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## **Coming of Age in the Rio Grande Valley: Race, Class, Gender, and Generations in Narco Culture**

— Rosalynn A. Vega

**Abstract:** *Based on ethnographic observations in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, this article examines the multiple, overlapping, criss-crossing axes of inequality that both shape and fracture the experiences of individual borderland residents. Instead of focusing on the national border, this article analyzes intersecting axes of social inequality and uses ethnographic data to describe social borders that divide and separate those living in the borderlands. Using ethnographic data culled from 133 young adults in focus group settings, this article merges the theory of intersectionality with border studies scholarship in order to analyze how socio-economic stratification, gender inequality, histories of racial discrimination, and generational differences map onto one another in a place characterized by narco violence. In essence, the article demonstrates how the lives of adolescents and young adults in the Rio Grande Valley are ensnared within a unique matrix of intersecting axes of inclusion and exclusion. The intersecting axes of gender, race, and class inequality unfold in a context of “narco culture,” where residents are not only living along the US-Mexico border, and within social webs of intersectional borders, but also on the border of legality/illegality.*

**Keywords:** *Rio Grande Valley; borders; intersectionality; social inequality; narco culture*

### **Introduction**

When contemplating social division in the borderland, it can be tempting to focus on the national border dividing the United States from Mexico, the one that presumably separates Mexican poverty from the American dream. The border separates the twin cities of Tijuana and San Diego, El Paso and Juarez, and, in the region where my research takes place, McAllen and Reynosa. Elsewhere, I have focused on the permeability of the US-Mexico border for the

purpose of consumption (Vega, “Medical Mobility” 6). In this article I stress that not only is the border extremely permeable with regard to Mexican culture and the Spanish language, but that it also post-dates the existence of Mexican culture and Mexicans in the region. That is, the region where this research takes place—approximately 230 miles south of The Alamo in San Antonio—was Mexico long before it was reterritorialized as part of the United States (Romo, “Introduction” 8; Romo, “Conclusion”). Therefore, it is not that Mexican heritage has intruded into the area; rather, Mexican heritage has defined this region for centuries.

In many ways, ongoing ethnographic research, combined with my own personal experiences across several years of residence in the Rio Grande Valley, suggest that the national border is not the only revealing analytic for understanding social divisions in the region.<sup>1</sup> This is why I have chosen not to focus on the national border itself as the primary marker of social division.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I bring Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality to bear on Cristina Salinas’s notion of “social space” (48) and use ethnographic data to describe social borders that divide and separate those living in the borderlands.

Specifically, the ethnographic research in this article took place in Hidalgo County, Texas. The majority of the county is Hispanic: according to the US Census Bureau’s 2015 “ACS 1-year Estimate” data set, 768,798 +/- N/A of residents were Hispanic and 58,583 +/- 459 were white. The Census also indicates that 618,351 residents were Spanish speakers in 2015. In 2016, 27.9% of the population was foreign-born persons. The Migration Policy Institute in Washington, DC, estimates that one hundred thousand undocumented people reside in Hidalgo County. Of these, it is estimated that 80% are of Mexican origin.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the Institute used ACS data to calculate the educational attainment of the undocumented population—they determined that about 67% do not have a high-school diploma, and only 6% have a college degree.<sup>4</sup>

Within the geographic context of Hidalgo County, the research focuses on the experiences of a specific population: young people. While lower-class standing remains a constant for many families in the Rio Grande Valley, the region experiences rapid cultural transformation from one generation to the next. Thus, young people’s lives—especially those in the “1.5 generation” (González 6)—are diagnostic of both socio-economic stagnation and cultural

<sup>1</sup> For a powerful theorization of the border and its injurious effects, see Jusionyte.

<sup>2</sup> One might ask how this might change amid US President Donald Trump’s forceful determination to construct a border wall—even while a wall already exists along vast portions of the southern border.

<sup>3</sup> According to a *Texas Tribune* interview of demographer and senior policy analyst

at the Migration Policy Institute (Ura and McCullough).

<sup>4</sup> See the interactive map from the Migration Policy Institute for more information.

<sup>5</sup> Many undocumented migrants and their families (including documented family members) remain in this region of South Texas due to an immigration checkpoint located seventy miles north, in

transitions underway. Young people’s narratives provide a unique vantage point from which to examine both change and tenacious inequality. That is, while these young people’s lives unfold at the economic margins of a community located at the nation’s periphery, their behaviours and decisions are often ensnared within intersecting social borders and boundaries. Their narratives offer detailed insight into asymmetrical social relations characterized by issues of power, unequal legal standing, and economic resources (Heyman, “US–Mexico Border Cultures” 23).

The ethnographic content of this article aims to extend and complexify the concept of the border by examining *borders within the border*. Similarly, the theoretical corpus that the article draws from defies inconspicuous borders within the academy, separating Northern scholars from theory produced in the Global South. This work not only aims to analyze intersecting borders in the borderlands but also heeds Pablo Vila’s call to uncover and resist borders within academic discourse (“Conclusion” 306). Academic dialogue across borders helps to dismantle discursive structures that position the North as the primary or exclusive place to cite theory and points to the richness of different academic disciplines around the world, as well as the immense knowledge and different perspectives that can be gleaned and produced by participating in a truly transnational dialogue about theory.

This article engages binational discourse and refers to Liliana Meza González and Michael Fiel’s argument that public insecurity in Mexico is a “push factor” for international emigration out of Northern Mexico (71). While their research is based in Northern Mexican states where families react to high levels of direct and indirect violence and homicide, my research is based just a few miles north, in one of the communities where many security-seeking migrants end up.<sup>5</sup>

Residence in Hidalgo County provides a certain element of security—even from audible gunshots “on the other side.” Nonetheless, young people’s lives in the Rio Grande Valley are often circumscribed by a context of “illegality” (De Genova 2) and narco violence. While popular depictions bifurcate immigrant communities into dichotomous categories—thus labeling individuals as either legal or undocumented, college-bound or “street kids,” good immigrants or “criminals” (González xiv)—all of the young people in this study are familiar with the spectre of narco violence by virtue of where they live.<sup>6</sup>

Many of these young people are from mixed-status families in which older members of the family are marked by “illegality,” and they are intimate witnesses to how undocumented family members live in constant fear of deportation (Dreby 19). These experiences throw into question whether law enforcement is friend or foe. In this culture of incarceration, young people contend with co-occurring law enforcement strategies aimed at policing their mobility and policing the border. At the same time, they must negotiate borders of legality in a region where the lingering spectre of transborder crime (such as kidnapping, sexual slavery, human smuggling, and drug trafficking) is always present. In this context, how do young people’s decisions map onto local understandings of security, risk, and danger?

## Methods

The ethnographic data discussed in this article is culled from focus groups conducted in September 2018, which included a total of 133 participants. For the most part, the members of these focus groups are in their late teens to early twenties. With few exceptions, they have lived in the Rio Grande Valley for most, if not all, of their lives. As a result of the relatively large number of focus group participants, Rio Grande Valley residents from both rural and urban settings are represented in the ethnographic data set, as well as young people from the lower and middle classes. Furthermore, individuals from across a spectrum of gender and sexual identities attended the focus groups.

Focus group participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were administered consent forms at the outset of each focus group session. Due to the delicate nature of some of the ethnographic data, I have decided to anonymize all focus group participants. At a minimum, I have changed all participants’ names to pseudonyms; in addition, I have removed all necessary identifying markers on a case-by-case basis to maintain the anonymity of the individual participant.

During the focus group sessions themselves, my primary goal was to facilitate and maintain a safe space for both individual and collective expression. While in other publications I have primarily relied on one-on-one, in-depth interviewing, I found that, given

Falfurrias, that deters passage to central and northern parts of Texas, including the major metropolitan cities of Austin, Houston, and Dallas. While some of these migrants arrived to Texas “cruzando el río,” others are visa overstayers—in both cases, many stay in the Rio Grande Valley instead of risking detention at the Falfurrias checkpoint.

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth, ethnographic study comprised of oral histories from both drug traffickers and law enforcement officials, see Howard Campbell. Campbell focuses on the El Paso/Juárez “Drug War Zone,” where he provides an up-close analysis of the corrupt culture of drug trafficking.

the sensitive topics approached in this article, collecting data via focus groups allowed individual participants to feel more comfortable. Instead of feeling singled out, especially with regard to documentation status, focus group members synergistically created a “hive,” allowing them to reveal commonalities without fear or shame. Furthermore, the “think tank” quality of these focus groups effectively provided some balance to the perspectives shared within the group, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the range of individual experiences and allowing for an inclusive consensus to be reached.

Focus group participants were faced with questions meant to tease apart experiences of social inequality in the borderlands. While in-depth participant observation is considered by many to be the most valuable method in the ethnographic tool box, I chose to obtain ethnographic data through focus groups since, according to Vila, “the only way to construct an anti-racist alliance is to allow the differences inside the community to appear and to vent them publicly” (“Identity and Empowerment” 40; see also *Crossing Borders* 167-90). As I would be with one-on-one, in-depth interviewing, I was careful not to lead focus group informants, and instead used a semi-structured method that allowed the group’s conversation to flow naturally—thus revealing realities that I would have never thought to inquire about. In general, the questions that I asked the group addressed the following issues: coming of age in the borderland; experiences with incarceration and policing; the borders of legality; the social borders of race and class; borders separating one generation from the next; and gender in the borderland. During these focus group experiences, I noticed “Master Signifiers” and hegemonic narrative plots emerge as participants “quilted” coherent identity discourses in the group setting (Vila, “Processes of Identification” 607).

My data analysis is specifically derived from detailed fieldnotes on focus group sessions. After facilitating these focus groups, I engaged in an iterative process that used open coding to identify emergent themes and synthesize higher order constructs. In addition, my argument incorporates observations gleaned from a broader, ongoing project in the Rio Grande Valley, for which I have, at the time of this writing, conducted twenty months of ethnographic research. This research has received Internal Review Board (IRB) approval.

## Theoretical Framework

This article draws from Kimberle Crenshaw's theorization of "intersectionality" (149). Intersectionality theory is, essentially, an analogy used to describe intersecting axes of inequality and the potential noxious effects on those caught in cross-traffic at an intersection. It is important to emphasize that intersecting axes of inequality are not additive—instead, using terminology from statistics, inequality is a multivariate model that includes an interaction term. For example, a white woman may experience discrimination on the basis of her female gender. A black man may experience discrimination on the basis of his minority racial status. A black woman's experience, however, is *not* the sum of the white woman's experience of gender discrimination and the black man's experience of racial discrimination. Instead, a black woman sometimes experiences discrimination on the basis of her gender, at other times she experiences discrimination on the basis of her race, and finally, she is sometimes discriminated against as a *black woman*. Thus, while intersections involving more axes are likely to experience more "traffic," every intersection of distinct axes of inequality leads to a unique experience of discrimination and exclusion.

Thus, this article merges the theory of intersectionality with border studies scholarship in order to analyze how socio-economic stratification, gender inequality, histories of racial discrimination, and generational differences map onto one another in a place characterized by narco violence. In other words, this article builds on existing literature on intersectionality and border studies by making the following argument: multiple borders between the classes, genders, races, and generations demonstrate that the border is, itself, contextualized by "narco culture" along the Mexico–United States border. While border studies scholars have not explicitly turned to the concept of intersectionality, many have objected to using the US–Mexico geopolitical border as the sole or primary interpretive framework for the borderland region. Instead, scholars have signaled how gender, class, religion, regional identity, nationality, race, ethnicity, and age intertwine to produce a differential sense of identity among Mexican nationals, Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, and Anglos (Vila, *Crossing Borders* 227-50). That is, borderland residents engage in complex social identification processes which defy idealized notions of "hybridity" (Vila, *Border Identifications* 229).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The concept of "hybridity" is a long-standing concept in border studies. A few prominent contributions to the debate include Anzaldúa; García Canclini; and Rosaldo.

### **Generational Borders: The Fault Lines of Language**

One of the most salient borders in the US–Mexico borderlands is the border that separates each generation from the next. Swift generational transformation is, in part, the result of migration patterns—that is, parents who migrated from Mexico as adults, older children who migrated as young children and consider themselves both Mexican and American—what González terms the “1.5 generation” (6)—and younger siblings who identify strongly with American culture. The different perspectives siblings express with respect to their cultural identity parallels their migrant parents’ shifting attitudes and expectations.

These generational and half-generational differences were a ready topic in the focus groups. For example, as the older son, Jorge’s father ordered that he listen to traditional Mexican music. His younger brother, however, is allowed to listen to pop music. Borders scholar Josiah McC. Heyman explains that border populations both resist state boundaries (i.e. “hybridity”) and simultaneously embrace state boundaries (leading to cultural polarization). Jorge’s family demonstrate how, “[w]ithin the border setting, some populations are carriers of specific processes, but often the same people are affected by both tendencies and manifest both cultural styles at different times and in different relationships” (Heyman, “Culture Theory” 48-49).

Musical fluency is not the only indicator of (vanishing) “Mexicanness”—Spanish language fluency is also disappearing. Spanish fluency is strongly correlated with birth order: the oldest child learns Spanish in the home during their pre-K years and often struggles with English when they begin school. As a result of having witnessed their first child struggling, parents may place a greater emphasis on English for the second child, who is exposed to more English in the home environment through their older sibling. This rapid language transition has left some younger siblings in a catch-22. While their parents may have made a point to emphasize English in the home environment so they could be successful in school, English–Spanish bilingualism has become a source of capital in the work environment, with some local workplaces demanding Spanish as a job requirement.

Many focus group participants identified themselves as the youngest person in their family who is able to communicate in Spanish. As such, multiple participants expressed concern

about their younger siblings' lack of relationship with monolingual elders due to their inability to speak with parents and grandparents. Being able to speak a common language is important because it structures and facilitates closeness between family members.

Ricardo revealed his concern for how his younger brother, Juan Carlos, is missing out on many of the opportunities for a meaningful relationship with his mother because he does not speak her language. Ricardo and Juan Carlos's mother, a homemaker, is monolingual in Spanish. Their father has learned some English working outside of the home. Since Juan Carlos only has a weak command of Spanish, he tends to communicate a lot more with his father than his mother. Older siblings described an intimacy with parents that their younger siblings do not have access to. Leticia, her mother's only child who speaks Spanish, described how in times of emotional strife, her mother would sometimes revert to Spanish as "our own intimate, private, little thing. She would comfort me in Spanish."

For some younger siblings, not being Mexican is not only about an absence of familiarity with the culture but also a pointed rejection of it. Manuel signaled that while he identifies as Mexican American, his younger sister insists that she is American. She wants nothing to do with Mexicanness and all it represents. Carlos nodded in agreement and provided this dark summary for the transition: "People became ashamed of their own culture and adapt to something that is not Hispanic." The cultural rejection is bilateral. Josefina shared that her grandma thinks that English is an "evil language" that is "taking over."

While some parent-child and grandparent-child relationships are regrettably debilitated by their lack of a common language, at other times lack of linguistic fluency is an advantage. Adriana indicated that another way that language comes to serve as a marker of difference or a barrier between the generations is when it is used by parents to discuss "things between them," such as family or job issues. Margarita chimed in, "Spanish is the language of secret adult gossip." Groups of older women will begin speaking in Spanish, then pause and ask the respective mothers of youth present if their child(ren) understand Spanish. If the mother confirms that her child(ren) do(es) understand, they will defer the conversation for later.

While speaking the same language (or not) can facilitate both intimacy and distancing, at other times, members of the "1.5 generation" are positioned to be their parents' defenders,

since they are bilingual. Patricia explained that she and her monolingual mother were in a store when she heard derogatory comments being spoken in English about her mother. She spoke up in her mother's defence. Other focus group participants corroborated the experience of being taken for a non-English or non-Spanish speaker and hearing derogatory things being aimed at them or their family members, only to then respond in the language of the offender, to that person's surprise and embarrassment. Another important way that students use bilingualism to "defend" the older generation is by translating and representing the older generation in their engagements with the health care system—for example, during medical appointments.

Spanish-language fluency, or the lack thereof, not only structures the quality of relationships between family members but is also a criteria of exclusion and even "Spanish shaming": Alicia shared an experience where, as a customer service worker, she was addressed by a customer in Spanish. When she responded that she does not speak Spanish, the customer responded in perfect English, "You grew up in the Valley. You should be able to speak Spanish." Another young customer service worker, Leticia, explained that Spanish can sometimes be used by customers when their intention is to have a private conversation that does not include her. When they address her, they will speak in English. When they switch to Spanish, that is a cue to her that she is not a part of the conversation. Alejandra also feels a sense of exclusion in her work place, since all of her colleagues speak really quickly in Spanish, and although she is translating in her mind, trying to piece individual words together, by the time she understands the meaning of a sentence, they are already on to the next topic.

This type of "clique" mentality among Spanish speakers is also apparent in schools. Verónica sometimes encounters groups of classmates in the lunch hall speaking Spanish. Verónica is a Hispanic woman who, due to her Islamic faith, wears a hijab on a daily basis. Assuming that she does not understand Spanish and intending to exclude her from the conversation, the classmates she encounters will immediately switch to Spanish.

Together, the personal experiences of young people living in the Rio Grande Valley demonstrate that primary spoken language is closely correlated with immigrant generations (first generation, 1.5 generation, so on and so forth). Furthermore, language differences serve

as criteria for inclusion or exclusion within families, in the workplace, at school, and in the community at large.

### **Sex and Gender in the Borderland**

Generational transitions are underway not only with respect to language but also with respect to expectations regarding gender roles. Both male and female participants in focus groups commented on the inequitable expectations parents apply to their daughters and sons. Many participants compared the gendered standards they are held to with that of their sibling(s) of the opposite gender. For these portions of the focus group sessions, it was especially helpful to have groups of coed participants, since participants from both genders were able to corroborate assertions about their own gender and the opposite gender.

Male siblings enjoy unparalleled freedoms when compared to their female counterparts. As adolescents, they often come and go from the parental home, unrestrained by strict curfews. Furthermore, most boys are not expected to take part, and are sometimes actively discouraged from taking part, in household chores and domestic work. Teresa argued that boys' transition to adulthood is dependent on their displaying certain "masculine" behaviours: "they are men as soon as they begin drinking, doing drugs, or having a job." Male focus group participants chuckled nervously, but also nodded in agreement. For men, certain behaviours serve as markers of adult masculinity—and due to the local narco culture (more on this, below), some of those behaviours may be illicit. While in some circumstances adolescent boys are instigated by peers to accrue sexual experience, marrying and becoming a father are *not* required in order to leave the parental home, begin an independent life, and be considered an adult by elder family members.

In contrast, girls are not allowed to move out of their parents' house until they are married. Francisca, Martha, and Silvia were all admitted to universities outside of the Rio Grande Valley but were forced to turn down offers for admission due to their parents' lack of agreement with unmarried daughters leaving home. The lives of young women in the 1.5 generation are tangled up in a messy transition toward greater gender equity, a transition that is being inconsistently implemented in conflicting ways. Young women like Francisca, Martha, and

Silvia have been told by their fathers, “you should get an education so you never have to depend on a man,” ever since they were young girls. At the same time, those very fathers are uncomfortable with their wives working outside of the home since their masculine identities are largely undergirded by their ability to “provide.” Then, when their daughters *do* seek higher education, they are forbidden to pursue opportunities that would take them away from home or even to take classes at the local university that would keep them out late.

Again and again, female focus group participants expressed frustration at the contradictory way in which they are treated: as young women, they are not allowed to leave home, yet they are expected to take a parenting role for younger siblings. Moreover, parents are constantly telling them, “you live under my roof, my rules.” “House rules” commonly include respecting a strict curfew, seeking parental permission before inviting a boyfriend over, leaving the door open when a boyfriend is visiting, and so on. While illicit behaviour may be considered “masculine” for many members of the community, migrant parents often consider safeguarding their daughters’ purity as one of their primary roles as parents. Their daughters are their wards until marriage or pregnancy—only when these young women take on the roles of wife or mother are they allowed to shed the role of child. For this reason, many young women spend their twenties betwixt and between (Turner 93)—as elder daughters, they have significant domestic and caregiving responsibilities, but without husbands or children of their own, they are stuck in an extended liminal period and not yet considered full adults.

While the intersection between generations and genders is clear, these two axes also intersect with that of race (to be discussed further in the next section). These intersections can become evident in the most mundane ways. For example, focus group members suggested that local attitudes toward firearms reflect different attitudes about masculinity among Mexicans and whites. That is, since firearms are illegal in Mexico, first-generation immigrants from Mexico usually do not approve of guns. Robert explained, “In Mexico, if you have a gun, they associate you with drug dealing.” For this reason, the “gun culture” that is so notorious in the state of Texas is noticeably less vibrant in deep South Texas. While many gun owners in Texas cite their desire for self-protection, in the context of narco culture, it is safer to *not* own a gun.

Gender also intersects with race in the context of border insecurity. Martín described what happened when his mother’s car broke down. Seeing a fair-skinned woman on the side of the highway, a police officer stopped to offer her help. When his aunt, however, a dark-skinned woman, experienced similar car trouble, not even a male police officer offered her help—they all just drove by. Of course, this could be attributed to the individual male police officer, but according to Martín’s interpretation, intersecting perceptions of race and gender shape how people interact in the Valley. For his mother, her female gender was the predominant axis, and for his aunt, her dark skin was a stronger determinant. While on the one hand chivalry is common in the borderlands (especially given the family dynamics described above), on the other hand, the struggles of vulnerable, dark-skinned migrants are tolerated and even ignored on a daily basis.

### **The Border Between “Race” and Class: Thinking “Brown and White”**

Racial difference in the Valley is readily visible due to the local racialization of space and the naturalization of segregation (Lund xiv, 98). At the same time, Anglo and Mexican communities come into daily contact with each other, and these interactions form the basis of Valley culture. Stated differently, class, race, and ethnicity intersect in unique ways in the Valley to produce border culture (Richardson and Pisani, *Batos* 14, 234).

Racial difference was also a recurrent theme during focus group sessions. Alicia acknowledged that some of the phenotype-based “racial” discrimination I described in Mexico also extends into the Valley (Vega, *No Alternative* 97-130; see also Lytle Hernández 17-18). Alicia’s mother has a lot of Indigenous-looking features, and as a girl in school, she was a constant witness to the lack of respect her mother was shown. Alicia commented on a social subtext of indifference toward people who look like her mother and quoted how others naturalized this discrimination: “*Oh, pos. Parece india*” (“Oh, well. She looks Indian”). She went on to explain that this indifference is based on phenotype, since “[w]e don’t have a lot of true Indigenous people here, but if they look the part.” Colonial legacies contextualize “racial” assumptions in Mexico (Nemser 8, 68),<sup>8</sup> and these assumptions have permeated the border and are reproduced in the Rio Grande Valley.

<sup>8</sup> In *Infrastructures of Race*, Nemser argues that

racialization enables the extraction and accumulation that are characteristics of colonial domination and global capitalism.

At the same time, the Valley has its own history of racial inequality. In the Valley, most residents identify as Mexican, and a history of migration is something many families have in common. The second most common US Census category for ethnicity is “non-Hispanic White.” The socio-economic differences between these groups are readily apparent. Yolanda reflected aloud that she makes more race-based assumptions about socio-economic status since moving to the Valley because whiteness and wealth so often coincide in the local context. She catches herself thinking that people who are white are automatically rich: “I never would have thought that five years ago.” As a high-school student, however, she observed a pattern of differential privilege: it was the white kids who were in all the AP classes and got new cars on their sixteenth birthdays. These kids are descendants of “older white families” (sometimes self-identified as “McAllenites”) who have owned land for generations.

While Yolanda uneasily acknowledges how her assumptions regarding wealth and whiteness have become more naturalized since she relocated to the Valley, Yolanda’s experience is somewhat unique to the focus group since most other participants have resided in the Valley since childhood or birth. In contrast to Yolanda’s experience, María opened up to the group about the moment when she realized that race operates differently in other places. Growing up as a Hispanic in the Valley, she was part of the majority. When she applied for a job in the mall at San Antonio, however, she was made to feel like she was not a worthy applicant for a job in retail. María explained that she would never doubt her ability to take a job at the mall in the Valley, where most of the people working in the retail sector are young Hispanics like her. In San Antonio, however, she was treated, for the first time, as a racial minority and as an inferior candidate. For young women like María, growing up in a Hispanic majority can be as much a protective barrier from racial difference as it can be a totalizing experience of racial homogeneity: “Since five years old I’ve been exposed to U.S. culture . . . but not all the way because we are in the Valley. I don’t have a lot of experience with full white people.”

As Rosa made clear, however, assumptions about class are not always based on skin colour. Rosa insisted: “it is also based on where you live.” She went to school in a nearby,

wealthier school district. “There, you hear comments that ‘the daddies are all drug dealers.’” Taken together, Yolanda’s self-reflection and Rosa’s description regarding community-based perceptions beg the listener to unravel assumptions about how whiteness and wealth are bound together through a history of land ownership, while assumptions about Hispanic wealth reference the local narco culture.

### **Caught Between Poverty and Narco Culture: The Vanishing Borders of Legality**

In the focus group setting, the vulnerability of young, impoverished border residents constantly surrounded by narco culture was quickly laid bare. This vulnerability points to the vanishing borders of legality in the Rio Grande Valley. The way in which focus group participants talk about the fraught context within which everyday choices are embedded makes it clear that they are making out their lives “in the gray zone” (Scheper-Hughes 159). Commerce in the borderlands is characterized by informal and underground economies. That is, borderland residents do not report the legal exchange of legal goods and services or engage in criminal economic activities. In both cases, these economic activities evade government scrutiny by taking place beyond the realm of government oversight. Chad Richardson and Michael J. Pisani argue that Valley residents engage in informal and underground economies in part due to lack of access to protection under the law. These economic activities increase when citizens feel that they are subjected to the state’s illegitimate intervention (for example, in the form of fees, taxes, and regulation) while not benefiting from state-sponsored recourse (Richardson and Pisani, *Informal* 68, 129).

In the focus group setting, the stories of individuals harked back to Richardson and Pisani’s argument while also highlighting the recurrent theme of vulnerability. Gabriela recounted her experience getting “kicked out” of her home. She described experiences such as hers as unique to the Valley due to swift cultural transformation from one generation to the next—what she termed “the new generation having a counterculture.” Making matters worse, Gloria explained that the vulnerability of young, impoverished individuals is compounded by the fact that “Hispanic culture” emphasizes the importance of close knit families, such that many young Rio Grande Valley residents often do not have the life skills

<sup>9</sup> One concrete example that was shared is about the experience of being disabled in the Valley. In her opinion, people with disabilities are encouraged to get jobs and do as much as they are able to. Here, people with disabilities are “sheltered” and kept at home where they are dependent on family members—the “close knit” quality of the family disables them further.

<sup>10</sup> Women whose “sugar daddies” are cartel bosses are locally referred to as “buchonas.” Focus group members described “buchonas” as tending to have lots of plastic surgery (paid for by their sugar daddy) and

to be self-sufficient.<sup>9</sup> I prompted the two young women, suggesting that maybe it was just a symptom of intergenerational discord, common in many places. Gabriela then expanded and said that what made the experiences of local youth unique is that people in the Valley are poor and their vulnerability forces them to make “rash decisions.” She explained that what might be considered moments of intergenerational discord in other places can be conduits into drug dealing and human trafficking in the context of the Valley.

While young men are more susceptible to drug dealing when placed in vulnerable situations, young women are more likely to become financially dependent sexual partners to cartel bosses. The focus group reflected on how the “sugar life” is common in the local context due to endemic poverty. Elena began clarifying, “It’s harder to find sugar daddies in the valley. . .” and Luisa finished her sentence, saying, “because your sugar daddy here is a narco, because that is what is available.” Focus group participants agreed that a tendency toward the “sugar life” is much more commonplace than prostitution. They suggested that a strong cultural emphasis on “the family dynamic” renders prostitution shameful. Furthermore, given the fears of local women with regard to human trafficking, being the “mistress” of a cartel boss<sup>10</sup> seems like a comparatively “safer” alternative. In essence, strong “family values” combined with narco culture, nested within a context of widespread socio-economic scarcity, provide a framework within which extramarital affairs with cartel members flourish. On the other hand, fears regarding human trafficking discourage vulnerable young women from entering into prostitution.

Thus, vulnerable young men and women are easily swept into narco culture—either through dealing drugs or having an affair with a narco. In the process, many begin using drugs and alcohol themselves, and some are quickly acquainted with the carceral culture in the Valley. Yolanda explained that easy access to illicit substances such as Xanax (available without a prescription just across the border) make it all too tempting for those struggling with drug abuse or tempted by dealership. Unable to resist the temptation, Yolanda’s cousin has been in and out of jail. The group began rapidly affirming each other’s perspectives on how commonplace drug dealing and incarceration are in their community, almost like members of a unified chorus: “People are struggling, and it is just easier to sell drugs.” “It is so easy and accessible here in the Valley.”

In addition to drug dealing, another common motive for incarceration among the family members of focus group members is human smuggling. The focus group recognized that, with respect to human smuggling, there is a large undocumented population hiding from officials, and many documented counterparts who are also struggling to make ends meet. Group members asserted that multiple forms of vulnerability (low socio-economic status, lack of education, and joblessness) intersect to produce this situation. Juana shared with the group that two of her aunts have been incarcerated for human smuggling “because it paid well.” One aunt was a permanent resident at the time of the offense and “lost her papers” due to the crime. Juana’s husband, a US citizen, was offered money “to take people past the checkpoint up towards Kingsville.” While her gestures and tone suggested that he did not accept, she did not explicitly state his refusal; and given the nature of the focus group topic, I did not ask questions that could potentially incriminate any of the focus group members or their families. One thing became strikingly clear, however: when a family member engages in human smuggling or drug trafficking, the choice can be disruptive to their relationships with family members. Jesús explained that when someone is involved in drug trafficking or human smuggling, “It’s hard to get out, once you are in it.” He furthermore elucidated how the situation is socially isolating, since “[y]ou can’t get attached to anyone else—you don’t want to risk harm to your loved ones or family members.”<sup>11</sup>

Narco culture—and with it, carceral culture—are normalized in the region. Yareli asserted that due to carceral culture in the Valley, sharing one’s experience of getting arrested is considered normal. The person you are speaking with might respond to you with a certain degree of comradery, “Yeah, I got arrested there too.” When she left the Valley to visit with the “white side” of her biracial family, however, she offered this carefree update: “Dominic got arrested again.” At that moment, the room fell silent, and she realized that what is normal in the Valley is cause for dismay elsewhere. In the Valley, sharing experiences of incarceration is normal banter since “[w]e’ve all had our experiences getting arrested.” Eduardo agreed: “You can meet anybody and say, ‘Oh, have you been in jail?’ ‘Yeah, at county.’”

In a context where experiences of incarceration are so common, having gone to jail no longer serves as a social marker for “bad.” At the same time, law enforcement officials, especially border patrol, are not unquestioningly associated with “good.” As Chad Richardson and Rosalva

died hair. Thus when one sees a woman with an “artificial” body type and coloured hair, assumptions are made about her association with narco culture.

<sup>11</sup> While actual involvement with drug trafficking and human smuggling can disrupt family relationships, feigned involvement can be used as currency for social inclusion among young people. With respect to drug trafficking and human smuggling, Edgar explained, “Even if

they aren't into it, they pretend they are."

Resendiz explain, Rio Grande Valley culture is filled with numerous apparent contradictions unfolding on the edge of the law (xii, 163).

Many focus group members belong to mixed-status families in which US citizens are constant witnesses to the marginalization of their undocumented family members who are forced to live life "in the shadows" (Boehm 25). Any pre-existing lack of trust in law enforcement was exacerbated recently when a border patrol agent was arrested and found guilty of the serial killing of sex workers. Rubí explained that, as a woman, she is afraid of the sense of entitlement displayed by law enforcement. Other young women in the group shared experiences regarding abuses of power by local law enforcement. For example, at the Hidalgo bridge, officers detained Elizabeth and her friend when they were travelling alone. They strip searched the two young women, patting them down. Elizabeth asserted that this would not have happened if they had been accompanied by a man. In contrast, Tanya interjected that sometimes she asks to be accompanied by police so as not to be harmed by anyone else.

While there was definite ambivalence and even conflicting opinions among the group about whether or not law enforcement agents are "good guys" or "bad guys," the recurrent theme was women's vulnerability at the hands of men. This theme serves to reiterate the analytical value of intersectionality: in the context of narco culture, individuals are rendered vulnerable not only on the basis of their socio-economic class but also on the basis of their gender.

### **Conclusion**

The Hispanic community in this South Texas borderland region is characterized by dynamic transformation from one generation to the next. One prominent generational change is the rapid loss of Spanish fluency. Growing up in the Valley instills young adults with a certain intimacy with Hispanic culture and most are exposed to a bilingual environment, but in many families only elder siblings speak Spanish conversationally. For a community under linguistic transition, language has become an additional criterion for inclusion/exclusion.

Furthermore, rapid generational shifts have unfolded distinctly for young men and women. Unmarried young women, especially older siblings and those of the 1.5 generation, are, in many ways, trapped in a liminal phase of not-quite-full-adulthood. On the one hand, they are encouraged

to obtain higher education, earn professional degrees, and earn their own money so they will not need to be dependent on a male partner. On the other hand, without a husband, they are not allowed to move out of the parental home and are under the constant surveillance of their parents' watchful eye. In contrast, marriage and fatherhood are not requisite criteria for young men as they transition to independent adulthood.

While parents may attempt to shelter young women, it is impossible to shield young adults from the harsh local reality of race-based inequality. On the one hand, these individuals grow up in communities where a "minority" ethnicity is the overwhelming statistical majority. On the other hand, borderland residents grow up with an acute awareness of marginalization—they are constant witness to the exclusion of undocumented friends, family, and community members. As Victoria put it, "Children in the borderlands grow up faster since they see people getting deported beginning at a young age and have to deal with loss and family struggle in their home environments."

Furthermore, the region is permeated by colonial legacies emanating from Mexico and deeply seeped in histories of landownership among white "McAllenite" families. Unsurprisingly, socio-economic class maps onto this stark racial divide. While many young white individuals inherit a family legacy of permanence and property, some young Hispanics view engaging the local narco culture as the most readily available path out of scarcity.

Thus the lives of adolescents and young adults in the Rio Grande Valley are ensnared within a unique matrix characterized by both vertical relations of power and horizontal bonds of mutuality (Heyman, "Contributions" 54; Heyman and Alarcón 164-65). Young people are ensnared in intersecting axes of inclusion and exclusion, and their experiences evince a cultural transition that is currently underway. These generational changes, however, intersect with tenacious gender inequality within families and households. Drawing from Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (149), this article uses ethnographic data to argue that gender, race, and class are all intersectional axes that create "borders within the border" for young people living in the Valley. Furthermore, these intersecting axes of inequality unfold in a context of narco culture, where residents are not only living along the US-Mexico border, and within social webs of intersectional borders, but also on the border of legality/illegality.

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