Bordered identities: Class, ethnicity, and transnational social networks

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BORDERED IDENTITIES: CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND
TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

by

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ABSTRACT

Bordered Identities: Class, Ethnicity, and Transnational Social Networks

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This thesis looks at the bordered identities of middle class second generation Mexican Americans in Las Vegas, Nevada. Through an analysis of the borderlands or gray spaces that occur at the intersections of class practices, transnational relationships and ethnic identities, participants’ bordered identities were found to be reinforced, contested, and generally negotiated. Participants’ identities are flexible; their expressed identities change in relation to context or situation. In the United States, Mexicans and Latinos more generally have been subjected to racial and ethnic oppression since the Mexican American war ended in 1848. This long history of discrimination has maintained perceptions that all Mexicans are lower/working class. Furthermore, the relationship between Mexico and the United States has led those in Mexico to perceive Mexicans in the United States as privileged. Many also see Mexicans in or from the United States as having an elevated status. Therefore, depending upon which context or location participants are in, their class identities are perceived differently. Ethnic identities are also seen differently depending upon context. When participants are in the United States, they are seen as Mexican, Mexican American or Latino but excluded from simply using the term American. They are questioned about their
legal status, assumed to be immigrants, and perceived as lower/working class. In contrast, when in Mexico, participants are not able to identify solely as Mexican. They are told they are American because they bring with them cultural customs from the United States, as well as privileges from being born there. Through middle class practices of higher education and transnational travel, participants come into these borderlands where their identities are reinforced, contested, and negotiated. Participants are not passive recipients of identity labels. However, common perceptions of who they can or cannot be influence how they assert their bordered identities.
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I was first intrigued by Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans when I moved to Las Vegas, Nevada from Anchorage, Alaska in 2003. I did not grow up with anyone of Mexican ancestry and had only worked with a few in restaurants where they were dishwashers. I was, however, exposed to negative stereotypes of lazy, dirty, and poor Mexicans. Therefore, I was confused when I found myself working beside many Mexican men and women at a collection company call center. These were some of the smartest and most motivated people I had met in Las Vegas. The youngest woman there became a manager by the age of 19. I did not expect to learn that despite their comfortable lives in Mexico, her parents had decided to move to the United States. In Mexico, her mom had been a nurse and her dad a business owner. In Las Vegas, her father owns a lucrative landscaping business which supports his family. His wife enjoys the luxury of being a stay at home mom in a wonderful house in Summerlin (a suburb known for expensive houses and posh lifestyles). My friend’s life experiences did not fit the stereotypes and media messages that I received about Mexican Americans.

Only three years after living in Las Vegas, I got to see the media images of Mexicans reiterate the negative stereotypes I had grown up with. In 2006, during the immigration reform act debates, the media focused on images of Latinos. I do not recall seeing images of immigrants from other areas. Furthermore, the Latinos were often only discussed as Mexicans essentially making the immigration issue into a Mexican issue. The following excerpt from
the essay, *America Under Siege*, in the Las Vegas Review Journal exemplifies the most negative sentiments and stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican Americans that I came across in Las Vegas.

Mexican nationals … are bringing undue burden to our taxpayers by overcrowding our cities, schools and social services. This is not an issue of immigration or racism, this is an issue of a foreign country invading America. Instead of adopting American customs, these "invaders" are forcing us to alter our existing lifestyle…. If you want to be a citizen here, then maybe you should consider supporting the United States instead of some other place that you were supposedly trying to escape from.

[Thompson 2006: 4D]

This excerpt was written by a sophomore high school student. Her essay was the winner of the local Las Vegas newspaper’s high school essay contest and she was the recipient of a 200 dollar prize. Her sentiments were not uncommon. Fear, especially of all Mexicans, was a regular theme in news media. Mexicans were often portrayed as poor, unassimilated, invaders who refused to live by U.S. rules and customs. In response to these types of messages, I was motivated to explore the lives of second generation middle class Mexican Americans (like the one I met at the call center) to bring attention to the diversity within the Mexican population in the United States.

In the summer of 2006, after I had decided to work with Mexican Americans for my thesis, I went to Guadalajara, Mexico for a language emersion program. I spoke only minimal Spanish and thought some time in Mexico would help me to better understand the culture. I spent three weeks living with a host family in an upper middle class neighborhood that, at the time, I thought was lower middle class. I got to explore the city, meet new people, and spend countless hours with my host family. They discussed the poverty and joblessness
in Mexico, how difficult it is for them to get visas to go to the United States, and how they see life in the United States as being so much better than in Mexico. All of these discussions added to my interest in working with middle class U.S.-born children of Mexican immigrants in Las Vegas, which is the focus of the following thesis.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

They are the people who belong to more than one world, … inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home; who have learned to negotiate and translate between cultures, and who, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, have learned to live with, and indeed to speak from, difference. They speak from the ‘in-between’ of different cultures, always unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of another, and thus finding ways of being both the same as and at the same time different from the others amongst whom they live. [Hall 1995: 206]

U.S.-born children of Mexican immigrants, whom I will call second generation Mexican Americans¹, do not possess a singular identity, rather their identities are bordered. They are located in a position between an identity of place in America and an identity of history and cultural “roots” in Mexico. However, their identification and lives are not simply half Mexican and half American. Identities are complex, as Judith Nagata explains, they “vary according to particular factors of the broader social situations, rather than a fixed anchorage to which the individual is unambiguously bound” (1974:333). Broader social situations vary widely for each individual. Second generation Mexican Americans are constantly negotiating multiple aspects of their identities and there are a variety of contexts in which these negotiations take place. Stuart Hall (1995) illustrates the interplay between identity and context in his concept of diasporas quoted above. He views

¹ Throughout this thesis I will use the terms Mexican, Mexican American, Latino, and Hispanic. Mexican refers to those who identify with being from Mexico. Mexican American is a term that I use to refer to those of Mexican ancestry living in the United States. Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably and refer to those of Spanish speaking descent. For a more complete definition of Latino see De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2002) Latino Crossings. In their book, they discuss how the history between Latin American countries and the United States has shaped and racialized Latino identity formations and the place Latinos hold under the sociopolitical order of white supremacy.
people in diasporas as having multiple identities, living in between two cultures, and experiencing similarities and differences simultaneously. These concepts apply to the middle class second generation Mexican Americans in this study.

Bordered identities are identities formed and transformed in the contexts of borderlands which are the spaces in between cultures, classes, and sociopolitical borders like the U.S.-Mexico border. As Anzaldúa describes, “Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch…” (1999:19). In addition to Anzaldúa’s explanation of borderlands, scholars of border studies have identified a kind of gray space, the space of overlap between cultures. The people who inhabit the gray space, as Alvarez explains, “…are constantly shifting and renegotiating identities with maneuvers of power and submission and often they adopt multiple identities…” (1995:452). As my research shows, many participants have multiple class and ethnic identities and assert their different identities in different contexts.

For example, many participants feel more Mexican and are placed in perceived

2The following Oxford American Dictionary definitions show how dominant U.S. discourse uses race and ethnicity interchangeably.

Race n. 1. one of the great divisions of mankind with certain inherited physical characteristics in common (such as color of skin and hair, shape of eyes and nose). 2. a number of people related by common descent.

Ethnicity n. ethnic background, trait, etc.

Ethnic adj. of a racial group. n. a member of an ethnic group.

Ethnic group, people who share distinctive cultural characteristics originating from a common national, linguistic, or racial heritage. [Ehrlich et al. 1980:294,738]

What is missing from the dictionary definitions and dominant discourse is that both race and ethnicity are socially constructed categories. They are not fixed, rigid, exclusive categories. Rather, they are fluid, permeable, sometimes chosen and sometimes ascribed categories of difference and similarity.
lower/working class positions in the United States but experience being seen as more American and in privileged class positions when they are in Mexico.

For this thesis, I examine cultural, physical, and class borderlands within second generation middle class Mexican Americans’ lives to see how identities are shaped and in return are shaping these gray areas. While there is variation among middle class second generation Mexican Americans (they are all individuals) and it is important to acknowledge these differences, they do have similar cultural and structural forces that touch their lives. For instance, second generation middle class Mexican Americans’ location as descendents of Mexican immigrant parents creates cultural and physical borderlands where bordered identity negotiations occur. Cultural borderlands can be seen in the differences that occur between the generations especially because many second generation Mexican Americans were raised in the United States and their immigrant parents were raised in Mexico. While their parents may instill cultural values, customs, and ideas they learned through their Mexican upbringing, the second generation is also being influenced by their location in the United States: attending American schools, watching American television, speaking English, and numerous other activities.

Furthermore, with parents who were raised in Mexico, many second generation Mexican Americans have family members who currently live in Mexico, thus, creating physical borderlands between families that live in both countries. These borders are often crossed by the family residing in Mexico and by the second generation themselves. This transnational movement allows the
second generation to experience life on both sides of the sociopolitical U.S.-Mexico border. It also creates contexts for challenging and/or reinforcing identity by looking at one’s ethnic identity through the lens of those from Mexico. For example, through these transnational relationships second generation middle class Mexican Americans can see how certain elements of their upbringing and cultural roots make them similar to those in Mexico. At the same time, other factors, like their class status and U.S. citizenship, place them in positions of difference.

Cultural and physical borderlands in second generation Mexican American lives are also transnational borderlands. Transnational communities are simply defined by Kearney as “migrant communities spanning two nations” (1995:559). However, membership in these communities is not limited to migrants but incorporates the later generations as well. Furthermore, transnational networks are not separate from the individual. They are integrated into the everyday lives of transnational (im)migrants (Basch et al. 1994; Ong 1999) and their children regardless of where they were born or in which country they currently reside (Fouron and Glick-Schiller 2002). Therefore, transnational connections do not just occur on one side of the border. Transnational social fields exist in multiple localities and influence people on both sides of the border. Transnational connections through networks can be seen in the lives of second generation Mexican Americans in a multitude of ways including ideas of belonging to more than one place, carrying the cultural customs of one place into another and
transnational ties through travel, phone calls, e-mails, and other forms of communication.

Transnational ties are strong between Mexico and the United States. For example, “The U.S. is the destination for nearly all people who leave Mexico, and about one-in-ten people born there currently lives in the U.S.” (Passel and Cohn 2009). The long history of migration and steady stream of immigration ensures that there is regular interaction between second generation Mexican Americans and new immigrants. These interactions have allowed for the maintenance of transnational social ties and exposure to cultural elements from the “homeland” (Levitt 2001:18), which has created a dynamic context different from previous periods of immigration.

Authors such as Espiritu (2003), Bao (2005), Boehm (2000, 2004), Hall (1990, 1995) and Ong (1999) have shown that transnational connections and practices help shape identities. For example, through a transnational lens, Yen Le Espiritu was able to observe,

> Even as transnational migrants live literally or symbolically across borders, they are not deterritorialized, free-floating people. Instead, they continue to exist, interact, construct their identities, and exercise their rights within nation-states that monopolize power and impose categories of identity on local residents. [2003:12]

While Espiritu is discussing migrants, her ideas also apply to later generations as well. Social constructions or categories of identity are not always chosen by the individual. Oftentimes, the list of racial, ethnic, and class categories they can align themselves with is already set for them. For instance, I discuss those born in the United States to Mexican immigrants as Mexican Americans. This
identification is based on common conceptions of identity being related to place and parental origin. How participants actually identify themselves varies, but their identities are reflections of where they have lived, how they have been raised, and where they consider home to be.

Transnational borderlands are also influenced by and produce class practices. Second generation Mexican Americans occupy all class statuses. While the struggles of the working class are very important and much research has focused on both immigrants and working class Mexican Americans, this original research focuses on the middle class second generation, a group which comparatively little research has addressed. Most people discuss class in terms of class status with education, occupation, and income being the three primary determining factors for location on a hierarchy of categories from low to high (Agius and Lee 2005). Questions such as, how much do you make, what is your highest degree obtained, and what do you do for a living, are all questions geared to assess class status.

Speaking of class only in terms of status makes class seem as though it is a fixed category with a list of unchanging traits. Liechty explains how viewing class as a cultural practice avoids this oversimplification.

Class is real, but its reality is something that never exists outside of its continuous production and reproduction in cultural practice... Thinking of class in terms of ‘project,’ ‘performance,’ and ‘practice’ highlights the fact that class is a cultural process—active, fluid, contested, in-the-making—not a timeless, objectlike, social category. [2003:255]

Instead of looking at class status, Liechty (2003) focuses on the tangible yet fluid nature of class culture. Class culture is not a fixed measurement. While it is
determined by available resources, it is also based upon shared cultural practices (Liechty 2003).

Middle class cultural practices vary but these practices are “fundamentally, inescapably, about the tension of perpetually negotiating betweenness” (Liechty 2003:252). This “betweenness” is referring to the borderland between the lower and the upper class. In other words, individuals experience middle class culture through shared practices that express a location between perceptions of “lower” and “upper” class. Furthermore, these practices are observable and create contexts for identity negotiations. This thesis focuses on the observable middle class practice of consuming both education and travel. These practices are common to most participants; they are expressions of self and identity among members of middle class Mexican Americans, as well as the middle class more broadly.

Overall, this thesis looks at the borders that occur at the intersections between class practices, transnational experiences, and ethnic identities. One cannot look at ethnic identity without taking class and transnational experiences into consideration, nor can one look at class practices without viewing the influences of transnational relationships and ethnic identity. The extent to which these factors are related can be seen through many activities; for instance, having the middle class privilege to pursue higher education sets participants apart from others without such resources. While people of all class positions may attend university or college, participants experienced a general cultural attitude within their families that encouraged their pursuit and were provided financial
assistance when available. In some cases, participants’ middle class privileges and experiences led to distinctions between themselves and lower/working class Mexican Americans who, often depending upon circumstances, are not able to obtain higher education and who are often looked down upon.

Many scholars have studied Mexican Americans and second generation Mexican Americans. Sociologists have focused on theories of segmented assimilation (Fernandez et al. 1996; Portes and Rumbaut 2005) and selective acculturation (Portes and Rumbaut 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993) to explain why children born to Mexican immigrant parents in the United States do not just consider themselves American. Their theories are based on the idea that people want to assimilate to “American culture” and are unable to do so due not only due to racism but also a lack of economic and social resources (Fernandez et al. 1996; Portes and Rumbaut 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993). While these factors do exist for many working class immigrants, not enough research has been done on those with economic and social resources like the second generation middle class Mexican Americans in this study.

Anthropologists have conducted numerous studies on Mexican immigrants (Alvarez 1995; Boehm 2000; Rouse 2002; Stephen 2007) and working class Mexican Americans (Garcia 2004). Those who have looked at Mexicans and Mexican Americans through a transnational lens have mainly focused on issues other than class, such as transnational networks (Alvarez 1995; Boehm 2004; Rouse 2002; Smith 2002; Stephen 2007) and gendered migration (Boehm 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Viruell-Fuentes 2006). Cross-generational immigration
between home communities in Mexico and the United States has also been a topic of examination (Richard Mines quoted in Alvarez 1995: 457).

Many researchers look at transnational relationships, the second generation, and upward mobility, yet do not look at how all of these factors intersect. For example, researchers like Roger Rouse (2002), who was interested in the lasting effects of parental transnational relationships on their children, failed to directly address the connections that are made and maintained by those born to Mexican immigrant parents in the United States. Robert Smith’s (2002) study on an international youth group addressed the lack of focus on the transnational ties of U.S. born children of Mexican immigrants. His study, however, did not evaluate how the upward mobility of his second generation participants affected their transnational connections or their identities.

The attention anthropologists have paid to lower/working class (im)migrants, gendered migration, and transnational social networks is not because anthropologists are ignoring the middle class but because there are many serious issues impacting the lower/working class—immigration reform, workers rights, poverty, and discrimination—that need attention. For instance, in 2007, 20.8 percent of Mexicans, compared to 11.9 percent of the U.S. population, were living in poverty (Pew Hispanic Center 2009). With that stated, it is still important to understand how middle class and transnational social practices influence and are influenced by ethnic identities. A study in understanding middle class experiences is, in and of itself, a contribution to the literature within the broad and diverse fields of sociology and anthropology.
Furthermore, by focusing this research on the experiences of the second generation and how their middle class practices, ethnic identities, and transnational social networks intersect and create flexible bordered identities, this research will contribute to other gaps in the research on Mexican Americans in general.

The research for this thesis relies heavily on the premises of practice theory (Liechty; 2003; Ong 1999; Ortner 1998) to analyze qualitative data collected from interviews, social network exercises and participant-observation. Practice theory studies human behaviors and analyzes these behaviors in order to understand events or processes that are involved in maintaining or challenging “some set of structural features” (Ortner 1984:149). Therefore, practice theory lends itself to a study of class practices, ethnic identities, and transnational social networks because these are areas that cannot be questioned directly and understood fully by simple answers on a Likert scale or typical survey. Rather, interviews were transcribed, participant-observation noted, and social networks gathered and analyzed through a social practice lens to extract meaning and actual instances of class practice, ethnic identity assertion, and transnational activities.

In this study, there were ten volunteer participants, three male and seven female, all between the ages of 22 and 37. Due to limited records on this specific group (second generation middle class Mexican Americans), participants were selected through convenience/snowball sampling. Through previously established connections with university students and a group of friends who were
willing to solicit their co-workers, I recruited participants through referrals. This method expanded my sample in a short time frame. Even though it is not a random sample, selecting participants from these two groups (university/college students and professionals\(^3\)) minimized the risk of specifically letting participants know the research was also about class. A shortcoming of using a convenience/snowball sample is that the findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond the participants. The findings can, however, be a starting point for further exploration.

Once participants agreed to meet with me, I recorded an initial open interview and social network exercise with them. I started each interview with the same list of topic questions (see Appendix 1 for the complete question list). About halfway through the interviews, which usually lasted around two hours, I asked participants to complete a social network exercise. This exercise in general had participants list people who are close to them, specifics about their relationship with that person, and where that person lives (see Appendix 2 for the social network format used during the interviews).

After the interview and social network exercise were completed, I asked participants if they were willing to let me “hang out” (conduct participant-observation) with them for a few hours. Eight of the ten participants allowed me to go along with them while they did a number of different activities. I spent around six hours with each of the eight participants. Participant-observation included visiting them at their homes, attending birthday parties, and meeting

\(^3\) While being a professional or a college/university student does not automatically indicate middle class status, it is a middle class practice.
their families. Other situations arose where I went shopping at the mall, spent a day at their work, and went to a bar to meet with friends. These hours of participant-observation allowed me to view and experience class culture and identity negotiations in different contexts.

In addition to over 6 hours of participant-observation in Las Vegas, I spent two weeks with Coral (whose name, like all the other participants, has been changed to protect her identity) as she made her annual holiday trip with her mother to visit family in Mexico. While in Mexico, I conducted participant-observation and mapped a family tree including the location of each family member. I found that throughout her family there were units (composed of a mother and father, their children, and their grandchildren) and individuals living in both the United States and Mexico making her entire family part of a transnational social network. This part of the research was a great opportunity to see how transnational ties affect the participant’s family members. Furthermore, these interactions and observations showed me how Coral feels about her identity and her sense of belonging when she is in Mexico.

As the opening of this introduction stated, second generation Mexican Americans have bordered identities that are constantly shifting. When starting this research, I did not fully understand how complex participants’ identities were and how important their middle class practices were in forming these identities. The following chapters are organized to peel back the layers of bordered identity in order to answer the following questions: (1) What are the middle class practices of second generation Mexican Americans in Las Vegas, Nevada? (2)
What are their transnational ties and who is in their social networks? (3) How do middle class practices and transnational ties and social networks influence identities? The first chapter discusses the setting for the study in Las Vegas, Nevada, an area that has traditionally been open to economic advancement for Mexican immigrants. The second chapter discusses the class practices of middle class Mexican Americans and how these practices affect bordered identities. Chapter three shows how transnational ties and social networks create contexts for bordered identities. The final chapter explains the complex ethnic identities of the participants and how these identities are constantly being negotiated.
CHAPTER 2

WHY LAS VEGAS?

With a prosperous working class environment unparalleled in Mexico or other parts of the United States, Las Vegas is a unique location for Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans to gain upward mobility. The majority of participants moved into Las Vegas for economic or educational opportunities or to be near family who had already established themselves in Las Vegas. This chapter will further discuss how and why participants and some of their families came to live in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Mexico

![Map of States in Mexico (Burton 2009)](image)

Figure 1. Map of States in Mexico (Burton 2009)
Participants’ movement into the Las Vegas Valley starts with their parents’ migration stories. Participants’ parents moved to the United States from many different areas in Mexico (Figure 1), three were from Nayarit, two from Durango, two from Jalisco, and one from each of the following states: Aguascalientes, Michoacán, Oaxaca, Puebla, Mexico City, Sinaloa, Zacatecas, and Chihuahua. Even though they were from different regions, they moved to the United States for similar reasons.

Many members of participants’ families moved to the United States for economic opportunities not available to them in Mexico. These reasons included saving money to build a home in Mexico, working to send money back to Mexico, and moving to the United States for more economic opportunities. Others came to the United States because of family, for instance, assisting male relatives with housekeeping, being asked to join relatives in the United States, and a desire to be near family. Even though each individual had their own reasons for moving to the United States, in general decisions to move were based on economic advancement and family relationships.

While at first, most families migrated to California (70%), many participant families and a few participants by themselves now reside in Las Vegas. Three individuals moved to Las Vegas to attend college. Others moved with their families mainly for work or to be near extended family or close family friends. For example, Coral’s family moved to Las Vegas because a close family friend owned an apartment building in a nice area. This family connection made moving to Las Vegas easier for her family financially. These friends also provided
valuable insight into living in Las Vegas. Adelia’s family moved to Las Vegas because of her father’s employment. She explained, “We moved here when [a] department at UNLV opened up. [My father] was one of the founding professors here.” As these selected quotes illustrate, the reasons to move to Las Vegas are similar to the reasons to move into the United States—economic opportunity and family ties.

Las Vegas, Nevada

![Figure 2. Sign that welcomes visitors to Las Vegas, NV](image)

Often referred to as Sin City, Las Vegas has over half a million residents in a sprawling urban valley surrounded by Mojave Desert mountains. The Las Vegas strip, one of the most visited tourist areas in the United States, makes up a small fraction of what is referred to as the Las Vegas Valley, which includes
North Las Vegas, Henderson, Paradise, and others (Figure 3). In 2008, the Las Vegas Valley accounted for 96 percent of Clark County’s estimated population.
With a total population of almost 2 million, Clark County is the most populous county in Nevada (U.S. Census Bureau ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates). Suburban areas with grocery stores, strip malls, chain restaurants, and mega stores like Wal-mart spread from one end of the valley to the other.

Las Vegas’ population is diverse. In 2005, Las Vegas was 58 percent White; 24 percent Hispanic or Latino; 10 percent African-American; 8 percent Other (City of Las Vegas N.d.). Despite the recession and decreasing job opportunities in the Las Vegas Valley and Clark County, the Clark County population estimate projected a 1.5 percent increase in Hispanic or Latino self-identified persons between 2007 and 2008 (Clark County 2007, 2008). It is expected in the 2010 U.S. Census that the number of Hispanic or Latino self-identified residents will continue to increase. However, it is important to note that census data may be conservative, since it does not represent those who have moved to Las Vegas without documentation.

In recent years, Las Vegas has been a desirable destination for many Mexican immigrants. The booming economy and increasing residential growth in the past decades has been able to support the influx of many laborers, particularly blue-collar workers. In the 1990s, approximately six thousand people were moving into the Las Vegas Valley monthly (Land and Land 2004). In fact, one of Las Vegas’ unique appeals was that low skilled service workers were able to earn high wages. These higher incomes allowed them to own homes they could not afford in other areas of the country. Additionally, these workers could
use this excess income to invest in retirement funds and afford college educations for their children (Land and Land 2004).

In a 1999 study of satisfaction with overall quality of life in Las Vegas, Hispanics ranked the most satisfied followed by Whites and African Americans (City of Las Vegas 1999). Until recently, Mexicans in Las Vegas raised their American born children in an economically prosperous context,\(^4\) which allowed for the possibility of upward mobility not often found in other locations in the United States (Land and Land 2004). Some of the participants in this study had parents who took advantage of the higher income for low skilled jobs. For example, in 1998, Filiberto’s father was one of many construction workers who moved to Las Vegas. He explained, “My dad is a tile worker and work pretty much dried up out in southern California but there’s always construction here.”

Historically, Las Vegas has been an area open to advancement for Mexican immigrants and their children. For example, the top five industries for Hispanic employment are: 1) educational, health and social services; 2) arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodations, and food services; 3) construction; 4) retail trade; 5) professional, scientific, management, and waste management services many of which are heavily concentrated in Las Vegas (Pew Hispanic Center 2010b). As stated above, many of the participants or their families work in these industries, especially in casinos, hotels, and construction/landscaping. For

\(^4\) The lower class generalization is challenged in Las Vegas, Nevada where 80 percent of the Mexican population is above the poverty line and five percent have a college education (U.S. Census Bureau 2000a, 2000b).
example, Cina, moved to Las Vegas from California in 2003. She describes how she ended up in the hotel industry,

Right now I am working as the housekeeping executive manager assistant. This is the first time that I've worked in the hotel industry. Before, I used to do real estate. And of course the market’s not good right now, so that’s why I changed to another, you know, another way.

Las Vegas provides employment opportunities that are not available elsewhere. When Cina could not work in real estate, she could get work in Las Vegas at one of the many hotels. While Cina was unable to work in the type of employment she had imagined without prior experience, she still found a good paying job. She and her husband, who is a manager at the local waste management company, have achieved what they refer to as “middle class” status. They already own two homes; one they rent, and the other they live in. They also drive new cars, take multiple vacations a year, and send their two children to daycare.

Unlike Cina, who moved to Las Vegas recently and for employment opportunities, Natalie’s parents moved directly from Mexico to Las Vegas in 1970 to be near the only family they had in the United States. After only seven years of her father working as a landscaper in Las Vegas, her family was financially secure and able to participate in middle class practices. For example, Natalie’s father owned his home in North Las Vegas in 1977. Since then, her parents have purchased a total of four homes. They started with their initial home, upgraded and used the older home as a rental and continued with that process. Right now, they own the home they are living in and a second home they use as a rental. With her father’s landscaping wages, they were also able to hire tutors for their three children and send them to private school for a number of years. This type
of economic power is not something usually associated with people who are in landscaping.

Cina and Natalie’s family experienced upward mobility through work in jobs typically viewed as working class. While their stories are personal, these types of stories are not uncommon among participants. At the time of my research, eight out of ten participants were working and four out of ten were in college (Table 1). They worked in a variety of fields: two different universities, a major shipping company, a day care, a home owners’ association, a large hotel chain, an international bank, and an elite automotive retailer. Not only did they work in diverse fields, they all had higher education in different areas ranging from automotive and beauty school to Bachelor and Master’s degrees.

Each of my participants has their own story about how they came to live in Las Vegas. Many have parents who moved to the United States for economic advancement or family relationships. These are some of the same reasons participants who were not born in Las Vegas came to live there. Despite the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Enrolled in School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adelie</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coral</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filiberto</td>
<td>Day Care Provider</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Graduate Assistant</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cina</td>
<td>Housekeeping Manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Collections Manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>Warehouse Clerk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>University Professor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Scheduling Department</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
current economic downturn, Las Vegas has provided a wealth of job
opportunities in many of the top industries for Hispanic employment. Many of
these jobs are seen as blue-collar, but, in Las Vegas, provide wages that allow
participants and their families to engage in middle class practices. The following
chapter will discuss participants’ middle class practices and how these practices
influence participants' bordered identities.
CHAPTER 3
MIDDLE CLASS PRIVILEGE

Class is a touchy subject in the United States. Americans rarely talk about society, themselves, or others in terms of class. Instead, they discuss class in covert ways by hiding class within other categories of difference, gender, race, and ethnicity are just a few examples (Ortner 1991). For Mexican Americans race or ethnicity often trumps class in American discourse. As I will further explain, Mexican Americans are automatically associated with being lower/working class, placing those who identify as middle class in a precarious situation. They have the opportunity to challenge these stereotypes while at the same time they are subject to discrimination.

Oftentimes, people refer to themselves as middle class because the middle class is simply in the middle and is a socially neutral category. For instance, identifying as upper class may be seen as egotistical whereas identifying as lower class may be seen as pitiable. A good example of this idea is when someone told me the middle class are “the people who are not on welfare but do not own Lamborghini.” Due to the arbitrary nature of defining class position, for this thesis, I generally defined participants as middle class if they were professionals and/or college students. I did not ask participants for their class status directly because it is a taboo subject in American discourse and most people will identify as being in the middle regardless of where they feel they actually fit (Ortner 1998). Therefore, rather than focus on subjective categories of
class position, this thesis focuses on class culture and how it contributes to participants’ bordered identities.

Class culture is defined by the joint practices in which people of different class positions engage. Liechty (2003), who understands the complexity of pinpointing class position, simply defines the middle class as the class of consumers. Everyone consumes goods and services but access to certain buying practices depends on the ability to finance those purchases through jobs, credit or loans. So even though lower, middle and upper class people all consume, how and what they consume will be different from those in other economic and cultural positions. These buying practices will show patterns, which Prince refers to as “patterns of consumption” (2004:35). Class practices and patterns of consumption are instrumental in understanding class culture. Bourdieu further explains how everyday items like clothing or flooring choices can indicate both a group’s economic and cultural taste,

If a group’s whole life-style can be read off from the style it adopts in furnishing or clothing, this is not only because these properties are the objectification of the economic and cultural necessity which determined their selection, but also because the social relations objectified in familiar objects, in their luxury or poverty, their ‘distinction’ or ‘vulgarity’, their ‘beauty’ or ‘ugliness’, impresses themselves through bodily experiences which may be profoundly unconscious as the quiet caress of beige carpets or the thin clamminess of tattered, garish linoleum, the harsh smell of bleach or perfumes as imperceptible as a negative scent. [1984: 77]

While not seen as everyday choices, two common and very important class and cultural practices among participants were higher education and travel. This chapter will focus on the middle class practice of consuming education—which results in an accumulation of class capital—and how these practices shed
light on classed borders in participants’ lives, while the practice of traveling to and from Mexico will be discussed in the following chapter on transnationalism.

Obtaining higher education is an important middle class practice and method to obtain middle class capital. It is a vehicle for obtaining the jobs that provide the financing for middle class consumption (Prince 2004) while at the same time being a product to be consumed by the established middle class. Once participants’ parents, like many other Mexican families, moved to the United States, they saw their children’s education as a catalyst to success in the United States. The majority of the time, middle class parents helped pay for their children’s higher education. Those participants without financial help from their parents paid for their education through hard work and their native born access to scholarships, federal loans, and grants. Citizenship status helped those participants whose families could not help them pay for school. Their privileged position as citizens also set participants apart from other Mexican students who did not have the opportunity to get scholarships, loans, and grants because they lacked sufficient documentation. Furthermore, since all participants received some form of higher education, they were all placed in positions where they did not fit the presumption that Mexicans are all working/lower class.

Mexican is Lower/Working Class

Why do Mexicans make tamales for Christmas?
That’s the only thing they have to unwrap.
(Rosa recalls a joke she heard in high school)
Unfortunately, middle and upper class Mexican Americans are invisible to many in the United States because Mexican Americans are often seen as lower/working class as well as burdens on social services and resistant to becoming “American.” Vila refers to this view as the ‘All poverty is Mexican narrative’ …such a narrative can range from the denial of poverty on the American side of the border to the recognition that poverty still exists but assigning it to the presence of Mexican immigrants or to the Mexican Americans, who supposedly still have not overcome cultural deficiencies that they or their forbearers are thought to have brought with them from the Mexico (deficiencies that, in one way or another, are considered the cause of poverty in Mexico). [2005:171]

Ortner reiterates Vila’s concept in broader terms when she explains:

Because hegemonic American culture takes both the ideology of mobility and the ideology of individualism seriously, explanations for nonmobility not only focus on the failure of individuals (because they are said to be inherently lazy or stupid or whatever), but shift the domain of discourse to arenas that are taken to be “locked into” individuals—gender, race, ethnic origin, and so forth. [1991:171]

Vila and Ortner’s theories both explain that the perception of Mexicans as a lower class group affects the way many people view Mexican Americans. As such, the participants in this study are not often seen as individuals in middle class positions; rather they are viewed as Mexican and are therefore automatically assumed to be lower/working class. According to hegemonic American culture, participants, as individuals, are to make their own way and be judged by their own actions. Yet Mexican Americans continue to be defined in dominant discourse by their ethnicity or race, which is used to explain why Mexican Americans are, as a group, lower class. The inability to remove race and ethnicity from the discussion of class has made it possible for the continuance of the narrative that “all poverty is Mexican.”
Furthermore, there is a long history which helped construct and perpetuate the idea that all Mexicans are lower/working class. After the Mexican American War ended in 1848, Mexicans in the territory seized by the United States were made U.S. citizens (Miranda 1997; Rosales 1997). “Nineteenth-century Mexicans were largely conceived of as debased because of their intermarriage with indigenous people. They were likewise strongly associated with the enslaved black population” (Rosas 2007: 85). Therefore, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were oppressed by racist and prejudiced restrictions until the 1960s Chicano Civil Rights Movement (El Movimiento). The Chicano Civil Rights Movement finally forced the overturning of many restrictions that had kept Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the lowest class (Miranda 1997; Rosales 1997).

Prior to the overturning of restrictions that impeded class mobility, all poverty was in fact Mexican. Furthermore, it was not that Mexican American parents did not value gateways to upward mobility, like education; they were discouraged from attending school themselves and from encouraging their own children to attend because of institutionalized racism (Miranda 1997; Rosales 1997). Generation after generation of Mexican Americans experienced barriers to upward mobility throughout the United States.

The history of oppression and the freedoms provided by the Chicano Movement are often ignored or forgotten. A lack of reflection on the past allows people to follow the views of hegemonic American culture, which blames Mexicans as a group for their lack of class mobility. Without a historical context, it
is also much easier for people to believe the narrative that “all poverty is
Mexican” because somehow or someway Mexican culture is inherently deficient.

The relationship between class position, an individual’s ethnic or racial
origin, and a lack of historical context are expressed in all types of venues. It is in
these venues that participants’ bordered identities are negotiated. Jasmine
recalls around the time of the May 2006 immigration reform marches:

Some ignorant man was on the radio. I was so offended by the things that
he was saying. He was saying that these Mexicans they just come over
here and they use our welfare system and they don’t do anything because
all they do is they sell drugs and they steal. That really offended me
because I know that my dad brought my family over here because he
wanted to give them a better life. Over there, in the part of Mexico where
they live, it was a really rural area where you live off your land and that’s
your life. I’m sure that my dad had ultimate goals for us. Whereas, some
people, who do come over here..., they come out here to work and send
money back home so that they can move back home and live off their
land. I don’t think my dad ever had that dream for us. It seemed like we
migrated and we’re here to stay and we’re not planning on moving back.
So that really made me upset hearing that on the radio. I was so mad. I
was like, where the heck does this guy get off saying these things? I lived
first-hand that not every single Mexican over here does drugs. Like, my
family is a very predominant family in our neighborhood. My two uncles
own a restaurant which is very popular where we live. My other two uncles
own another restaurant in the same town. It’s also very popular. So we’re
big pillars in our community. That just goes to show typical “oh they just
come and feed off the system”, we never collected welfare.

Jasmine’s family owns their own businesses, and they do not consider
themselves lower/working class. She resents the fact that she and her family are
lumped into one group with some who do not share the same goals, values, or
practices and others who do not have the ability to achieve the same goals or
engage in the same practices. She does not deny that some Mexicans do the
things that they are being criticized for, such as coming into the United States
undocumented, collecting welfare, and using drugs. She is just angry that people
are using these examples to generalize about all Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Her perceived difference goes beyond separating herself from lower/working class Mexicans and Mexican Americans to resisting being associated with more generalized negative perceptions imposed upon her by her status as a Mexican born in the United States.

Jasmine’s feelings are not unique. During my interview with Rosa, she explained how she is often mistaken for being undocumented even though she was born in the United States. “I consider myself Mexican and I mean a lot of people ask are you an illegal and I think that’s the number one question: do you have a green card or things like that.” Rosa is often annoyed with questions about her citizenship status. Since people continue to make generalizations about Mexicans and Mexican Americans with little regard to the variation within these groups, Rosa and Jasmine, among others, are subjected to negative generalizations.

Second generation Mexican Americans are constantly faced with the assumption that they are low income, undocumented burdens on social systems. Just because there is some truth to the statement that many Mexicans living in the United States are working class individuals (Pew Hispanic Center 2010b), it does not justify labeling all Mexicans and Mexican Americans as such because of their race or ethnicity, let alone labeling them as illegal burdens on social services. As Ortner (1991) explained, hegemonic American culture has “locked” perceptions of nonmobility and failure into race and ethnic origin, therefore, the individual is often overlooked. Those who do have documentation as well as
economic and family resources, like the participants in this study, have the ability to challenge these stereotypes.

Education as a Middle Class Practice

All of my participants have received some degree of higher education or are currently attending college. For many, their families have helped or are helping them pay for it. Although, it is sometimes the participants themselves who, once they are on their feet as adults, are able to put themselves through college (Table 2). Whether they have assistance from their parents or not, obtaining higher education is seen in the United States as a marker of middle class status and is a part of middle class culture. A college education is especially prestigious in the United States for Mexican Americans, with only 9 percent of Mexicans in America age 25 or older obtaining at least a bachelor’s degree (Pew Hispanic Center 2010a).

Table 2. Participant’s Higher Education and Financing Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Yrs.</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Grant/Scholarship</th>
<th>Loans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cina</td>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adelia</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>College &amp; University</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coral</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filiberto</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regardless of how many years of education an individual’s parents had, prioritizing education was a common theme in participants’ childhoods. Education levels for parents ranged from 0 to 22 years, averaging out at 9 years or the equivalent of a ninth grade education for both mothers and fathers (Table 3). Adelia, whose father went to school for a total of 22 years, explains “education is a huge, huge, big factor in our house. It’s always been, ‘we won’t’ accept anything less than you making education a huge part of your life.’” Another participant, Coral, recalls what her dad, who has a 6th grade education, tells her and her younger sister: “I never got to go to school; so, I’m helping you now and we have all this working for you guys, so take advantage of it.” Even though Adelia and Coral’s fathers had different educational experiences, their families both felt the same way about school: it was a priority and they expected nothing less than their children to make it a priority as well.

Two participants shared details about their experiences dealing with the false impression that all Mexican immigrant parents discourage their children

Table 3. Total Years of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years.</th>
<th>Mother’s Years</th>
<th>Father’s Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cina</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adelia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coral</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filiberto</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
from going to school. As can be seen from participants’ education levels in Table 3, this is a common misperception for the people in this study. While some children of immigrants end up in situations where they must forgo higher education to assist the family, others, whose families have the means to provide for them or when they have the means to provide for themselves, make education a priority. Rosa and Filiberto’s parents could help them with school expenses and encouraged them to achieve higher levels of education. Their stories show how they were exposed to this negative perception in very different contexts. First, Rosa shares how she saw the stereotype in action through the life of her high school friend. Secondly, Filiberto explains how he was faced with the stereotype when he heard his college professor speak of it as truth in one of his courses.

I had a friend; we were in high school together, all four years. She hardly ever went to school and she would get bad grades. One time we got our report card, I remember she came to my house. My mom asked [me], “Where’s your report card? You were supposed to get your report card today.” My parents were very active in our education. “You were supposed to get your report card today.” “Oh yeah, I got it.” I show it to her. “Oh, you got a C. Why did you get a C?” C’s were never good for my mom or my dad. It always needed to be an A. A or B if I had to. They were very strict with our education. Then, I remember my friend, she’s like, “I wish I had a mom like yours. My mom never asks us about school. She never asks us about grades or nothing. I wish I could just have a mom like yours.” And sure enough, she didn’t graduate from high school because her mom just didn’t enforce her to do good in school so she gave up and went to work and helped her mom. She went straight to the statistic: young and pregnant with a kid. I think the average girl that gets pregnant, at a young age, a Mexican girl, is to not go to work because she was 15 when she had her first son. She had dropped out of school and her mom told her “you need to work.” So, she figured if she got pregnant, she wouldn’t have to work.
Rosa got to see the stereotype in action. Her friend did exactly what second generation Mexican Americans and their parents are criticized for. She dropped out of school, got a job, and had a baby at a young age. Rosa’s friend in this example was not the only one she witnessed taking this path; many more of her peers took the same route. While Rosa’s story is a good example of how some families fit negative perceptions, it is also an example of how class practices, like education, place participants in situations that challenge their identities as middle class and Mexican and thus help shape bordered identities.

It is unclear what the circumstances were that led Rosa’s friend to drop out of high school because it is missing from the story. It is possible that her friend wanted to continue high school, but could not due to economic circumstances. What I do know is that this girl’s mother worked picking fruits and vegetables, while Rosa’s family grafted trees and worked in the greenhouse where they made more money. Rosa’s family advised her not to work and just to focus on school. She followed their advice and did not get her first job until after she completed two years of community college and moved to Las Vegas to go to university. Rosa grew up in a privileged position compared to her friends and she saw what a difference this made for her.

Filiberto’s story is different. He was confronted by negative perceptions of Mexicans and education in an academic setting when he was already in college. According to Filiberto, the following incident is one of the only situations where he has ever felt ethnically offended.

Once, actually [at a university] in a Chicano studies class, they were talking about how second generation kids don’t go to college because
their parents don’t value education and these are people that only care about manual labor and they don’t have that ambition. I just started chewing out everyone in the class. It got to the point where the professor had to stop and be like, “ok well, we’re sorry. We shouldn’t say that. It is a blanket statement.” I was just like, “you can say whatever you want about me, but saying your parents are ignorant…” What do they know about it? That set me off. It was like, how dare you?

It is obvious that the perception of immigrants being ignorant and discouraging their kids from attending school upset Filiberto. Later in the interview he explained:

My parents never said, oh you need to get a job. They stressed that school was way more important. Like, right now, my sister works with me…but her grades slipped from As to Bs and they made her stop working until her grades got better… So they’re way more concerned that we’re going to school.

Both Rosa and Filiberto’s parents encouraged them to put school before work. Their parents could afford to forgo economic contributions from their children. Rosa and Filiberto’s ability to focus on education put them in a privileged position compared to those who had to work in high school like Rosa’s friend and most of the other kids in her high school with families in similar situations. This is not to say that people must have parental support to make it into higher education, just that it makes things much easier when they do.

Participants realize how their class privilege sets them apart in some ways from many other Mexicans and Mexican Americans. These differences reflect upon their bordered identities. While they may share the identity of Mexican American with many others, their class privileges places them in a position of difference.
Finances are Key

Being able to support their children’s efforts to obtain higher education is a practice afforded to the middle class. Not only do participants’ parents make education a priority, they help them pay for it as well. For example, throughout her life, Natalie’s family put time and money into her education. When she was about to enter 6th grade, the school district in Las Vegas put 6th grade in a school by itself. So she could attend an elementary with a 6th grade in it, her parents drove her to and from her aunt’s house in North Las Vegas. Her parents paid for her to attend a private school for 7-10th grade because, at that time, they thought the education standards in Las Vegas public schools were failing. They even hired a tutor when she had problems with her classes. Finally, they paid for her bachelor’s degree. She did work throughout high school and college to pay for some of her miscellaneous expenses, like going to the movies or hair products, but working was never enforced nor a necessity.

Coral on the other hand has never worked. Rather her parents have paid for all of her activities, a car, and schooling. They paid for her to attend a private elementary, helped her get to and from a magnet high school, and assisted with paying for her bachelor’s degree.

I had FAFSA\(^5\) [federal student aid] and I did the whole Millennium scholarship\(^6\) thing. That’s how the first two years I had to pay for nothing.

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\(^5\) Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is commonly used to determine eligibility for grants and other types of financial aid.

\(^6\) The Millennium scholarship provides up to $80 per credit hour for undergraduate studies and is offered to Nevada high school graduates with a 3.25 GPA. Recipients must maintain a 2.75 GPA and enroll in a minimum number of credits at an eligible institution. For more information go to: https://nevadatreasurer.gov/documents/millennium/Doc-FactSheet.pdf
bought my laptop. I bought an iPod. I needed the laptop. The iPod is just kind of a splurge. Recently, we didn’t qualify for FAFSA anymore because they [my parents] started earning more money. I only had Millennium. It didn’t really matter because my dad helped me. So it really wasn’t such a big deal.

Coral was able to attend college without worrying about finances. She recently graduated with a bachelor’s degree in a social science program with honors from the McNair$^7$ program. Now, she lives at home and has applied to Master’s programs. She is looking for her first job but is unconcerned with how she will pay for graduate school. She explained that it will all work out. Her optimism can be attributed to her parent’s ability to help her, if she is not awarded funding.

Sometimes, even with all the parental support, participants did not make it all the way through school. Rosa decided to work while in college after she had seen what her parents went through to help her and her siblings go to college. She explains how they sacrificed,

My dad told us, whoever goes to college, gets a car. My brother went to college and he got a new car and I got the truck, a little Ford Ranger. Then, when I moved to a university in Las Vegas, he bought me a car. Now, he drives the little Ranger…My parents didn’t want us to work. They said, let us suffer and figure out how to pay for your education and then, when you’re done with school, you can go work, do whatever you want to do.

Seeing what pressure these values put on her parents resources, Rosa decided to pay for the remainder of her education herself. This way her parents, who helped her pay for her first two years of community college, could help her younger sister, who had just started school.

$^7$ McNair Scholars must maintain a 3.0 GPA, have completed 59 credits, and qualify as a low-income and a first-generation college student or as a member of a group underrepresented in graduate education.
I’d seen my parents, how hard it was for them to pay for both me and my sister’s educations. I told my parents, as soon as I get a job, I’ll start paying for it. So that’s when I started working. I got a job and it was just, it was too much. I was working two jobs, two full-time jobs and going to school full-time… It was hard. I remember the stress was amazing. Sometimes I wouldn’t sleep. Sometimes I’d get three hours of sleep, all just to go to school.

She made it through two years at the university before dropping out. She is financially stable in her job and has no immediate plans for returning to school. While Rosa is no longer in college, her years of schooling and her professional employment status keep her in a middle class position. She has and does engage in middle class Mexican American cultural practices through her previous consumption of education and, as I will discuss later, her travel to and from Mexico.

There Is Always a Way

While most participants’ parents were openly supportive of school, Jasmine’s father, who had an 8th grade education, was skeptical of school. “He was always very discriminatory about school in general …but then at the same time when we did well he would be like, ‘oh my child does so well at school.’” Like Rosa, Jasmine went to two years of community college then transferred to a university in Las Vegas where she was a full-time student and worked full-time. She dropped out because she could not handle working and going to school full-time. Even though she does well in her current job, her goal is to go back to school to get a liberal arts degree.

George’s parents did not have the finances to help him with school. He has paid for his two undergraduate degrees through student loans and work. He
is currently a master’s student and is paying for school by taking out additional student loans and working as a graduate assistant. Paying for his degrees has not changed his motivation for higher education. He needs a master’s degree to own the type of business he wants to run, but he also wants to make his parents proud. “I want to be the one that goes to college and gets my college degree and all that kind of stuff. I put it on myself. My parents, my dad came out here for us. My mom was out here. I kind of want to make her proud.”

Cina’s parents were very supportive of her schooling but their finances and her U.S. citizenship got in the way of higher education in Mexico. Cina was born in the United States; however, her family went back to Mexico to live. In Mexico, her parents sent her to a private school from kindergarten until high school when they started having money problems. When she applied for college in Mexico, where she was raised, the university rejected her application because she was not a Mexican national. At that time, her parents could not afford to send her to a private university. She explains, “That’s why pretty much I decide to move here because I didn’t, I wasn’t going to have opportunities over there so I realized that it was going to be better for me here.” She and her husband moved to California where she went to college to study English as a second language and to get her real estate license. Cina, like Jasmine and George, figured out a way to achieve her goals.

Each participant has had different experiences ranging from their parents supporting them entirely to having to work to pay for school. What they do share is some level of higher education which influences their bordered identities by
setting them apart from other working class Mexican Americans who do not. Mexicans are in the minority when it comes to representation in higher education. This fact compounds the difference between participants and less educated Mexican Americans despite the circumstances that may prevent many Mexicans from obtaining higher education. For example, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, in 2008, “nine percent of Mexicans ages 25 and older—compared with 12.9% of all U.S. Hispanics—have obtained at least a bachelor’s degree” (2010a), placing Mexicans as the lowest in higher education out of all Latinos.

Class and Bordered Identities

While class is not often considered an identity in itself, as explained earlier by its automatic incorporation into other categories of difference like race, ethnicity, gender, etc., it is a gray area, a borderland where identity negotiations for second generation middle class Mexican Americans take place. Being that race or ethnicity trumps class in American society, middle class or upwardly mobile Mexican Americans, once noticed as more than lower/working class, are seen by many as having “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.” They are viewed as Mexican success stories and examples that with hard work (learning English, finishing school, a strong work ethic, etc.) anyone can achieve the American Dream.

Nevertheless, the issue remains that many people often assume, based on their ethnic or racial identity, that participants are lower/working class. They are exposed to these assumptions on a regular basis and are faced with
decisions about whether or not to challenge these ideas. When Jasmine and Filiberto were exposed to derogatory comments about Mexicans, they decided whether or not to take a stand. Many middle class Mexican Americans are faced with decisions to act like Filiberto did when he challenged his teacher and classmates, or sit by silently like Jasmine did when she did not call to complain to the radio station for airing such discriminatory remarks. As Smith explains “… [the second generation] simultaneously fought against the image of Mexicans as powerless immigrants and against the ‘wrong path’ they saw many of their peers taking as they worked to realize some of the promise that their parents had held out for them” (2002:151). It is at these times of distancing oneself from negative perceptions and the poor choices of peers that participants’ middle class positions and ethnic identities combine to make gray areas or borderlands. It is in these the bordered spaces that the differences between us and them are evaluated and bordered identities are questioned, challenged, reinforced, reconstructed, and negotiated.

Beyond questioning oneself about whether or not to act, being located in a middle class position places participants in a position of difference. These differences illustrates how class is more than just an economic status but a culture, as Liechty (2003) described, and this class culture is not isolated but influences and is influenced by ethnic or racial identities and their meanings and corresponding cultures. While participants often identify as Mexican American, they do not fit the negative generalizations they have heard, especially the comments about lazy and uneducated Mexican Americans. Neither do they
support the actions of those who do reinforce these stereotypes through their lifestyle choices. Yet, at the same time, many participants like George, who has put himself through school and lived in cramped quarters with extended family, have experienced lower/working class life but do not see themselves or their families as lazy and uneducated. They, like George and other children of Mexican immigrants, have watched their parents work hard and struggle to make better lives for themselves and their children.

While education is only one of the many middle class practices engaged in by Mexican Americans and their families, it is of importance to this study because it affected the lives of all participants. Through their education participants have expressed their middle class positions or their class mobility. With a little over 23 percent of Hispanics age 25 or older having earned less than a ninth grade education and only 26 percent completing high school in 2008, (Pew Hispanic Center 2010b), participants’ achievements stand out. Therefore, participants with higher education sometimes feel different from other Hispanics, many whose circumstances have prevented them from going to college. Sometimes these differences can be seen when participants are placed in us versus them situations where the them are members of an ethnic group that they identify with and the us are the educated middle class. For example, Rosa watched her friend fall into the drop out and pregnant teen category, a lifestyle that her family fought hard against by enforcing her grades and “instilling success” in her. She saw the differences between the us and them first hand.
Education is not the only middle class practice in which participants and their families engage. Classed transnational practices, such as frequent travel to Mexico, are also significant practices which influence the bordered identities of middle class second generation Mexican Americans. These practices will be covered in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4

TRANSNATIONAL TIES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Having parents born in Mexico, many second generation Mexican Americans maintain family connections across borders. These family members are often the people found in the transnational social networks—networks that span more than one country—of the second generation. Interactions, through phone calls, emails, or travel, with these family members help to carry cultural practices from one place into another, while at the same time solidifying the differences between locations.

Many participants stay in contact with family in Mexico through the Internet and phone calls. Having access to the Internet is common for households in the United States; however, for the poor in Mexico, it is unlikely for them to have that service. During my trips to Mexico, I noticed there were cafes and other businesses that sold Internet access but having disposable income to keep in touch with people internationally is relatively uncommon. Despite the expense of using the Internet, almost half of my participants use the Internet to keep in touch with family in Mexico. For example, Coral’s family considers themselves upper class according to standards in Mexico and has members with access to the Internet in their homes. Coral keeps in contact with her cousins through e-mail and social networking sites, like MySpace and Facebook. Filiberto also communicates with family and friends in Mexico through e-mail and social networking sites but he also uses Skype. He explains, “I’ll also Skype people. It’s
a program you can download. It’s like voice chatting but you can buy minutes on it and call somebody like a phone and it’s a lot cheaper.”

While using the Internet to keep in touch is popular for those with access, phone calls are another major means of transnational communication for people in all class positions. While their parents are the ones usually making the calls, nine out of ten participants have phone conversations with people in Mexico. Coral, Filiberto, Luz, and Rosa have had weekly phone conversations with relatives in Mexico. Rosa explains how she kept in touch with her grandmother, “every Wednesday night my dad would call over there and we had it lined up, my mother, my brother, me, and my sister because we all had to talk to her.” Luz exclaims, “yeah my mom calls down there all the time.” Unlike the others, Cina communicates by phone daily. She uses a Nextel radio and pays only about 70 dollars a month for unlimited calling. Her friends and family must also have the Nextel radio phone and service in Mexico. The service is an additional 33 U.S. dollars a month in Mexico and they must have the radio features for the system to work. Having this system is not a problem since she described her friends and family in Mexico as upper middle class, meaning they have disposable income to spend on these services.

While the Internet and phone are the most common methods for transnational communication, the most influential and popular means of transnational connection is actually traveling to Mexico or having family from Mexico come to the United States to visit or to stay. These personal connections

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8 The one who does not maintain contact does so because of extenuating circumstances that will be elaborated upon in the following chapter.
between family members from Mexico and those born in the United States are influential in how participants identify themselves in terms of class and ethnicity. In this chapter, I will focus on the impact transnational travel has on participants’ ideas of class and will leave the discussion of its influences on ethnic identity to chapter five.

Travel: A Classed Transnational Practice

Like education discussed earlier, travel to Mexico is another somewhat universal (90 percent) middle class practice among my participants. Unlike those who travel to Mexico to vacation at resorts in popular destinations like Cancun and Cabo San Lucas, the second generation Mexican Americans in this study are mainly traveling to visit family. Vacations are secondary. From these experiences, participants make a clear distinction between tourist Mexico and “real” Mexico. Jasmine explains, “My thing is if we’re going to go [to Mexico], we’re going to go and see the real stuff.” Rosa further elaborates,

Every time people are like, “I want to go to Mexico,” I tell them, you need to go to the real Mexico. Don’t go to the little tourists spots because it’s not Mexico anymore. It caters a lot to tourism so there’s not a lot of culture. You need to go into the heart of it.

The perspective that Mexico is found outside of tourist destinations where participants go to visit family makes participants’ travel to Mexico a fairly unique marker of middle class status for Mexican Americans. As with education, participants’ travel experiences were varied but financial ability and family relations were significant factors. Over half of the participants took annual or biannual trips to Mexico to see family during school vacations while others took
trips less frequently (Table 4). Now that many participants are in college or are starting families and careers, many take less frequent trips to Mexico or have stopped traveling in general. However, others, like Filiberto and Jasmine, have increased the number of trips they take now that they are more independent from their immediate families.

Table 4. Travel to Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>In Youth</th>
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<th>Main Reason</th>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filiberto</td>
<td>&lt;once a year</td>
<td>once a year</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>&lt;once a year</td>
<td>&lt;once a year</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>once a year</td>
<td>once a year</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cina**</td>
<td>once a year</td>
<td>&gt;once a year</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz*</td>
<td>once a year</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coral*</td>
<td>twice a year</td>
<td>once a year</td>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa*</td>
<td>&gt;twice a year</td>
<td>once a year</td>
<td>Family Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>&gt;twice a year</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These participants have spent time living in Mexico as opposed to just visiting. **Cina spent her youth traveling from Mexico to the United States and adulthood traveling from the United States to Mexico.

Of the participants, I have selected to share the varied yet frequent trips of Coral, Natalie, Rosa and Luz. Coral started making regular trips when her family moved to Las Vegas. “When we were here [in Las Vegas] my dad started getting more money, so if he couldn’t go to Mexico, he would send us. So we would always go. We would go twice a year. We would go summer vacation and for winter vacation...” Natalie’s father prospered in his Las Vegas landscaping business and she explained, “My parents took us to Mexico every year. We would go for the summer and spend a month or two there. We loved it. We just couldn’t wait to go.” Rosa, like Coral and Natalie, had parents who could afford to
send her frequently. She was fortunate enough to go more often than once or
twice a year. “We lived in Mexico for three months at a time… We’d move over
for the summer and then come back. We would always go for weddings,
baptisms, quinceañeras\(^9\), and things like that, for the big party things.” Luz,
whose family was not as financially stable as the others, had a short and less
expensive trip to make to regularly visit family just on the Mexico side of the
border with Arizona. “I think it was until 9th grade summer, every summer we
would go to the Arizona border because that’s where my mom’s brother lived.
And that’s where we would always go visit.”

Cina, on the other hand, lived in Mexico and traveled to the United States
to see family. Her reasons for going were the same as the others and her family
was also wealthy enough to send her.

My parents sent us every year on vacations [to California], most of the
time it was like a month or a month and a half because I have family here
[in the United States]. I have, my mom’s sister, she lives in California. All
my cousins live here. So basically, we were the only ones living in Mexico.
So every year that we used to come to California, they were really happy
to see us and everything and for us it was fabulous vacations. For me, it
was like Disneyland. It was like, I can’t wait to go again because it was
only to have fun and come over here shopping and things like that.

A notable difference for Cina was that she was going from Mexico to the United
States, while other participants were going from the United States to Mexico.

Not much has changed now that Cina lives in Las Vegas. She continues
to take regular trips to see family in California. However, she has added annual
trips to Mexico with her husband and children.

\(^9\) Quinceañera is a party that is thrown for a girl when she turns fifteen. It is seen as the year a girl becomes a woman.
We still go [to Mexico] every year on vacations and we try to spend as much time as we can. Especially because I don’t want my kids to, you know, they live here, so I don’t want them to forget about their grandparents, and then their aunts and all my husband’s family that lives there. So right now we try to go at least once a year.

Cina and her husband own two homes in Las Vegas, and both work in management. They have the income to take frequent trips, whether it is to see family in California or family in Mexico.

Those who took less frequent trips or had to reduce their number of trips usually did so for financial reasons. George’s family had fewer resources than many participants when he was growing up. For instance, all five members of his immediate family and sometimes extended family lived in a small two room condo. Overall, he and his family only made a few trips to Mexico. He fondly remembers a summer-long trip they made when he was in second grade.

It was a whole like vacation/meet the family trip type of a deal. We went down to Baja, Jalisco, and Mexico City and stayed where we had some family. On the way back, we stopped in Chihuahua. It actually took us so long that I came back late for school. That was the biggest one that we did, the most significant one.

Similarly, Jasmine’s family could not afford many trips. They went to Mexico two years in a row, and then had to stop. “We went to Mexico for like three weeks during summer break because my grandma lives there. Then, after that, we stopped going. I guess because of a financial crunch.” Like Jasmine’s family, Coral’s family reduced their trips because of money and other circumstances. “My older sister, after she got married and she had her baby, they got divorced. She came to live with us so it only got to going once a year [to Mexico] because it got expensive. There were two more people to go with us.” Later, her sister and
niece moved back to Mexico but her mother’s job changed to where she only had
time off in the winter for their trips. So they continue to go only once a year.

Except for circumstances like changing family relations or lack of time,
most participants, if they have the financial means, have taken trips to Mexico.
Overall, the main draw has been to see family, often staying with them for
extended periods of time from weeks to months. Most participants balanced
vacation and family time. Many traveled with siblings and parents when younger,
but now travel alone or with friends, children, and spouses. This frequent contact
with Mexico has impacted their lives in numerous ways, mainly instilling a sense
of pride and a deep connection to being Mexican.

**Family from Mexico in the United States**

Further contact with Mexico occurs when family from Mexico comes to the
United States. These family members come to the United States to visit, work
seasonal jobs, have babies, attend important cultural events, and establish
themselves in the United States through their family networks. Some have come
on work visas, while others are in positions to move much more freely between
the countries because of their citizenship status, occupations, and educational
backgrounds. Nine out of ten participants have had contact with family from
Mexico in the United States. For some the contact is more frequent than for
others. The following excerpts were selected to show the different contexts of this
contact.

Jasmine and Rosa experienced frequent contact with their families from
Mexico because their parents were the gateway for employment and movement
between Mexico and the United States. Jasmine describes how her household was instrumental in helping family members move into the United States,

[My family] had a couple of bachelor uncles that lived in one of the spare rooms of the house. Then, when they moved out and got married or established themselves, we had some more family that lived in there. They pretty much all came over [to California] because that’s where my dad was the first to make roots. That was like the pinnacle where everyone said, oh yeah, so and so’s there, so ok, we’re going to go over there. Then they all pretty much passed through, you know, established their jobs and all pretty much made their roots there.

A large portion of Jasmine’s mother’s family moved to California with help from Jasmine’s mother and father. Jasmine is now able to stay in touch with family remaining in Mexico through talking with her relatives in the United States. So even though she did not take frequent trips to Mexico, she has and continues to have contact with her relatives there.

Rosa’s family also served as a gateway to the United States. She discusses how her family was the one connection that helped everyone start moving over. “It’s almost like as long as you have one person over here or one connection over here it benefits everyone in the family because it makes it that much easier for everyone to come over.” She lived in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood in an agricultural town in California and watched her uncles either make a permanent move to the United States or participate in seasonal agricultural migrations between Mexico and the United States. She explains how the uncles migrated,

[My uncles] would come over … stay here, work, and then go back. They mostly came on work visas. It’s too expensive to come just to visit because they have to get a regular visitor’s visa. Then the process is so long to get a visa to visit. So, they would come, visit, spend a couple months here, and go back with all their money. A lot of them had wives
and children over there. They would come over here for a couple of months, work, and then go back. One of my uncles, to this day, still does it and he’s forty-something.

Rosa’s location in an agricultural town in California allowed her to view this pattern of movement in her family and in others. For example, a large portion of her town moved from the same area in Mexico. This made her feel very proud to be Mexican and kept her from feeling like an outsider in her hometown. A lot of the other children that she grew up with were also second generation Mexican American or immigrated when they were very young.

She felt comfortable enough to tell me about how funny she thought it was that her family members were moving back and forth in the back of U-Haul trucks. The media often portrays this image negatively, making it a symbol of unauthorized migrants who, once in the United States, are trafficked across the country in the back of moving vans. However, in her interview, she explained that her family members obtained work visas to work seasonally in the California fields. They may have looked like undocumented migrant workers but they were just using the most reasonable transportation available to them. Her family was not the only one in town with members who migrated this way. While having people see your family members pile out of the back of a U-Haul truck could make some feel embarrassed because of the perception that Mexicans in the back of U-Haul trucks are undocumented lower/working class migrants, this did not bother Rosa. In fact, she found the irony that her relatives did have documents humorous.
She was not, however, always comfortable with some of the things her family did. She shared with me an instance when she felt embarrassed by them.

I was never so embarrassed to be Mexican until I’d seen [my uncles]. They get here and the truck they had like those little like things hanging in the car. I was like, “mom, who are they?” She said, “Those are you uncles.” I’m like, “no they’re not!” I was like, “if they honk the horn and it says ‘la cucaracha,’ I’m going inside and I’m going to hide.” Sure enough, it did. I was so embarrassed, so embarrassed.

Rosa is quite open about her pride in being Mexican and of her fondness for some of her family from Mexico. However, she does acknowledge that her U.S.-upbringing has influenced her, especially how she views things like what is and what is not classy. It is interesting that things like fringe in a truck or a horn singing a popular mariachi tune (la cucaracha, meaning the cockroach) would embarrass her so much, when riding in the back of a U-Haul, to migrate for work, did not. Fringe and singing car horns are cultural stereotypes in the United States of stigmatized Mexican taste. However, working hard in the fields and inexpensive means of travel were seen frequently in her hometown, and were considered a means to achieve success, and, therefore, something to be proud of.

Both Jasmine and Rosa were in constant contact with people from Mexico. Jasmine lived with her family from Mexico and watched as they established themselves in the United States. Rosa had family that moved to the United States to stay, that would seasonally migrate to work in agriculture, and family that she only saw when she was in Mexico. Because both Jasmine and Rosa have many family members living in their hometowns in California, they
always feel like they are connected to their Mexican heritage and to those who remain in Mexico.

While Jasmine and Rosa’s families were privileged by having family networks in the United States to assist them with coming to United States, other participants have family members in Mexico in positions to travel on their own. For example, George has a cousin who works for an airline so she is able to visit frequently. Cina’s family is wealthy and can get visitor visas easily. Coral also has family members who travel freely.

A Picture of a Transnational Family

Coral’s grandparents came to the United States to work during the Bracero Program (a temporary guest worker program) which ran from 1942-1964. Coral recalls that her maternal grandparents and their children, who were born in Mexico, were granted U.S. citizenship status when they were in the United States working in agriculture. This dual Mexican and U.S. citizenship status is what many of Coral’s family members use to move freely between Mexico and the United States. She explains, “I know that [my aunts and uncles] weren’t born in the States but they got their citizenship here when they were growing up and so did my grandparents. They just prefer to live down there.” Furthermore, Coral’s cousins, who were born in Mexico, are able to get visitor visas because their parents hold dual citizenship, their families are middle to upper class, and they have educations or jobs that help them obtain these privileges.
Figure 4. Kinship Chart of Coral’s Maternal Lineage

Oval=Female   Triangle=Male
Green=Mexico   Blue=United States   White=Unknown location
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<th>Son(s)</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
Coral’s family on her mother’s side is distributed fairly equally between Mexico and the United States, as shown in both Figure 4 and Table 5. As I mentioned above, when I was in Mexico with Coral, we created a family tree or kinship chart. The chart was of her grandparents on her mother’s side and all of their siblings and their families. Each family unit is shown in Figure 4. I placed them in one figure to visually illustrate her family distribution between the United States and Mexico.\(^{10}\) Table 5 lists each of Coral’s grandmother’s siblings and their family’s distribution to show the variety between family units that reside in both Mexico and the United States or in only one country. Of the 399 people she, her mother, and relatives in Mexico identified during interviews, 222 (56 percent) currently reside in Mexico and 174 (44 percent) reside in the United States\(^{11}\). There is a mixture within many families where siblings reside both in Mexico and in the United States making transnational connections and correspondence very common throughout Coral’s mother’s side of the family.\(^{12}\)

Overall, participants have contact with family members from Mexico through phone and Internet correspondence. Connections are maintained through their travel to Mexico and family members coming into the United States.

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\(^{10}\) I did not place her family members in a traditional linear chart because the goal is only to show the residential distribution within the family not how family is related to one another.

\(^{11}\) Three out of 399 (.08 percent) of her family lived in countries other than the U.S. or Mexico.

\(^{12}\) I did not collect her father’s side of the family due to a lack of access to him nor did I collect family trees for the other participants.
Economic access to travel and having family in Mexico who are also able to travel through citizenship status or other means, results in frequent contact between second generation Mexican Americans and their Mexican born and/or residing family members.

While each participant’s experience was different, they all have connections that are more than just senses of belonging or cultural practices that they have been taught. They have maintained relationships beyond physical and class borders. These relationships impact, reinforce, and challenge how participants see their identities. Participants’ ease of contact with family in Mexico sets them apart from other undocumented or lower income Mexicans in the United States who cannot travel or who are unable to make frequent international contact. Participants’ access to family in and from Mexico also solidifies their identity as part of the family and therefore Mexican, but at the same time, the differences in practices and taste, like fringe in a car, are also experienced. These connections and experiences question participants’ values and the meaning they have placed behind their identities as middle class Mexicans born in the United States.

_El Norte (the United States) is Upper Class_

The most significant impact that travel to and visits from Mexico have had on participants’ lives and identities has been related to experiencing class differences between Mexico and the United States. Participants’ occupy fluid class positions that fluctuate depending on the nation they are in (Mexico or the United States). When in the United States, they are generalized as lower class
because of their Mexican heritage, race, or ethnicity; but, in their practices, they are middle class Mexican Americans. When people from Mexico view my participants’ class status, it is elevated to a higher class because of their U.S. citizenship. There is an assumption by both my participants and their families in Mexico that those in the United States are of a higher class status than those in Mexico. This assumption creates divisions among families based on class privilege, location, and legal national membership.

Some participants articulated in interviews how they felt different pressures when they were in Mexico as compared to the United States. The following examples provided by Rosa and Jasmine illustrate that differences can be perceived, as Bourdieu (1984) has discussed, in ordinary everyday choices, such as what to purchase at the grocery store and what types of foods to eat.

Rosa explains,

“It’s not to sound snobby. How can I put it? [I’m] not Mexican like them over there [in Mexico] like status wise. A lot of things I’ll do the way they do. But, it’s almost like, if they use flour, I used enriched bleached flour, already sifted for me. It’s little things. I remember I would go over there and my grandma, if there’d be things like tomatoes here and tomatoes here, these tomatoes are 5 cents each, these are 10 cents each, I always tell my grandma, just get the 10 cent ones. She’s like, “no, because I can get two for the price of one as a bargain shopper.” I was more like,” just go for the 10 cents.” It’s a little more classy.

In this excerpt, Rosa explains that she views spending more money on simple everyday items, like tomatoes, as a symbol of class. She explicitly describes spending more money as “a little more classy” than being a “bargain shopper.” Rosa’s view of what is or is not classy is influenced by her time in the United States, a highly consumerist culture, and her class position. Bourdieu (1984)
explains that class taste is found in simple things such as what one considers to be art or what type of flooring one chooses to install. He sees these tastes as reflections of both economic access or necessity and cultural influences. Therefore, Rosa’s and her grandmother’s actions illustrate how patterns of consumption or taste express how classed culture practices overlap with Mexican and American cultural practices and how these practices differ. 

Luz also noticed a difference in how she felt and was perceived as more upper class than her family in Mexico.

I felt, because of the way that they live down there, I just felt more upper class when I was in Mexico. The way that they live is way different from how you live here, the bathrooms, the toilets, everything is different. My aunt’s house, their bathroom’s outside. It’s not even inside of the home. I don’t like what they eat. Like when they kill chickens, they eat everything on the chicken. They feel that I’m upper class the way that I eat or that I’m really picky.

Due to her American upbringing and middle class position, Luz’s taste is made apparent when she is with her family in Mexico. Having enjoyed her American amenities, especially her indoor bathroom and plumbing and her practice in the United States of discarding less desirable bits of food, she realizes how she is different from her family in Mexico and these differences reinforce her privileged class position when she is there.

As Rosa and Luz have explained, they feel the differences between themselves and their families in Mexico. These differences occur because of different class and cultural tastes. These tastes are observed through everyday class practices which can be as mundane as food choices. Class culture and U.S. upbringings have reinforced differences between participants and their
families in Mexico. Amenities often taken for granted, like enriched bleached flour and indoor plumbing in the United States, become noticeable class and cultural differences when in Mexico. These observations and the feelings of difference associated with them are areas where participants question and negotiate their bordered class and ethnic identities.

Differences are also experienced when one moves from Mexico to the United States and has to get used to a change in class structure. Attributes and assets that would increase class status in Mexico are dramatically less powerful in the United States. Rosa saw this happen when her parents’ income increased in California.

I remember my mom and my dad started making decent money for what’s considered decent money for Mexico. I think they were still so consumed in the way the country worked that they kind of figured, “oh this is how much it is in pesos, so this is how much [I have].” If they made a certain amount here, they would be like, “oh my god I’m a millionaire in Mexico.” So they figured, “I’m a millionaire here.” Yet they’re clear that they’re not.

Rosa’s parents’ perceptions of income and how it would raise their class position in Mexico is not uncommon. Many people in Mexico believe that all individuals move up the social scale through movement from Mexico to the United States (Vila 2005:170). Even though the cost of living in the United States makes money less valuable than it would be in Mexico, the physical border dividing the two countries is seen as a privilege border with those to the north having more opportunities and more status. Overall, movement to the United States is seen as moving up regardless of the fact that class positions for Mexicans in general are often seen as lower in the United States than in Mexico.
Unfortunately, the association of class not with the individual but with a group—people in the United States—creates divisions among families based on location. For Rosa, these perceived class differences caused her family to split. Unlike other participants who want to visit Mexico, Rosa, despite having adequate time and money, has lost her desire to see family there.

I don’t have the desire to go back anymore. When my grandma passed away, her will came into effect and she left people stuff. I know she left my parents stuff and she left us stuff. It was a big controversy because all of my aunts and uncles that live over there were like, “they don’t need anything, they live in *el Norte* [the United States], and they don’t need anything. They live over there and they’re rich over there.” It’s like we’re rich according to Mexico but we’re not in the United States. Ever since that big old controversy about who gets what and why, I don’t have the desire to go back just because I don’t want to listen to it. I had told my dad, because my grandma had left me some property, I told my dad, I don’t even want it.

Despite her Mexican relatives’ upper class status in Mexico, they still perceive Rosa’s immediate family in the United States as wealthier than themselves and not deserving of inheritance. Her family in Mexico agreed with the assumption that those in the United States are wealthier even though, when her parents were making money in the United States, these family members visited and were able to see that a dollar is not the same as the number of pesos you can exchange for. Rosa’s family in Mexico may also be judging other resources her immediate family poses as status markers, such as their U.S. citizenship and access to opportunities that are not available in Mexico. Rosa’s immediate family may be rich according to Mexican standards but in the United States, they are perceived to be middle class. These facts did not change the perceptions held by her family.
in Mexico. To them, Rosa’s family’s location in the United States only adds to their wealth.

While Jasmine did not experience separation from or significant tension with her family in Mexico, being from the United States, she experienced aspects of elevated status—popularity and privilege—the few times she went to Mexico. “We were like celebrities in the sense that [kids in Mexico are] like, ‘oh they’re from el Norte, from the north.’” She also saw the privileges of being born in the United States through comparing her lifestyle with those of the children in Mexico.

I feel privileged per se to be born in the United States in the neighborhood that I was raised because I remember seeing the kids there [in Mexico] that don’t have a proper education and health care. You know the girls over there get married off younger and get pregnant. They don’t get an education. I remember seeing how the other kids were raised. There is a big role difference, their responsibilities to go herd the cows and like the chores that they’re held accountable to. As in our society, we, here in the United States, like you wouldn’t see a small kid being responsible for going and milking the cow, at least not where I was raised. So I do notice those differences.

Coral also got to see the class differences between Mexico and the United States through her visits to Mexico and watching her parents struggle in the United States. Coral’s grandparents and her mother came to the United States to save money to build their homes in Mexico. With their earnings from the United States, they were all able to afford large connected homes in the center of the downtown area of a small town. They built businesses underneath the homes that they
Figure 5. Coral’s Mother and Grandparents’ Connected Homes in Mexico with Stores they Rent on the First Floor.

Figure 6. Homes of the Lower/Working Class
rented (Figure 5). These homes were noticeably nicer than the homes of the less wealthy in the area (Figure 6). Her family members were also involved in local politics, were well educated, and able to travel to and from the United States. All of these class practices indicated to the town that her family had a significant amount of status.

Overall, according to Coral, her family was perceived to be upper class while they lived in Mexico. However, when Coral’s parents first moved to the United States, their situation changed as did their class position. They dropped in class position because of their Mexican heritage being associated with lower/working class in the United States and because of their lifestyle change. In addition to renting an apartment instead of owning their own home in the United States, another more obvious indicator that her parents moved down in class status were the jobs her dad had after their move.

In Mexico, they owned a liquor store and my mom had like a little craft store. When we came to the states, the first job I remember was a job my uncle got for my dad. They worked at a like pig farm type of thing. I remember because he would come home and it would just smell horribly…Then, when we came to Vegas, he worked at a plastic factory. He worked there for awhile until he befriended someone who worked at a funeral home and he likes doing that. Mom didn’t work up until I got into high school. She stayed home took care of us, that sort of thing. Now, she works at the elementary school that’s in front of our house as an office specialist.

Many of the jobs her dad had were less desirable than those in Mexico but over time, both of her parents were able to become successful and happy in their jobs. However, it took them many years to accomplish this goal. They went from home and business owners to apartment renters and working in factories. Coral saw her parents struggle in the United States to provide better opportunities for her
and her sister. It took her parents many years after moving from California to Las Vegas to move up to middle class. Over those years, they were able to save up enough money to buy a home, take frequent trips to Mexico, and pay for their daughter’s bachelor’s degree. At once she was upper class when in Mexico and lower/working class in the United States. Her class status was fluid and fluctuated in response to context.

Conclusions

Participants have had a variety of transnational experiences including travel to Mexico, family visits from Mexico, phone and internet conversations, and many other types of connections and contact. These practices have impacted their lives by created contexts for them to perceive class differences. Income, education, and occupation are still three of the primary determining factors of class status in Mexico and in the United States; however, these factors are not the only ones that impact how one’s class position is expressed and perceived. As explained throughout this chapter, class culture and position are seen through practices such as what one eats, where one lives, and how often one travels. Mexican Americans and Mexicans may share similar cultural practices but, as Hall explains,

‘A culture’ is never a simple, unified entity, but always has to be thought of as composed of similarities and differences, continuities and new elements, marked by ruptures and always crosscut by difference. Its meanings are the result of a constant, ongoing process of cultural negotiation which is constantly shifting and changing its contours to accommodate continuing tensions. [1995:185]
The association of class with location, whether in the United States or Mexico, compounds the differences between Mexicans with U.S. citizenship and those without that privilege. Participants are aware that there are privileges that come with being from the United States, even if these privileges do not reflect an economic reality. Overall, their transnational relationships and experiences challenge their ideas about class and where they fit. These questions have led many to the realization that they are Mexican but not Mexican like those in Mexico because of their class status as Americans.

Furthermore, Ortner explains how class status can place people in precarious situations: “Middle-class status is highly desirable for its greater material affluence and security, but undesirable for all the ways in which its patterns are culturally “other,” and or the ways in which upward mobility would pull one away from kin, friends, or neighbors” (1991:176). It is this perceived upward mobility that is projected on second generation middle class Mexican Americans in Las Vegas by their families in Mexico.

Rosa’s experience is a good example of how perceptions of class difference can so clearly impact participants’ lives. Rosa was challenged by her family in Mexico over inheritance. Her success and location in the United States created class barriers between her immediate family in the United States and her family in Mexico. Even if her family’s income was the same in number, her location in the United States gave her more economic status and deemed her, in the eyes of her relatives, as undeserving. She experienced classism and chose to disconnect from her family to avoid the hatred she was feeling. She was put in
a different category from her family in Mexico because of her U.S. status, perceived class position, and class practices (like opting for the more expensive tomatoes or sifted flour). This family conflict made her realize that she could never be accepted the same way her family who live in Mexico are; she would always be seen as an American.

Class position and transnational practices have impacted participants’ lives. As the following chapter will show, these positions and practices also influence bordered ethnic identities. It is within the contexts created by these forces that the complexity of ethnic identity negotiation for second generation middle class Mexican Americans becomes most apparent.
La Virgen de Guadalupe\textsuperscript{13} is the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess (Anzaldúa 1999:52).

Identity is a difficult thing for many people to articulate. In order to be a part of this study, participants were asked if they considered themselves second generation Mexican American. Regardless of how they define themselves—

\textsuperscript{13} A common Catholic symbol in Mexico and for Mexicans in the U.S., the Virgin of Guadalupe is the Mexican depiction of the Virgin Mary. In appearance, she is a mixture of indigenous female “saints” and the Virgin Mary brought over with Catholicism by the Spanish. She is seen by many as the embodiment of the mestiza/o or mixed heritage of the people of Mexico.
Mexican, American, Mexican American—since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848\textsuperscript{14}, they are defined by the United States government as Americans because of their birth in the United States, but ethnically Mexican, Hispanic or Latino because of their connections to Mexico. Furthermore, the treaty provided Mexicans the ability to be White on legal documents, such as the U.S. census, but did not protect them from discrimination based on their perceived differences (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003).

Conceptions of both ethnic and racial categories have been around for a long time. People have always constructed ways to acknowledge what is similar to them and what is different. Actual fixed categories of race were first discussed in the scientific community in 1775 by Linnaeus who defined five races based on ideas of subspecies (Dougherty 1999). The idea of distinct racial groups gained support during the time of European colonialism. Racial categories were used to understand the outside world and as justifications to subjugate colonized people (Dougherty 1999). This use of race to distinguish “us” from “them” has become a historically grounded and naturalized idea.

Since then, many others have attempted to use differences as reasons to categorize people. For instance, the U.S. Census forced people into racial and ethnic categories and these categories have histories and have developed social meanings (Dougherty 1999). For example, the terms Hispanic and Latino, which are homogenizing ethnic labels, were created during the 1960s and early 1970s

\textsuperscript{14} With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexicans in the United States were granted citizenship and allowed the name American. The treaty was also supposed to guarantee Mexicans “the right to their property and the right to maintain cultural institutions, i.e. the Spanish language and Mexican traditions” (Rosales 1997).
by state administrative agencies in response to both the notion of the United States being a melting pot and an attempt to silence the Chicano movement (Perez 2003:99). However, despite the diversity they attempted to homogenize, these new ethnic terms have helped give political power to groups like El Salvadorians who otherwise would not have the numbers to be heard. Furthermore, the terms Latino and Hispanic have become racialized. For example, Mexicans in dominant discourse within the United States are not identified as White but rather Latino in terms of racial categorization (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003). Over time, these labels have gained social value (Perez 2003). While most are aware of the diversity of people and cultures included within these categories, identities are used in different contexts and their use carries embedded histories full of meaning. These generally accepted constructions of identity exist and influence people’s decisions and actions (Basch et al. 1994). Bauman asserts, “That our individuality is socially produced is by now a trivial truth” (2001:124).

Children born in the United States to Mexican immigrant parents have a variety of identities available to them. Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) explains, they can choose from Spanish, Hispanic, Spanish-American, Latin American, Latino, Mestizo, Chicano, Raza, and Tejano among others. Each of these categories comes with implications and to a certain extent participants choose which position they wish to take (Hall 1990). For instance, Spanish is used for language identification. Hispanic, Latin American, and Latino are used when identifying with a larger group. Mestizo implies mixed heritage of indigenous, Spanish,
African, and many others. Chicano and Raza are political identities. Tejano shows identification with a Mexican heritage and a location in what is now Texas. “Mexican-American [is used] to signify…neither Mexican nor American, but more the noun ‘American’ than the adjective ‘Mexican’” (Anzaldúa 1999:84-5). As Anzaldúa’s list shows, there are a large number of identities second generation Mexican Americans may select from but each identity comes with its own history and meaning and many times people will position themselves within more than one category.

The following discussion of participants’ identities demonstrates, as other theorists and researchers have explained, that ethnic identities are not fixed. Instead, identities are continually negotiated, reinforced, and expressed in different contexts. Hall explains this fluidity when he describes cultural identity as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (1990:225). Bauman elaborates on this conception when he states, “…identification, [is] a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged” (2001:129). Identity activities are practices and the foundations for these practices are occasionally conscious and at other times only apparent during periods of conflict or when identities are questioned. Furthermore, identities are self-constructed and at times imposed by others.

Whether it is a confrontation in Mexico or a discussion in class, participants are made aware of their bordered identities. Bordered identities, as previously explained, are identities that result from being part of two or more cultures, ethnicities, or classes. How second generation middle class Mexican
Americans choose to identify themselves is a personal matter but their choices are influenced by many shared factors like class borders and transnational experiences. Participants’ identity negotiations, which are the foundation of their bordered identities, help illustrate the reasons why people choose to identify themselves under different terms in different situations. Not surprisingly then, many participants identified as Mexican American when asked. However, during their interviews, when I asked them what they are and how they describe themselves, they had a variety of answers.

There are many overlapping forces at work influencing ethnic identity negotiations. It is not just the initial categorization by the state in which identities are partial, ethnic identities are also subjected to influences of culture, power, and history (Hall 1990). The rest of this chapter will utilize participants’ experiences to show the complexity of their ethnic identities and how their ethnic identity negotiations intersect with transnational social networks and class practices. First, I will illustrate how identities are positioned through quotes from two participants who explain how their identities depend upon who is asking. The next section of the chapter will explore three participants’ identities to show the variety of experiences and resulting identities which are found within second generation Mexican American lives.

It Depends on Who’s Asking

George and Natalie’s following excerpts illustrate that identity positioning often depends upon the context of who is asking and why they are asking, as
well as class and transnational practices. They are able to at once have what
Nagata (1974) refers to as “social solidarity and social distance.” This concept
refers to what occurs when people will identify as a member of one group most of
the time, then change to another group “in accordance with the degree of affinity
they wish to express in a given situation” (1974:340).

As George describes

In general, when people ask me what my background is or whatever we’re
talking about, like my ethnicity, I usually say I’m Mexican. I’m Mexican and
just kind of leave it at that. If it’s one of those things where I’m kind of
trying to get to know the person or we’re really trying to figure out each
other and I really want to let them know more, I tell them that I’m Mexican
American, my dad’s Mexican and my mom’s from South America, Chile…
If its friends of friends, I tell them I’m a spicy bean, the spice being from
Chile and the bean being from Mexico.

George uses three identities: Mexican, Mexican American, and one he made up:
spicy bean. He chooses his position based on the type of relationship he has or
wants to have with the person he is discussing it with.

It is interesting to see that he does not choose Chile as a reference for his
identity until he uses the identity “spicy bean” with people he wants to get to
know. This can be explained by his mother’s youthful political exile from Chile
and the lack of cultural, historical, and physical ties to Chile. However, as
discussed in Chapter 4, George had taken a few family trips to Mexico when he
was younger. He remembers cultural things in the home like his father having
him do the Mexican hat dance. Now that he is older, he travels to Mexico to
vacation in his Chilean family’s property in a popular resort town. Even though he
is not going to Mexico to visit his Mexican family, he still has a physical
connection to the country his father is from. It is these types of transnational
connections and class practices which maintain George’s Mexican heritage and influences him to identify as Mexican American not Chilean American.

Natalie, positions herself as Latina, Mexican American, Mexican, and American based on the perceived intentions of the person asking her about her identity.

It kind of depends on who’s asking and why I think they’re asking. Generally, I say Latina and/or sometimes I’ll say Mexican American or Mexican. In Mexico, when people ask me, and if I say Mexican, they right away say, “no you’re not.” So I’m like,” ok, my parents are from Mexico.” All my blood is Mexican. Yes, I was born in the U.S. and by the way, I did get my Mexican citizenship, so, technically I am Mexican. I tell them this when they try to tell me I’m not. People have even argued that [Mexican citizenship] doesn’t mean anything and that it really doesn’t have a real value, that you can’t really have the same benefits as real Mexicans, which I don’t know if that’s true or not. I still told them. Maybe it’s more symbolic… So, that’s one example.

Then, if people here ask me and if I feel like they think I’m an outsider, and they say, “Where are you from?” I’ll say, “oh, I’m from Las Vegas.” Then, they have to keep digging, like, “oh, what do you, but I mean.” I just like to see them squirm, you know, until “oh, ok well yeah, I’m American. I was born here. Oh, my parents were from Mexico, that’s what you’re digging at.”

But, usually when students ask me, I’ll give them the whole run down, like, “where are you from?” “Oh well, I was born here in Las Vegas. My parents are from Mexico, so, I’m Mexican and American.” So, I mean, I won’t do that all the time, usually.

Natalie’s identity “game” is a contextual expression of her bordered identity.

Nagata explains, “the selection of ethnic reference groups can vary depending upon the perception of the relative ranking of ethnic groups within the wider social system, which then determines the oppositions being expressed” (1974: 343). Natalie shows that she is conscious of the implications of her identity choices so she chooses who she is going to share her selected identities with.
She also expresses the difficulties of identifying as Mexican or American in different contexts because of the categories of identity that are imposed upon her in those situations.

For her entire life, Natalie has been able to engage in the middle class practice of taking frequent trips to Mexico to visit her family. These trips have impacted how she negotiates her bordered ethnic identity. As she described in the above quote, she cannot identify as Mexican in Mexico. The people she has met there have expressed to her that despite her dual citizenship status she will always be a U.S.-born Mexican. Her birth and time in the United States has impacted how those in Mexico see her and she cannot change that.

Natalie is also faced with being considered an outsider in the United States. She responds to this by making people who question her origins uncomfortable. So at once she wants to be able to identify as Mexican in Mexico and American in the United States but neither location will allow her such membership. Her position as a U.S.-born Mexican creates a gray area in both contexts. It is in this borderland that her bordered identity is negotiated.

Varied Identities of Second Generation Mexican Americans

While all participants identified as Mexican American when asked, none of the participants identified as Mexican American in the same way. When they further elaborated and described their ethnic identities including Mexican, American, and Chicana aspects, the complexity of their identities became more apparent. The following three examples will illustrate this complexity and variety.
I am Mexican, not Hispanic, not Latino

Just by looking at me they can’t tell [I’m Mexican] until I bring up that I know Spanish and they’re like you know Spanish? I didn’t know you knew that. When they ask me like, “where’re you from,” “well what do you mean where am I from? Be more specific, like, where I was born? I was born in California. But ethnically, I’m Mexican.” I don’t say Hispanic or Latina. I say Mexican…But census wise, it would have to be Mexican or it would be Hispanic or Latina, whatever they have that year.

Especially now, I mean, because…there’s like Indigenous, Spanish, and then there’s French and there’s German. And then, because I know there is a port [with my last name] in Portugal. I think we might have some Portuguese but I’m not so sure. I know there’s Spanish, some recent Spaniards on both sides of my family, but I don’t know really how far [back]. So, I don’t know exactly what combination of all those I am.

After listening to Coral’s response, it is difficult to really say that she only identifies as Mexican. She says she does but then further elaborates on the different ancestry she is a “product” of. This mixed ancestry confuses many who judge her based on appearance because she is lighter skinned. However a diverse heritage is common in Mexico where the history of the country has created what is referred to as mestizo or a mixture including Spanish, Indigenous, and sometimes Black among other heritages. In the United States, this mestizo heritage is generalized as a homogenous group—Mexican.

When I spent two weeks with Coral and her mother in Mexico, we went to the capital city to visit family and go to museums. We were looking at the history of the Spanish conquest in a regional museum housed in a converted 1890s neoclassical mansion built for the son of a Spanish governor (Figure 8), when Coral explained to me that she is equally proud of both sides of her Mexican heritage: Spanish and Indigenous. Personally having European and Native American ancestry, I had a difficult time understanding how Coral could
simultaneously be proud of a people who were subjugated and of the people who
subjugated them. She explained to me, “I think the Spanish did some really great
things.” She gave examples of the Spanish bringing Catholicism and education
systems to Mexico. She sees the histories of both the Spanish and the
Indigenous peoples as her history. She is so proud of this heritage that she took
her niece through the museum, emphatically explaining the accomplishments of
both the native Mexicans of her region and the Spaniards (Figure 9). While it may
seem like a difficult balance to be proud of having both Indigenous and Spanish
heritage, to Coral and many others, being proud to be Mexican is not just being
proud of one ethnic category, it means being proud of a Mestizo heritage.
Figure 9. Coral and Niece

Despite Coral’s strong stance on identifying as Mexican and her pride in her Mestizo heritage, her Mexican identity has been challenged in transnational contexts. A little over half of Coral’s mother’s family lives in Mexico while the rest live in the United States. She visits her mother’s side of the family in Mexico every winter. When in Mexico, her American upbringing interferes with identifying as Mexican like those in Mexico. I asked her: “When you are in Mexico, do you see yourself as Mexican?”

Sometimes I do and sometimes I don’t. When I speak Spanish, they can tell that I’m American. I don’t know inflections. They can also tell right away with how you dress and how you carry yourself differently. Like with my family, I see myself as Mexican. But then, like out on the street, it’s kind of like not so much.
Coral’s family in Mexico is upper middle class. When Coral visits Mexico, things in her relatives’ homes are not much different from her home in Las Vegas. There are a lot of the same amenities like indoor plumbing, hot water, washing machine, cable TV, Internet, etc. Her family in both Mexico and the United States make sure they are dressed nicely and their hair and make-up is done before they leave the house. Therefore, the way Coral carries herself and some of the ways that she dresses blend in with her family in Mexico.

When she is out of the house, walking around the small rural town her grandmother and many other relatives live in, she is noticed as being different because of her appearance and the cultural customs she has brought with her from the United States. I noticed when we were in the larger city, differences in taste and American influences are not as noticeable because of the variety of styles and the mixing of different classes that is found in larger urban areas.

Even though Coral says she feels Mexican when with her family in Mexico, some of her family members do bring up the fact that she is not just Mexican but American as well. She explains, “My older sister [who lives in Mexico, will say] ‘oh, you’re trying to look American.’ I’m like, well I am in America. I mean, it’s the trends you follow here. If I were in Mexico, it would be different trends…” Coral’s sister notices differences between herself (a Mexican-born and raised in Mexico) and her Mexican American-born and raised sister. Clothing, hair, and other styles do differ between Mexico and the United States not only because of cultural differences based on location but economic situations. For instance, when I was in Mexico, I noticed Coral had significantly
more disposable income to buy trendy clothes whereas her sister in Mexico was struggling with her personal business and being a single mother. The economic difference was more noticeable to me than how their hair was styled or the clothing choices they made. There are, however, other cultural differences that people in Mexico would perceive that I could not because of my outsider perspective.

Furthermore, Coral’s U.S. citizenship status sets her apart from some of her cousins.

My older cousins start questioning: “Well, what are you? Are you Mexican or American?” I don’t see it as an issue. I’m Mexican but my citizenship is American. So, yeah I’m American, so? Then they look at you like betrayal and things like that…

Coral’s cousins find themselves questioning Coral’s identity as a Mexican when she has a privileged status as an American. This questioning has Coral acknowledge that she is not just Mexican but American as well. Coral’s class position and cultural differences become issues of identity contention especially because her family members are the ones pointing the differences out to her.

As reflected in the quotes above, when in Mexico, Coral’s pride in her Mestizo-Mexican heritage and identity is reinforced but at the same time it is challenged when she is reminded that she is also American. Her life in the United States, her citizenship status, the way she holds herself, speaks Spanish, and dresses are all cues to others that Coral is not like them. Coral defends herself in these contexts by stating that she is not trying to be different but that’s just the way things are. She happens to have been born in the United States.
Coral’s explanation of her identity in different contexts illustrates that identities are complex; they are not fixed, in that one does not have to quit being Mexican to be American. They can be both at the same time. This is how Coral articulates her bordered identity. She is not alone in her thoughts. Anzaldúa explains, “… we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship” (1999:84). Yet many do look at location and its related class privilege or lack thereof as markers of difference. For example, Coral’s birth in the United States keeps her from being “authentically” Mexican in the eyes of many Mexicans in Mexico, including her own family members, and her physical features keep her from being seen as American without a preceding ethnic adjective (since to be solely American is synonymous with being white, all “others” possess dual racialized ethnic identities such as African American, Asian American, Mexican American, etc.).

I was Raised in Mexico but I am a U.S. Citizen

I’m really proud [of being Mexican]. I am really proud. I don’t know if it’s because I grew up and I was raised in Mexico? I don’t know if it’s different when you grow up here [in the States]. But for me, it’s something, it’s part of my life, you know. I feel really proud.

Despite being born in the United States, Cina was the only participant who was raised and lived most of her life in Mexico. In addition to her life in Mexico, her Mexican identity was reinforced eight years ago when she moved to the United States. Despite her U.S citizenship, Cina had mostly an “immigrant” experience, meaning she had to learn English, find work, and figure out all the different systems.
Well, that was really tough. It was really challenging because I left behind my country, my family, and my friends. I didn’t speak a word of English. And I did feel discrimination when I got here. It is hard. You try to... be part of a group. You try to make friends and they kind of look at you like you’re weird. I did make a couple friends but most of them were people who just, you know, who were from Mexico. But I’m a really social person. I like to have friends from all over the world, the country. I don’t mind about that. But, they have things against me because I don’t speak English. Language was the biggest problem that I had when I got here.

At that time, her “immigrant” experience helped solidify her Mexican identity. Later on, things changed and she started to incorporate an American side to her bordered identity.

Cina explained, “When I go back to Mexico, I feel like I am going back to home.” Her attachment to Mexico as her home is not uncommon. According to Hall (1995), “home” is the geographic location that first influences our identity by creating emotional ties and associating traditions to these locations. Cina calls Mexico home because that is where she spent the majority of her childhood. However, she starts questioning her relationship to home after being in the United States for eight years.

The only thing is that our country has so much insecurity that sometimes you feel kind of scared. When you live there, you kind of get used to all that violence and everything and then, suddenly, when you move out and you go back, it’s weird. And my family and friends are all the time “Don’t do that. Don’t do that. Put your locks, watch where you are walking, don’t wear jewelry.”

Now that she has lived in the United States for so long, when she visits friends and family in Mexico, she realizes how privileged people are in the United States. From her experience, Cina has observed that most U.S. residents don’t have to worry as much about their safety and theft as those in Mexico.
Over time, Cina's friends have also noticed how her time in the United States has changed her.

Sometimes people in Mexico make comments about my Spanglish. Because, even though I speak perfect Spanish, I would say, I can't help it. Sometimes, I'm talking to my kids and they will ask me something that doesn't have a translation or something. And then, people are like, “Why are you guys talking Spanglish? You just don't talk Spanglish.” I'm like, “OK, sorry…”

Clothes in Mexico, people take care, more care of their appearance. You have to be really dressed up wherever you go, even if you go to the spa. So, once you move [to the United States] you kind of, like you're just kind of comfortable, whatever fits you or you don't take much care of your hair and things like that. So, when I go back there and like “Oh my God you used to be always dressing really nice and your hair and this and that and now you're like whatever.” I'm like, “whatever.”

Cina’s friends and family notice, when she comes back to visit Mexico, how she has started becoming more “American” in her language and appearance. Her friends and family are upper class in Mexico, so they have different class taste than the middle class in the United States that she has become accustomed to. She responded to their comments with “OK, sorry” and “whatever.” Her responses mean that she has realized that the time in the United States has impacted her behaviors and this has impacted her bordered identity. She is more than Mexican: she is also American.

These differences in class practices have also made her feel detached from her friends and family back home. When I asked her, “Do you see yourself as Mexican, like people who live in Mexico?” she responded,

Right now, I feel like in the middle. Before, like a couple years ago, I would still feel like I could go back and live there and have a life there and everything. Now, because of my kids, I don’t think I will be able to do it because I want them to have the opportunities I didn’t have to study. I do
fit very well, but I just don’t feel like a part of it anymore, maybe because I
don’t live there anymore.

Cina wants to remain in the United States not because she prefers the class and
cultural practices she engages in but because of the privileges it will provide her
children such as education.

Despite her bordered identity and feelings of being in the middle, Cina
chose to identify herself as Mexican in our interview. Over time, her experiences
in the United States have influenced her sense of identity and she has added an
American aspect to her identity, especially when she is in Mexico with her friends
and family. Cina’s excerpts from her interview show how people who identify as
Mexican can still have bordered identities that they are constantly negotiating.
They have just chosen to position themselves as Mexican. Their Mexican
identities may change over time.

**Chicana Emerging**

I consider myself a Chicana. I feel that I’m equally proud of both my
Chicana and white heritage. So, I don’t necessarily choose one over the
other. It’s just kind of, more of, I guess siding with Chicana because it’s
like you have the typical survey. What are you, white non-Hispanic, Black,
Asian, Latino, whatever.

Adelia was unique in that she was raised solely in the United States with no trips
to Mexico. Her mother is Caucasian and her father is from Mexico. Having had a
very rough childhood and early adulthood, her father severed all of his
relationships with people from Mexico. Consequently, he did not teach Adelia
Spanish, about her relatives, his cultural heritage, or anything else about Mexico
resulting in a lack of any transnational relationships.
I think for a long time we never really were very aware of our heritage. That could be because our dad didn’t really like to talk a lot about it. It probably wasn’t really until we moved to Las Vegas that we started realizing that we had a different kind of cultural background than maybe we thought originally. When I got into college, I started realizing that there was a lot of diversity throughout my classes and it just became a little bit more apparent. When I took my first women’s studies class, I really started thinking about the cultural aspect of my identity and all that kind of stuff, which, I know it sounds so cliché, because it’s like, women’s studies: race, class, and gender, of course you start thinking about it. But, it really was kind of an eye opener for me and I had a great professor that helped me think about it more critically.

Through engaging in the middle class practice of higher education, Adelia is “finding her roots” as a Chicana. The timing of her efforts to establish her identity is not uncommon. According to Smith (2002), high school and college years are times when transnational life increases in importance and ethnic identities are evaluated.

Not only did she start to look at her identity more critically when she started college, she also started taking classes to learn more about Mexico’s history and the history of Mexicans in the United States.

I think it’s just really part of wanting to be able to form my own identity on my own terms. I don’t feel like I’m going to learn something from a book on who I am but I do think it kind of helps to know about my cultural background, so that I can pass it on to my kids. In a sense, I wish that my dad would have done that with us, but of course, I understand the reasons that he didn’t. So, I guess, at this point, I’ll just kind of take what I can get.

She is taking classes for her own knowledge and so she will be able to teach her son about his heritage. This knowledge building can be seen as learning the history behind an identity and creating transnational ties without engaging in transnational relationships or crossing political borders. Anzaldúa noticed this

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15 Adelia has a Caucasian mother and a Mexican father. She had her son with a Caucasian man.
trend in young Chicanos and Chicanas, who, after losing touch with their Chicano
culture, took classes to learn more about their culture and history (1999).

Adelia experience shows that despite being disconnected from her
“Mexican heritage” during her youth, she is able to define herself as Chicana—
politically active Mexican American—by her own efforts to find her “roots”. She is
going through what Hall calls a revival of ethnicity which occurs after there is a
“loss of identity” which is responded to “by a ‘return’ to one’s cultural roots”
(1995:200). It is through the middle class practice of education that she is
establishing transnational connections to Mexico and developing her bordered
identity.

Overall, Coral, Cina, and Adelia’s varied experiences illustrate that
bordered identities are complex continuous negotiations. Their stories show that
identities change with changing contexts and with class and transnational
experiences over time. Even though they each have unique life experiences,
their position as middle class children of Mexican immigrants has resulted in their
having bordered identities that are in constant negotiation.

Conclusions

Despite their different life histories, by looking at second generation middle
class Mexican American identities as bordered, we can start to see a common
thread that ties second generation middle class Mexican Americans together as
a group. When it comes to class identity, participants occupy a gray space or
borderland. They may be middle class in practice but in Mexico they are seen as
upper class because of their American citizenship and location and in “El Norte” (the United States) while at the same time they are seen as lower/working class in the United States because of their Mexican heritage and the assumption that “all poverty is Mexican.” Participants occupy all class statuses but each is assumed or asserted in different contexts. They are also positioned in a borderland when it comes to ethnic identity. They are not seen as fully “American” in the United States because of their Mexican ancestry nor are they considered fully “Mexican” in Mexico because of their U.S. births and citizenship status. Their Mexican and American identities are simultaneously reinforced and challenged on both sides of the border. However, neither identity—Mexican or American—is completely accepted in either location. Instead, their identities are always bordered and as Clifford explains, “a basis for connection as well as disconnection” (2000:106).

Participants’ class practices, including pursuing higher education and travel to and from Mexico, in addition to their transnational connections and relationships, bring these borderlands and gray areas into view for many participants. Higher education in the United States places participants in privileged positions that set them apart from other Latinos and Mexicans, the majority of whom do not have higher educations. Their middle class practices also challenge common misperceptions that all Mexicans are lazy, ignorant, blue-collar workers. Whether participants decide to openly challenge these perceptions or not, their lives are affected by these assumptions and the difference that their education provides them.
Transnational connections—whether they be from travel to Mexico, visits from family that reside in Mexico, phone and internet conversations, or even taking Mexican history classes—impact participants’ perceptions of their class and ethnic identities. It is often in these transnational contexts that both class and ethnic identities are reinforced, challenged, and negotiated.

Overall, second generation middle class Mexican Americans have bordered identities that are fluid and in constant negotiation. Their situation is unique compared to Mexican immigrants in the United States, the lower/working class, and later generations that may not maintain such strong transnational relationships and connections. Viewing second generation middle class Mexican Americans’ bordered identities is important in understanding how they position themselves in terms of ethnicity and class. They are often overlooked in research and in popular culture. This thesis has brought attention to their unique experiences in an attempt to bring attention to the diversity within Mexican Americans and within class groups.

This research also goes beyond the study of second generation middle class Mexican Americans by showing the importance of taking a practice theory approach to researching the relationship between transnational experiences, class practices, and ethnic identities. While one can conduct a study about each topic individually, it is only when their intersections are analyzed does the full complexity of each area of inquiry become apparent. Further research using this approach is needed. It would be especially insightful and valuable to compare how class practices and transnational relationships affect the identities of people
in different positions. Second generation Mexican Americans who experienced
the Chicano Civil Rights Movement may not share the same experiences that my
participants have had. Other Latino groups, such as Puerto Ricans or Cubans,
have their own experiences as well. It would also be interesting to compare the
experiences of Latino groups with those of Asian Americans since Asians are
often perceived as the model minority in the United States.
APPENDIX 1

INTerview TOPIC LIST AND QUESTIONS

Note: The underlined text is the topic list. The bold italicized questions are the open-ended questions. The following questions are the minimal topics I had participants include in their answers. Furthermore, all lists of choices for example, A, B, C, D were just prompts to get the participant to answer the question. They were not read as A, B, C or D.

Basic Information

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Current College Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. What is your profession?</td>
<td>2. What is your class standing and major?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Did you go to college?</td>
<td>3. How are you paying for school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What is your monthly income?</td>
<td>4. Are you working right now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4a. If yes, what is your job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4b. What is your monthly income?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. How old are you?
6. Where were you born?
   6a. If not born in Las Vegas, when did you move to Las Vegas?
       6b. Why did you move here?
       6c. Where else have you lived?
       6d. How long did you live in each place?

7. When people ask you about being Latino(a), what do you say you are or how do you describe yourself?
8. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents?
9. Where were your parents born?
10. When did your parents come to the United States?
11. Why did your parents come here?

Class status growing up

I’m going to ask you a few questions about what life was like growing up.
1. How was your household structured?
2. What was your neighborhood like? For example, who lived there?
3. Did your parents (caretakers) own or rent?
4. Who lived in your home?
5. Did your family (caretakers) speak English or Spanish at home?
6. Did your parents (caretakers) speak English?
   6a. If no, do your parents (caretakers) speak English now?
7. What did your parents (caretakers) do for work when you were growing up?
8. How did being a child of Mexican immigrant parents affect your school experiences?
9. Did you attend public or private school?
10. Did you enroll in ESL classes?
11. When you were 16 or got your drivers license, did your parents buy you a car?
   11a. If yes, what kind?
   11b. Year
   11c. Make
   11d. Model
12. Did you work in high school?
   12a. If yes, where?
   12b. What did you do with your earnings?
13. Did your parents’ educational background affect your schooling?
   13a. If so, how?
14. Did your parents attend private school in Mexico?
15. At what grade/level did your parents end their education?

**Transnational experiences**

1. When growing up, would you say that you maintained ties with Mexico?
   1a. If so, can you explain what kind of ties you had?
2. Did you take family vacations to Mexico?
   2a. If yes, what are the 5 most frequented locations?
   2b. If yes, how frequently did you take vacations?
      A. Less than every two years
      B. Every two years
      C. One or Two times a year
      D. Three or more times a year
   2c. When you or your family went to Mexico, was it for vacation purposes, to visit family, or both?
3. Did anyone from Mexico come to visit you?
   3a. If yes, who, why, and how long did they stay?
4. Are their other ways that your family kept in contact with people in Mexico? (Mark all that apply)
   A. Telephone
   B. Letters
   C. Internet/Email/Instant Messaging
   D. Sending remittances
   E. Other ________________________________________________

**Personal transnational connections**

1. What are some of your current ties to Mexico today?
2. Do you or your parents hold dual nationality?
   2a. If yes, who holds it?
   2b. Why do they hold it?
   2a. If no, why not?
3. Do you or your parents own land or hold investments in Mexico?
   3a. If yes, where is the land located or what kinds of investments do you/they hold?
   3b. If no, do you/they plan to in the future?
4. Do you currently travel to Mexico?
   4a. If yes, who do you travel with? (Indicate all that apply)
      A. Friends
      B. Family
      C. Other-please explain____________________________________________
   4b. If yes, why do you go?
   4c. If yes, how often do you go?
      A. More than once a year
      B. Once a year
      C. Every two years
      D. Less than every two years
5. Do you send monetary support to Mexico?
   5a. If so, what kind?
      5b. How frequently?
   5c. What are a few of the reasons you send support?
   5d. When did you start sending support personally?
6. Do you call people in Mexico?
   6a. If yes, who do you usually call?
   6b. If yes, how often (on average) do you make calls to Mexico?
      A. Daily
      B. Weekly
      C. Monthly
7. Do you email friends/family in Mexico?
   7a. If yes, who do you usually email?
       A. Friends
       B. Family
       C. Work contacts
       D. Other—please explain___________________________________________
   7b. If yes, how often (on average) do you email contacts in Mexico?
       A. Daily
       B. Weekly
       C. Monthly
       D. Every few months
       E. Yearly
       F. Less than once a year

8. What has influenced you to keep in contact with Mexico?

INSERT SOCIAL NETWORK PROJECT (See Appendix B)

Ethnic identity in relation to connections with Mexico

1. If someone were to ask you “what are you?” How would you respond?
2. What events have influenced how you perceive your ethnic identity?
3. If they have answered that they have been to Mexico, when you are in Mexico, do you see yourself as Mexican?
4. Do you see yourself as Mexican like those who live in Mexico?
   4a. If yes, have you always felt this way?
   4b. How do you see yourself?
   4c. Have you always thought of yourself this way?
5. When you’re at work do you feel different than the other workers? —or—
   When you’re at school do you feel different than the other students in class?
   5a. If yes, please explain how you feel?
   5b. Why do you think you feel that way?
   5a. If no, what is it about UNLV that makes you feel at home? —or—
   5a. If no, What is it about your job that makes you feel at home?

Is there anything else that you would like to add before we end the interview?
I provided three by five inch note cards. I asked the participant to write the initials of no more than fifteen (living) people that they consider close to them, allowing for one name per card. Then, I asked the participant to place the card in no more than five rows in front of them. The row closest to them signifies a closer relationship than those further from them. They could have ended up with five people in the first row, one in the second, four in the next, and so on. I then asked them to put a star on each card that holds the initials of someone who currently lives in Mexico and to write the name of the country of anyone who doesn’t reside in Mexico or the United States.

After numbering each card (row one-closest to participant- card one, row two-card one, etc.), I asked the questions listed below for each card. I wrote down the number and corresponding notes about each person the participant discussed.

Initials on Card: _________________________________

Location:   United States   Mexico   Other_________

City: _________________ State: __________

Row:          1              2              3              4                 5

Number: _________________________________________

1. If they indicated that the person lives in the U.S. or Mexico:
   What city and state does the person live in?

2. Please describe the kind of relationship you have with this person?
   *It is ok for the person to belong to more than one category.*
   A. Family
      What is their relation to you? (ex. godparent, sister, cousin)
   B. Friend
      How would you describe your friendship? (ex. best friends, casual)
   C. Co-worker
      Is this a current co-worker or someone you worked with in the past?
If it is from the past, when did you work together?
How long have/did you work together?

D. Peer

Where did you meet this person? (ex. elementary, high school, college)

3. How long have you known this person? (years, months)

4. How often are you in contact with this person?
   A. Daily
   B. Weekly
   C. Monthly
   D. Yearly
   E. Other___________________________________________

5. How do you stay in contact with this person? Indicate all that apply.
   A. See them in person
   B. Phone
   C. Internet/Email/Instant Messaging
   D. Mail/Letters
   E. Other___________________________________________

6. What would you say is their class status?
   A. Lower class
   B. Lower middle class
   C. Middle class
   D. Upper middle class
   E. Upper class
Social/Behavioral IRB – Expedited Review

Approval Notice

NOTICE TO ALL RESEARCHERS:

Please be aware that a protocol violation (e.g., failure to submit a modification for any change) of an IRB approved protocol may result in mandatory remedial education, additional audits, re-consenting subjects, researcher probation suspension of any research protocol at issue, suspension of additional existing research protocols, invalidation of all research conducted under the research protocol at issue, and further appropriate consequences as determined by the IRB and the Institutional Officer.

DATE: February 5, 2009

TO: Dr. Jiemin Bao, Anthropology

FROM: Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

RE: Notification of IRB Action by Dr. Paul Jones, Co-Chair

Protocol Title: Bordered Identities, Class, Ethnicity, and Transnational Social Networks

Protocol #: 0811-2923

This memorandum is notification that the project referenced above has been reviewed by the UNLV Social/Behavioral Institutional Review Board (IRB) as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45 CFR 46. The protocol has been reviewed and approved.
The protocol is approved for a period of one year from the date of IRB approval. The expiration date of this protocol is February 3, 2010. Work on the project may begin as soon as you receive written notification from the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS).

PLEASE NOTE:

Attached to this approval notice is the official Informed Consent/Assent (IC/IA) Form for this study. The IC/IA contains an official approval stamp. Only copies of this official IC/IA form may be used when obtaining consent. Please keep the original for your records.

Should there be any change to the protocol, it will be necessary to submit a Modification Form through OPRS. No changes may be made to the existing protocol until modifications have been approved by the IRB.

Should the use of human subjects described in this protocol continue beyond February 3, 2010, it would be necessary to submit a Continuing Review Request Form 60 days before the expiration date.

If you have questions or require any assistance, please contact the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at OPRSHumanSubjects@unlv.edu or call 895-2794.
Agius, Jodi A. and Jennifer Lee  

Alvarez, Robert R. Jr.  

Anzaldúa, Gloria  

Bao, Jiemin  

Basch, Linda, with Nina Glick Schiller, and Christina Szanton Blanc  

Bauman, Zygmunt  

Boehm, Deborah A.  

2000 “From Both Sides”: (Trans)nationality, Citizenship, and Belonging among Mexican Immigrants to the United States. In Selected Papers on Refugees and Immigrants, Volume VIII. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants, American Anthropological Association.

Bourdieu, Pierre  

Burton, Tony  
City of Las Vegas


Clark County


Clifford, James

De Genova, Nicholas and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas

Dougherty, Lynn, dir.
1999 Understanding Race. 52 min. Films for the Humanities & Sciences. Princeton, NJ.

Ehrlich, Eugene, Stuart Berg Flexner, Gorton Carruth, and Joyce M. Hawkinski

Espiritu, Yen Le
Fernandez Kelly, M. with Patricia and Richard Schauffler

Fouron, Georges E. and Nina Glick-Schiller

Garcia, Aloma M.

Hall, Stuart


Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette

Kearney, M.

Land, Barbara and Myrick Land

Levitt, Peggy

Liechty, Mark

Miranda, M. L.

Nagata, Judith A.

Ong, Aihwa

Ortner, Sherry B.


Passel, Jeffery S. and D’Vera Cohn

Perez, Gina

Pew Hispanic Center


Portes, Alejandro and Min Zhou

Portes, Alejandro and Ruben G. Rumbaut

Prince, Sabiyha

Rosales, F. Arturo

Rosas, Gilberto

Rouse, Roger

Smith, Robert C.

Stephen, Lynn

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U.S. Census Bureau


Vila, Pablo

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Deans Honor List: 2001-2005

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