

# AFFIRMATIONS OF BILINGUALISM, BILITERACY AND BINATIONALISM IN THE CALI-BAJA BORDERLANDS: TRANSFORMATIONAL POLITICS OF LIMINALITY, COUNTER-ERASURE AND BORDERIZING.

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.51734/pgdc6m72>

## **ABSTRACT:**

Our collective reflection communicates perspectives from four leaders of the Developing Effective Bilingual Educators with Resources (DEBER) Project. DEBER is an inter-institutional bilingual teacher preparation program in the Cali-Baja borderlands sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education. DEBER goals include supporting the transfer processes for prospective bilingual teachers (scholars) from community colleges to undergraduate programs as well as the completion of a postbaccalaureate teacher credential program.

## **RECOMMENDED CITATION**

Lozano-Soto, M., Wickert, M., Hernandez, S., Maldonado, S. (2024). Affirmations of Bilingualism, Biliteracy and Binationalism In the Cali-Baja Borderlands: Transformational Politics of Liminality, Counter-Erasure and Borderizing. *Rio Bravo: A Journal of the Borderlands*, 25, 208-213

Our collective reflection communicates perspectives from four leaders of the Developing Effective Bilingual Educators with Resources (DEBER) Project. DEBER is an inter-institutional bilingual teacher preparation program in the Cali-Baja borderlands sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education. DEBER goals include supporting the transfer processes for prospective bilingual teachers (scholars) from community colleges to undergraduate programs as well as the completion of a postbaccalaureate teacher credential program. DEBER leaders design, implement and evaluate ongoing advisement as well as professional development learning opportunities for scholars. Leadership in DEBER is operationalized via ad-hoc working groups. We are four of the seven members that comprise the research and evaluation workgroup. We are bilingual, biliterate, and binational doctoral students, faculty members, researchers, and evaluators at Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) that are designated as Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs). In consideration of the geospatial context of the San Diego-Tijuana region where DEBER is implemented, we critically reflect how DEBER's ways of knowing, being, and valuing affirmed scholars' bilingual, biliterate and binational identities in Eurocentric, white-supremacist, monolingual IHEs. The following collective reflections draw from our individual reflections and memos, audio-recordings of group dialogue and excerpts from "I'm From" poems written with and for our DEBER Scholars.

Our reflection considers how Latinx students in IHEs experience cultural, racial-ethnic, and linguistic affirmation (Garcia 2019) through our intentional engagement with the transformational politics of liminality, counter-erasure and borderizing. Our reflection addresses the following question: What are the navigational practices that contribute to scholars' development of bilingual, biliterate, and binational identities and practices in the Cali-Baja borderlands? Informed by Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework and Garcia's (2019) typologies of Hispanic-Serving Institutions, we analyzed how IHE students affirmed their cultural, racial-ethnic, and linguistic assets as emerging bilingual, biliterate, and binational educators. Specifically, we welcomed the opportunity to critically reflect on how our experiences, beliefs, motivations, and politics cultivate a collective ideology that influences our leadership practices, and policymaking at IHEs as well as why we prioritize scholars' well-being, academic self-concept, and sense of belonging (Garcia, Núñez, & Sansone, 2019).

Politics of liminality (Hastings & Haller, 2002) are one navigational consideration for our community of scholars and leaders. Liminality honors our authentic selves as well as our common and unique communities. Liminality honors our natural demeanors, languages, interests, and instincts. Along the Cali-Baja borderlands, liminality naturally takes on many forms and communicates our dynamic situatedness in cultures, languages, and nation-states. *Somos una comunidad que vive en un espacio liminal; ni de aquí, ni de allá* (Anzaldúa 2012); we are the children of the corn, *somos de mashed potatoes, enchiladas y burgers también*; a limbo of constant adjustments depending on our audiences, on which side of la línea our bodies, our minds and hearts happen to know, be and value at any particular moment. Lines are drawn in the sand between our nation-states, neighborhoods, generations, worldviews, and often our liminality manifests like

door jambs between the students in hallways and teachers in classrooms. In these spaces somos los shapeshifters, coyotes, y magicians of IHEs- we are from the words of César Chávez, we are from mighty warriors in the face of adversity.

Sometimes our audiences are friendly, such as being with family and friends where laughter dances and tears flow with as much ease in Spanglish, ingléñol, inglés and Spanish. Other times our audiences are hostile, especially when we cross the borders of concrete riverbeds, bridges, and tunnels and uniformed officers employ every ounce of authority, both granted and perceived. A culture of surveillance cameras continuously records our crossings of a geopolitical line designed for division as we travel from campo santo and the promised land into nepantla and then back again. Our crossings are not our definition but our constant counter-narrative of how we know, who we are and our values.

Politics of liminality affirm scholars' bilingual, biliterate, and binational intersectional identities. DEBER scholars are an antidote to division, they push back against the unnecessary death and destruction de la mente, el cuerpo y el alma. They are the coyotes y cascabeles that roam the chaparral-filled ridges and ravines, moving as freely as possible between cities and through cañones where their souls come to rest and to be rejuvenated despite the constant beating of nativist rhetoric from both sides of la línea. In spaces of liminality, we find our natural selves that purists tend to scoff at because here we move beyond the dichotomy of Español de la Academia Real and the Queen's English. We move beyond punitive divisions from la Ciudad de Mexico and Washington DC. We speak the language of abrazos y sueños, de humildad, y de momaxtiani-temaxtiani más que maestr@-alumn@, or teacher-student because we all greet the same sun and travel together across la misma tierra de aprendizaje. Through the politics of liminality, we look to the past and the future, while rooted in the present, much like planting maíz in soil made fertile by the discarded pieces of life. We embrace our authentic selves and liminality, respectful of our knowing, being and valuing as a cooperative and engaging in academic mulmenyah, a collective work that honors our strengths, our traditions, and dreams beyond artificially constructed borders meant to keep us toiling in Plato's cave. Preferimos el sol y no tenemos miedo de las sombras proyectadas por la tierra.

Politics of counter-erasure are another navigational consideration for our community of scholars and leaders. Counter-erasure is an entry point for our scholars and leaders to address our intersectional identities and navigational practices in walled borders, militarized borderlands and Nepantla. Counter-erasure situates our intersections of racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, linguisticism, and xenophobia. Counter-erasure supports scholars' interactive analyses of linguistic acquisition and loss, dynamic categories of migrant, immigrant, refugee and asylum-seekers, racial-ethnic inclusionary, and exclusionary formations of power and privilege, as well as dehumanizing and transformative pedagogical practices and ideological stances. Politics of counter-erasure are navigational practices that support scholars' critical reflection of the liminality of racialized bodies at IHEs, categorically segregated for support system access and simultaneously homogenized into pan-ethnic labels of Latinidad and Hispanicity. Counter-erasure directly holds space for alternative epistemologies that resist logics of white supremacy—

navigational practices that reject a constant sense of urgency, hierarchies, quantity over quality, individualism, and binary ways of thinking, being and mattering. Politics of counter-erasure supports our existence as our full selves, as we work towards unsettling practices and approaches that align with Eurocentric, white supremacist monolingualism.

The politics of counter-erasure are decolonial practices that affirm persons and the politicized nature of knowledge. Our IHEs erase Latinx languages and cultures. We unapologetically elevate Brown spaces and center Latinidad and transfronterice realities (e.g., comunidad, relationships with time, translanguaging). We center our borderlands in our programming and practices. We acknowledge our geo-political realities of our learning and living in a highly politicized and militarized border region. We normalize our border languages and cultures. Counter-erasure happens in spaces that are not only inhabited by Brown people. We normalize our Spanish use in our monolingual English-only IHEs. We also make explicit ideological stances of solidarity with other historically minoritized groups (e.g., programming on anti-Black racism, Asian hate) and supporting the students we serve to engage with intersectionality and intersectional frameworks (e.g., raciolinguistics). And there is so much more counter-erasure to be practiced for us to say we do decolonial work. We self-examine if we are doing enough to center Indigeneity and Blackness. We interrogate if we are unintentionally offering a singular narrative of Latinidad or “Brownness.” For example, our letter of understanding with scholars (a Eurocentric practice of transactional contracts) asks scholars if they are Latinx, Hispanic, or Chicanx, but what about the erasure of scholar’s cultural identities that are not affirmed by such categorical labels? We are naturally engaging in decolonial practices by showing up as ourselves in IHE spaces that have done harm to us and our families. With more conversations and reflections on our structures and practices, we believe we can continue to move in a decolonial direction. We can continue to elevate humanizing pedagogies and praxis, but how do we move from the critical to the decolonial as epistemologically they are not the same. We think we can start by reckoning with the contradictions of what we do by unpacking our positionalities in IHEs and explicitly naming our politics of counter-erasure.

Politics of borderizing are another navigational consideration for our community of scholars and leaders. The Cali-Baja borderlands are a geospatial and conceptual location explicitly influenced by the beliefs, values, traditions, customs, and social practices of those that are borderized. This concept that persons, and their perspectives and practices, are borderized is interesting to us as persons, as educators, and as community members. Specifically, we are interested in learning about the complementary process of how persons borderize. Borderizing is similar to translanguaging as both an action verb as well as conceptual construct. How is a pedagogy of borderizers both decolonial as well as liberatory in terms of ways of axiological feeling, epistemological thinking, and ontological being? Are DEBER’s practices decolonial and liberatory? Is decolonial an appropriate framework for institutional analyses? Are liberatory practices appropriate measures or constructs for individual and interpersonal analyses? We do not know of any institution of higher education in any of the three Californias that explicitly prioritizes the teaching and learning of liberatory practices. As we reflect, we interrogate the limitations of

decolonial frameworks as appropriate for the analyses of DEBER Scholars' development. Is the decolonization of economically inaccessible IHE institutions an appropriate goal for DEBER? Are measures of borderized students' bilingualism, biliteracy, and binationalism indicators of best practice? Yes, there are social and economic salaries and benefits that are associated with being a bilingual teacher; however, the distinction between being a teacher and being a simultaneous student and teacher of a pedagogy of borderizers is a nuanced distinction. Just as praxis is the blend of theory and practice, our notion of *colega-ness* is the blend of learner and educator. *Colegas* that learn and teach a pedagogy of borderizers recognize and respect the multiplicity of languages, literacies, cultures, dispositions, worldviews, nation-states, and reconcile the contradictions of colonial markers of institutional difference such as gender, sexuality, race-ethnicity, linguistic competence, enrollment, persistence/participation, graduation. *Colegas* that learn and teach a pedagogy of borderizers continuously affirm languages, literacies, and cultures as liberatory practices to reflect on, situate and negotiate colonialism, classicism, racism (anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity), patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia. Theorizing from the Cali-Baja region we cannot ignore the sociopolitical reality of the pandemic. Though the militarized border has always functioned as a *de facto* fortress to keep brown bodies, brown minds, and brown ideas outside of the U.S, during COVID-19 we truly experienced the full closure and exclusionary nature of Empire. We are scholars, shapeshifters, coyotes, magicians, and *nahuallis*. We are from thorns, roses, *Califas*, y *Aztlán*. *Somos de everywhere and nowhere and the in-between*. As human beings that engage in decolonial practices, our minds and hearts are also impacted, shaped, nurtured by the temporality, and physicality of our geospatial realities. Our hearts remaining open as we confront multiple closed borders.

In our critical reflection we have written about liminality, counter-erasure and borderizing not merely as abstract ideas but as concrete realities that shape our innermost beings. *Cultivar estos conceptos de liminality, counter-erasure and borderizing en este suelo del sistema educativo es nuestro DEBER*. Findings from our critical reflection suggest that cultural, racial-ethnic, and linguistic identity affirmation are crucial for transformational learning experiences of scholars. It is with this in mind, that we enter this intellectual/academic critical reflection. Our bodies and minds are full of dreams, ideas, and reflections about how best to continue the work of ancestors by sharing our generational knowledge to rescue the sacred wisdom buried beneath our feet. This is our calling, this is our duty, this is our DEBER.

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**FUNDING:**

Research reported in this publication was supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education Developing, Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program (Award Number: P031S190108). The research reported in this publication is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Education.

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