalization debate because it is concerned with scale. First, globalization indicates a specific scale of social activity- is it worldwide or planetary in scope? What makes twenty-first century web-based “global communication” substantively different from nineteenth century steamship facilitating
“international trade?” Second, globalization transcends relations between states, or international or cross-border processes. Globalization is characterized by “trans-state” processes that are not constrained by national borders. Global financial markets and global warming are two very different but classic examples of the trans-state dimension of contemporary world society. We can see that these two primitive aspects of globalization are intrinsically geographical in nature (Taylor, Watts and Johnston 2002).

Globalization also occurs as the result of technological advances leading to a metaphorical shrinking of the world. This phenomenon is mentioned by David Harvey (1990, 426) as “time-space compression”. In his analysis, Harvey demonstrates that places are becoming increasingly interconnected, transforming the local into a microcosm of the global. Places both actively produce and are the products of global and local influences in dynamic multi-relational networks. As a result, scholars now recognize that there is no separating the local from the global (Amin 2004, Escobar 2001, Massey 2004). A new type of scale has increasingly been discussed by geographers and globalization scholars, the “glocal,” which basically recognizes the global aspects of the local (Escobar 2001, Swyngedouw 1997). The world is not ruled by globalization but rather by a complex set of interrelated processes. These processes transforming the geo-economy are highly uneven and socially inequitable, but nonetheless have made the world qualitatively different from what it was 60 or 70 years ago in that it is not so much more open as increasingly interconnected (Dicken 2007). Contemporary research in human geography points to the differentiating impacts of ‘global’ processes as they interact with ‘local’ places, institutions and people. So it is true that world economies and cultures are increasingly interconnected. But these processes are often resisted and dynamic in that they create different impacts in different places (Murray 2006).

To expand briefly on what I mentioned at the beginning, globalization involves competing discourses which raise the question of whether globalization is a good thing. Who gains as a result of these global transformations? Murray (2006) divides these discourses broadly into three main camps: The pro-globalization, the anti-globalization and the alter-globalization camps. The pro-globalization camp postulates that capitalism promotes moral good through economic growth, efficiency and supposed global welfare gains overall. This is the view of globalization most often adopted by powerful countries in the world like the U.S.
and the U.K. and associated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The pro-globalization view sees globalization as inevitable and as the logical progression of human evolution and of modernization and progress. The anti-globalization perspective sees globalization as a threat to the environment and to local society; one that echoes colonialism. This view sees the poorest nations on earth bearing the heaviest burdens of globalization. According to this view, globalization is increasing the inequalities in development and increasing the possibilities that many poor nations remain marginal. The anti-globalists argue that pro-globalists make globalization seem inevitable because it promotes the interests of powerful multinational corporations that benefit rich nations. Lastly, the alter-globalist view posits that globalization is not predetermined and that it does not follow a given evolutionary path. This view proposes reforms and pushes for citizens and institutions to play a role in resisting, regulating and transforming globalization. This view says that positive outcomes can result from globalization by changing its nature (Murray 2006).

Within a more critical perspective on globalization, possibly alter-globalist, and a position that aligns closer with some of the arguments related to globalization that conceptualize this paper, Robinson argues that, “activists and scholars alike understate the systemic nature of the changes involved in globalization which is re-defining all of the fundamental reference points of human society and social analysis and requires a modification of all existing paradigms” (Robinson 1996, 13). Robinson calls for critical globalization studies that are subversive and that seek to replace predominate power structures with more equitable social arrangements; that is, a counterhegemonic practice that seeks to rebuild public discourse by “speaking truth to power”. Capitalist globalization denotes a war of a global rich and powerful minority against the global poor, dispossessed and outcast majority (Robinson 2006).

2.2 NAFTA, MEXICO AND THE BORDER 15 YEARS LATER

A global transformation that has impacted Mexico and the U.S. Mexico border region is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Thus an analysis of NAFTA can provide insight into how globalization has transformed the U.S.-Mexico region
economically, politically and socially; it is with this purpose in mind that I provide a brief analysis of NAFTA in this study. NAFTA was signed and ratified in 1993 and implemented in January 1, 1994. The agreement created an economic community that is much larger than the European Union or the Pacific Rim in terms of geography and demographics (Davy and Meyers 2005). Along both sides of the US border there was a great deal of activity and high expectations about the prospects of regional economic integration between the US and Mexico. On the US side the prospects of a more open Mexican economy made the US Chamber of Commerce, as well as state and local officials, hopeful about the possibilities for greater sales for a growing Mexican economy. Mexican officials were also hopeful that increased trade would create badly needed jobs to stimulate local economies.

It has been over 15 years and the reports are mixed about whether NAFTA has been beneficial or damaging to the economy of the U.S.-Mexico border. While trade between the two countries has increased and thousands of jobs have been created along the Mexican side of the border, it is not clear who has benefited and who has been adversely affected. The opening of Mexican markets to American agriculture has devastated small and mid-size Mexican farms. Many new manufacturing jobs (maquiladoras) have been created, but these pay low wages and workers work under difficult conditions with few benefits. Guillermo Gómez Peña (2003, 750) notes that this agreement is “based on the arrogant fallacy that ‘the market’ will solve any and all problems, and it avoids the most basic social, labor, environmental, and cultural responsibilities that are actually at the core of any relationships between the countries.”

NAFTA was an opportunity to demonstrate the value of free trade for a developing country. It gave Mexico access to the largest economy in the world. According to Stiglitz and Charlton (2005) fifteen years later you can say that there have been benefits: Trade liberalization stimulated trade, with Mexico’s exports growing at an annual rate of around 10 percent per year in the late 90’s and early 2000. Foreign direct investment also significantly increased. On the other hand, growth during the first decade of free trade was slower than it had been in earlier decades: mean real wages at the end of the decade were lower, and some of the poorest Mexicans were poorer as subsidized American farm products flooded the market and lowered the price received for domestic production. Inequality and poverty also
increased under NAFTA (Stiglitz and Charlton 2005) and Mexico was losing to China many of the jobs that had been created. Even the manufacturing sector, which initially had seen significant growth, experienced a net loss in jobs when NAFTA took effect. As a result, some families living in the Imperial/Mexicali valleys benefited from NAFTA because of the growth in trade and employment but, in most cases the heads of families, and particularly the working classes did not see dramatically higher wages or greatly improved working conditions (Marquez and Romo 2008).

2.3 THEORIZING THE BORDER

In order to place the U.S. Border within a theoretical framework I draw from the work of Juan Poblete, who elaborates on the benefits and risks of national/transnational/cross border frameworks. His work focuses on transnational dialogues on globalization and contemporary Latin American struggles (Poblete 2006). Poblete’s discussion is appropriate for the type of theoretical framework that I establish in this study, because while it addresses the impact of globalization and the emergence of transnationalism it confronts the issues created by the flow of people, goods, and capital across the U.S. Mexican border. Theories must address the sub-national region that spans the political boundary of the two countries as well as the supranational regional and global dimensions of migrations, trade, and border economies. Latin American scholarship raises questions about the consideration of the “nation,” which still defines how people are divided into relations of power and status (Poblete 2006). This is especially the case when a very wealthy nation borders a nation with an emerging economy, and when both have long histories of nationalism.

A positive effect of theorizing about the border in this way is that it encourages thinking differently about the nation-state and the kinds of binary divisions of the two countries that have permeated so much of the social analysis of the border. It is certainly important to consider the “national” when thinking about transnational spaces, because part of the immigrant history and experience has been shaped by the recognition, or lack of citizenship status and/or basic human and labor rights. There are also other kinds of borders such as ethnic, cultural, gender and economic within each country with which trans-border migrants must deal. Along the border with Mexico, in places like the Imperial/Mexicali
valleys where many trans-border migrants concentrate, areas emerge as strategic sites for
globalized economic processes and a unique cross-border geography and culture (Sassen
2005). While there is a consensus that migration is changing U.S Border states and other
areas, there is no consensus on what might comprise an interdisciplinary, comparative, and
regional framework (Suarez-Orozco 2006).

With regards to families and children, new national/transnational/cross-border
frameworks must be considered. One example is a framework of trans-nationalism that
defines the ways immigrants build extensive social fields linking their communities of origin
to their community of settlement (Basch, Schiller and Blanc 1994). Trans-nationalism
extends and challenges the more traditional assimilationist approach to studying border
families. The past decade has seen an explosion in research on trans-nationalism, thus
making the case that rights need to be extended beyond the national framework, that
individuals belong culturally to more than one nation state, and that new circumstances of
migration brought about by globalization processes have an impact on both sending and
receiving countries (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995).

To extend Poblete’s theory of the border I draw from elements of postcolonial and
feminist theories found in the work of Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. In the broader sense
Anzaldúa defines herself as a border woman (Anzaldúa 2007) who partakes in the social and
cultural production of personal identity and who chooses to reside in a place of ambiguity.
For Anzaldúa borders are ever changing spaces that are not restricted to host power relations,
but also incorporating projects of resistance and liberation. Border spaces are social,
geographical and political constructions and are shaped and reshaped according to multiple
influences. In this context, according to Orozco-Mendoza (2008, 1), “borders in the
contemporary world are better described by both contrasts and contradictions, permissiveness
and restrictions, control and disorder, peace and violence, justice and injustices, more than
this, borders are characterized by the dynamism that contributes to the production of all kinds
of knowledge.”

Anzaldúa’s theories of the borderlands have had many impacts in various academic
disciplines such as feminism, Chicano/a studies, queer theory, American studies, composition
studies, cultural studies, women’s studies, and critical pedagogy. In this thesis I plan to
approach Anzaldúa’s theories from a spatial/geographical perspective, which has not been
done in an explicit manner before. This spatial approach unavoidably must include the
colonial context that produced the concept of boundaries and nation-states that create
difference and exclusion. Here is where postcolonial theory interfaces with geography and
where the border is situated in the context of the discovery of the new world and the
subsequent colonization of Mexico that gave way to the concrete borderlands between
Mexico and the United States. In this sense, historical and spatial dimensions inform the
production of Anzaldúa’s borderland theory.

In the context of the Chicano and feminist movement Anzaldúa addressed the concept
of borderlands in a multi-dimensional way. She situated her notion of a geographical
borderland located in the Southwest, but she adds ideological and epistemological
dimensions. Accordingly, territoriality is only one of the many elements in which the
borderlands theory is founded. Anzaldúa (2007, 108) stated: “the actual physical borderlands
that I am dealing with is the Texas-U.S. southwest/Mexican border. The psychological
borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the
southwest”. Although Anzaldúa does not delimit the entire scope of the borderlands
cartographically speaking, she shows awareness of the fact that, in the first place, the
geographical borderland is one that involves a territory previously under Mexican
jurisdiction. And second that this territory does not exclusively pertain to the U.S. but it
includes parts of Mexico that are proximate to the border and share a common and unique
culture that is neither Mexican nor American. In short, Anzaldúa’s dealing with geographical
borderlands forcibly includes the United States where Mexican-Americans/Chicanos are
treated as conquered people or as inferior and marginalized (Anzaldúa 2007).

Relevant to the topic of immigrant young people in the U.S-Mexico border,
Anzaldúa’s work exposes the political forces that construct borders to divide and conquer
those least empowered. The fact that the borders are in a state of constant transition gives
impetus to movements for social change. Those who are “othered” by dominant culture must
resist labels such as transgressors, aliens, inhuman, through embodied cultural and political
acts aimed at social transformation (Hawley 2001). Her inclusionary ideology, which refuses
to deny any part of herself, provides a model that is now becoming adopted in the academy and reflects the realities of a postcolonial world.

Lastly, relevant to the border region, Anzaldúa’s theory crosses linguistic borders creating new ways of knowing and new ways of explaining. *Nepantla* means the space in between, the middle ground, and Anzaldúa uses it to refer to the luminal states of being, the borderland, and the interface between established grounds (Keating 2009, 243). Significant to postcolonial geography theory, *nepantla* states create spaces of understanding for experiences and realities that layer and overlap across different cultures and social and geographic spaces. Communication through language is one of the ways former colonized peoples are reminded of their “otherness” by the colonizer. Crossing linguistic borders Anzaldúa creates a liminal state between cultures, knowledges, and symbolic systems (including phrases in Spanish) and maintaining a rich oral tradition in which women have always participated and in which they transfer knowledge to the young (Keating 2009). Language’s powerful role in shaping reality and ordering experience gives it primary significance for promoting social transformation. The internet, globalization and the information society are advancing an Anglophonic environment on the Mexico side of the border. Enforced use of English creates lasting painful memories for young people in school environments and provokes a desire to leave linguistic binds and borders behind through creatively deploying use of a combination of the two predominant languages in the border, English and Spanish (Hawley 2001).

### 2.4 Globalization and Children

In the description of the situation in the U.S./Mexico border region provided earlier, globalization makes people feel tied in, albeit in often unseen ways, to larger economic and political systems over which they have no control. It is those who have the least voice whose lives are usually affected the most (Kaufman and Rizzini 2002). Some of the global economic transformations with regards to children can be seen in the debate about child labor. According to the International Labor Organization (Valladares 2010) there are 250 million child laborers in the world, 30 million of whom live in Latin America and the Caribbean (Kaufman and Rizzini 2002). Some research shows that labor has a negative effect
on children’s development as a whole. In some countries in Latin America, including Mexico, up to a quarter of the children who belong to the economically active population do not attend school. This amounts to between 800,000 to about 1.5 million children (Bacon 2004) whose main reason for dropping out of school is to find work (Kaufman and Rizzini 2002). In the case of child labor, the complexities of cause and effect come under two headings. The first is whether, in light of the general decline of child labor, globalization has encouraged child labor in some countries; and the second is whether the response of the global community has done more harm than good?

While globalization has allowed these social transformations to take place, one needs to understand how the materialism of class affects experiences of mobility and immobility since not everyone has the same opportunity to move. This is particularly important when considering the options young people have when it comes to moving across borders. While some American children have the option of moving to and from the U.S./Mexico border, not all Mexican youth are afforded that option. Avtar Brah (1996) suggests that this mobility is conditioned by class. James Clifford (1997) explains that it is not only goods, people, and ideas that travel, but cultures as well. They do so in a particular “classed” form, already impregnated by the cultural economies of globalization. In contrast with the recent tendency in cultural analysis to avoid discussions of class it is difficult to understand the everyday experiences of young people without looking at how global conditions of mobility are both affected by, and are instrumental in producing and reproducing, class formations.

When we think of youth moving trans-nationally it is important to understand what this constant shifting means. Doreen Massey (1998) points out that there is no rigid paradigm in which economies, cultures and politics are first global, then national, then regional, then local. Instead, the different registers and scales intersect at all points. For those on the receiving end of colonial practices, as I argue is the case with immigrant youth in the border area of Mexico and the U.S. (both sides actually), there is never an autonomous “local” or “national” context: culture, politics, and the economy are always international, always a site of interaction between a here and there, so that today the line between them is no longer clear. Mexico and the U.S. are deeply intertwined and largely inseparable in the human imaginations that constitute the spaces of modernity (Appadurai 1996). Today’s interactions
in the global society are driven by the intensified and accelerated movement of people, images, ideas, technologies, and economic and cultural capital across national boundaries. Youth then must move differently in the world today than they did in previous generations, as the sites in which they live are themselves transformed (Dolby and Rizvi 2007).

2.5 Literature of Children Geographies, Immigrant Youth and Globalization

In terms of the literature on children and globalization, much of the research on children’s geographies has focused on local scales primarily in the “developed north” (North America, Europe). This is beginning to change and recently the focus of geographers has been placed on a global scale with an increased emphasis on the “developing” south (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) where assumptions about childhood may be different (Aitken 2007, Ansell 2002, Ansell and van Blerk 2007, Ansell and Young 2004, Beazley 2003, Bosco 2007, Jennings et al. 2006, Katz 1998, Katz 2004, Punch 2007, Robson 2004, Swanson 2010b, Swanson 2010a). For example, children in the “south” are shown to be important care providers for their ill or disabled parents with significant impacts on the children’s upbringing. In many cases, this is an expectation of children rather than an option (Aitken et al. 2006, Aldridge and Becker 1993, Robson 1996).

In her work in Sudan, Katz (2004) explores how work and play are often intermingled, and children learn important lessons about their environment as they play and perform tasks their parents or adult supervisors expect them to complete. At the same time Katz’s work compares the deleterious effects of economic restructuring for the children of Sudan with the effects of neoliberal disinvestment for children in New York City. In a similar context (Punch 2002) explores how poor children in Bolivia integrate work, play and schooling, interrogating the notions of childhood in the global north that distinctively separates these activities. Punch (2003) in another study in rural Bolivia examines how children and youth negotiate work and school. She explores how various factors affect the decisions children make regarding work and school.

Children do not always work when they come into the cities from urban environments, at times they seek charity by begging in the street. While most people do not
consider begging a type of work and more often these children are stereotyped as lazy and mischievous they are able to survive in the streets of Quito. These young people alternate between begging and working in the street despite persistent harassment of municipal authorities that seek to cleanse the streets of their presence. The revanchist efforts of authorities do not stop these children from exploiting the global tourism market of the city of Quito to earn a living and accomplish their goals (Swanson 2010a, Swanson 2010b).


Higher levels of education are often seen as a solution for young people to be prepared to adjust to the global transformations; they are also seen as the key for upward mobility in the global north and has gained wide acceptance in the global south as well. Craig Jeffrey in his work in the U.K. and in India questions this notion (Jeffrey 2008, Jeffrey and McDowell 2004). Neoliberal economic and social changes are radically changing how young people transition into the work force in a globalized economy. Today young people face greater uncertainties than in any other era and options must be considered and critically analyzed.

Some works on indigenous and Mexican migrant children who are forced to move in search of jobs either for themselves or their parents provide a fresh perspective on the issue
of migrant children and globalization (Balagopalan 2002, Bey 2003, Nieuwenhuys 2007, Taracena 2003). Additional work has been written on the identities of migrant children in Bolivia and Argentina; while its focus is on internal migrations this research provides a good perspective on how the children see themselves in this context (Punch 2007). Scholarly work also addresses the impacts of globalization on children with a particular focus on the implications for schooling. This source is very helpful for the aspects of this thesis that deal with schools (Suarez-Orozco 2001, Taracena 2003). Works published in Spanish dealing with children in the context of globalization and in Mexico and other Latin American countries bring additional perspectives to this project. Some deal with migrations of farm-worker children in Mexico; often these children are from indigenous backgrounds and are subject to hard work in the fields (Cos-Montiel 2001). Various works dealing with children workers in agriculture demonstrates the multitude of issues arising from the re-structuring of the agricultural sector in Mexico that is due, in part, to new arrangements from NAFTA that permit agribusiness corporations to farm in Mexico. One of the unfortunate consequences is the increased presence of children to perform many of these labor intensive functions in the fields often under precarious and unhealthy conditions (Bacon 2004). Journal articles, reports and conference proceedings, give reasons for concern. Among the topics addressed in the literature are health issues, school drop-outs, child exploitation, poor housing conditions and an increasing levels of poverty (Bacon 2004, Bey 2003, Bilbao 2002, Encinas and Armando 2007, Gamlin and Hesketh 2007, Pedraza et al. 2008, Rangel 2006, Sanchez Saldaña, Brumer and Piñeiro 2005, Sorcia 2007).

Bi-national studies about the U.S.-Mexico border have been conducted primarily in Anthropology, Sociology and City Regional Planning (Alvarez Jr 1995, Herzog 2001, Martínez 1994, Vila 2000, Vila 2003). Specifically, bi-national studies about young people are few and have mainly taken place within Sociology. For example an extensive bi-national study of young people’s expectations with regards to family education and work in the San Diego-Tijuana region was conducted by Ojeda and Zavala-Cosio (Ojeda and Zavala-Cosio 2011). While there have been studies that compare young people in two very different countries and settings like Sudan and New York (Katz 2004), none have compared immigrant and transnational, transborder children on opposite sides of a border fence with
very distinct national identities and geographies that nonetheless share historical, cultural, and socio-economic traits and values. As interest in children’s geography grows and new works on the impacts of globalization on children surface, careful consideration needs to be given to research projects that interrogate the spatial dimensions of excluded populations such as Mexican immigrant children in the U.S-Mexico border. The desired outcome of this thesis is to add to the literature of geographies of young immigrant populations in the global south and specifically in the spaces of the U.S.-Mexico border. Globalization is real and is transforming our world, it certainly is transforming the U.S.-Mexico border region and young people on both sides of the border play an important role in these transformations. As actors who are at the receiving end of these global transformations it is imperative that the critical perspectives of young people in the U.S-Mexico border be documented.

2.6 SUMMARY

This introductory section provided background to this thesis by setting up the framework for the study of young people on the U.S.-Mexico border. Poblete’s innovative theorizing of the border allows for a new way to study young people and families in transnational spaces of the border. Anzaldúa interrogates the physical and mental borders of the U.S.-Mexico border region. Her postcolonial, spatial approach provokes us to examine the challenges and consequences of the often contentious U.S.-Mexico border. For young people literally growing up in two very distinct politically and economically worlds that are nevertheless linked by culture, history and socio-economic factors this can be challenging as we will find in my study. The spatial proximity that brings two highly politically and economically unbalanced nations and that has subjected Mexico as the less powerful actor to a quasi-colonial status provides an opportunity for postcolonial analysis of the region. This condition contains physical and psychological borders that must be reckon with. For young people often this means overcoming inferiority feelings about their “Mexicaness” that include all aspects of culture, politics and economics. The approach young people take with regards to these challenges has long-lasting implications for their future particularly with regards to their educational and occupational choices.
In this introduction it was also demonstrated how contested globalization is and how it is particularly difficult to determine who benefits and who is affected negatively. As we will find out in the focus groups and interviews that took place in this study young people are keenly aware that globalization impacts people differently. Global transformations like NAFTA are proof that globalization impacts people on each side of the border differently and so it is not any different with regards to families and young people. Lastly, an analysis of the literature of young people’s geographies demonstrates an explosion of interest on immigrant young people and their entanglements with globalization. The large amount of work focusing on the geographies of young people in the global south is encouraging and it provides an excellent framework for this thesis. In the next chapter the methodology used to conduct this study is presented in detail.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study is designed to gauge the knowledge that immigrant young people have about globalization in the border region between Mexico and the United States. Within this context the primary objective is to determine their understanding about how globalization impacts their daily lives in relation to work and education. In this chapter I briefly describe the social and spatial context of the two sites where the study took place. I then describe in detail a combination of qualitative research methods utilized to obtain the data.

3.1 LOCATIONS OF STUDY

The interview and focus groups took place in two locations with students who share similarities in ethnic background, nationality and relative socio-economic status. The student participants were Mexican immigrants that either emigrated from interior Mexico to the northern border of Mexico or who emigrated from Mexico to the United States. Many immigrants in this region of Mexico come from rural/agricultural backgrounds as do their counterparts in the United States side; to date many of the residents of the region even if not directly engaged in agriculture still have deep ties to farm work. The physical geography of the region is a desert but years of reclamation efforts that brought irrigation from the Colorado River have made both Valleys productive agricultural producers. This is particularly true in the Imperial Valley which remains largely rural with agriculture as its main economic engine. The Mexicali Valley also has a fairly productive agricultural production sector but in addition it has a strong manufacturing/industrial sector and a relatively large urban population of over 600,000 people from a total of over 900,000 total population. As a result the young people from the location of the study both have strong connections to agriculture and farm work. They also have in common a relative similar socio economic status; the young participants in this study come from low-income backgrounds in both sides of the border. But due to the relative inequalities between the two countries a low
income individual in the United States may be comparatively speaking better off economically that someone from a marginal status in Mexico. However, for comparative purposes of this study I consider the populations socio-economically similar. The students who are part of the Upward Bound Program in the United States meet guidelines that make them 150% of the poverty levels in the United States. For example, for students to be eligible a family of four may not have an annual income higher than $34,575 (TRIO 2012). In my experience as a former director of Upward Bound it was not unusual for families of four or larger to have annual incomes of half the income threshold. Many of the farmworker families I worked with had an average of six family members with average annual incomes of $25,000. Similarly the students in Escuela Secundaria General No. 76 live in a relatively marginal region of Mexicali when compared to the rest of the population of Mexicali. So let me briefly explain the socio-spatial context of the students which comprise Upward Bound and Escuela Secundaria General No. 76 in Mexicali.

Upward Bound is a college preparation program funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The goal of the program is to academically prepare low-income, first-generation college high school students for admission to and graduation from postsecondary education. The program provides students with an array of services during an academic year component that includes after school tutoring, Saturday school sessions, financial aid information, and university admission information including college visits. Services also include an intensive six week summer residential program where students attend classes at a university, live in the dormitories and experience the social/cultural/recreational environment of a university. The only criteria for admission to Upward Bound are family income and the educational level of parents; as a result all student participants share a similar socio-economic background. The income criteria combined with the fact that the student’s parents lack a college education result in almost all of these families being working class. Most of the heads of households in these families are farmworkers picking crops or working in agriculture related businesses such as packing sheds and canneries. Those families not engaged in agriculture related jobs work in service type jobs such as retail, hotel and restaurant jobs. All of the participants are from the local area comprised of seven high schools in six cities in Imperial County. Upward Bound participants are recruited from Calipatria, Brawley, Imperial, Holtville, Calexico,
Central and South West (both from El Centro) high schools. The demographics of this region and its proximity to Mexico result in over 90 percent of the student participants having a Mexican heritage. The interviews and focus groups with students in this program took place during the program’s Summer Residential Session at the University of California San Diego campus (UCSD) in the summer of 2009.

Escuela Secundaria General No. 76 in Mexicali is located in Fraccionamiento El Robledo a colonia that is part of the Gonzalez Ortega Delegación (Borough) formerly known as Palaco. This delegación is the largest and most densely populated of the Mexicali Municipio with about 132,458 people and El Robledo is one of the most economically marginal colonias of the delegación. The school site is surrounded by industrial parks that contain maquiladoras and various important commercial centers. Most of the students’ families are working class; many work in the maquiladoras nearby, some work in the agriculture related industries that also populate this part of the Delegación. A large portion of the people who are employed work in the service sector in the downtown or Centro Cívico section of the city. Moreover, an undetermined number work in the informal sector selling in the streets on makeshift commercial outfits (INEGI 2011). Students in history and geography classes at Escuela Secundaria General No. 76 “Francisco I. Madero” participated in the focus groups and interviews. These students were largely in third grade of secundaria, which is the equivalent of 9-10th grade of high school. The school serves about 500 students, but as it is typical in many schools in Mexico there is a morning and afternoon session. The morning session which is Secundaria No. 76 proper is the session where I interviewed students; the morning session or Secundaria No. 76 serves about 300 students. Figure 4 below indicate with a yellow pin the locations of the schools where the study participants came from. Figure 5 is a close-up of the mixed urban, industrial agricultural context in which Escuela Secundaria No. 76 is located in Mexicali.
Figure 4. Location of study participants’ schools

Figure 5. The location of Secundaria No. 76 in context
Sample size was not appropriate or necessary for this qualitative research because I am more interested in the young people’s knowledge of these issues rather than in quantifying or surveying their answers. My prior experience as a social science high school teacher and director of an Upward Bound Program working with high school students as well as my contacts with university and secundaria personnel in Mexicali enabled me to identify young people to participate in this study. Due to the bi-national nature of the study and in an attempt to talk to a good cross-section of young people from the Imperial and Mexicali valleys, interviews and focus groups took place with the two student groups I mentioned above.

Having been a director and being extremely familiar with the program gave me a lot of advantages in the conduct of this research. The director of the program is a former colleague and a friend and she facilitated my access to the students. Similarly in Mexicali, my familiarity with the school system and with the city facilitated my ability to engage the students with my research. As a result, I was able to access young people during the times they were available during school hours and while they engaged in the daily activities. I primarily used focus groups, and in-depth personal interviews. These methods allowed me to work around the schedules of the Upward Bound students involved in a tightly regimented summer program. In the case of Mexicali, students were in the middle of their school day. This methodology also allowed me to talk to the students in a classroom/educational setting environment where they could focus on the topics at hand and so the encounters could be held in an open/public setting.

With this thesis I examine a dynamic that places young people as major actors in the research rather than mere subjects of the research. As a result, I expand on theories about the border and then incorporate the voices of young people on both sides of the international line. Although I have some general hypothesis about what young people think about globalization and how they prepare for changes resulting from these global transformations based on what I’ve read in the literature; the variations, processes, and meanings were unknown. Qualitative methods are ideal for research of this kind because it allows much greater exploration and deeper investigation into young people’s experiences. Among some of the reasons why I feel that qualitative methodologies are best suited for this research project is because with these
methodologies I can engage with the young people in the places where they are conducting their daily activities. Even as I discuss global issues these methodologies allow me to tie them up to the local level and allow me to examine the diversity of opinions and circumstances these young people experience in the globalized spaces of the U.S.-Mexico border. What follows is a narrative explaining the methodologies used in the project, including the theoretical basis, as well as the rationale, that justifies the use of each of the methods.

3.2 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In depth interviews are used in geography as our questions and concerns reflect greater sensitivity to a complex set of personal, political and place-based processes (Katz 1994, Valentine 1997). For instance, where interviews take place is of great importance to geographers, particularly when dealing with young people (Elwood and Martin 2000). Thus, at the onset, great care was exercised in choosing the location of the contact with the young participants. At a summer program orientation permission was granted by the parents to interview the students after the project was introduced; parents signed consent forms if they wanted their sons/daughters to participate. The setting of the interviews was public and one that allowed students to feel safe and comfortable. I was granted access by gatekeepers to both the participants and the settings where the research took place; both of them were public and in educational institutions. This setting minimized disruptions to the daily routine of the students and, because it was located in an educational setting, it allowed a degree of formality that made students take their participation seriously.

Eyles (1988, 2) describes an interview as ‘a conversation with a purpose’. An interview can also be construed as, “a data-gathering method in which there is a spoken exchange of information and one that requires some form of direct access to the person being interviewed” (Dunn 2005, 79). The advantages of this approach is that it is sensitive and people-oriented, allowing interviewees to construct their own accounts of their experiences by describing and explaining their lives in their own words. I used a semi-structured interview approach, where I was able to utilize some degree of predetermined order of questions, that still ensures flexibility to accommodate issues raised by the students (Dunn
I found this approach to be very useful in dealing with young people’s spontaneity. For example in my interviews with the students in Mexicali I did not expect so many of them to be American citizens. The lack of formal structure allowed me to explore this unexpected topic in more depth.

I also used in-depth interviews to ask young people about their understanding of what they have to do in order to be prepared for a job. I also questioned young people in both sides of the border about what kind of jobs they may have to perform in the future. If they were working already I asked questions about the nature of the job they are performing and why they think they need to work at this early age in their lives. Additionally, if they were working, I asked them if they dropped out of school and why? Their answers assisted me in getting a better understanding of how they thought an education was helping them to prepare for a future in a complex global economy. Some of the questions I asked are the following: What type of careers do you think will allow you to have the job/lifestyle you want? What kind of choices do you have to attend school? How are education and the type of job you want related? Are the jobs you dream about available where you live?

3.3 Focus Groups

In recent years, focus groups have enjoyed growing popularity as a research method in human geography (Conradson 2005). Across a diverse range of settings, they are employed to explore the complex understandings and interactions that people have with their everyday environments. Subjects investigated in this manner include recreational forest use, childcare provision, citizenship issues of immigrant youth, and urban leisure practices (Conradson 2005). The basic format of a focus group is a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of research. But rather than seeing focus groups as quick ways to collect group data, the case is made that they are one of the most engaging methods for geographers working with qualitative data and approaching geographic questions from a critical perspective (Bosco and Herman 2010). Focus groups are a good way to engage young people with complex conceptual themes such as globalization. A focus group allows the researcher to guide the students along with the discussion. Just as a teacher would do in the classroom,
students can be prompted with familiar knowledge and then the discussion may rise to a higher level of complexity. Students can also engage with each other and learn from their peers as the complexity of the discussion increases. Somewhere between four and ten participants for a group size is an ideal with a researcher or two to facilitate and moderate the conversation. The interactive aspect of focus groups provides an opportunity for people to explore different points of view and formulate and reconsider their own ideas and understandings of the issue at hand. This approach gives the researcher a pivotal role in promoting interaction and keeping the participants focused (Cameron 2005).

In my research the conversations were recorded and then transcribed. Student participants were asked to consent to the recording of their comments in the focus groups. Parents also approved of their students’ participation and of their agreement to be recorded by signing a parent consent form. Participant answers to the initial set of questions were supplemented with the moderator’s notes in the transcripts in order to account for group dynamics, mood, gesture and other nonverbal aspects of the discussions (matters which a transcript can only partially convey). The focus groups explored themes with participants that included the following: school/training issues, work performed currently, limitations they encounter in finding jobs they want to perform, description of what they understand as globalization, examples of job their parents perform currently, and transnational issues associated with work/training/education among others.

3.4 Participatory Approaches

Participatory techniques have been around since the 1980s but are increasingly making an impact in human geography (Cameron and Gibson 2005, Kindon 1998, Kitchin 2001, Pain 2003, Pain and Francis 2003). They emerge at a time when a broader “relevance” debate is resurfacing within critical human geography and offers one means to try and make geographical research more relevant to the lives of ordinary people. The intention here is to encourage people to think about the possibility of doing research differently than traditional academic research. Ideally participatory approaches are about working with rather than on people, and about generating data and working in ways that increase participants’ ability to bring about positive change in their own lives. Like other forms of “action research” they are
about changing, not simply describing or analyzing, social realities (Pratt 2001).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) signals a shift in understanding about who should instigate, conduct, analyze, present and act on and benefits from a research project. In PAR, participants are recognized as valuable and they are encouraged to have a voice. Given the opportunity ordinary people can work together to identify pertinent research questions, design and utilize techniques and generate and analyze data about their own lives (Pain 2003).

Since the research involved young people, I expected that participants would benefit from the research project. Through the young people’s participation in in-depth interviews and in the focus groups I expected that the participants would increase communication skills by sharing their experiences about how they are preparing to deal with the impacts of globalization in their lives. It is expected that if they did not have an understanding of globalization through their participation in the project they would gain a higher level of understanding about the fact that they are indeed socio-economic actors in the world. It is also hoped that they will come out of the research better equipped to face choices in training and schooling. Sharing a similar socio-economic experience with the participants and having been an interested in teaching students about these social issues, PAR research provides an opportunity to create a reciprocal learning experience. Through this research project I get to document and learn about what young people think about globalization in the U.S.-Mexico border and they in turn learn about how this issue impacts their lives.

In my discussions with the gatekeepers of the Upward Bound Program in Imperial County and with the Escuela Secundaria General No. 76, ‘Francisco I. Madero’ in Mexicali, B.C., Mexico, we discussed developing a bi-national project to bring together teenagers from both sides of the border. The objective is to have these young people create an exhibit or presentation that will elaborate on the topics/ themes that were explored in this research project. A “globalization and young people in the U.S.-Mexico border bi-national project” would consist of young people in each side of the border talking to students groups about globalization. American students would engage with their Mexican counterparts in a joint presentation or exhibit where they would share their experiences. It is understandable that Mexican students may not have the same freedom to join their American counterparts
because they may not possess the required documentation to come to the United States. It is more likely that American students could come to Mexico to join their Mexican counterparts.

3.5 INTERVIEW/FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Because none of the interviews are formal or scripted (Aitken 2001a, Barker and Weller 2003, Aitken 2010) there is room for maneuvering and improvisation. Themes for inquiry were used rather than questionnaires with pre-determined sets of questions. The following are the themes used in the focus groups with young participants: Globalization, NAFTA and the U.S. Mexico border, the global economy and education, the border economy and jobs of the future, jobs required for the global economy, school/job choices for young people, future aspirations, and growing up and working where you live today. The following are some of the questions that were used for individual in-depth interviews and many others came up in the process:

- What types of careers do you think will allow you to have the job/lifestyle you want?
- What kinds of school choices do you have?
- Tell me what you know about things that relate to economics in the world?
- Do they affect you? If so how?
- Have you lived in another country? If so where?
- Would you be willing to go to another country if your job required it?
- Are you interested in technology?
- Are there connections between things related to the economy of the world technology? How so?
- Is technology required to survive to succeed financially in this country and in the world?
- Will the jobs of the future require technology? Can you give examples?
- What types of jobs do you think the world requires?
- How are education and the type of job you want related?
- Are the jobs you dream about available where you live?
• Can you provide examples how jobs in the local area tied to jobs in the rest of the world?
• What are the education levels of your parents?
• What are your educational, occupational goals?
• Have your parents moved because of jobs? Have you?
• Do you plan to move looking for a job if so where?
• Where do you go to school? Where have you gone to school?
• Do you work currently? If so why? What type of job do you do?
• Do you plan to stay where you currently live? Why, why not?

The research was conducted in three stages. In stage one there were two focus groups of 10 students in each site (one in Imperial Valley and the other in Mexicali). The logistics of classes and available times to conduct the focus groups precluded the creation of separate groups of boys and girls; as a result the focus groups were mixed. In stage two, each of the focus groups was followed by 10 individual in-depth interviews at each site. The third stage of the project involved data collection which consisted mainly of transcribing the recorded group and individual interviews. One last part in this stage is planned to take place after the project is finished and defended and it consists of disseminating and presenting the findings to students on both sides of the border as part of the PAR aspect of this project. Unfortunately due to the limitations of a thesis project I will not be including results of the PAR project here.

Stage 1:

The first stage of the research used focus groups to develop empirical knowledge of what young people understand about the connections between the global economy, the local economy and their prospects for education and work. Topics discussed in these focus groups included globalization, NAFTA and the global economy. They were followed by more direct and specific topics such as job aspirations, jobs required in the 21st Century, connections between education and work and perceptions about prospects for jobs and education in the border region. As will be discussed in more depth in the findings section, interesting
questions/ideas came up about what they understood as globalization. Overall, this stage provided a baseline for deeper and more exploratory individual interviews into the effects of global economic transformation in their local community and in their own lives.

Stage 2

The second stage of the interview process consisted of intensive in-depth interviews. These interviews focused on individual perspectives, opinions and ideas about the impact of global transformations on their own lives. Based on some of the baseline knowledge established in the focus groups more specific questions were sought out. As the interviews were semi-structured, set questions were asked but each participant elaborated based on their own personal experiences. The specific questions that were asked were introduced in page 42.

Fortunately the logistics worked well enough to allow for stages one and two to take place close to each other. With the Upward Bound Program focus groups took place in two separate days and interviews followed each respective evening. The Upward Bound Program Director allowed me to conduct the focus groups in the students’ free time and also allowed me access to the dorms where they were staying. This arrangement worked well because I was able to conduct both the focus groups and the individual interviews within the fourth week of the program, around mid-July.

Similarly with the students in Mexicali the Prefect of the secundaria allowed me access to two social science classes with full cooperation from the teachers who were enthusiastic about the project. I had full access to two different classes on the same day and as a result I was able to conduct and record the focus groups. I returned the next day and I was given permission to pull from classes ten individual students from the twenty students who had participated in the focus groups the day before and conduct individual interviews.

Stage 3

The final stage of data collection took place after transcription and preliminary analysis of data collected in stages 1 and 2 had taken place. I analyzed the transcripts to develop common themes that allowed for categorization of the findings. I initially intended to
use N*Vivo to develop the themes and to code but it was easier to do it manually by looking at the text and the patterns that resulted. Seeking guidance as to how to proceed after I had pages of transcripts and hours of recorded interviews in front of me I followed some of the techniques suggested by Jackson and Russell on what they term, “life history interview research methods.” (Jackson and Russell 2010) I proceeded to code by using lower-order codes that came directly from the students’ words. For example in tackling the students’ definition of globalization I used many of the words they used when prompted. They brought up outsourcing, Walt Mart, China, maquiladoras, shirts made in Thailand, Japanese cars etc. and so I began to code those words under definitions of globalization. So as Jackson and Russell suggest I went back and forth between the text and the actual audio recordings to get at more abstract codes about globalization, transnationalism and even to some degree postcolonialism, which are of course more academic and in line with some of the theoretical issue I was tackling. Jackson and Russell suggest this technique as a way to prevent researchers from jumping to premature conclusions (Jackson and Russell 2010, 189). I found this approach to coding useful in working with young people because it is similar to what one does with teaching; it is helpful to start from their baseline level of knowledge and from there expand to a higher level of thinking such as the conceptual. After that students can begin to analyze, be more critical and form their own opinions and perspectives on the issues at hand.

The methodology described in the last pages suggest a thorough process that allows for young people to discuss, analyze and deduct their own conclusions about the global transformations they experience in their daily lives. The qualitative methodologies used in this research project proved to be an appropriate approach that allowed young people to provide their valuable perspective on a set of rather complex research questions about globalization in the U.S.-Mexico border. In the next chapter I will present what I found young people had to say about these issues. The findings are organized as answers to the research questions of this study. I close with some conclusions that discuss the degree to which the overarching hypothesis drawn from the theoretical framework discussed at the beginning matches with what I found from my conversations with young people.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The interviews and focus groups provided data that demonstrated distinct differences on how students viewed and interpreted globalization based on what side of the border they were from. In very general terms the young people of Mexicali seem to be more aware of globalization and they expressed that it was everywhere. My analysis of the focus groups’ and interviews’ dynamics illustrates this in more detail. These are important to notice because they allow the participants to construct their understanding of the complex issues in the discussion even if they don’t fully grasp the concepts. The individual interviews provide a deeper insight that personalizes the participants’ experiences with the global transformations on the border.

Another finding was that the young people in this study on both sides of the border seem to be relatively clear on the requirements necessary to be successful in the global economy; they understand that technology, languages and a solid education are some of the essential elements to succeed in the global economy. Based on the interviews and focus groups I get a sense that it could be that living in the border region may be a factor influencing a higher level of global awareness. As they expressed it in the interviews and focus groups, for these young people living on the border may make them more aware that there are people who live and think differently. They are more acutely aware of the interrelatedness of the world since they see it every day across the border where two different countries’ cultures and traditions interact with each other; for them, it is real, they see it and live it every day of their lives. In Mexicali, the abundance of maquiladoras from different

\[1\text{ Jeffrey, C. (2008) ‘Generation Nowhere’: Rethinking youth through the lens of unemployed} \]
countries make complex issues of globalization and international trade seem a part of daily life to the extent that it renders these issues comprehensible and accessible for these young people.

I made an argument in the introduction that young people at the border are transnational and that global transformations like NAFTA force them to adjust by moving in the direction where the opportunities are without regard to the international border line. The main research question for this study is: In the border region of the Imperial and Mexicali Valleys, how do the forces of globalization such as NAFTA, affect the aspirations of young people with respect to schooling and work? In the next section I provide an analysis of the findings in the context of the research questions asked. This will be accomplished by looking at each of the sub-questions and elaborating on the themes that resulted from the focus groups and the in depth interviews.

1. What educational and occupational options are available for young people in the border region to pursue the lifestyle they desire for their future?

Young people responses demonstrate a high level of awareness of the requirements necessary to compete in the global economy. In the Imperial Valley young people clearly understood the importance of a higher education to achieve professional and personal goals. They knew about college entrance requirements and the fact that jobs involving science and technology are cutting edge and critical in the current global economy. A great deal of this knowledge can be attributed to the fact that students are part of a college preparatory program and that these issues are part of their required knowledge. Having worked with Upward Bound in the past I know that these programs are highly successful in placing non-traditional low-income, first generation college high school students into colleges and universities. The program I directed at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo placed over 90% of graduates into college. While college graduation rates were not available, persistence rates, that is, the rate at which students made progress toward attaining a college degree, were over 50%. These figures demonstrate a substantial increase from the national rates of 6% placement in college for this population and from a dismal 12% bachelor degree attainment
rate for residents of the area that the Upward Bound Program served. Success rates for the
Upward Bound Program in which I conducted the study are not available but in a personal
communication with the Director she shared that her program had rates of success close to
the ones I had in my program\(^2\). Because of this it is not surprising that the population of my
study has a strong focus on education.

On the Mexicali side as I explained earlier the presence of global firms, literally in the
students’ neighborhood. The mere presence of these global firms resonates with young
people even if they may see “good jobs” with those companies as unattainable. I will discuss
this issue later in more detail. They connect the importance of an education with highly paid
technical jobs, like engineers and skilled technicians. And because many of their parents or
family members work in maquiladoras they know that only with education they can avoid the
low paid, unskilled, strenuous jobs that abound in these factories. Technical \textit{secundarias} and
\textit{preparatorias} exhort the value of learning computer programing and other technical fields
as the key to prepare for the careers of the 21st century in the global economy. And, of
course, the students express these ideas in my interviews with them.

In the focus groups when asked about current careers choices Upward Bound students
primarily said that they wanted to pursue careers that involved a college education. Answers
typically included doctors and teachers but there were also more specific careers such as
psychology, computer engineering, pediatricians and so forth. Frank (not his real name)\(^3\) is a
junior that will be senior in the next academic year, from El Centro, CA said, “I am taking
advanced math and a drafting class which next year for seniors is either architecture or a
higher level of drafting.” Some students mentioned careers that do not necessarily involve a
college education such as law enforcement, correction officers, and computer technicians. In

\(^2\) Programs vary in their degree of success but there are reports that document the success of interventions of support
programs such as TRIO Programs of which Upward Bound is one see the Pell Institute web site for some of these reports
http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications

\(^3\) All of the names used to reference a particular young person are fictitious; this is done to protect their privacy and
their identity.
Mexicali, young people also demonstrated high levels of awareness about careers they felt were needed to function in a globalized economy. Many students discussed careers in electronics, architecture, engineering, computer science as well as business, accounting and business. A typical response was like that of Marta, a 3rd grade secundaria student or the equivalent of a freshman/sophomore in high school. When asked about her preparation in school she answered, “I am taking English, Spanish and Mathematics; English is needed because I plan to study Forensic Medicine and I want to go to the United States to study it since they don’t have schools that teach it here.”

Other very interesting themes came up on both sides of the border when young people were asked about their possibilities of staying in the border region to work. In Imperial Valley many students talked about the depressed economy and the lack of jobs. They talked about the lack of “good jobs” where they can practice the profession of their choice and where they can earn a decent living. So many students said they would leave the county first to study since there are not many higher education opportunities and second because they did not think they could find a job here when they finished school. One student, Tony, said, “maybe in five years when I am done with college I’ll come back to the valley, there may be more engineering projects because right now most of them are taken and the way the economy is a lot of the building in the valley is slowing down.” Another young man Juan said, when asked the same question, “It depends if I get a job offer somewhere, I’ll come back when I have enough money and I’ll take my family out of here.” One girl Yhara, was a bit more explicit, she said, “You should stay out of the valley because people are losing their jobs, so even if you have a job you may not have it for long, so it’s better to go where there are more opportunities even if it is more expensive, elsewhere you are going to get all of that money back, so it is better to go away.”

In the Mexicali valley the options for the students appeared a bit more limited. No one really talked about going somewhere else within Mexico to work or study since many felt, though did not articulate it explicitly, that there were plenty of opportunities in Mexicali in comparison with interior Mexico. A few of the young people however mentioned going to the United States to either join family, study or seek other employment opportunities. Most of those demonstrating a desire to go to the United States said that they were looking for
better educational opportunities, like the case of Marta that I mentioned earlier; she indicated that she wanted to learn English so she could go study forensic medicine as she felt Mexicali did not have appropriate schools. Another student Manuel, who is an American citizen lives in Mexicali because his parents were deported for being in the United States illegally, was not sure if he would go back to the United States. He was too young (one and a half year old) to remember anything and thus far liked life in Mexicali. I will talk more about Manuel in the subsection below which deals with transnationalism on the border.

2. How do young people see globalization manifested in their daily lives?

The attention of my questions turned to young people’s broad understanding of globalization and whether they understood some of its effects in their daily lives. For the young people from the United States I had to do quite a bit of probing to get them to talk about globalization. In fact, many young people explicitly said they had not heard about the term “globalization.” I had to use some of my high school teacher techniques to get them to discuss globalization. For instance, I asked students to look at some of the labels of their t-shirts, or blouses and had them read me what the labels said. Once they looked at the labels we then began to have a conversation about where the products came from and how those products were part of globalization. When asked directly if they knew what globalization was about, two thirds said they had not heard of the term. The third that had heard about it had various answers ranging from, “something related to saving the earth.” Another young person said, “I’ve heard people say it but I don’t know what it is. A few others said, “it has something to see with space” or another one said, “it is related to the world.” Lastly, one young person began to talk about global warming and how that was globalization; Marcos, said, “Isn’t it like climate, like with global warming, everything is connected, and it affects us all.” Once prompted, young people from Imperial Valley began to talk about how Imperial Valley was connected to the world. Almost in a chorus they said “agriculture”; “mostly vegetables, agriculture and stuff.” Some mentioned that they had seen maquiladoras when in Mexicali, so I asked what are maquiladoras? One young person, Frank, said, “they are factories from China or Taiwan, and they make Xboxes, TVs and cars I think.” One young
person Pedro replied, “no they don’t make cars, Japan does.” Yeah he added, “they make little toys, like the toys that are in happy meals and stuff.” Pedro added, “Lots of stuff is made in China, you rarely see anything made in the United States; even stuff from the U.S. like Microsoft, the machines are made in other countries, they find it cheaper to make it in other countries rather than paying people in the United States.” “So this is globalization?” one young person asked, “no” another one said, “that’s outsourcing.” As the conversation got more involved many began to talk about where the stuff we see at stores come from. One girl Lucila, said, “I’ve seen stuff from China, Thailand, Japan, Korea…lots from Mexico.” It was interesting that the students in the United States connected globalization with consumerism. While it was hard for them to conceptualize globalization, they immediately connected it with consumer products they use or see and hear advertised on TV.

One last theme that developed from the focus group of young people from the U.S. was about the connection of Imperial Valley to Mexico and to the world. Many young people were very aware and concerned about the dire economic situation of the region. They said that everything that happens in the U.S. affected Mexico and that when there are problems in Mexico, like some of the economic problems they face, Imperial Valley suffers some consequences. They talked about how immigration to the U.S. from Mexico goes up because people need to work but also people from Mexico don’t shop in the U.S. so it affects both sides of the border. One young person expressed this connection succinctly, saying, “with the world economy if there is one weak link it can bring everything down like a domino effect.” Another young person summed it up this way, “I had an idea of what globalization was, I thought it was only outsourcing, but I learned that everything in the world is linked together, what happens in America or in the middle of Africa can affect us in Mexico and here in Imperial Valley.”

The discussion about globalization with the young people in Mexicali was bit a more direct. For many of these students globalization was a given, in fact they even used the term globalization almost casually and with an apparent familiarity with the concept. Most students immediately talked about maquiladoras, as there are multiple industrial parks near the Gonzalez Ortega Delegación where their school is located. The liberalization created by NAFTA that allowed American corporations to more easily establish their companies in
Mexico was obvious, visible and readily noticed and understood as globalization by young people in Mexicali. When asked why they thought maquiladoras came to Mexico one student Lorena, expressed it very clearly (I am translating her comment from Spanish), “since we are so close to the United States it makes it convenient for them to set the factories here, they can use our resources like oil, and as a third world country Mexico has lot of needs for jobs and there are many people that need to work” Other students also talked about how these companies came to Mexico because the people here work very hard and because they can work for less money than the company’s countries of origin. Lupita expressed the feeling this way, “Mexico is a third world country and people need the jobs to help themselves, Mexicans are the ones that work everywhere, we Mexicans are hard workers.” Many students in this focus group had relatives that work in the maquiladoras so they knew many details about work routines and conditions. Not many of them thought they would want to work for maquiladoras, they simply saw it as a job that paid the bills but not as a career. One student described it best, “I have aunts and an older sister who work there, they don’t like it, it is hard work. They get up early and it is dirty.” Another theme that came up was the abundance of American stores, they talked about the overabundance of them and how it seemed as though there was one at every corner. These are the American businesses they mentioned when prompted: Kenworth, Sony, Circle K, Seven Eleven, COSTCO, McDonalds, Taco Bell, Jack in the Box and Walmart. Lastly, when asked if there were any negative impacts of globalization (as perceived through maquiladoras and American businesses) one young person Juan said this, “maquiladoras come in and they leave trash and pollution damaging to the environment…there is also a lot of corruption.”

3. Does the condition of the border economy created by globalization hinders or enhances the future occupations of young people? Does it affect young people in both sides of the border equally?

The current global recession seemed to be in the mind of the young people interviewed on both sides of the border. Despite the relative higher standard of living the youngsters in Imperial Valley have, or maybe because of it, the depressed economy seemed
to be a bigger preoccupation. Most young people interviewed expressed some concern with the condition of the economy in the Imperial Valley. One student’s comment related to how Imperial Valley is connected to the global economy is particularly telling, he said, “Yeah people stop spending, then people lose jobs and things go bad, a lot of people are trying to cut on everything, they are cutting cells phones, and cable and that’s hurting those businesses and the people are getting laid off and people are losing their homes; I hear Imperial county has the worse unemployment in the country.”

Most of the participants in the study in Imperial Valley expressed concerns about the lack of jobs in Imperial Valley and as I indicated in an earlier section most think that they won’t be able to stay in Imperial Valley to continue their careers. One student commented that the close connection Imperial Valley has with Mexicali actually hinders their possibilities of getting jobs after they finish college. He expressed that he wanted to be a doctor and that because many in Imperial Valley go to doctors in Mexicali for their medical needs he may not be able to practice medicine in the Imperial Valley. Many young people are also aware that the agriculture based economy of Imperial County is dwindling, largely because their parents who work in the industry are losing jobs. From what they learnt from their parents they realize that many of these jobs are going to the Mexicali Valley. Rodrigo, a student from Holtville said, “yeah my dad worked in the ensalada and he lost his job because Bud Antle grows the lettuce in Mexico now.” Ensalada literally translates to salad, which is how lettuce picked and tossed in big bins in the field is called by farmworkers. This is lettuce that is processed and made into salad mixes rather than lettuce sold as individual heads of lettuce. The conversation about career continued this way:

Frank: very specifically, “I know I am going to have to move not only away from Imperial Valley but possibly to another country. I want to study engineering so no matter where I go they need engineers; they always need to build new things or to design new things.”

Some students saw opportunities right across the border, like Gladys.
Gladys: “since I speak Spanish and I am interested in computers I know I can work for an American company in Mexicali and still make a good living, that’s why I said it is important to speak other languages.”
In Mexicali there were general concerns about economic conditions but the young people did not express them as explicitly as their counterparts in the United States. Despite the fact that these young people are from a marginal *colonia* they did not express their concerns about jobs in the same manner as the young people of Imperial Valley. The students who participated in the study appeared focused on their studies and understood that they needed a college education to get the careers that would give future success. Important themes arose from my discussion with young people from Mexicali. Despite the preponderance of agriculture in the region most did not indicate any interest in working in that industry. Their demeanor was very urban and they seemed to be almost unaware that Mexicali is surrounded by agriculture and that even the *delegación* where they live used to be an *ejido* where agriculture was the main occupation. In fact agricultural fields can still be seen surrounding the southwestern part of the *delegación*. They did mention that some of their relatives were involved in agriculture but that occupation was not attractive to them. They had the same feelings about working with the maquiladoras. I asked if any had any interest in working with one of those firms. Most of the students said no; most had relatives working on maquiladoras and their life-style did not appeal to them. Prompted if they would work for maquiladoras as an engineer or business manager, they seemed perplexed because for the most part they feel that higher echelon management type jobs in maquiladoras are unattainable for them. Lupita who I interviewed early and who had a sister and an aunt working in maquiladoras said this, “my sister says that the engineers and the ‘big shots’ are ‘chinos’ and ‘gringos’ and always men, she never sees women or Mexican engineers.” Lupita’s reference to chinos and gringos may be that many of the engineers and top administrator are Asian or American depending on the countries where the companies are from. There are many companies from the U.S., Germany, Korea and Japan operating in Mexicali.

Some of the young people in Mexicali were concerned with being able to pay for their college education since they did not feel there were many resources for them from the government or elsewhere. One students Marta, said very assertively, “the good schools here in Mexicali are the ones that you have to pay for, technical private *prepas* (high schools *preparatorias*) or universities like El Cetys (a very prestigious but expensive high school and
university), but they are too expensive and my parents can’t afford them.” Marta continued expanding on the topic she had brought up earlier in the focus group about wanting to go to the United States to study forensic medicine. She said, “Some of my cousins that live in the United States tell me that there they pay you to go to college, that’s why I want to go study there since they don’t have a school for forensics here in Mexicali anyway.” She continued, “here in Mexicali you have to pay for good schools because the ‘state’ schools are worthless.” Somewhat surprising was the finding that besides Marta many of the students did not consider the United States as an option in their future, despite some of the young people being American citizens and some having relatives in the U.S. The exceptions were a few students who like Marta thought that they could have better educational opportunities in the United States. Even then, they only thought of that option as a temporary rather than a long term/permanent option. In comparison with young people in the United States the youngsters in Mexicali did not consider other regions of Mexico or of the state as a possibility to seek better opportunities. They did not entertain the possibility of attending school in other parts of Mexico as many of the students in the U.S. did. In some ways this makes sense since the northern border region of Mexico is relatively better off than the rest of Mexico (Anderson and Gerber 2008).

4. How is young people’s transnationalism influenced by globalization at the border?

Much of the discussion that I brought up in the earlier sections relates to issues of transnationalism. Findings in this section focus exclusively on how globalization in the border creates an almost extreme sense of transnationalism for young people and their families on both sides of the border. According to Claire Fox (1999), the border can be characterized as a contact zone where the terms of self-identification are relative, and where centuries of complex histories, geographies and migrations produce multi-layered social networks. She adds that the border is a concrete locale of transformative behaviors rather than an abstract for transnational studies. Michael Dear talks about how the U.S.-Mexico economy can be characterized as a “vast flow of people northward, matched by a flow of dollars back to the south.” (Dear and Lucero 2005) According to Dear this is particularly
evident in the US-Mexico borderlands. The late Carlos Monsiváis (2003) coined the phrase, la *frontera portátil*, a portable border, to describe the US-Mexico borderlands because they have become the fastest growing region in both countries; this is a border that moves from Los Angeles to Mexico City, in essence moving existing political borders northward and southward. Despite the many economic obstacles found in the Imperial and Mexicali valley region as we saw with the feelings expressed by young people in the Imperial Valley, it remains an attractive area for many immigrant families because of relatively low rents, and the opportunity to live within neighborhoods where bi-culturalism is valued and appreciated. The Mexicali-Imperial valley region is a true border community, home to a bi-national community wherein the rigidity of immigration laws, the fluidity of bi-cultural experience, and the imperative of economic-self-sufficiency are reconciled through family activity patterns and social networks. These are the main reasons why the Imperial and Mexicali Valleys provide an interesting window on the changing conditions of young people based on their educational and occupational choices resulting from the transformations of an increasingly globalized economy.

Transnationalism was expressed in many forms by the participants in the study. First, it was amply discussed by young people who alternatively lived in Imperial Valley and in Mexicali. Many families in Imperial Valley did this because they lost their homes due to the economic recession and the housing market problems. As a result students expressed spending weekends back in Mexicali since they lived with relatives in Imperial Valley during the week in order for them to go to school. Other students, particularly those living closer to the border in Calexico and even in El Centro, commute to school daily. Students indicated that in some cases their parents continue to work in the U.S. but they had to live in Mexicali where they already had a home. One student indicated that his mom was working in an office in Mexicali and his dad was doing seasonal work in the Imperial Valley. This topic was discussed openly but at times students spoke “tongue and cheek” about it. Norma, a student from Calexico talked about it this way, “yeah I go to Mexicali, sometimes two three days, on weekends, well sometimes the whole week.” Her response brought laughter from the other students who knowingly nodded. I then asked do you live in Mexicali then? To which Norma replied, “No I live in Calexico with my aunt.” I then asked where are your parents? To which
Norma replied, “oh they live with me and they go to work in El Centro.” Her expressions and wording seemed hesitant as if she was hiding something and the other students in the group seemed conspire by backing her up. I stopped probing because I was aware that I was touching upon a controversial topic in Calexico. The issue of students commuting back and forth between Mexicali and Calexico to attend school became controversial back in 2008 after a controversial policy by the school board; it still remains an issue in many border towns all over the U.S.-Mexico border. Faced with budgetary constraints Calexico school officials were concerned that students living in Mexicali were attending schools. The Calexico Unified School District, like most districts in the country, require that students live within designated boundaries in order to attend local schools. The idea is that residents of that district pay property taxes that in turn benefit the district with budget allocations. Calexico school officials hired a person who photographed students as they crossed the border into the U.S. and then cross referenced their pictures with the information in the schools’ database to make sure that the address of residence provided in the child’s file was actually the address where they reside. If the students could not prove that they lived at that residence then they were told that they were ineligible to attend school in the district (Spagat 2008). It was no wonder that Norma seemed hesitant to expand on the subject.

A couple of students that I interviewed in Mexicali were American citizens. These youngsters were born in the U.S. but their parents were undocumented and were deported; as result the students had to move back to Mexicali. I asked Manuel, one of the students, if he had any desire to go back to the U.S. and he said “I was one a and half year old when my parents were deported and I really don’t remember much from the U.S.” He continued, “maybe in the future when I am older and maybe want to go to school out there, I’ll consider it.” I probed and asked why he did not want to go to the U.S. and he said: “Well I do go, I go shopping for groceries in Calexico with my aunt who has a commuter passport, I like to get Christmas presents there, when I have money. I don’t want to leave my parents, what would I do out there? Besides, I hear that there is too much racism there, they are trying to kick Mexicans out.”

I thought about the situation of some of the young people who are U.S. citizens and who live in Mexico. This is a topic that warrants further study at a time that deportations to
Mexico have reached some of the highest levels in recent history (Yager 2011). Many of these undocumented immigrants have families and children who often are American citizens like the situation of the two students from Mexicali that I interviewed in my study. What circumstances would drive these young people to move north to the United States later in life? While it is understandable that being young and still dependent on their parents is a limiting factor that determines their mobility what would motivate them to migrate to the United States at a later stage in life? Conversely under what circumstances would these young people continue to pursue a life in Mexico? In some ways that is the opportunity that the young people of the Imperial Valley have that most of the young people of Mexicali don’t have. Because of their unique situation as transborder youth the young people in the United States can go to school in the United States and live in Mexico if it is not affordable for their parents to live in the United States.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

In this next section I provide a summary of what young people expressed about global transformations in the U.S.-Mexico border. I highlight the salient themes and findings that resulted from this study. I then proceed to discuss these findings in the context of the theoretical framework I presented in the introduction of the study. And lastly I expand on some areas for further study.

I found that most of the participants expressed a deep belief that education was essential for their success in the global economy. Almost all of the participants felt that education was important, particularly an education that prepared them for careers involving technology. This desire appeared to be a bi-national sentiment with young people. This outcome may be expected because the study was conducted in an educational setting and with school age young people but it is worth noting nevertheless.

I also found that young people expressed diverging views about their desire to stay and pursue their educational and occupational goals in their local area. Whereas young people in Imperial Valley expressed an almost unanimous desire to move out of the Imperial Valley to seek schooling and employment opportunities the young people in Mexicali did not express that wish as much. Students in the Imperial Valley felt that the depressed economy and lack of colleges and universities did not leave them many choices but to leave the area. In Mexicali, despite their concern with the quality and affordability of schools, participants did not feel that there were any better choices in other regions of the country or state. Young people have different levels of knowledge about globalization in each side of the border. Young people in the U.S. had knowledge that was more consumerist and tied it to products they saw on TV such as McDonalds, Microsoft, Sony Xbox; for these youngsters globalization was not something they could articulate for it seems like everything was globalized as a matter of fact. Whereas young people in Mexico articulated it, they talked about it in school and expressed feeling surrounded by it. They talked about being inundated
by “foreign” stores like Burger King and Walmart; it seemed that reminders of globalization were found in every corner. In the focus groups the young people from Mexico could see the problems that globalization brought to the area where they live. Living next to maquiladoras these young people lived with the negative consequences of globalization because they smelled the air pollution, they saw the dilapidated factories left by the companies when they departed, and they talked about the corruption of officials and plant managers. While they saw potential opportunities for employment in these factories they felt that the “good jobs” were unattainable to them because the engineering and top management jobs seemed to be held by male foreigners. And despite their faith in education to help them achieve their goals they also felt that the quality of the schools was lacking and that the good schools were private and unaffordable. Yet they still firmly believed that with a good university education they could get those “high tech jobs.” Interestingly, the young people of the United States did not talk much about the costs of education nor did they complain about the quality of the schools. However, in some ways the young people in the American side also suffered the negative consequences of globalization when their parents lost their jobs to companies moving to Mexico, they just did not articulate it as such.

One unexpected finding was the rejection of young people on both sides of the border of their rural background and their ruling out of any careers dealing with the agriculture industry. Despite young people on both sides of the border having strong connections to farming and being surrounded by fields, and maybe because of it, they almost unanimously ruled out any involvement with farm life. For young people in Mexicali the urban Mexicali was more attractive than the rural south Mexicali. Similarly for the young people in the United States getting away from the Imperial Valley may have been a way to seek urban centers in San Diego or Los Angeles where better employment and educational opportunities combined with a cosmopolitan lifestyle are available. Is this a byproduct of current globalization? Or is it part of the trend of development particular to Latin America, the global south and to some degree in the U.S. that lures young people to urban centers in search of better economic opportunities as it has in the later part of the twentieth century and that continues today (Pellegrino 2000, Mazumdar 2006)? A potential topic for further
research is that another by-product of globalization is the desire of young people to seek urban centers and reject rural life.

With regards to transnationalism I found that the desire of young people to go to the United States is not as strong as conventional wisdom suggests. Two of the young people I interviewed in Mexicali were American citizens and they demonstrated no desire to live in the U.S., at least for now since they are young and still dependent on their parents. But overall the young people in Mexicali that I interviewed expressed no genuine interest to go to the U.S. Carlos Monsiváis (2003) talks about the idea that the border city is no longer just a fixed locality next to another city in a different nation state. He says that the border city “abandons any idea of being a locale free from the pressures of homelands and recovers the ambiguities between collective and individual life.” (Monsiváis 2003, 38) Monsiváis calls this the frontera portátil (the portable border); a border that is everywhere, from Mexico City to Los Angeles; from Sao Paulo to New York City. The U.S-Mexico borderlands are a rapidly growing region that exhibits this radical change in economic, sociocultural, political and demographic life that Monsiváis talks about. There was also much evidence of the frontera portátil with young people in the U.S. living in Mexicali and going to school in the U.S. and with agribusinesses moving their companies from the U.S. to Mexico with great consequences to families in both sides of the border. Many students in the U.S. side, particularly those living next to the border in Calexico said that they actually lived in Mexicali and commuted to school every day. Others like those living further north said that their parents had homes in Mexicali and that they spent a considerable amount of time with family and friends there.

The findings from this study reinforce Poblete’s call for a new framework of analysis to critically study the U.S.-Mexico border. As the young people demonstrated their daily routines do not fit the norms of a nation state. Their transnational activities are supranational in that they transcend other borders such as ethnic and economic borders. Neoliberal economic policies create borders for the young people of Mexicali that make achieving their educational goals very difficult because these policies result in lower quality state funded schools. As a result a quality education can only be obtained at private schools that are unaffordable to most of these young people. Conversely for young people in the U.S.
international border is no obstacle to live in an affordable place and still be able to get an arguably higher quality education. So they create their own *frontera portátil* and move it back and forth to Mexicali to live in a home their parents can afford and to go to school in Calexico where they can get the education that will prepare for the careers they desire.

Young people on both sides of the border challenge the idea of assimilation to a particular culture. The U.S. youngsters are ethnically and culturally Mexican but not really Mexican because they are American citizens. And as their answers in the interviews and focus groups demonstrated they are as American as any typical American teenager anywhere in the U.S. Along the same lines, the young people in Mexicali are seen by their Mexican peers from interior Mexico as *pochos* or *Americanizados*, not “real Mexicans,” but they are as Mexican as any other typical Mexican teenager. These young people residing on the U.S.-Mexico border live in a *nepantla* that as Anzaldúa describes is a land in-between (Anzaldúa 2007). Similarly, American citizen youngsters that live in Mexicali unable to move back to the United States, and who are victims of restrictive immigration policies that have deported larger numbers of immigrants than ever, are in a *nepantla* state. Why is it that these young people don’t see the U.S. as a land of opportunity? Have the side effects of rampant globalization that they see every day when they walk to school or when they take the bus to downtown demonstrate globalization’s nefarious aspects? Maybe the answer is for these young people in both sides of the international border to create their own *nepantla*, one that is full of hope and opportunities where their dreams of a good life are shared with all of their families and friends. Perhaps young people of this *nepantla* can maneuver the existing international political border and move it around as *frontera portátil*, a portable border that will provide an environment that will help grow into productive and responsible global citizens as they mature into adulthood. As young people in this new brave *nepantla* march towards the future ahead, a growing Baja Alta California awaits them. Call it a *reconquista* of these borderlands if you will, but in this *nepantla* young people have hopes for a better future with new possibilities.
REFERENCES


