

Calexico: True Lives of the Borderlands

Peter Laufer

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Life in Calexico, California, population just under 50,000, is circumscribed by border town issues, like the severely restricted access to its sister-city Mexicali, Mexico, population 700,000. Waits of up to ninety minutes at the border fence are common. Calexico also faces severe air and water pollution. Lax regulations in Mexico allow raw sewage to pollute the New River and make the air quality one of the worst in California. Illegal immigrant raids, vehicular pursuits, and a rapidly changing ethnic demographic also characterize life in Calexico. This complex mix of border town issues makes Calexico the perfect subject for University of Oregon journalism professor Peter Laufer's follow up to his Mexican-American borderlands study, *Wetback Nation*, which won honorable mention for the 2005 Gustavas Myers Book Awards.

In this interview-driven study of Calexico's residents, Laufer succeeds in transcending the faceless media rhetoric of America's national immigration debate. Through the personal stories of people who "live, work, and transit the California-Mexico border," Laufer offers snippets of support for his claim that "the border has become a new type of geopolitical fraud." According to Laufer, this malady/circumstance manifests in the "criminalization of Mexican and other migrants, the bloating of the mismanaged Immigration and Customs Enforcement sector of the Homeland Security Department, the deterioration of living standards along the frontier, and the enrichment of American employers."

With this less-than-positive viewpoint, Laufer might expect to find the citizens of Calexico bitter, disgruntled, or taken advantage of. Ironically, his subjects—a mix of natives and migrants, Caucasians and Mexicans—wield a fierce love of and loyalty to Calexico. Theirs is a community they feel is a growing town, filled with opportunity—a great place to raise a family. Despite Laufer's criticism of America's border politics, it is with "typical California optimism," that he approaches not only Calexico's citizens, but also his call for a new national open-border policy with Mexico. Despite Calexico's Imperial County placing "last in water and air quality, schooling, and income," among California counties, Laufer manages to portray the border town lifestyle of Calexico in a positive light. Laufer sees American "Calexicos" as a microcosm for the potential of border towns to move the immigration debate in Washington and Mexico City from hype and hysteria to hope.

The book could have been strengthened with chapter or page notes and an index. But academic readers will appreciate the foreword by Ralph Lewin, president, California Council for the Humanities, and the Afterword by Vassar College geography professor, Joseph Nevins. These bookends place *Calexico* within the discourse of citizenship, immigration, transnational commerce, and the human "body politic" that navigate America's border regions.

KAI WHITE (September / October 2011)

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