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## Beginning from the Border

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*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

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*Introduction to the Journal*

## Beginning from the Border

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### Abstract

In this essay, *Educational Borderlands: A Bilingual Journal* (EBBJ) is introduced in relation to borderlands, in South Texas and beyond. The journal's purpose is explained, beginning with its inception as part of the bilingual mission at a majority Mexican American university, then placed within educational, political, and linguistic contexts. Each of EBBJ's threads is situated in relation to hybridity, intersectionality, bilingualism, translanguaging, transnationalism, and the border itself. The journal seeks to apply these to the study of curriculum, instruction, special education, dual language bilingual education, and research across various interdisciplinary fields.

*Keywords: borderlands, bilingualism, hybridity, interdisciplinary, education*

### Resumen

En este ensayo, *Educational Borderlands: A Bilingual Journal* (EBBJ) se introduce en relación con las fronteras, en el sur de Texas y más allá. El propósito de la revista se explica, desde su inicio como parte de la misión bilingüe en una universidad con cuerpo de estudiantes mexicano-americanos, hasta sus contextos educativos, políticos, y lingüísticos. Cada uno de los hilos de EBBJ se sitúa en relación con la hibridez, la interseccionalidad, el bilingüismo, el translingüismo, el transnacionalismo y la propia frontera. La revista busca aplicarlas al estudio del currículo, la instrucción, la educación especial, el lenguaje dual (educación bilingüe), y la investigación tras varios campos interdisciplinarios.

*Palabras clave: fronteras, bilingüismo, hibridez, interdisciplinario, educación*

## A Beginning

On July 23, 2015, early in his presidential campaign, Donald Trump took a plane to Laredo, Texas. In his own words, he was visiting the borderlands “despite the great danger” to illustrate how “important” the border problem was (Corasaniti, 2015). As part of a political strategy to demonize immigrants and Mexicans (Giroux, 2017), it was irrelevant that Laredo – like the U.S. border in general – is considerably safer than most U.S. cities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The southern border cities, which are majority Mexican American, have violent crime rates among the lowest in the country (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016).

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One month later, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) officially opened its doors, offering a different perspective on the borderlands. UTRGV is our state's first new university of the 21st century (Perez-Hernandez, 2015). It was formed by combining two existing UT universities and adding a medical school. UTRGV, with a majority Mexican American student body, is now the third largest Hispanic-Serving Institution in the 50 states.<sup>2</sup> The university has crafted a plan to become a truly bilingual and biliterate institution, the first of its kind in the U.S. (Tyx, 2017). UTRGV has over a thousand international students, which is not unusual; what is unusual, however, is that UTRGV also:

- enrolls hundreds of students who live in Tamaulipas, Mexico, and cross a border checkpoint daily to attend class;
- has Border Patrol vehicles continuously surveilling its Brownsville parking lots;
- fought off the U.S. government's previous attempt to build a border wall through the middle of campus.<sup>3</sup>

During UTRGV's first semester, our newly unified Education faculty gathered for an all-day retreat. The day's discussion spanned teacher education, research, and the borderlands and their languages. Faculty members and our new dean, Patricia Álvarez McHatton, embraced the idea of sponsoring a bilingual journal. This was envisioned as a journal in support of our university's bilingual vision, but also serving a purpose larger than the university itself. It would challenge the marginalization of Spanish within educational institutions of South Texas and the U.S. in general (Valdés, González, García, & Márquez, 2003). That is, even in a Spanish-speaking region such as the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), Spanish is perceived by many as being a wholly non-academic language, suitable for informal speech (Díaz, 2011). Millions of Texans behave as if they are unaware that Spanish is *the* academic language in 21 countries, hundreds of universities, over 3,500 academic journals,<sup>4</sup> and countless studies (e.g., Navarrete-Cazales, 2017, p. 15 of this volume). In my work as a teacher educator, I have met public school teachers and principals who grew up using only Spanish with their parents while learning only English in RGV schools. Some see nothing wrong with imposing the same on the next generation of students. The "bootstraps" attitude of such educators (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Johnson & Campbell-Stephens, 2014) ignores the fact that linguistically displaced success stories are the exceptions. Most children of color who undergo subtractive schooling are not successful (Menken & Kley, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Most multilingual children never find adequate support in a monolingual education system. Fortunately, we have educators at all levels who do respond to the unique needs of children (e.g., Orosco & Abdulrahim, 2017, p. 27 of this volume).

In an influential paper, Ruiz (1984) argued that the way we treat multilingual children is shaped by whether we view language as a problem or as a resource.<sup>5</sup> The borderlands, likewise,

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<sup>2</sup> As measured by total degrees awarded (Sharpe, 2016); as measured by proportion of Latina/o enrollment (90%), UTRGV is second only to the University of Puerto Rico among national university HSIs in the U.S. (HACU, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> In 2006, employees and students at the Brownsville campus (then called UTB/TSC) challenged the Department of Homeland Security's plan to seize an 18-acre strip of land, which would have left half of the campus on the south side of the wall. DHS backed off its threat to use eminent domain. The prominent wall was instead built along the school's southern property line. Many other properties in Cameron and Hidalgo were not so fortunate. Over 50,000 acres are now south of the wall (del Bosque, 2010; Dorsey & Díaz-Barriga, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See Lobachev (2008) for a summary of publishing, academic production, and literacy across languages.

<sup>5</sup> Ruiz's framework actually proposes three ways to view language: as a problem, as a right, or as a resource.

can be viewed either as a problem or as a resource. Disparagement of the borderlands is bigger than any one election. From the moment this line was drawn, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have been manipulated as a rhetorical tool (Cisneros, 2014). The words of prominent white men, including Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Zachary Taylor, John Ford, and William S. Burroughs, have long presented the border as dangerous, or ignorant, or unsanitary, or all of the above (e.g., Mora, 2009). U.S. perception of the borderlands is shaped by racism and white supremacy (Ortiz & Telles, 2012). Thus, fear of the border merges with nativism and xenophobia in general, encompassing many of white America's unfounded fears: people with dark skin, people with different belief systems, people with different languages, people who are "infected" (De León, 1983; Molina, 2016; Schrag, 2011). A president framing the border as a problem is neither surprising nor innovative.<sup>6</sup>

### From the border

*"Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.  
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."  
– Arundhati Roy, 'Confronting Empire' (2003)*

If, on the other hand, the borderlands are seen as a resource, then a geographic border can be a meeting of two nations. But even here, I have accepted the simplistic binary of one country here and another country there. So I turn to the great border theorist Gloria Anzaldúa.<sup>7</sup> To Anzaldúa (1987), Mexico and the U.S. were united by the borderlands, even defined by them. She positioned the frontera as its own country, partially abandoned by its north and south neighbors. Such abandonment leads to suffering, but also independence, perseverance, creativity, and a measure of self-definition unknown in a monocultural zone. Anzaldúa centered the borderlands as the font of hybridity. Homi Bhabha (1994) finds hybridity is a superior manifestation of human culture. However much a border attempts to segregate us, the intermingling of cultures and peoples is (through the arc of history) inevitable. In that respect, the U.S.-Mexico wall arguably belongs in the same category as the Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China (Langerbein, 2009).

Hybridity is often perceived as a threat, not just to nation-states but to languages. The ideologies of languages are structured hierarchically. Europe's self-appointed keepers of British English and *Castellano* Spanish may shake their heads at the 'flaws' in academic English and Spanish of their former colonies (Mar-Molinero, 2008). In turn, coastal liberals may mock the phonology of Texas English and Chicano English (Lippi-Green, 2011), just as Mexico City intellectuals scoff at the *pochismos* adopted into RGV Spanish. One thing all of them may agree on is the unsuitability of Tex-Mex – the local variety of Spanglish – as an academic language. Yet in diverse fields, scholars defend the role of Spanglish (e.g., Postma, 2013; Stavans, 2000). Not only does bilingualism provide cognitive benefits (e.g., Bialystok & Barac, 2012), but the very consideration of 'language' from a monolingual perspective might be misguided. Working with a framework of translanguaging, Suresh Canagarajah (2013), Ofelia García (2011), and Alastair Pennycook (2010) have all argued for *plural* conceptualizations of language:

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<sup>6</sup> A recent example: though Barack Obama began the Deferred Action program to protect some immigrants, he also instituted anti-immigrant policies that further militarized the border, spurring activist resistance (e.g., Cházaro, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> I am fortunate to have studied under Chicana feminists at the University of Texas San Antonio. They taught me of Anzaldúa, hybridity, and third space. I am forever grateful, and forever learning.

- thinking of language as a flexible repertoire rather than a rigid rulebook;
- thinking of language as a verb;
- ending the focus on which 'big' language a local variety belongs to.

All of this serves to undermine the idea of segregated languages, one of many topics that will be explored in EBBJ's thread *Dual Language and Multilingual Studies*. What would it mean to assess the limitations of monolingualism from a bilingual perspective? How can a dual language program embrace multiliteracies? How do we present a study in (as well as on) multiple languages? What can we do to advance multilingual education for marginalized communities (Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2013b)? We can recognize that Spanish is oppressed in some regions and oppressive in others, specifically in relation to indigenous languages of the Americas. Education systems need curricula that account not only for these languages, but also for local epistemologies and methods. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Kathleen Heugh (2013a) explain that "local, indigenous or organically developed educational practices have been largely overlooked or misunderstood from without and replaced with ones which do not meet the needs of communities on the margins" (p. 3). A final question, what would it mean to remove the border between 'dialect' and 'language'? In linguistics, a *dialect continuum* is a range of language varieties with small shifts from one location to another, which lead, eventually, to something that is not mutually intelligible (Ammon, 2006). This is seen in the Iberian peninsula (Penny, 1999) and across some of the Chinese languages (Hamed, 2005); lack of official status does not stop such varieties from persisting for decades or centuries. The determination of which point along the continuum counts as *the* language is based not on merit but on political power. As Max Weinreich (1945) wrote, in Yiddish, "A shprakh iz a dialekt mit an armye un flot" ["A language is a dialect with an army and a navy"] (p. 13).<sup>8</sup>

When thinking of metaphorical borders, such as those between academic disciplines, power may play a similar role. Intersectional and interdisciplinary work does not fall in the center of the dominant disciplines (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Influential journals in a particular field may even avoid research that is interdisciplinary, preferring work confined to the field's mainstream ideas and well-trod debates (see Rafols et al., 2012). Never mind that, like geographic and linguistic borders, the distinctions between some of our fields (e.g., between anthropology and sociology, or between school psychology and school counseling) were arbitrarily chosen. A different disciplinary past would have led to different categories. Similarly, our daily interactions span cultures, policies, communities, and organizations. In this spirit, the EBBJ thread *Borderlands of Practice* will highlight research on multiple contexts and fields in our educational practice – from instruction to policy, within and beyond schools.

To renowned folklorist Américo Paredes (1991), the cultures of the U.S.-Mexico border are entwined in ways that are not so much international as transnational (Saldívar, 2006). Not all transnational influences are positive. Yet on balance, we at *Educational Borderlands* see connections across languages and borders as beneficial. We are by no means the first to assert this. This border region is replete with individuals and organizations that embrace the Anzaldúan confluence of cultures, societies, nation-states, and economies. Since the 1930s, the Charro Days

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<sup>8</sup> Significantly, Yiddish is a language that has often lacked official status. Weinreich was quoting an attendee at one of his lectures. As Yiddish is generally written with the Hebrew alphabet, Weinreich's actual words were: אַ איז שפּראַך אַ פּלאַט און אַרמיי און מיט דיאַלעקט

festival<sup>9</sup> in Brownsville and Matamoros has celebrated the border as a confluence, a place where bicultural communities and new ideas thrive. To the northwest, the Día del Río similarly brings people together in Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas.<sup>10</sup> Further west, the Tohono O'odham Nation Rodeo & Fair<sup>11</sup> convenes tribal members from their lands in northern Sonora, Mexico and southern Arizona, United States (Cadava, 2011). Though the visions of Anzaldúa and Paredes root EBBJ's beginning in the RGV, we take Anzaldúa's cue and look beyond physical manifestations of borderlands.<sup>12</sup> Globally, communities persist in the periphery, and people live their lives across disparate categories. We look forward to exploring educational contexts and practices that place borders at the center.

It remains to be seen whether the U.S. government's goal of a solid concrete wall will materialize (Lanktree, 2017). And it is even less certain what impact this would have on the RGV, Mexico, the Tohono O'odham, and various communities. Writing for the *New York Times*, Domingo Martinez (2017) argues that people in Brownsville have long since learned to adapt and survive: "this border, which has lived through wars and political mood swings and buffoons and bloviates before" (p. 13). Here, Martinez reminds himself and outsiders – such as me – against positioning ourselves as 'saviors.' At the same time, he expresses that "for once, I'd like to hear something good come out of this part of the world." There are political advantages to dismissing the strength and potential of border communities. This pattern was lamented back at that 2015 meeting, when the seed that became *Educational Borderlands* was planted. Marginalized peoples (of the borderlands or otherwise) are not objects to be saved (Matias & Liou, 2015). They are, instead, communities to be listened to and engaged with.

### This volume

With this first volume, *Educational Borderlands* is a reality. This publication was built through efforts of faculty members of UTRGV's College of Education & P-16 Integration, our dean, our editorial assistant, and thread editors at other universities. Invaluable support has come from editorial board members at institutions in the U.S. and Mexico, reviewers at institutions in the U.S. and Mexico, information science experts at UTRGV and the Texas Digital Library in Austin, and especially the submitting authors at institutions in the U.S. and Mexico. We are grateful for all of this support. I am personally grateful for the chance to contribute to EBBJ during its first year.

The editors are proud to share the work in this, the first volume of *Educational Borderlands*. Our thread *Transnational Curriculum Dialogues* considers curriculum as a lived experience integrating epistemologies, imaginaries, and various linguistic practices, across many places and contexts. The article for *Transnational Curriculum Dialogues* in the volume is by Zaira Navarrete-Cazales of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Navarrete-Cazales (2017) uses a framework of discourse theory and political analysis to examine archival interviews from the 1950s, coming to a better understanding not only about teacher educator training in Mexico, but also about the very nature of memory and affect, in the Lacleuian sense. EBBJ's *Borderlands of Ability Differences* thread looks at the physical, educational, and socio-emotional environments

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<sup>9</sup> Since the 1930s, Charro Days (Cásares, 2007) remains fully binational, despite Washington, D.C. and its border walls.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.rgisc.org/outreach.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.tonation-nsn.gov/79th-annual-rodeo-fair/>

<sup>12</sup> As such, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rjbs20/current>) is a valuable publication, and EBBJ's mission is different from theirs.

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we create, and the ways we can build bridges that promote the functional and educational fulfillment of individuals with ability differences. For the current volume, *Borderlands of Ability Differences* features a case study by Michael J. Orosco and Naheed A. Abdulrahim of the University of Kansas. Orosco and Abdulrahim (2017) look at the classroom practices of a special education teacher for Spanish-speaking students who are learning English. One part of their argument is that a teacher's valuing of the students may be at least as important as the teacher's pedagogical skill. The works offered here are central to EBBJ's mission, as they consider marginalized voices and intersections, across discipline and across time.

### Future volumes

Our second volume of EBBJ is now being planned. There is an open call, and the deadline for submissions is September 1, 2017 ("Call for Papers/Convocatoria para Publicar," p. 46 of this volume). We seek submissions in each of our six threads:

- Community Voices
- Dual Language and Multilingual Studies
- Transnational Curriculum Dialogues
- Borderlands of Practice
- Borderlands of Ability Differences
- English and Spanish Book/Media Reviews

As stated in our title, we are an intentionally bilingual journal, focused on English and Spanish. We object to the premise that there is only one 'correct' form of any language. Disclosing our biases, the journal editors approach this work as scholars largely trained in the English of the U.S., and in the Spanish of Mexico, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and Texas. Our sections accept manuscripts in multiple varieties, and to the extent possible, each work will be evaluated on its own terms. Our ability to carry this out will grow and improve over time.

Led by our *Community Voices* thread, *Educational Borderlands* intends to avoid limiting authors to 'academic' preoccupations and registers. We hope it is not naïve to say that a journal can play a role in building communication between researchers and the communities we serve.<sup>13</sup> We look forward to beginning this work with *Community Voices* in the second volume on EBBJ. Additional bridges will be built by our *English and Spanish Book/Media Reviews*, which seeks to understand published works and share critiques across communities and across languages. If media can promote language ideologies (Tollefson, 2015), then we offer EBBJ as one media text setting an example of plurality in language. Over time, it will play a role in building dialogue among research communities. This is not to diminish the work of the open-access bi- and multilingual publications that have come before us. To cite just a few examples related to education, *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (epaa.asu.edu) accepts, manages, and publishes research covering a wide variety of topics in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. *NABE Journal of Research and Practice* (www2.nau.edu/nabej-p/ojs) publishes research related to bilingual education, in English and Spanish. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research/Sozialforschung* (qualitative-research.net) publishes on a range of methodology issues, in German, English, and

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<sup>13</sup> See Castleden et al. (2010) for a discussion of publishing issues for researchers and community members.

Spanish.<sup>14</sup> EBBJ operates in addition to these valuable voices. Our journal explicitly embraces open-access as a format available to a larger number of researchers and community members. In my view, open-access as a philosophy applies to authorship as well as readership; if a journal requires an author to pay publishing fees – as is common for open-access journals operated by for-profit publishers – such a cost restricts participation in a way that belies the word “open” (Peterson, Emmett, & Greenberg, 2013). To that end, EBBJ is free for authors as well as readers.

## A Conclusion

*“There is a crack in everything,  
that’s how the light gets in.”  
– Leonard Cohen, ‘Anthem’ (1992)*

In EBBJ’s spirit of intersectionality and interdisciplinarity, I turn to the Broadway musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Mitchell & Trask, 2003). *Hedwig* tells the story of a transgender punk rock singer from East Berlin. The show’s opening number is focused on the Berlin Wall. Hedwig sings this verse:

There ain’t much of a difference  
between a bridge and a wall  
Without me right in the middle, babe  
you would be nothing at all (p. 8)

Here, Hedwig attempts to shift power toward the margins. Her narrative spans gender, language, and citizenship, finding that borders are for crossing, regardless of what they supposedly divide. Mitchell and Trask prompt the question, where are the ‘borders’ between our concepts of *bridge*, *wall*, and *border*? That is to say, walls and borders are intersections as well as divisions.<sup>15</sup>

Further, it is true that without the border – whether of nation-state, gender, language, or academic discipline – we would have difficulty locating the center in the first place. This is not to minimize the real-world damage caused by militarized border walls, refugee deportations, and other nationalist policies (e.g., Rodriguez, 2016). All of those affect and are affected by borderlands and by education, placing them within the scope of this journal. Yet beyond *reacting* to policy and practice, EBBJ must seek to empower the literal and metaphorical borderlands by destabilizing hierarchies. In that sense, we can challenge ourselves to begin from the margins. My own questions, as I consider the development of this journal:

- What does it mean for all fields and movements to see intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (e.g., Dhamoon, 2011; Miranda, 2015)?
- What if responding to racism were a central concern of educators, rather than an afterthought (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2010)?

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<sup>14</sup> Closed-access bi- or multilingual journals related to education include notable titles such as *Hispania*, *Acta Philosophica*, *Canadian Journal of Linguistics/Revue canadienne de linguistique*, *Latin American Research Review*, *L’Année sociologique*, *Revista española de lingüística aplicada*, *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, *Social Science Information*, *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, *Translation and Translanguaging in Multilingual Context*, and *Semiotica*.

<sup>15</sup> Transposing Mitchell and Trask’s phrasing to South Texas, I think of my student who mentioned in a presentation that she “crossed the *bridge* to come to class”; she could just as easily have said she “crossed the *border* to come to class”; both are readily understood. And being that some of the bridges are elevated, leaving a section of border wall that actually runs under the bridge, it could even be true to say that she “crossed the *wall* to come to class.”



- What does it mean to integrate community voices at all levels of the research process, including authorship and publishing (cf. Flicker & Nixon, 2016)?
- What does it mean to position bilingual education as our default form of education (Flores & Schissel, 2014)?
- What if all teachers valued hybrid languages in their instruction (Martínez, 2013)<sup>16</sup>?
- What if all school principals brought expertise in inclusive special education (Pazey & Cole, 2013)?
- What if our institutions – from federal agencies to local schools – acted to integrate and support refugees (cf. Ataç, Rygiel, & Stierl, 2016)?

Some may argue that recent elections and upheavals – whether in the U.S., or Turkey, or Britain, or Venezuela – have made certain questions too political. My response is that education has always been political. We teach and research either on behalf of change, or on behalf of the status quo. It is true that politicians will always try to further marginalize the marginalized. And it is also true that walls eventually crumble.

*Educational Borderlands* is only a journal, and is only one of many journals. Our education systems are complex, and none of this will change quickly or easily. So let us begin.

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth reminding ourselves that English as we know it originated as a hybrid language (McArthur, 1991)

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