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Thesis

“Making it” in America:  
Understanding the American Dream in Trump’s America

Submitted by  
Dayla Weems  
(B.A., Trinity College, 2020)

In Partial Fulfilment of Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in American Studies  
Summer 2023

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## Cast of Characters

**Ana Maria Jimenez** – 42-year-old Mexican American woman, owner of The Mystique, a salon in Fort Stockton, Texas.

**Stephanie Carrasco** – 33-year-old Mexican American woman, Banker for Charles Schwab, resides in El Paso, Texas.

**Maricela Fuentes** – Middle aged Mexican American woman, oil field Operations Manager for Roy's Sand Co. In Midland, Texas.

**David Whaley** – Black 47-year-old man, Educator who has gone back and forth between the Oil Industry and Education Industry for work, lives in Fort Stockton, Texas.

**Emmanuel Rojas** – 21-year-old young adult who recently decided to withdraw from his First-Year at the University of Texas at the Permian Basin (UTPB) and now works in the Oil Industry.

## Introduction

The first beams of sunlight crept through the window of my childhood bedroom, casting a warm glow over the familiar surroundings. I took a deep breath and smiled, feeling a sense of comfort and belonging that I had not experienced in weeks after the United States declared a national emergency. I returned to West Texas in March of 2020 after Trinity College closed its campus while I was pursuing a master's degree in American Studies. Growing up in West Texas, I was captivated by the idea of the American Dream. The notion that hard work and determination could lead to success, regardless of one's background or circumstances, was powerful. However, as I matured, I came to understand that the American Dream was far from a simple or straightforward concept. It was complicated by factors such as race, class, and gender, and influenced by the unique history and culture of different regions across the country.

I recognized that to truly comprehend the American Dream, I needed to focus on the region that I knew best - West Texas. This area was often neglected by mainstream media and academic research, but it held particular significance for me. It was where I had grown up, where I had learned the value of hard work and perseverance, and where I had first contemplated the American Dream. As I set out on my research, I was both excited and apprehensive. I understood that given the times, it would be difficult to address questions about race, class, and gender. I also knew that I would need to somehow immerse myself in local communities to truly comprehend the issues that defined this region in the midst of a global pandemic. Nevertheless, I was determined to see my research through to the end, knowing that it could make a real difference in the lives of people in West Texas and across America.

As I delved deeper into my research, I realized just how intricate the issues facing West Texas were. The impact of the oil industry on the local environment was a significant concern, as

was the struggle to portray a specific political identity to achieve upward mobility. In addition, gender issues in the workplace, particularly for women in the oil industry, were a major issue, as was the ambivalent approach to education that many people in West Texas had. Despite these challenges, I remained committed to my research. I recognized that comprehending the American Dream in the context of West Texas was vital to understanding America as a whole. West Texas was a microcosm of the diverse communities that made up America, with its unique struggles and triumphs. By comprehending what the American Dream meant to the people of West Texas, I believed that I could shed light on the broader social and political issues that were shaping the country.

As I set out on my journey, I felt a sense of purpose and excitement tempered only by the knowledge of the difficult road ahead. However, I was ready for the challenge. I was ready to confront the complexities of the American Dream, to grapple with the contradictions and challenges that defined it, and to ultimately shed light on what it meant to make it in America in the Trump era. In the end, this story, as I believe, is reflective of America itself. It was a tale of hope and perseverance, of struggle and triumph. As I set out to uncover the secrets of the American Dream in West Texas, I knew that I was embarking on a journey that would change me forever. *Making it in America: Understanding the American Dream in Trump's America* seeks to explore the complexities and contradictions of the American Dream in West Texas. Focusing on the making of Hispanic conservative political identities, women working in the oil industry, and an ambivalent approach to education, this thesis aims to shed light on the challenges faced by those seeking success in the Trump era.

The research concentrates on a period spanning from the 2016 presidential election to the present day, a time of significant political and social change in America. Through a combination

of personal narratives and in-depth analysis, this thesis examines the experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds who are striving to achieve the American Dream in West Texas. The research questions this thesis analyzes, and answers include: How do individuals from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds navigate the challenges of achieving upward mobility in West Texas? What factors contribute to the formation of conservative political identities among Hispanic communities in West Texas? How do issues of gender, race, and class intersect in the workplace, particularly in the oil industry? And how does the education system in West Texas both facilitate and hinder social mobility? This research is centered around the personal narratives of individuals like Ana Maria Jimenez, Stephanie Carrasco, Maricela Fuentes, David Whaley, and Emmanuel Rojas. Their stories provide insight into the complex realities of the American Dream in West Texas and highlight the unique challenges faced by those seeking success in this region. Through their experiences, this thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the American Dream in Trump's America and to offer insights into how we can view West Texas as a quintessential piece of the American pie.<sup>1</sup>

### *Literature Review*

There has not been a lot of published scholarship describing West Texas as the heartland of America. Truthfully, scholarship on West Texas, in general, is scarce. Most research on West Texas revolves around the land's natural resources, such as groundwater, oil or gas. Other scholarship perhaps includes commentary on the US/Mexico border, however, that tends to concentrate more on the southwestern region as opposed to West Texas at large. This project is one of scholarly reporting, as per Andrew Ross.<sup>2</sup> My thesis combines cultural analysis with accessible narrative-driven storytelling to address a broader audience. If considering this work as such, there are several books that engage the issue of the American Dream in times of despair or



in the shadows of downsizing and deindustrialization such as: *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich,<sup>3</sup> *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond<sup>4</sup> and *Janesville: An American Story* by Amy Goldstein.<sup>5</sup> These works and those that are similar almost all focus on the rust belt as America's Heartland, haunted by the absence of industry. My work turns attention to a heartland that is organized differently. It is a historically multiracial landscape in America's borderland that is organized around the oil economy. How does turning attention to this different heartland offer a different story about the American Dream or "Making It" amid so-called despair?<sup>6</sup>

### *Methodology*

To compile this body of work, much thought was put into the type of research needed to express the sentiments of the residents of West Texas. Because West Texas is under researched, my methodology primarily consisted of original research through ethnographic interviews, primary source documents, oral histories, and visual or physical analysis. My secondary sources were used to substantiate my argument and relevancy of the research I produced, not necessarily to expound on research already conducted about West Texan ideals of labor relations, social mobility, race relations, nationality and political identity. I selected qualitative research because it gave me the opportunity to create an exposition as opposed to an investigation. Rather than having my research and interviews be solely inquisitive, I was able to piece together a variety of perspectives from West Texans. This allowed me to gather a more wholistic story as opposed to relying solely on my interpretation of happenings. I selected respective individuals based on their relevancy to the topics I explored in addition to their availability and willingness to share their story during the sensitive time of the pandemic.

Over the course of time beginning my research in 2019, I conducted a total of twenty-two interviews with West Texan residents. These were entrepreneurs, oil field workers, school board

members, educational administrators, college dropouts, and general community members. Their individual stories are what has made my work possible to complete. Initially, these interviews were conducted in-person, however due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the public health crisis, I pivoted to conduct these interviews online and over the phone. Prior to each interview, I shared the goal of my work, topic I was interested in exploring and sample questions. Each individual interviewed was given the opportunity to answer questions, ask questions, or, if uncomfortable, given the opportunity to only answer what they felt comfortable with. Everyone was also offered the opportunity to remain anonymous given the nature of this work and subject.

If it were not for everyone's generosity of time during the midst of me losing research during the pandemic, my research would be left incomplete and futile. Prior to the pandemic, I believed my research would answer the question “how can one ‘make it’ in America?” As time went on, and the question of *how* became instable due to a failing economy. Then my question shifted. Ultimately it became “what does it mean to ‘make it,’ to you, in West Texas?” With representatives from a variety of walks of life as West Texans, answers differed, and yet shared few common themes.

### *Chapter Breakdown*

**Chapter 1: Making it as a Hispanic Conservative.** This chapter will explore the complexities of political identities in West Texas through the personal narratives of Ana Maria Jimenez and Stephanie Carrasco. By examining how their experiences of upward mobility intersect with their political affiliations, this chapter will provide insight into the making of Hispanic conservative political identities in this region.

**Chapter 2: Crude Realities: The Untold Story of Women in the West Texas Oil Industry.** This chapter will share the untold story of Maricela Fuentez, an oil field operations manager for

Roy's Sand Co. in Midland, Texas. Through her experiences, this chapter will examine the challenges faced by women working in the West Texas oil industry, particularly in navigating gender expectations and traditional values.

**Chapter 3: Degrees of Opportunity: The Ambivalent Approach to Education and Social Mobility in West Texas.** This chapter will explore the ambivalent approach to education in West Texas through the stories of David Whaley and Emmanuel Rojas. Whaley, a Black educator who has gone back and forth between the oil industry and the education industry for work, will offer insight into the challenges faced by educators in this region. Rojas, a young adult who recently left university to work in the oil industry, will provide a perspective on how the education system in West Texas both facilitates and hinders social mobility.

## Chapter 1: “Making It” as a Hispanic Conservative

### *Into The Mystique*

On an October Monday in 2019, I decided it was time to finally take a return trip to The Mystique. I was eager to meet up with my aunt, Ana Maria, who is the owner of this popular beauty salon. In desperate need of a haircut, I drove downtown to Main Street, parked my car, and gazed out of my window at the pearly white doors of the salon. I stepped out of my vehicle, onto the dusty street and sidewalk, then opened the door to the building. Laughter and Tejano music filled the air as I stepped into The Mystique. In an instant, I felt like an eight-year-old walking into The Princess Fairytale Hall at Disney World. It was hard to believe I was still in the middle of nowhere, Fort Stockton, Texas. Like Disney, going to The Mystique was a magical experience for a woman who likes a little pampering and “self-care.” It is an oasis, not just for customers like me but also where especially the thirst of Hispanic cosmetologists can be quenched in the economic desert that is Fort Stockton.

As the rare successful Hispanic businesswoman, Ana Maria is the hope of what is possible. Alongside Ana Maria, The Mystique has six different stylists with their own booths. To the left is Monica, as the youngest stylist in the shop, most of her clients are trendy young people deeply concerned about social justice and social media. To the far right is Eliza whose clients tend to be older women in their late 50s and 60s. Eliza’s clients keep to themselves as they enter The Mystique but may give a side-eye to some of Monica’s young clients if they fail to maintain a modest hairstyle. It’s always a delicate dance between various political orientations and personal behaviors, rarely discussed explicitly but always played out in the theater of style. Nevertheless, the entire Mystique team carries a spirit of entrepreneurial hustle; the stylists are known for being the best.

Other Hispanic women may go to Headways, an older, more traditional salon three blocks up the street, or to another town if they have a family connection. White women from the Fort Stockton area mainly travel 100+ miles to Midland or Odessa, Texas; a town with a larger white population to get their hair done. The Mystique's presence on social media is also another reason for its success. Visitors from neighboring small towns often make a 45 minute to 1 hour drive to visit the salon. Employees at the Mystique may not be the youngest nor the most traditional stylists in town, but they carry excellence. Even Isabella, the Puerto Rican nail tech of the salon, though not Mexican like the other stylists, is known in the Mexican community for her designs. Behind Ana Maria's booth is a small clothing boutique filled with the newest western chic outfits owned by Andrea, another member of the team. As I finally approached Ana Maria's booth in the middle of the shop, she was bouncing back-and-forth with chatter. I took a deep breath and was grateful that on Columbus Day, a holiday in West Texas, Ana Maria could still squeeze me into her schedule.

Though just one of the girls, Ana Maria is known as the centerpiece of The Mystique; she is the owner, the visionary, and always up to date with the latest trends. Though Ana Maria never commanded attention to herself by being boisterous or brash, she drew people in because of the way she made others feel. Even if I was not a princess outside of The Mystique, as I took a seat in her chair, I felt like royalty. Luxurious golden wallpaper, a massive mirror, and bright magenta styling adorned her booth. If, I, or any one of her other clients felt dissatisfied, she would massage our egos with a compliment and smile trying to make sure that we got a taste of what we hoped for. Ana Maria would do anything to keep the value and spirit of this majestic place at a high-level. The Mystique was how she had made it: a physical reflection of her American dream story.

It had been a few months since we had seen each other, and I was not going to be in town very long. So I already knew I would be in her chair for at least an hour. We talked about a range of things, catching up about family and the success of the shop. But then I slowly shifted the conversation to get a sense from my aunt how she succeeded in the U.S. and what she thought it meant to “make it” more broadly, especially as a Chicana in West Texas. She immediately brought up the theme of sacrificing. Sacrificing was almost like a tradition in her family. As an immigrant to the United States from Mexico, her mother, worked extremely hard to establish the largest daycare in town. This meant late nights and long hours, but it paid off when Ana Maria’s mother was recognized as Fort Stockton’s businesswoman of the year in 2008.<sup>7</sup>

But for Ana Maria, sacrificing was more than working longer hours. In the world of beauty, she was dealing with adults and their both fragile and demanding egos. In order to keep people coming in the door, to pay the bills, and build a successful shop with the limited disposable income of many in West Texas, she also had to sacrifice a piece of herself, her personal identity. What makes Ana Maria’s story is that in order to climb economically, she had to adjust her personal identity to suit the political identity that was displayed before her, in the notoriously conservative climate of West Texas. Especially as a Chicana, Ana Maria had to mute the sense of having any strong opinions, especially around the very sensitive area of politics.

While Texas is a red state, the conservative identity is not monolithic. Conservatism is broad, and there are shared values with Whites and Hispanics – even if Whites are typically the ones holding the political power. For example, strong family, religious background, supporting law enforcement, and first amendment rights are all traditional conservative values that are shared between both groups. Conservatism is not always the best label since there are differences between being conservative and being a Republican. As political scientist Geraldo Cadava points

out, Hispanic “support for the Republican Party isn’t new, and, seen in historical perspective, it’s not surprising.”<sup>8</sup> But for Ana Maria who is a Chicana in West Texas, and her predominately Chicana clients, a beautician’s strong political position to the left or even too far right could result in a loss of revenue. So, Ana Maria became an adept listener and an observer of human behavior; performing the idea that she either had no political affiliation or held the same views of whoever was in her chair. Her success, her economic viability was built on salon visitors never realizing they were talking to a mirror. It was built on reflecting to clients whatever they wanted to see while Ana Maria made her distinct self invisible, especially concerning politics.

When I asked Ana Maria about how she usually handles political conversations with clients she responded, “if we share the same views, I can, you know, intermingle with them. But if we don't have the same political views, I just let them speak and then I hold my piece.”<sup>9</sup> Each morning as Ana Maria is getting ready, she is painting her face, determining which shade of red, blue, or something in-between to put on, and making detailed assessments of who she will be, all based on who she’s talking to that day. She reviews their political beliefs, their stories, their opinions, to the point where she realizes that years have passed, and she has neglected her own and become apolitical. She stated “I've had to shy so far away from it that I think it's pulled me away from being active in that world.”<sup>10</sup> When in conversation about politics Ana Maria does not claim a political side because she does not have one, she simply mirrors the political identity of her clients and “[goes] with whatever's put out in front of [her].”<sup>11</sup> So exactly what was “out in front” of Ana Maria in this sleepy West Texas town? What is the political terrain of West Texas that Ana Maria navigates daily and how does it shape her hustle for success in the role as a mirror?

West Texas is a region where conservatism is in the soil. How a person politically identifies – be it as Republican, Conservative, or apolitical is a secondary conversation because conservatism is the pathway for economic and social security. The skill or strategy of mirroring mainstream political identity is a strategy for many of those who we consider minorities in the southwest. I say perceive as minorities because, unlike most popular accounts, let's be clear: talking about West Texas is talking about Hispanic Americans. They are a population that makes up more than 65% of the entire West Texan region.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, to be Hispanic, conservative and from West Texas is not a farfetched idea. In fact, Hispanics in West Texas have long engaged in conservative practices to maintain the status quo. Why? Because while Hispanic Americans make up the majority of the West Texan population, they hold only a fraction of the political power that's in the hands of their white counterparts. While this is not a story about politics, this is a story about assuming a political identity to access power; as a pathway to upward mobility for Hispanic Americans, who are the numerical majority, in West Texas.

The shaping of Ana Maria's mirror identity was not an anomaly; many people in West Texas have their political identities shaped by their work. In a place where conservatism rules the political arena, Ana Maria revealed that specifically many small business owners "have to keep it neutral" in order to retain customers, she's been conditioned to view political conversations as a business risk.<sup>13</sup> She explained: "that [conversation is] not something I'm interested in. That's not something I'm going to look forward to," so she mirrors back what is out in front of her: a landscape of conservative values that go beyond simply electoral politics.<sup>14</sup> These values include: law and order, religion, pro-military, strong border control etc. While Ana Maria may identify as someone who is apolitical, she mirrors back conservative values to her clients given the overwhelming ethos that pervades West Texas. This chapter will explore the West Texan



political landscape through sharing the stories of two Hispanic women on their journey of upward mobility and how their work complicates and shapes their political identity. One claims to have no political affiliation which I define as apolitical, and the other identifies as a Republican.

### *Political Landscape of West Texas*

West Texas is a loosely defined region within the state of Texas, it is comprised of the counties west of the city of San Antonio and north of the Rio Grande River.<sup>15</sup> The political terrain of West Texas spans across the 16th and 23rd congressional districts. While district 23 contains the western outskirts of San Antonio and the bulk of western Texas, district 16 contains residents in the El Paso area.<sup>16</sup> Fort Stockton is located in the middle of the 23<sup>rd</sup> district, 312+ miles from San Antonio, Texas and about 240 miles from El Paso, Texas. District 23 is predominantly rural, with one of the lowest population densities in Texas.<sup>17</sup> Its political map is a reflection of the socio-political sphere; designed to swing votes towards the more populous areas of the district. Western San Antonio residents tend to be the biggest influencers in elections. For example, before 1993, the district was Democratic because the congressional map included a mostly democratic portion of western San Antonio.<sup>18</sup> Years later the district began to elect Republicans conveniently after the congressional map was redrawn, including a portion of republican western San Antonio.<sup>19</sup>

When San Antonio is removed from the scope of voters in West Texas, shades of blue quickly fade away. In fact, West Texas is widely known for being varied shades of red. Family values, religion, and the oil economy are the strongholds of West Texas. In almost every town, you will find a school, a church, and an oil derrick. This is because residents hold these things at a prominent level of importance. Political engagement is not a priority unless a person lives in a

space where their values do not align with the policy makers. What is interesting is that most state politicians do not campaign in West Texas, they feel that the population is too scarce, and the region is too broad to cover. Yet in a conservative political ticket, you will find the topics of oil, religion, education as central to their platform.

Other businesses are dependent on the disposable incomes that are generated by Big Oil. Political affiliation is largely tied to entrepreneurial interests, as an employee or small business owner, to be in good standing with stakeholders in this industry, one must support the oil and gas industry at all costs. Even though the oil field is not service based in the way cosmetology is, your ability to be employed is contingent on your reputation. Openly supporting a politician who is for green energy would not be a promising idea for those wanting to maintain clientele in a region dominated by the oil and gas industry. So, again, people's true political views are hushed at the job (or hushed *by* the job).

Politics in Fort Stockton are not as active or dynamic as they might be in a bigger city. Things are straightforward. The dominant political party has been Republican. Most of the politicians in the city are also small business owners. The current Mayor owns several car washes in the region, and three of the five city council members are also business owners.<sup>20</sup> The trend has been that in order to have a successful business, one must be aligned with the most popular political party or at least not make their political opinions known. In an economically desolate place, people vote with the party that aligns with where they hope to be. Ana Maria, who was born and raised in Fort Stockton, grew to understand the correlation of being a business owner, and how one's political views can help or hurt that business.

### *Shaping Ana Maria's Apolitical Identity*

As a cosmetologist, so much of who Ana Maria is, was shaped by the events that happened to her when she was younger. Ana Maria grew up in Fort Stockton, a small, middle-of-nowhere town in West Texas. In big sky country, everyone is familiar with Fort Stockton; though the town population barely rises above 8,000 people, outsiders know the good places to grab something to eat, they know the historical park, the famous roadrunner Pisano Pete, and where the local Comanche Springs are.<sup>21</sup> Fort Stockton had many opportunities for events, as a small town with a predominantly Mexican population, homecoming and prom were not the only major dates on the calendar. Though not directly on the border, families often make road trips to Mexico for school shopping, prom dress hunting and to visit family. About 75% of the population is of Hispanic or Latino decent and the majority of the population has roots in Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

15-year-olds book out the town's Civic Center for Quinceanera's for half the weekends of the year. This created the perfect opportunity for Ana Maria to build her skills. As Ana Maria developed her craft and people saw her work at weddings, proms, homecoming, games, and Quinceanera's, she became the go-to girl for cosmetics. She became *the* cosmetologist, the "MUA" (make-up artist) before that was even a coined term. But her success wasn't inevitable. In fact, it seems like Anna Maria was always hustling. She started out doing people's hair in-between classes and sports practice. It was amid the hustle when she came to a realization that she could actually make a living for herself in the cosmetology industry.

Most women in Fort Stockton who do not have a degree and would like to work, gravitate to service based businesses, the retail industry, administrative support for businesses or the school district. That's not to say there are no women in agriculture or oil, their presence is

rarer in those industries. For Ana Maria, doing hair became a vehicle to control her future. Cosmetology has been her safety net; she was able to create her own schedule doing something she was naturally gifted at; it gave her space when she didn't know what else to do. Despite being in the small town of Fort Stockton, Ana Maria was exposed to cosmetology early in her life through working underneath her aunt who is also in the business.<sup>23</sup> Ana Maria enjoyed doing the little things: picking up hair coloring, getting the chance to snip off split ends every here and there. In high school, she decided to take the cosmetology profession more seriously. Fortunately for Ana Maria, a cosmetology program had started at her high school.<sup>24</sup> She had the opportunity to take classes and graduate with a cosmetology certificate. She had already been exposed to the industry through her aunt; taking advantage of those classes in high school was just icing on the cake.

What she did not realize, though, was how much, in this industry of image, her life, her success, would be shaped by others' views or opinions. In a small town, Ana Maria's best marketing strategy was word of mouth. Her career in the industry took flight in the early 2000s, before social media shifted how cosmetology worked.<sup>25</sup> Though Ana Maria would not consider herself a people-pleaser, she is competitive; reviews or lack thereof shaped her exposure and success in the industry. Now, the community loves her, they love to give her the latest "chisme" or gossip, they update her about life with their kids, or get advice on prom dresses and makeup looks. Her success is dependent on giving people what they want, not only through hair and nails but in the refuge that The Mystique provides. And I loved being there but, until recently, I had missed so much of the dynamic work lying just beneath the surface of hairspray, make-up, and glam.

*“I was always taught ‘you don’t.’”*

One of the easiest ways to shy away a customer is to put them in an uncomfortable situation for a long period of time. Ana Maria is very gifted with coloring hair, especially bleaching; this process can take up to four to five hours. But she was perhaps even more gifted at creating a sense of intimacy, cataloguing the lives of her clients while never revealing much of anything about herself. When I asked Ana Maria how well she gets to know her clients, she responded:

“I have a close relationship with every client that I have... by the time they leave [the salon], we're friends. I've never had a client that I don't know nothing about. And when they come in...I remember the last conversation we had. So, I check up, you know, "has your daughter had her baby?" "Did your daughter move already?" You know? I always know what's going on with my clients, like I always know...”<sup>26</sup>

Like the old saying goes there are two conversations that Ana Maria has kept “totally out the door”: political opinions and religious views.<sup>27</sup> She discussed this from a business perspective initially, mentioning that she never wanted potential clients who identify differently than she does to feel unwelcome in the shop. She never wanted there to be “talk about ‘I'm not going in there because they're there. You know, they support Trump, and we hate Trump!’”<sup>28</sup> Ana Maria has done her best not to engage in politically charged conversations with clients and potential clients, she revealed, “you know, I've been doing this since I was 18... I was always taught you don’t.”<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, this has led her down a path of little to no engagement in the policies that shape her life and her business, down to the local level. When I asked Ana Maria how she identifies politically, she responded: “It’s horrible to say, but I don’t even vote... it's been years, years since I've voted. I don't vote for anything, not county, city, national, nothing.”<sup>30</sup> In the conversation she kept returning to the busyness of her work, as a single mother of two, recently remarried, she is consumed by work, simply trying to support her family. Oftentimes she’s only

focused on what is right in front of her. If an opportunity is presented to give an opinion about politics, she'll simply remove herself from the conversation by leaving the room, unless the client initiates the conversation, and they share similar views.

Though Ana Maria would not consider herself someone with any solid political stances, she is opinionated about the issue of immigration on the U.S.-Mexico border. These views stem from her understanding and interpretation of her family history. In the late 1950s Ana Maria's grandfather, Romelio, traveled from Chihuahua, Mexico to install telephone poles across rural areas in West Texas. Romelio crossed the US-Mexico border with legal documentation for work. His goal was to save up enough funds from work to send for his wife and four children and establish his family in the United States. Nearly a decade later, when Ana Maria's mother was ten years old, she immigrated with her mother and three siblings to the United States. Though she never had the opportunity to finish high school, she received a shot at "making it" by establishing a daycare in town. After establishing herself as an integral member of the community in Fort Stockton, the entrepreneurial spirit was passed down to the next generation.

Ana Maria believes her family's migration to the United States is the correct way to enter the country, despite a person's circumstance.<sup>31</sup> As a first-generation immigrant she believes that those doing illegal border crossing now are vastly different than those who came before her. In her perspective they are not trying to "make it" in America, they are trying to, in her words, "receive handouts for government assistance."<sup>32</sup> Ana Maria is not completely against government assistance, as she received assistance from the Economic Development Board in the process of building The Mystique. The board gave her \$1,500 for each person she employed, and she employed seven people.<sup>33</sup> But she has disassociated herself from the links between her government assistance and the "bad immigrant build" solely because her family had legal

documentation to begin work, and legal documentation of citizenship when they received their residency.

Despite her opinion, in the rural towns like Fort Stockton, immigration has not been looked upon as something negative. For decades, what we today would call illegal immigrants provided the backbone for the dominant farm economy, as a cheap labor force. Ana Maria's family, once they migrated from Mexico worked on the many ranches and farms on the outskirts of Fort Stockton while Romelio serviced telephone poles. It was a familiar landscape for them, being from ranch towns in Chihuahua. They could see cows, horses and small farms within a 10-mile radius. In fact, just 30 miles north of Fort Stockton is Coyanosa, Texas, one of the largest suppliers in the state of watermelons, cantaloupe and pumpkins. Ironically, one problem the farms Ana Maria's mother worked have recently faced is finding enough workers to man the fields.<sup>34</sup> While the actual Fort Stockton history around border crossing is complicated, in more direct border towns such as El Paso, opinions about immigration are polarizing.

### *Becoming a Hispanic Conservative*

Stephanie Carrasco was born and raised in the closest major city to Fort Stockton: El Paso, Texas, a border town only five minutes away from Juarez, Mexico.<sup>35</sup> Her father's family has been in the states for five to six generations and her mother's family between two to three generations.<sup>36</sup> In most respects, the border crossed them. Stephanie's maternal grandfather was a hard worker who spent most days doing strenuous work in the cotton fields.<sup>37</sup> Achieving the dream for his generation, according to Stephanie, was simply to get to the United States.<sup>38</sup> Her maternal grandfather's generation was not concerned with building generational wealth or about an education, it was simply to "survive and sustain" the dream of living in America.<sup>39</sup>

Stephanie's parents took over her father's family construction business that was founded the generation before.

Maintaining a family business in a border city unfortunately became a financial struggle. As a border town, many immigrants take advantage of opportunities to work in the city.<sup>40</sup> So, there is a lot of traffic of Mexican citizens coming to nearby border towns, like El Paso for work. On early morning commutes, people can see the lines for Mexican workers waiting to cross the bridge into the United States for work.<sup>41</sup> It is often backed up with people waiting to get clearance to make their way to El Paso causing traffic delays. Immigrants like these are also often seen by conservatives as the reason why their city is overcrowded, or not maintained. Stephanie explained "many times my parents' business had to compete with others who were hiring [undocumented] immigrants as workers and paying them low wages to save money."<sup>42</sup> Rather than seeing this as exploitation of people from her ethnic background, she was taught to see this process as a business threat. Her parents never hired undocumented immigrants and spent more money paying their workers a higher wage.<sup>43</sup> This created a strain on the family business, especially during low economic seasons, and pushed Stephanie to redefine what the American dream was to her.

As Stephanie grew older, she did not want to rely on the fluctuating economy of the family business, what she desired in a career was to "establish something consistent."<sup>44</sup> She started as a bank teller in her early 20s and moved up quickly in the ranks because she had the desire to provide more for her children than what her parents were able to provide for her.<sup>45</sup> Similar to Ana Maria, her economic success was tied to the political terrain of West Texas. Stephanie began working at Wells Fargo Bank in Midland, Texas, a predominantly white town close to Fort Stockton.<sup>46</sup> Midland is notably Republican; it's the hometown of former President



George W. Bush. Conservatism in Midland is different than that of the small-town Fort Stockton because whites are the majority.<sup>47</sup> In Midland, white people may be comfortable in sharing an opinion that can be perceived as politically incorrect. However, in small towns like Fort Stockton or areas where there is a large Hispanic and Latino population, there is precaution in sharing political opinions due to the fact Hispanic and Latinos make up the majority, not whites.

Though Stephanie is Mexican, most of her coworkers in Midland were not, therefore when they engaged in conversation, they spoke no different than when they would have conversations with other White people. The banking world exposed her to people who grew up in completely different circumstances than she and the generations that came before her.<sup>48</sup> One of the biggest differences was generational wealth.<sup>49</sup> Stephanie admitted that before banking she was more liberal:

“That’s really just what [I] knew [when I] grew up. So, when I left [El Paso] I just got exposed to...a completely different mindset. When I came back to El Paso everybody's like, ‘whoa, you're like this mega Republican now, like what happened?’ And I said, ‘hey, you know, I've been able to sit down with some very wealthy people and, you know, their mindsets and their values, just really align with what I believe in and what I think is right.’<sup>50</sup>

Through banking in Midland, she was able to see grandparents, parents, and children who came from one family have a large set of assets that changed hands between family members.<sup>51</sup> This was different from her family that was just able to barely survive the move from Mexico to America. Her embrace of explicit republican identity was aspirational, it aligned with the lifestyle she wanted to secure.

Stephanie also saw the importance of having assets such as homes, IRAs and a savings account.<sup>52</sup> On the one hand, her clients were able to have more opportunities for expanding their wealth simply because of their credit score. On the other hand, some of the people she grew up around were skeptical of banks and having someone else hold money and assets. Her loyalty to

the Republican party increased because of a nexus of beliefs about US–Latin American relations like the United States as the protector of freedom in the world and market-driven capitalism as the best path toward upward mobility.<sup>53</sup> As she built a career as a successful banker in Midland, she continued to surround herself with people from the financial sector who espoused explicit Republican ideals.

She learned that there was more to the American dream than simply paying off a mortgage and having a car. She began to learn the benefits of investing in stocks, real estate, and an education.<sup>54</sup> Abiding by more of the principles she was taught in banking, Stephanie associated her growing financial success with her evolving conservative political stance. Her belief system changed because she was able to provide two to three times more for her children than what her parents provided for in her childhood.<sup>55</sup> She felt that her success came from embracing her political views, speaking openly about them, and aligning with like-minded people, that it opened the door for financial advancement.<sup>56</sup> She networked with people who were able to put her in touch with influential people within her career field.<sup>57</sup>

Eight years after moving to Midland, Texas, Stephanie began sharing with others that politically she identifies as a Hispanic Conservative, an ideal that expands far past the scope of social mobility.<sup>58</sup> She started to feel comfortable speaking about political topics that put her in the position to have the unpopular opinion as a Hispanic conservative. She gained a sense of confidence that her political views were justified because those around her (mostly white conservatives) were supporting her ideals and beliefs. In a place such as Fort Stockton, Stephanie would often get into political debates because many people felt her views were not supportive of her culture, especially in her thoughts on immigration.<sup>59</sup>

After feeling outcast by some of the people she knew, she began sharing her political beliefs with her family. She has been able to influence some of her family members and impact their political identity along the way, especially her mother.<sup>60</sup> During one of these conversations, her mother stated “you know what? I think my views are more aligned with conservatives.”<sup>61</sup> Stephanie believes without sharing the knowledge or experiences she had, her mother “may not have ever tapped into that different view of thinking because she's in El Paso, and that's all she's ever known.”<sup>62</sup> Unlike the small town of Fort Stockton, El Paso is known for having a more liberal population. The population is about 74 times larger than that of Fort Stockton, so there is a broader range of views.<sup>63</sup>

*“We truly are ‘the silent.’”*

After marrying her husband, Stephanie moved back to El Paso, a city where she was at a crossroads because of the city’s prominent policy makers.<sup>64</sup> She liked the political atmosphere in Midland, however, she wanted to be closer to family. El Paso is known for having various cultural festivals throughout the year and celebrations of Mexican heritage. The influence of the Mexican culture is undoubtedly in the atmosphere - which is something that she doesn’t fully embrace. This is why the label Hispanic conservative carries heavy weight, especially since former President Trump made comments about Mexicans. Stephanie has seen others making comments on social media such as “how can you vote for a guy that would deport your family?”<sup>65</sup> She sees that being associated with the Republican Party that has developed a tag of “racist” outside of her circle.<sup>66</sup> Stephanie revealed: “I don't feel like I can be out there and in your face, like, ‘hey, this is what I support,’” despite her strong belief that these ideals have transformed her way of life for the better.<sup>67</sup>

Stephanie is a firm believer in America first, during our conversation she mentioned that in general, the state should be more concerned about helping “our own” first.<sup>68</sup> She also believes that immigration opportunities should be limited as there are “veterans and even homeless people in the United States who need the help” more so than Mexican immigrants.<sup>69</sup> As a result of this, she believes human trafficking has increased since people are going “around the government instead of through it.”<sup>70</sup> Like Ana Maria, Stephanie has disassociated her family from the “bad immigrant” type because her family came to the United States legally and continues to abide by the laws of the land. Stephanie doesn’t believe that immigration is bad, she simply believes that everyone should have to go through due process, just as her family did.<sup>71</sup>

Stephanie has become very strategic about what, when, and where she expresses her political opinions because “God forbid it pisses someone off at work.”<sup>72</sup> She shared a story with me of her children participating in a mock election at school:

“[The kids] were super excited to vote because, you know, they hear what we talk about, and they may not know any better... but they heard that we support Trump. So, they were excited to vote for Trump, and um yeah... they got bullied. I mean, they got picked on! And [the kids] were like, ‘that's so bad!’ and a couple of the teachers made comments. As much as I wanted to go and fight that fight. I said, ‘you know what, it's not worth it.’”<sup>73</sup>

Stephanie has since then been very particular about her social media presence. Anything she publicly shares on social media; she’s made sure not to post her political affiliation.<sup>74</sup> Because she now lives in El Paso, which is moderately liberal, the last thing she would want is for her political affiliations to affect her livelihood and her children.<sup>75</sup> Over time she has learned to keep a circle of safe space for political expression with friends who support her ideals. In regions beyond the south, some may consider Stephanie an anomaly as a Hispanic conservative. Stephanie however, knows she is not alone, she believes that Hispanic conservatives in West Texas “truly are ‘the silent;’” even if they are not always the majority in El Paso.<sup>76</sup> She has found community and her experiences are hardly unique in West Texas.

For Stephanie to believe she's made it she must preserve her ideals.<sup>77</sup> While she's proud of her political identity, she is fearful now of the power of backlash on social media.<sup>78</sup> El Paso in the 2010s became more politically diverse and she now feels that her political views are not aligned with the majority.<sup>79</sup> While she has applied what she learned from her mentors in banking and her intention is to provide a life she was not able to have for her children, without exposing her beliefs to critique, she loses the opportunity to close holes in her philosophy. In the journey to "making it" it appears as though Stephanie has lost a connection to the very ideals that got her to where she is now: hard work and perseverance. But then the global pandemic changed everything and for these women it forced them to reassess an uncomplicated embrace of conservatism as the pathway to their American Dream

### ***Impact of COVID-19***

*"We were raised to obey and follow the rules."*

On March 13th, 2020, Governor Greg Abbott declared a statewide emergency after the mass spreading of COVID-19 in the state.<sup>80</sup> The pandemic affected Ana Maria in many ways. Her toughest battle was sustaining herself and her family financially.<sup>81</sup> While some businesses in town received financial assistance in order to stay open, The Mystique did not.<sup>82</sup> This was largely because her business was considered non-essential.<sup>83</sup> But for Hispanic business owners, small service outlets like beauty salons were essential to the survival of the community. During the heat of the pandemic, shortly after Governor Abbott's emergency declaration, The Mystique had to close. Ana Maria was extremely eager to return to work, however she wanted to ensure that she and her customers would be safe. Ana Maria stated that her background undoubtedly affected her response to shutting down. She explained, "we were raised to obey and follow the rules and not question authority. I always feel like when someone questions the rules or law it's

because they feel some sort of entitlement.”<sup>84</sup> Other salon owners, especially white ones across the state of Texas wanted to remain open, to make money, and some even directly defied the public safety plan.<sup>85</sup>

Ana Maria was afraid to open the salon because of the regulations the Texas Department of Licensing and Registration (TDLR) set forth during the COVID-19 lockdown.<sup>86</sup> Salon owners “were threatened to be fined and have [their] license revoked.”<sup>87</sup> That alone for Ana Maria was enough to keep the salon shutdown. However, she confessed to me that she continued to work from home, secretly, “I scheduled appointments and made the money I needed for my family to keep us afloat.”<sup>88</sup> The two-month closing actually opened up more time for Ana Maria to reflect on her personal opinions and brought an awareness to issues she was overlooking. About two months later, on May 18th, Governor Abbott officially allowed for salons to reopen.<sup>89</sup> After this, it was back to business as usual for Ana Maria and the rest of the people of West Texas. America, however, would not be returning to “normal” for quite some time.

*I will tell you that “Black Lives Matter”*



The death of George Floyd on May 25th shook even the small town of Fort Stockton. A few others and I gathered for a small, peaceful protest in honor of the #BlackLivesMatter movement at Zero Stone Park about a five-minute walk from The Mystique. Approximately 60 people attended what was arguably the first protest the small town had seen in Zero Stone Park. Ana Maria was not in attendance; however, this did not prevent the conversation of “Black Lives Matter” from entering the shop. After photos and videos from the protest were posted online, there were mixed opinions concerning the “desecration” of the American flag by the letters “BLM” with spray paint.

A few days later, a conversation sparked up in a small group at the shop concerning this topic. Ana Maria shared with me that she overheard a few Hispanic women in the shop discussing how much “disbelief” they were in about the “disrespectful” young man who desecrated the American Flag.<sup>90</sup> “So, this is the only time that I-- well probably not the only time. But one of the times, it really got under my skin,” Ana Maria expressed.<sup>91</sup> One of these women, Delilah, had a close family member who was part of the military and very “passionate” about the flag.<sup>92</sup> Ana Maria outlined that she has never had anybody close to her in the military. She stated, “I don't disrespect it, but what the flag and the symbolism and means to [Delilah] doesn't mean the same to me.”<sup>93</sup> This conversation was an explicit breach of her “mirror” politics, Ana Maria confronted Delilah, the woman criticizing the protest and stated to her:

“But I will tell you that Black Lives Matter because all my nieces and nephews are half...so that movement is closer to me because it's a part of me. It's a part of who they are...You probably don't have family members who are half or black, you may know someone but if you don't have a family member, then you're not going to feel like I feel about it. Just like I don't have anybody in the military. I'm not going to feel the respect like you feel over the flag.”<sup>94</sup>

The combination of the pandemic and a very personal connection to Black Lives Matter, disrupted Ana Maria's reliance on mirror politics, Ana Maria had to truly look at her reflection

and determine her stance. For that moment, Ana Maria was empowered to use her voice in the workplace despite the risk of creating tension with a customer and the other cosmetologists in the shop.

Though she didn't assert her personal belief, she spoke back to the customer stating that they did not have enough experience with Black people to comment on the emotion behind the protest and gave an ultimatum to agree to disagree. It was in this moment that she decided that she was no longer going to mirror her clients as she had done in the past, even though she knew this might affect her financially, she felt that the connection with her family was more important. The pandemic gave many people the chance to reflect on the economy, politics, and the way of life they wanted to live. While it took time to adjust, most people came to enjoy life at home. They enjoyed the relaxation of working from home without the pressure of going to the office. Employers soon would also realize the economic benefit of people being home. However, what this also did was allow people to state political opinions which they might not say in the physical presence of others. It was during this time that we saw more hate speeches being done. People took a stance on whether they wanted the government telling them what to do such as wearing a mask, getting a vaccine, how and when they could travel, etc. For conservatives, they had to take a stand on voicing their opinions.

Stephanie reflected that she was grateful for the pandemic giving her increased family time that she otherwise would not have had when working heavily.<sup>95</sup> Stephanie works for Charles Schwab, a major banking company.<sup>96</sup> She was able to receive extra financial assistance of a \$1,000 bonus to help offset any financial burden with COVID-19 and a \$250 stipend for technology.<sup>97</sup> The transition to a work from home posture was much easier for her company than others. She mentioned that several people around her were "fortunate and unfortunate."<sup>98</sup> Her



parents, on the one hand, had to lay off many workers in their crew since there were no jobs coming in for them to work. Stephanie described that former brick masons are now on a temporary layoff “accumulating that unemployment” in a negative context.<sup>99</sup> Whereas herself and her coworkers, on the other hand have been able to maintain their job at a sustainable company and transition with the times.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps in line with her political views, initially Stephanie shared that she held strong reservations about wearing face masks. She was unsure of how effective the masks truly could be in protecting against an airborne virus.<sup>101</sup> But she researched the effectiveness of masks early on and concluded from the research she did herself that she was going to “buy them and in every color.”<sup>102</sup> During the Fourth of July Stephanie’s family bucked pandemic mandates and gathered together to celebrate the patriotic holiday. She described the situation like the family “threw in the towel,” they are a large family and had been separate for a long time.<sup>103</sup> She said, “we wanted to see each other, so we took the chance.”<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately, Stephanie learned that her mother was diagnosed with COVID-19 shortly after the gathering.<sup>105</sup> During the celebration, Stephanie was one of the few that were strict about wearing masks and social distancing. Her kids did not social distance with their grandmother but wore a mask the entire time. After Stephanie’s mom tested positive for COVID-19, all the adults got tested and came back negative.<sup>106</sup> While most in her political community held strong beliefs that masking and quarantine was an infringement on their civil liberties and economic well-being, she believes that mask-wearing and social distancing actually protected her from getting the virus. As for her kids, she “[believes] in [her] heart that the masks protected them.”<sup>107</sup> Despite her party affiliation, this personal interaction with COVID-19 has affected her opinion on the use of masks. In this case, her personal experiences trumped Stephanie’s economically motivated political views.

*She's just Alicia*

During the pandemic and in the wake of George Floyd's death, Stephanie has also become more intentional about engaging with friends and family members who do not align with her political beliefs. Not only did she reach out to check on their well-being, but she also started talking more explicitly about race and even equity. Describing the racial makeup of El Paso, around 80% of the population is Hispanic, Stephanie said, "I guess the topic of racism has never really...been an issue, fortunately for me growing up."<sup>108</sup> The pandemic and ensuing racial reckoning after George Floyd opened up conversations that she "never thought [she] would have to have with [her] kids so early on."<sup>109</sup> She mentioned her daughter was on TikTok and was exposed to videos of George Floyd and protests, so she had to "think fast" to explain what racism and injustice is.<sup>110</sup>

After a separate conversation with a cousin-in-law, who is African American, she revealed to them that she has not taught her kids to "see color," to which the cousin's response was "well you should."<sup>111</sup> He shared with her that everyone is different and acknowledging those differences is okay, that she should explain to her children that just because we don't look alike, that doesn't mean that we can't share the same values.<sup>112</sup> She had "never thought about it that way," and began to tell me about her childhood friend who is mixed, like myself, being Black and Mexican (which is not identified as white in West Texas).<sup>113</sup> "[When] I'm seeing [Alicia], I don't see... she's Black or she's Blaxican or whatever. She's just Alicia, you know, we grew up together. We've been best friends since we were three," Stephanie explained.<sup>114</sup> The only time she ever felt threatened for her "race" was in August of 2019 when there was an active shooter in El Paso attacking Mexicans.<sup>115</sup> Stephanie believes that the Mexican community responded differently to a "direct attack" on their community, "we reacted in a sense of morning and

sorrow,” whereas the death of George Floyd led to protesting and riots.<sup>116</sup> She understood that the situations were different but linked them together because they were on the same topic of race. Stephanie confessed it had been tough for her to understand but, she has tried to maintain an open mind.<sup>117</sup>

Although Stephanie herself is still learning how to understand the injustices taking place in the United States, one key shift in her mindset is the “silence factor.”<sup>118</sup> When she was growing up and she saw mistreatment, it was normal to remain silent. Now, however, she wants to teach her children to go into “those tough situations and, you know, put a stop to it. That’s going to be the best thing that I can tell them, you know, is not be silent and not be an observer. But be that supporter.”<sup>119</sup>

Ana Maria and Stephanie were not exempt from the ways COVID-19 exposed underlying vulnerabilities in West Texas and ultimately the United States. Not only did it impact them financially and physically, it impacted their mentalities. Ana Maria and Stephanie both took calculated risks. When conservatism failed to provide the economic and social security, they believed it would, their political views went against their norm. The season prompted conversations they never intended to have, and although overall their political views did not shift, there were notable changes from exposure to diverse thought and new vulnerabilities. While their journey to “making it,” shaped their political thought, during the time when the nation was suffering, silence on social and political happenings was no longer their answer. These stories are not exclusive to West Texas or new to America, it is simply how two women from this region navigated the region to take control of their futures.



## **Chapter 2: Crude Realities: The Untold Story of Women in the West Texas Oil Industry**

### *Throwing the Lifeline*

It was 2:30 AM on a rainy spring night in west Texas. Maricela Fuentez woke up to an urgent phone call from one of her oil field drivers working the night shift for a sand delivery.<sup>120</sup> Calls after midnight never seemed to bring good news. Thoughts flooded her mind about what might have happened. As an operations manager for a startup oil company, Maricela always had to be ready, ready for the best and ready for the worst. That's why she made her duffel bag her lifeline.<sup>121</sup> Early on as a worker in the field she learned to pack a bag with every item she could possibly need in the case of an emergency.<sup>122</sup> After the call on the rainy night, she immediately threw on her work clothes, which included her coveralls and steel toe boots, and then grabbed her duffle bag that lives by her front door.<sup>123</sup> Hoping not to wake her husband and daughter, she tip-toed out of her bedroom and out the front door.

Leaving her family in moments like these betrayed the conservative values of the Hispanic household that she grew up in; the family always came first, especially for the women in the house. While it may have felt like a breach of her Hispanic womanhood, the reality is that Hispanic women in the United States have often worked in many settings outside of the home, including many who have worked alongside their husbands. Maricela transitioned to working in the oil industry because her husband's oil industry income was not enough to finance their daughter's education.<sup>124</sup> Economic instability in the United States today makes it impossible to even aspire to the desired status of a stay-at-home mom with a breadwinning husband.<sup>125</sup> It's all hands-on deck if you want to make it. While Maricela loved working in such a lucrative job, she worried if her work would adversely affect her family. Such self-doubt was just another symptom of being a woman working in a man's world. As she makes her way to her truck, she

reconciled her ideals with her reality. This work *was* serving her family. She took a look at the night sky and plugged in the rig's location to her GPS. The drive from her home to the oil rig was often dark and serene. But the pelting rain on this night changed that.<sup>126</sup> Workers tend to struggle with staying awake on the night shift, but with adrenaline flooding through her veins and anxious to get to her stranded oil field driver, Maricela hardly blinks as she's on the road.

Tumbleweeds, the rain, the stars, and her thoughts are the only things that keep her company on the lonely drive. Here she was, leaving her husband, who had just come back from a long shift in the oil fields, and leaving her daughter, who was just getting through her first semester as a freshman in high school.<sup>127</sup> What mattered more? Maricela's husband's and daughter's desire for her presence or the needs of a stranded oil field driver? She tried to convince herself that supporting her family just looked different in modern America. Taking on the role of what she considered being a professional caretaker became a way of survival. But it prevented her from being the traditional caretaker at home.

The decision to transition from working as a newspaper reporter into the oil industry was one she made with her husband to create a financially stable family in a changing economy.<sup>128</sup> They had decided that it would not be like this forever, only while her daughter was in high school. Then the path would be paved for her daughter to have a debt free education, or at least as close to it as possible, and Maricela would be able to go back to reporting. But she could not fast forward through the process, so here she was, sitting in the car, feeling the mom guilt for yet another time. Perhaps caring for this oilfield worker would be a viable way to relieve her of the guilt she was feeling. In her rearview mirror she sees the lights of the town fade to black. The closer she gets to the rig's location, the further away she is from civilization.

It is no secret that the oil industry is a dangerous place to work. In the terrain of West Texas, workers have to watch out for rattle snakes, tarantulas, mountain lions, etc.<sup>129</sup> Once workers arrive on the oil rig site, the potential hazards only increase. In addition to being extremely cautious of their environment, they must also become aware of their exposure to poisonous gasses like H<sub>2</sub>S which kills people within 60 seconds of inhalation while also operating heavy and dangerous machinery.<sup>130</sup> 90 miles away from her home, Maricela remembers the warning that her stranded driver gave, “when you get closer to the rig location, there’s a dirt road. Stay close to the outer rim of the road, otherwise you’ll get stuck in a massive ditch.”<sup>131</sup> Maricela makes a turn from the main Interstate 10 highway<sup>132</sup> Now, she is only a few minutes away from the location her driver sent.

Finally, the GPS pinged when she arrived. Scanning the road right and then left - she found her driver, just as he warned, stuck in a massive ditch. The guilt of leaving her family behind decreases as she sees that the driver is bleeding badly. Maricela learned that as he was driving in the rain he could not see the ditch he was approaching and had mistaken it for a pothole.<sup>133</sup> When his front tires hit the bottom of the ditch, the impact was so great that he bounced up and the top of his head smashed into the rigid plastic of his hard hat.<sup>134</sup> The driver’s skull burst open and the bleeding started.<sup>135</sup> Maricela was the first on the scene, assessed the situation, and went into crisis prevention. She then pulled out her personal lifeline, the duffel bag and helped to get him out of the rain and to safety.<sup>136</sup> She felt a sense of accomplishment by doing something that most people would not think a woman could do. Risk averted, another emergency night call handled by a woman doing a man’s job – all while the day-shift managers and her family were at home asleep.

As a bold Hispanic woman, Maricela grew into being a dependable hand on the rig by answering the hard calls like saving her driver at 3:00 a.m. There are not many women in the oil industry, and if they are employed, they are secretaries or trainers.<sup>137</sup> However, being a woman working a job that requires you to visit oilrigs in an actual oilfield is very rare.<sup>138</sup> Like other women working in male dominated sectors across the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she understood as a woman, many would not take her seriously, thus her leadership capacity tended to be limited. Working in West Texas also meant that she would be competing with conservative ideals surrounding gender roles and familial constructs. While her husband may still hold the breadwinner title in her household, Maricela must also work alongside him in the manly oilfields in order for her family to maintain stability.

Over the course of time, women found different ways to be present in the world of work while not posing a threat to the social ideals about gender roles. Maricela adopted the persona of “caretaker” to allow her to hold a non-threatening presence in the dangerous oilfields. In many ways, this persona benefits women because they are able to conform to traditional gender norms. However, it can also limit women's opportunities for career advancement and perpetuate gender stereotypes in the workplace. Unfortunately, for women like Maricela, this persona at work also compromises their desire for the position of caretaker at home. In this chapter, I will unveil the struggles women working in the oil industry face by looking at the underlying vulnerabilities of gender inequality, work-life balance, and job intensity in the age of late capitalism.

The reality of the economy in West Texas does not align with the patriarchal values that dominate both the home and the workplace. The oil industry can be volatile, with fluctuations in oil prices and job availability; this can lead to job insecurity for workers. To mitigate these risks, some families, like Maricela's, choose to have two incomes from the oil industry to provide a



more stable financial foundation. As patriarchal values dominate the oil industry culture, women who work in the industry face many challenges that are not present for their male counterparts. Through sharing the story of Maricela Fuentez, “Tending the Field” explores how women working in the West Texas oil industry are consistently navigating a tricky crossroads of work, gender, and traditional values. It is a place where the promises of capitalism come crashing up against the realities of life in modern America. Before unpacking the impacts the industry has on women like Maricela, it is important to understand what the oil industry is and how its culture is unique for women working in this particular male dominated industry.

### ***Big Oil in West Texas***

West Texas is known as the oil capital of the United States.<sup>139</sup> Not surprisingly, oil here has played a significant role in the economy for decades. That role, however, has been shaped by the region's unique geography and sparse population.<sup>140</sup> With a low population density, those involved in the oil business have had to find innovative ways to exploit natural resources while minimizing the need for extensive labor.<sup>141</sup> In West Texas, the structure of the oil industry has traditionally been dominated by large, vertically integrated companies that control every aspect of the supply chain, from exploration and production to refining and marketing.<sup>142</sup> These companies have invested heavily in infrastructure, such as pipelines, storage tanks, and refineries, to transport and process the oil efficiently.<sup>143</sup> The region's vast, sparsely populated lands have also made it an attractive location for smaller, independent oil companies. These companies typically focus on niche areas, such as drilling shallow wells or targeting specific reservoirs, that are not economically viable for larger companies.<sup>144</sup> They may also specialize in a particular type of oil or gas, such as natural gas liquids, which have a high value but require specialized equipment to extract and process.

In order to properly utilize the specialized equipment, these oil companies divide their employees based on the type of labor being done in the industry.<sup>145</sup> Men in the field can work in various positions out on a location. There are delivery drivers, pumpers, and drillers working on the oil rig derrick.<sup>146</sup> In the portable offices out on the rig's location, Measurement While Drilling (MWDs) operate behind a screen as the engineering minds alongside operation managers and general overseers.<sup>147</sup> Then, maintenance workers fix equipment that may not operate properly to ensure the site is fully functioning 24/7.<sup>148</sup> Although the site operates 24/7, as an employee, productivity is inconsistent; there's a constant precarity of work. There are not seasonal or yearly calendars that employees follow to help determine when they will be sent out to work at a drilling site.<sup>149</sup> The rhythm of their work depends rather heavily on the dance between government regulations and consumer demand.<sup>150</sup>

For employees inconsistent productivity manifests itself in a variety of ways. With MWDs, Operations Managers, and sometimes even maintenance workers, there are moments of intensive work and then hours of non-work.<sup>151</sup> My father worked in the oil industry for many years as an MWD. For him, intensive work as an MWD meant that while out on location he would have moments where he was multi-tasking: on his computer observing how fast per hour the drill was going into the earth and training the person who would take over on the night shift. In moments of non-work, he might recognize that the drillers ran into complications and his reports would not be needed until drillers hit an obstruction or oil, this process could take longer than 4 hours.<sup>152</sup> During times like that he would work on other things, watch a television show, or call his family - if he had cell service. He would rarely explore other parts of the drilling site due to the environment. Oil sites in West Texas are vastly different than what people may see in movies like *Deep Water Horizon*.<sup>153</sup> The terrain in West Texas can be brutal, especially in the

summertime and during the mid-day. Employees not only have to navigate wearing heavy protective layers in the West Texas heat, but they also must be aware of the wildlife in an oilfield.

An oilfield is the area of land that yields the petroleum the oil industry uses.<sup>154</sup> While driving on the highway they are easy to identify by seeing the drilling rig (which look like mini Eiffel towers), pump jacks, and red-orange flames used to burn hazardous gasses. In West Texas, the environment surrounding the oilfield is a natural wasteland. Many of the oil rigs in the field are located between 30 to 50 miles away from a town.<sup>155</sup> As a West Texas resident, I saw the power of the oil industry pervade my home life. There were times when my dad when working as an MWD Operator, living out on an oil field for 30 days, coming home for four, and then getting called back to work.<sup>156</sup> I was not the only person in my friend group who had a father working in the field. It seemed as if perhaps a small segment of my friend group's parents worked in education, the food industry, or in banking, but most spent some time working in the oil industry.



Figure 1. A Colgate Energy LLC oil drilling rig stands in Reeves County, n.d. (Photograph by Callaghan O'Hare in Texas growth offsets rig count dip elsewhere By Jordan Blum.)

<https://www.chron.com/business/energy/article/Texas-growth-offsets-rig-count-dip-elsewhere-13247918.php>

When West Texans imagine an oilfield, they do not think of an open plain with pools of oil throughout, because that is not what an oilfield looks like. Instead, oftentimes, an image of an oil rig or pump jack appears in their mind. An oil rig, which is sometimes called a drilling rig, is the platform used to drill underground for oil.<sup>157</sup> The rig is a structural metal tower that holds drilling pipes in place.<sup>158</sup> It also is the machine used to create holes in the earth through intense drilling. In West Texas, an oil rig's crown typically rises between 150-200 feet.<sup>159</sup> The staircase and platform are entirely made of metal for durability.<sup>160</sup> The oil rig itself is an extremely intricate object, it is composed of many parts, each needing its own special attention. This image is significant to keep in mind because this is where the majority of work-related injuries and deaths take place.

The work is toilsome and dangerous which explains why it is a male dominated field. Even after the significant advancement of machinery in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the oil industry still needs significant manpower to operate pumps, drills, and other machinery for discovering and extracting oil.<sup>161</sup> The men that are primarily operating the intensive labor aspects of the industry are also those that make up the "man camps" on oil rig sites.<sup>162</sup> Man camps are temporary housing facilities located near oil rigs and drilling sites that provide accommodations for employees. This is typically those that reside too far away to commute back and forth between where they live and the drilling site.<sup>163</sup> The impact of man camps on the culture of the oil industry has been significant because they create a culture of isolation and exclusion, particularly for women and other marginalized groups who may not feel comfortable in these predominantly male environments.

### *Culture of the Oil Industry*

There is a sense of loneliness and isolation working in the field. Workers that make their way out to work on oil rigs are several miles outside of a town.<sup>164</sup> When thinking about workers in West Texas, specifically the Permian Basin, population density is already extremely low.<sup>165</sup> Even when you travel into the closest town, the largest town a worker could travel to in the Permian Basin would be Midland or Odessa, Texas, where the population combined is about 343,000 people.<sup>166</sup> So even if a worker wanted to travel into town to interact with people, often times it is not going to be a massive city that they're able to engage with civilians. Midland and Odessa do not have oil rigs near the city, which means that often times oilfield workers in the Permian Basin are actually traveling 50 to 100 miles to get to work.<sup>167</sup>

Most of the time oil workers will not have cell service or internet connection, so they must use things like internet projectors and cell boosters to get a connection to do the job that they are tasked with.<sup>168</sup> For the average oil rig to operate it needs almost 100 crew members.<sup>169</sup> They divide the shifts into two crews.<sup>170</sup> They have a dayshift crew and a night shift crew.<sup>171</sup> While the dayshift crew has the opportunity to go back home or to go into town in the evenings, the night shift crew does not have that luxury because most the time during the daytime, they are resting.<sup>172</sup> This is another reason why many women are not dominant in this field, the hours are long, and the shifts do not correlate to having a successful family life.<sup>173</sup> Adding yet an additional layer of this being a male-dominated industry, as a woman you will be extremely isolated working out on the field.

Loneliness is not simply being away from civilization, for oil industry workers, this is also being isolated from other worldviews. Oilfield workers are not completely alone in the field, as stated, there are about 50 people on a location per shift.<sup>174</sup> However, being a woman in this

male-dominated arena, you might feel alienated even more.<sup>175</sup> The West Texas political landscape is predominantly conservative. If an oilfield worker transitions into this region with a liberal mindset or wants to make an impact in the oil industry through endorsing countercultural norms like being safe with the environment and going green, they may not be liked by their peers.<sup>176</sup> That is because they would ultimately be advocating for something that may threaten their livelihood.

Big oil has its own unique industry code of conduct and ethics.. This is likely due to the significant economic and political power that the industry holds, as well as the complex and potentially hazardous nature of oil extraction and production. The influence of the oil industry on everyday life in West Texas has been significant because of the region's close ties to the industry. The oil industry has had a profound impact on the region's economy, environment, and culture, and has arguably shaped the morals and values of those who work in it. For example, while the rest of the country is upset about rising gas prices, West Texans see the rising prices as a sign of job stability.<sup>177</sup>

My father explained that often times he would run into people who not only had a conservative ideal, but many of them did not understand cultural sensitivity and were culturally incompetent.<sup>178</sup> He had several interactions with people who were racist, and other instances of racism that happened while he was out on the night shift.<sup>179</sup> Such instances can be handled by HR, but it isn't an easy task. Finding a time to talk to the appropriate chain of command might take several weeks due to scheduling.<sup>180</sup> And by the time a charge is reviewed, it is highly likely that the rig's job is almost done.<sup>181</sup> In the end, there are often no reprimands and no consequences for the people who make racist remarks in the oil field.<sup>182</sup> The same holds true for any situations of sexual harassment on the job site.<sup>183</sup>

*The Nature of Women in the Oil Industry*

The oil industry, however, is not solely an industry, it is also a culture. The job itself is hard labor that involves lifting and carrying heavy objects and the conditions are outside in the Texas heat which usually ranges between 90-105 degrees.<sup>184</sup> The shifts are typically twelve to fourteen hours and often times require staying on locations in the middle of nowhere.<sup>185</sup> This is why oil has been traditionally deemed “man’s work.”<sup>186</sup> West Texan women in the early 1900s took care of the home and children while men went out to do the work.<sup>187</sup> This gendered division of labor did not change until the 1970s, when women were employed to work on rigs and platforms.<sup>188</sup> Here was the beginning of a new era in which women began to play a more significant role in the oil industry and challenge traditional gender roles.

Even to this day, women who work in the oil field are likely in administrative roles in the office space.<sup>189</sup> Some of the gendered segregation of labor goes back to the dangers of working in the field and the sexist presumption that women are incapable of enduring through danger. Oil field work is an extremely labor-intensive job, and if a person cannot handle the extreme heat in West Texas, handle heavy machinery, or handle being out on location at an oil site, then they are indeed unable to do the work. Of course, there was often nothing preventing women from transitioning into these jobs beyond plain sexism. Even though women have proven their mettle in the field and have conquered oil field jargon, the work remains a male domain. And even the women in office work in the industry are frequently employed off site.<sup>190</sup>

## *Women in the Industry*

### *Gender Inequality*

For an operations manager like Maricela, hours of non-work look very different than the men in the industry.<sup>191</sup> Non-work translates to all of her caretaking responsibilities being fulfilled and her oil field operations running smoothly. This means that she would not have to correct anybody in her staff because operations are already on site. For maintenance workers, downtime might look like arriving to a location to perform maintenance on a set of equipment, not knowing how long it will take, just to find that the piece of equipment only needed a tune up to work. Hours of intense non-stop work are just that: intense. I remember my dad speaking of days where under a specific contract, there were so many obstructions the drillers ran into.<sup>192</sup> Rather than having three to four hours of downtime, he could not even get 30 minutes for himself.<sup>193</sup> He ended up having to stay awake for three days straight because of the amount of work needed through the drilling and directing.<sup>194</sup> Maricela wore many hats for the company, her position changed nearly 20 times.<sup>195</sup> She started off as a sales operator where essentially her job was to check on all the drivers to ensure they received all necessary products that the inventory was properly accounting for all they maintained.<sup>196</sup> She also had to do drivers' logs and make sure that drivers complied and ensure that all the units had the right certifications.<sup>197</sup> Sand companies are essential in the fracking industry because whenever drilling takes place at different levels, a specific type of sand is needed at each level in the process.<sup>198</sup> She explained to me that she "was pretty much doing the whole job until [she] hired someone else to do THE job."<sup>199</sup> Which meant essentially, she had to do everyone's job until she could hire somebody to do the job for her.<sup>200</sup> The company was still seeking to hire an operations manager, which was essentially what Maricela was doing from the start.<sup>201</sup> Maricela was okay with not being paid to do the work of an



operations manager because she was still content and satisfied with the pay that she was receiving.<sup>202</sup> She said, “with my work ethic, it is not about my title, I am just a team player, and I will do whatever it takes.”<sup>203</sup>

Eventually the company did hire an operations manager, but he lived out of town and because of Maricela’s devotion to the company she was just more accessible.<sup>204</sup> So even if they had a man filling the position, she tended to pick up all the slack.<sup>205</sup> Eventually operations managers would be laid off due to their lack of availability or end up shifting positions to work closer to where they live. There always seemed to be a reason for why things were not working out with the operations managers the company hired, yet they still did not take Maricela into serious consideration for the position.<sup>206</sup> Maricela expressed to me with some discontent, “I was always the default. They always relied on me to train them.”<sup>207</sup> She said that she would consider herself a “good” right hand man, but unfortunately, she’s a woman.<sup>208</sup> At times she would think and question why they would not just hire her, but so long as she was getting paid a decent amount, she didn’t mind it until the company started going through multiple operations managers.<sup>209</sup> They had gone through six operations managers before they considered her, and she received the official title of operations manager.<sup>210</sup> When I asked how much more the male operations managers were making than she was while she was essentially doing their job, she didn’t know. She answered that she “didn’t care to know because she was happy with her work and her pay.”<sup>211</sup> Because in the grand scheme of things she was making “three times more than she had ever made [as a reporter].”<sup>212</sup>

After some time, the company had grown significantly. It needed to divvy up branches and split the sand and fuel portions of the company.<sup>213</sup> Sand and trucking went in one direction and the fuel portion of the company went in another direction; Maricela went with the fuel

because she was given the opportunity to lead operations.<sup>214</sup> She emphasized that when this happened it was not because they chose her, it was truly because of default, nobody else was lasting in the position.<sup>215</sup> Very few people could handle the demand of the job; the company was running 24/7 operations, 365 days of the year.<sup>216</sup> She had reached the six-figure range so she believed it was paying for what she was doing. Maricela did not deny that there is a difference in how male employers in the field treat woman. She explained “I don’t think they want to pay for what they get, they want to go the cheapest route. They want to roll the dice with somebody who doesn’t have the maturity level or the experience.”<sup>217</sup> This is able to happen often because the women working in West Texas do not have many offers to expand their income. They are mostly in education, restaurants, and entrepreneurship. The oilfield offers them an opportunity to make money they likely would not have made otherwise.<sup>218</sup>

Oil rigs function like New York City: they never sleep. The reason many workers are expanding their income drastically by working in the field is because the work is nonstop.<sup>219</sup> So even if women are hired at a lower rate they stand to get time and a half after 40 hours a week.<sup>220</sup> Many people can work 40 hours in just three days on a rig’s location.<sup>221</sup> The tradeoff for women is that oftentimes they are placed in a position to be around men who “do not respect women” - and not just for hours, but days on end in an isolated space with limited protection.<sup>222</sup> Maricela explained "when you are around that you just kind of get desensitized, you know... I have. I have lots of layers so it was easy for me."<sup>223</sup> She did not hide the fact that her mental health had been affected by her work. I heard her take a deep breath, then she admitted “the oil field abuses your mental, physical and emotional state.”<sup>224</sup> And although she is not considered “one of the guys” she’s considered as someone with “very thick skin.”<sup>225</sup>

Having thick skin was needed in the sand industry, especially as a woman working

closely with truckers and operators after a business deal is made.<sup>226</sup> Truckers are sent to a specific location to pick up the items needed to fulfill an order made by a company. Maricela was the person who would communicate with truckers after an order and direct them on what needed to happen for a smooth operation ultimately ending with the trucker receiving the sand.<sup>227</sup> Truckers would line up and wait for directions on where to move as they wait to complete their order for pick up.<sup>228</sup> At times the truckers would get impatient, perhaps Maricela's operations were running behind schedule because of multiple pickups, perhaps the trucker was strained from driving hours without a break, whatever the case might have been, she learned to stand firm and keep her ground.<sup>229</sup> Maricela described that truckers would call her a bitch or say she was power hungry or ignore her altogether and ask for the "real" boss.<sup>230</sup> It was obvious that they did not have respect for her as a woman who was running the operations behind the scenes. Maricela would tell truckers after their complaints: "you can say whatever you need to, we are still not going to give you your sand, until it is your turn."<sup>231</sup>

As an operations manager Maricela saw many instances of good conduct in the field, but she also had seen and heard of misconduct in the field. One of the ways she directly took matters into her own hands was by intentionally scheduling women who were scale operators to work during day shifts and her male scale operators to work during the night shift.<sup>232</sup> It had come to her attention that some of the women scale operators felt uneasy with working overnight. This was mainly due to leadership often not being on site unless of an emergency and drivers behaving inappropriately or saying something that was unsettling for her women operators.<sup>233</sup> Maricela always made sure to let the woman know that she was only a call away because safety was first and foremost.<sup>234</sup> For her safety was not simply protocols being followed with

equipment, it was ensuring that are women were working out safe and comfortable conditions so they could do the job they were paid to do.<sup>235</sup>

Another way that she looked out for other women in the field was by being honest about attire. She wanted to protect them as much as she could since gender roles were extremely traditional in the field. Out on the rigs, men thought that women should not be out there in that role, they were supposed to be home watching the kids and making dinner. She would tell her female employees that they were indeed in a man's world. "If you do not want to be... attacked or spoken to any certain way, then don't behave like that we always make sure that our order polo shirts, you know no cleavage. If you don't want to be spoken to don't speak to them in a certain way, do your job," she would warn them.<sup>236</sup> By her taking on the personal of caretaker became a way of survival and gave her credibility in the field but prevented her from being the caretaker at home. Her ability to be caretaker at the rig was her way of negotiating gender tension, she took on being the mother on the rig because she couldn't be the mother at home. Caretaking became a sense of survival and pride on the rig, but a sense of failure at home. In talking to me she spoke with a sense of angst of leaving her family home in order to provide for her family.

### *Work life balance*

Maricela Fuentes did not begin her work-life in the oil field; this was something that she stepped into later when she realized that she was not going to be able to afford to pay for her daughters' education. All of her work experience prior to working in the oil field was self-taught, when she started out, she was an administrative assistant in the field simply helping to manage a start-up sand company. She was confident in her ability to help because she had a lot of background in computer programs and office management in other previous roles.<sup>237</sup> She did not

go to college and does not have a degree, so she understood that she had to work hard in order to maintain her job and to move up the corporate ladder.<sup>238</sup> Outside of being a reporter, Maricela also had work experience in the law enforcement field but working for the government “doesn’t pay.”<sup>239</sup> Much of the benefit she received would be long-term, and her daughter’s graduation from high school was approaching closer and closer. Rather than waiting for an opportunity to fall into her lap, she began to take matters into her own hands and speak with some of her family and friends who had experienced working in the oil field.<sup>240</sup>

Maricela had many things that she wanted to enjoy in life, and the oil field helped her “get there faster.”<sup>241</sup> The drawback that she understood going in was that there was a sacrifice of working longer hours and being away from home. This is why whenever she started her searches, she was looking for things in the administrative field.<sup>242</sup> Administration matched her work experience and there was some promise that she would not have to be away from home for so long. Maricela’s husband was also working in the oil field at the time, so she understood the type of money that she could potentially make working in the field.<sup>243</sup> She wanted to contribute. Her crossroads was making the decision of staying in her administrative position working “paycheck to paycheck” or to take a risk and gamble on how much money her family could make by making it in the field.<sup>244</sup> However, she also realized the very reason that she was looking for a job in this field, (her family) could be the very thing that she could lose by working long hours and being away from home. This was something that she would have to get used to if she wanted to get ahead faster.

Maricela put in her two weeks' notice to her job place without another position lined up in faith that an opportunity would show itself.<sup>245</sup> For five days she was unemployed, reaching out to family and friends asking for them to keep an eye and an ear out for opportunities.<sup>246</sup> On her

fifth day of unemployment, she got a phone call from a friend who heard about a couple of businessmen that were staying at a hotel in Fort Stockton, Texas from the northern part of the state.<sup>247</sup> The businessman was from a company in North Texas owned by an affluent family who owned a trucking company, sand company, and a fuel company.<sup>248</sup> These two individuals were the director of procurement and their sand sales manager.<sup>249</sup> The company decided to build and grow their business in West Texas, and in Fort Stockton specifically because interstate 10 served as a central traffic artery for their business.<sup>250</sup>

At the time, they just so happened to be looking for someone to help run their start up sand company and had asked her friend who worked at the front desk for referrals.<sup>251</sup> Maricela said she had just told her friend earlier that day that she was looking for an opportunity.<sup>252</sup> This was a friend who only knew her work ethic from working with Maricela in the Lions Club of the town.<sup>253</sup> The friend completely endorsed her in the business and the men were sold so they called Maricela to schedule an interview that day.<sup>254</sup> She rushed over to the hotel and prepared for the interview, they were so impressed by her that they hired her that day and she became the first employee for this startup company.<sup>255</sup> Maricela had the opportunity to help this business get built from the ground up. This was just the opportunity that she was looking for. Here was something where a woman could serve in a position of power alongside her male counterparts, both making good money, even though huge gender disparities in pay and work expectations remained. In fact, Maricela did not know of any other woman in a position like this.<sup>256</sup> Everyone else she met in a leadership position was male.<sup>257</sup>

Maricela dove headfirst into the opportunity. She did not take the position lightly and after she was hired she immediately began hiring drivers and other parts of her staff.<sup>258</sup> She ordered furniture for the empty trailer that her supervisors were working from, desks, dry erase

boards, meeting equipment, you name it, Maricela had her hands in to make sure that things were completed in a timely fashion.<sup>259</sup> She stayed with the company for eight years and her position changed approximately 20 times.<sup>260</sup> Maricela grew extremely devoted to the company, she was a team player, and was willing to do whatever it took to keep the company afloat. Her job became 24/7 because she was filling in as the operations manager that her company didn't have the ability to hire upfront.<sup>261</sup> The job became her life because it was an operation that ran 24/7 year-round. In fact, she became the "go-to man" for six years. She was also excited by her six-figure salary. Everything was paying off, and Maricela also believed she would eventually get recognition for the work she was doing.<sup>262</sup>

At the time she started, her daughter was around 14 years old and in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, a first-year student in high school. Maricela's job was located on an oil rig just outside of Fort Stockton, so she was not too far from reach. But still, it was a very demanding job.<sup>263</sup> She was working quite literally 24/7. If someone was absent, Maricela was called to fill the gap. Her supervisors leveraged her proximity to the site for things like meeting truckers for late night drop offs to checking inventory and managing last minute issues at the terminals.<sup>264</sup> The expectation was that because she was closer to the rig's location, she would not have a rough time dropping everything and tending to the issues at hand.<sup>265</sup> In fact, she was closer to the problems that popped up more than many of her coworkers. She admitted she was not around for much at home. Although "you're making 3 times as much money but you're aging 3x as fast," she explained. Maricela missed a lot of her daughters first high school games and activities and any event she did make, Maricela was rushing from the oil rig into town to catch a glimpse of something...anything.<sup>266</sup> Maricela didn't mind this because as a woman, she was already used to multitasking, already used to doing two things at once. She didn't mind working 12–14-hour

days and rushing home from the field in order to see her daughter participating in school events.<sup>267</sup> Maricela shared that to be a successful woman working in the field, one must value and have excellent communication skills with their significant other and family, otherwise the job will interfere with a marriage and a family.<sup>268</sup>

The job grew into being more demanding and the 12–14-hour days became 16–18-hour days.<sup>269</sup> If Maricela wasn't asleep, she was at work, the job became her life, and she was unable to balance it all and multitask in the way she used to. Maricela talked about how she felt she was watching her family's life through a lens.<sup>270</sup> She was not there physically, but she felt she was kept in the loop through pictures or videos. This was not how she wanted her only daughter's last years of being in her household, but she kept saying that this would be a way to set her daughter up for life.<sup>271</sup> Her husband became the one who was there for her daughter at a lot of her school events.<sup>272</sup> He did not have such a rigorous work schedule and he got more phone calls from her daughter because he was more readily available.<sup>273</sup> In the middle of our conversation, she paused and stated: "I can honestly contribute my divorce to my oilfield job."<sup>274</sup>

It is hard to maintain communication when you are in the middle of the desert at a rig with no cell service. She stated it takes extremely strong values and excellent communication between spouses to not allow for the job to interfere with a marriage.<sup>275</sup> In Maricela's situation both her and her husband were working in the field so the strain on her marriage intensified even more than a couple that only has one spouse working in the field.<sup>276</sup> She prioritized work because her mindset was that in prioritizing work and being away, she was creating a way to support the family by creating greater financial stability and allow for their daughter to graduate with as little debt as possible.<sup>277</sup>



It wasn't until later that Maricela had the revelation that though she was making more money, time was passing by for her so fast. She went from rushing to make a game to missing her daughters' games because she was out in the field. She would have to work overtime in her personal life in order to maintain relationships. The luxury of making oil field money comes at the sacrifice of your personal well-being. She enjoyed the freedom from financial stress. But the truth is, it took her away from the very things she was trying to preserve – her home. As someone who grew up in a Mexican household, Maricela was used to never having a man in the home. The oil industry is filled with present but absent fathers, but when she became a present but absent mother – it put a large strain on her family. It was countercultural for the woman to be absent. And as Maricela said, unless you are fortunate enough to have an oilfield job within the community you're living in, the job will, in fact, take you away from your family.

Eight years later Maricela would not change anything because it allowed her to provide for her daughter who graduated from college with a degree that Maricela never had the opportunity to pursue. She admittedly said she's also an "adrenaline seeker," which made her desire to go back to the job daily despite how much it was tearing her family apart.<sup>278</sup> "The fact that I could do every aspect of that job, the fact that I was in charge, the fact that I was working in an industry where it wasn't normal [for me, as a woman to work], I wanted to be *that* person."<sup>279</sup> The fact that she could not be the housewife speaks to the gravity of the new conditions in the new economy. She HAD to work to mobilize her family. If not, her daughter would be in debt through the roof trying to get an education and break out of the blue-collar mold.

*Job Intensity*

It pays to be in the oil field. Maricela shared that whenever she began working in the field, she started making three times more than what she had ever made. During Covid-19 the work in the industry slowed down drastically and there were a lot of layoffs. Maricela went back to working for the government in the town of Fort Stockton.<sup>280</sup> And went back to making 1/3 of what she was in the oil field. It was the safer track; she had been in the field for nearly 10 years and the necessity for her to be working in the field was no longer there. She was back to leaving work at work and being home on the weekends. But with no family really to turn to because she had gotten a divorce and her daughter graduated from college and moved to another city. She misses the field and longs for a time when the income of the industry will be steady enough again for her to work in the field.<sup>281</sup>

Around the time of our interview she had actually got a call back from the company saying that they had an opportunity open for an office manager at one of their facilities, and of course, Maricela's name was brought up as being someone who was reliable and could get the job done.<sup>282</sup> They needed assistance with staffing and getting their personal files in order, as well as doing payroll and scheduling.<sup>283</sup> This is something that she could do in her sleep, so she was not surprised that they had called her.<sup>284</sup> She was the first person that the people who hired her preferred to be an operations manager for the position. She did do an interview and had not heard back from the company, but she longs to be back in the field.<sup>285</sup> Her decision of whether or not to go back into the industry is truly based on if the company will pay her well.<sup>286</sup> At the place she is at now, it is less strenuous, and the labor isn't intensive. The job she interviewed for would not be as intense as what she was doing before the pandemic, but it would take her out of town again. She did have a salary requirement so it may deter the company from hiring her now that she now

knows what she's worth. As our conversation closed, she sighed and looked to the side, and shared "I don't think they are willing to pay me what I think I'm worth."<sup>287</sup>

Maricela's story speaks to the American dream because it's one of success and overcoming obstacles that people would never dream would be possible for them. Women in male dominating industries often have to take on supplementary roles in order to be viewed as valuable or a necessary on the job. Her story also represents the struggles of the family navigating through the new economy in the United States. To survive economically in West Texas, a family must be connected to oil in some way. As a woman, Maricela working in the oil industry and working out in the field is nontraditional. She is fortunately one of the few woman in these various capacities. For successful woman in a male-dominated industry, the crude reality is that there must be a compromise between choosing to tend to the home or be valued and given equal opportunities in the workplace. Maricela chose to be a caretaker in the field to those around her and those who she could protect, like other women working in the field.<sup>288</sup> She also liked multi-tasking and getting things done without being asked because she felt that she could see the needs of the company even without being asked.

Maricela chose to replace her biological family with her work and this was not an easy decision. While she did gain monetarily, she lost time and relationships that are not easy to get back. This is not just a symptom in West Texas, it is taking place all over the United States. When given the opportunity to pursue a passion beyond a traditional female role, the challenge is conflicting not because of skill sets but because of the fight against traditional values. Many women must choose which one is more important to them, their career or their family and follow that path. Therefore, we often see career women with no children, or women who choose family, might not be in leadership roles. This is also one of the reasons that there are not many women in

the oil field. The long hours and strenuous work do not make it easy to have a work-family life balance.

## **Chapter 3: Degrees of Opportunity: The Ambivalent Approach to Education and Social Mobility in West Texas**

### *Navigating Education and Industry in Rural West Texas*

The Monday after the Fourth of July in 2015 David Whaley relocated from Fort Stockton, Texas, with his entire family to arguably become the first Black family to reside in Imperial, Texas.<sup>289</sup> 18 years prior, as a prospective college athlete, Whaley decided to put his dream on hold and leave his basketball scholarship to the University of Texas at San Antonio, along with the city to marry his soon-to-be wife, Norma Fabela.<sup>290</sup> This time around, the decision to leave his home was an opportunity to put education and basketball back at the forefront. Whaley received a job offer in Imperial that gave him the ability to coach his son as the Head Varsity basketball coach for the Buena Vista Independent School District.<sup>291</sup> Along with being the coach, he joined as the school counselor, technology director, and college dual-credit proctor/teacher.<sup>292</sup> As the first Black person to hold an administrative position, Whaley had a desire to change the small town's outlook on his race from just what the population saw on TV.<sup>293</sup>

His impact was felt through the many hats he wore, and Whaley's presence became an intimate part of the school's atmosphere; he brought in a diverse group of students, from new transfers seeking dual-credit opportunities to student-athletes looking for a college scholarship.<sup>294</sup> His two children were the first Black students to grace the halls of Buena Vista High School and soon the first to graduate from the school. In rural West Texas, those who meet in the high school's board room every two weeks wield a tremendous influence.<sup>295</sup> Unfortunately, when a series of transformative changes began to take place within the Buena Vista School District, the school board deliberated on whether these changes, which challenged

the status quo, were positive or negative.<sup>296</sup> It became evident that certain board members sought to uphold and perpetuate Whiteness as a fundamental source of power and privilege in the town. In April 2018, following a closed session during a school board meeting, a vote was conducted, resulting in the non-renewal of Whaley's three-year contract.<sup>297</sup> This meant they let go not only the sole Black employee in the school district, but they also succeeded in displacing the employee's family.<sup>298</sup> Essentially by firing David Whaley they removed all the Black people from the town. For Whaley, this meant his new dream was put on hold and the career path in education once again became a secondary option for upward mobility.<sup>299</sup>

This was not the first or second time that Whaley had pivoted from education back to the industry that kept the lights on for his family.<sup>300</sup> In 2018, with three kids in college, he returned to the oil industry.<sup>301</sup> Though working in oil was not his passion, David Whaley excelled in this lucrative type of work.<sup>302</sup> He understood the ebb and flow of work in the oil field.<sup>303</sup> He knew when to look for jobs in the discovery sector to best position for social climbing.<sup>304</sup>

That said, Whaley's forays into education were hardly flights of fancy. Alongside oil, education is a dominant industry in West Texas. In fact, many school administrators are very impactful to their community because so much of what they do affects the small rural towns.<sup>305</sup> They are landowners and employers for the majority of the townspeople.<sup>306</sup> However, even with their influence both at the school and in community, the youth are still uninterested in obtaining higher education.<sup>307</sup> Rather than working for what could be deemed as an essential and primary local institution, many young people seek employment in other industries, the most promising of course being oil.<sup>308</sup> This phenomenon has taken place because 1) educators in West Texas are viewed as non-progressive traditionalists by the youth, 2) the lure of the lucrative oil industry, and 3) West Texans value economic class over one's social status and influence. Despite

educators holding key positions as administrators functioning as a governing force in the town, education, both as a career and as a discipline, is a secondary route to upward mobility. This goes against the traditional view of education being the gateway to success.

### ***Impact of the Education Industry on Rural West Texas Communities***

#### *Education and Community at BVISD*

Beneath the surface of small rural towns in West Texas are independent school districts that can run an entire town's population.<sup>309</sup> Education administrators carry relevance and influence in West Texas because of the impact of education policy on communities.<sup>310</sup> These school districts, and the buildings that they are attached to, are not simply buildings or houses but socially constructed sites. Most of these sites are a part of the residue from the Jim Crow era in the south. Though the policy has changed and made it illegal to control a site based on its racial makeup, the decisions made in school board rooms have an impact on rural communities. The town of Imperial, Texas, where David Whaley was residing, showcases how towns in West Texas are shaped by school policy and administration.

Imperial, Texas, has a population of less than 300 people.<sup>311</sup> Its small size creates a unique environment for its citizens. For example, the town is governed directly by Pecos County and the county office is located in Fort Stockton, Texas, which is 31 miles from Imperial. Because of the distance separating the town from its official form of governance, the school district, as the only state industry and largest industry in town, became the on-site governing force when it was created in 1910.<sup>312</sup> And as the town grew smaller in population in the twentieth century, the administrative offices in the education system became the city builders, making decisions on the town's spatial dynamics.<sup>313</sup> Hence, there is a causal relationship between the spatial distance of the county and the social meaning of the education system.<sup>314</sup>

During the Civil Rights Era (1954-1968), in West Texas, there was a boom in the oilfield and agriculture industry that allowed for the population of Imperial to grow from 250 in 1949 to nearly 1,000 people.<sup>315</sup> Throughout that time Imperial's financial district was at an all-time high with about 26 individual businesses including multiple restaurants and a gas station. It was predominantly white, if not entirely, and was an upper-middle-class town. However, a large drought inevitably struck West Texas in the early 1980s and created high saline levels and a decline in the water supply sparking a time of massive deindustrialization.<sup>316</sup> In the early 2010s, the oilfield industry hit a recession, laying off thousands of oilfield workers in the area.<sup>317</sup> Today, the deindustrialized town has an Independent School District, food truck, and local post office as the only operating businesses in town. Its median household income in 2022 was \$75,250, and its racial demographics were 81% White, 6% Native American, and 12% Other Races.<sup>318</sup>

The Buena Vista Independent School District (BVISD) is the sole reason the town has operated after oil industries left the remote area. The school became a place of shared use amongst the town's citizens. The school is physically located where most citizens would consider the center of town, however, it is actually located in the Northwestern part of town.<sup>319</sup> Though it may not technically be central, it has remained extremely accessible to those who live in town. With new facilities built, including a football field with a track, Apple computer labs, and an auditorium, the school over time became the place for not only education, but also leisure.

BVISD, or the education system, set up an inter-local agreement with Pecos County in 1910 to regulate the use of the space, but was not really utilized until 2010.<sup>320</sup> This agreement has allowed for the school to operate as a place for different services to the community.<sup>321</sup> The school is used for community service events, its cafeteria serves as a restaurant for people passing through the county during the school day, and its auditorium is also used for funerals.<sup>322</sup>



Again, Imperial, Texas and BVISD are simply examples of a common phenomenon between school districts and towns in West Texas. Though it serves as a shared space, this does not guarantee peace among the community members and school administrators. Tensions often arise when the school provides for *some* of its employees, but not the population of the entire town.

### *The Dual Role of Education in BVISD*

The school district not only serves as a governing agent, but service providers as well. In Imperial, the school organizes most of the employees' homes because it provides teacher/staff housing.<sup>323</sup> For David Whaley, this drastically affected his reality. Oftentimes, we think that displacement only happens in major cities like New York, Boston, and Los Angeles, but in Imperial and other small towns, we see that there is displacement on even the minuscule level. After Whaley's contract was not renewed, his family had to leave the town because there were no apartments or forms of affordable housing in Imperial.<sup>324</sup> In fact, the rest of the housing in Imperial is either family-owned or built on land owned by Rooney Inc., which is an out-of-town buyer.<sup>325</sup>

When people started leaving Imperial drastically to find work after the huge drought in the 1980s, BVISD understood migration into the town would become static. People began selling their land and homes for extremely low prices. The school district took advantage of this opportunity and bought plots of land and homes with their fund balance.<sup>326</sup> BVISD decided to offer to rent out the homes to employees of the school district for a low mortgage in order to allow them to afford to live in town and make the commute to surrounding towns for their necessities.<sup>327</sup> Imperial has an absence of retail services - the only business or industry in town is the school. The school administrators have a meeting with the school board when deciding

whether to give an employer a home, and which house in town to give them. The majority of teachers live on Teacher Road, however, there are four lots of land dispersed throughout town that the school owns and provides to teachers.<sup>328</sup>

The homes other residents live in were typically passed down through generations from the time they were built—a time of Jim Crow and racial segregation. In other words, these homes were passed down through members of white families, which explains the absence of minorities living in Imperial. Working class Hispanics and other minorities typically don't live in Imperial but in surrounding towns such as Fort Stockton or Cayanosa. Over time as most of the homes in Imperial were passed down to white families, minority families found themselves living on land, but not owning it. For example, there are three trailer parks in the town that are predominantly Hispanic, two of which are full.<sup>329</sup> Relatively high land prices often prevented Hispanic land ownership, though recently Hispanic individuals have started to own land in Imperial.<sup>330</sup> And although the organization of residential housing may seem trivial, it is in fact crucial when thinking about the town's racial dynamics. After all, alongside the population growth and decay the town government (the county) failed to provide housing for potential residents. Instead, the school district rebuilt the Imperial population by providing houses for over half of the population to reside in.

If the school district stopped supporting the growth of the town, Imperial would cease to exist. However, BVISD is in control of more than what meets the eye. Because its citizens became socially attached to the space, it became more than just an education system; it became their form of government, policing, real estate, and employment. When the county seat's policy allowed for the vast distance between the town and its governing seat, operations like these became legal. Without an inter local agreement between the county and the school, the school

would not be able to operate as such a force and the town would have become a completely desolate and abandoned site. Through the powerful stakeholders on the school board, school administration, and offices, Buena Vista Independent School district can govern much of what happens in Imperial, Texas.

Although there is no question that in West Texas education systems can be viewed as a form of governance and educators are influential stakeholders, the youth in West Texas do not greatly aspire to be change agents in the education field. Despite educators across the region having an influential role in these small towns, there is an ambivalent approach to education as the pathway to make it in West Texas. Perhaps the youth does not truly understand the inner workings of how educators influence policies of the population, or perhaps it is something else. While not everyone is called into education, it is one of the major industries in West Texas. That is why it may be a surprise that the national staffing shortages for educators are felt tremendously in these rural towns. When I interviewed Whaley as someone who worked directly with the youth as a high school counselor and technology director, I could not help but to ask why the youth are not attracted to building out a career in education. Education seems like a sustainable option as a career for graduates, yet it remains unattractive. Why?

### *The Traditionalists*

#### *The Generational Divide*

One of the reasons there is an ambivalent approach to education in West Texas is because educators who have held their positions for many years are often negatively viewed as traditionalists.<sup>331</sup> Due to the job shortages in education, there are now many teachers and administrators who have served in their position beyond just a few years; they have served in their respective titles for multiple decades.<sup>332</sup> In many ways, the issue is a generational

disconnect, but high school students tend to believe their elder educators are not adept at connecting with what is taking place in society.<sup>333</sup> Whaley was able to witness this firsthand at the most recent school district he has been employed by: Pecos-Barstow-Toyah Independent School District (PBTISD).

Whaley began working for the Pecos-Barstow-Toyah Independent School District (PBTISD) as a Technology Director in November 2020, after the oil industry slowed down due to the pandemic.<sup>334</sup> For educators in West Texas, the pandemic impacted their work for just a few months and by August of 2020 schools were back to their standard for in-person learning.<sup>335</sup> Despite being in times of uncertainty, it was expected that Whaley would commute to work on-site daily.<sup>336</sup> PBTISD is in Pecos, Texas, which is about a 30-minute drive from Imperial, Texas, and a 45-minute drive from his current residence in Fort Stockton. During Whaley's drive to Pecos High School, he notices the dry, shabby roads closest to the school which are a side effect of larger issue than normal wear and tear from active use.<sup>337</sup>

The population of Pecos reflects that of the greater Permian basin in West Texas, over 75% of its population is Hispanic or Latino.<sup>338</sup> Although classified as one of the small towns in West Texas, it is the largest town in Reeves County. From Pre-K through grade 12, it is home to just under 2,700 students, with each graduating class containing 350+ students.<sup>339</sup> The school is a central piece of the community. Across teachers and other staff, PBTISD has employed over 400 people, making it one of the largest employers in Pecos, Texas.<sup>340</sup> Though the town's total population has increased over the last couple of decades, its educational facilities look the same as they did half a century ago.

*Beneath the Paint*

As Whaley wandered through the hallways, he noticed peeling paint in some of the corners, perhaps due to negligence.<sup>341</sup> Peeling paint, as he later learned, was the least worrisome of his findings. In fact, by the end of the first week, Whaley knew exactly what he had gotten himself into.<sup>342</sup> The teachers were so far removed from understanding how to operate the new computers, tablets, and Wi-Fi that they left most technology untouched, collecting dust in storage spaces.<sup>343</sup> The school had poor usage of most of its state funded technology and had many incidents of improper utilization of devices.<sup>344</sup> Indeed, the system the school functioned on was nearly a decade out of date. This led to the students essentially walking around in an archaic school district.

Whaley did not accept his position unaware of the situation.<sup>345</sup> One of the main reasons he accepted the job offer was the opportunity to transform an entire district with technology.<sup>346</sup> Unfortunately, like many of the other West Texan school districts, he was surrounded by lots of traditionalists, the opposite of technology enthusiasts.<sup>347</sup> Many of his coworkers were older than him and unfamiliar with how to use basic computer devices and their applications.<sup>348</sup> Not only would he need to teach staff members how to use technology, but he would also need to build a culture that valued the use technology in classroom spaces. Whaley had to become comfortable with dancing back and forth between his office and instructional spaces because his office was not located in any of the main school buildings.<sup>349</sup> The technology staff were set aside in a portable classroom building.<sup>350</sup> They were tucked away on the side of the high school almost as if they mirror the district's value of technology.<sup>351</sup> Luckily, Whaley had the support of the school district's superintendent. With the largest stakeholders' support, he had full range to transform the technology in the school district as needed so that it could reflect the times.<sup>352</sup>

Perhaps the height of the pandemic exposed the vulnerable parts of the education system that lacked generational diversity. Whaley shared that “their traditional way of teaching is not connected with the new generations way of learning.”<sup>353</sup> During the pandemic, while teachers were sending students home with paper packets, PBTISD students discovered through social media that across the country, other teachers were utilizing the virtual space to transform the classroom.<sup>354</sup> PBTISD had not found a way to leverage the technology at their disposal to teach its students at a time when it was needed the most. Their teachers were plugged into a system that was outdated. Students naturally began to associate education with the place where relevance goes to die. Schools in West Texas do not market education, so the youth are unmotivated to pursue a career in it, even if teachers and high-level administrators are high earners in the community. Individually, educators do not do a good job of advocating their own career paths to students. As a result, we have entire generations of youth ambivalent toward education.

Without adapting to the current times, PBTISD as well as school districts within the greater West Texas region, will inevitably degrade. Their state of perpetual stagnancy will negatively impact the quality of education being produced. The current ambivalent approach towards education is unsustainable in small towns like Pecos, Texas. A more direct approach is needed to address the issues plaguing the system and change the status quo. Teachers must adapt by utilizing the resources available to them, technological or otherwise. Administrators within the system need to be intentional about removing the culture of traditional education. This self-preservation approach has been sustained by educators feeling intimidated by change and fearful of being replaced.<sup>355</sup> To address the ambivalence, stakeholders must find ways to make

education more appealing and rewarding than other industries, especially those that are prevalent in West Texas such as oil.

### *The Oil Industry: The Primary Route to Upward Mobility*

Unlike some of the traditionalist educators who make up most of the people in the West Texas education system, the oil industry uses advanced technology to ensure efficiency for the extraction of oil, making their industry more attractive to young adults.<sup>356</sup> Though the school is the largest employer in town, the recent revitalization of the oil industry is what provides opportunity for capital growth and upward mobility.<sup>357</sup> It is rare to live in a rural West Texan town and see a household absent of someone who works in the oil industry. The oil industry is the largest employer in West Texas because it pays well, and most of the small towns are located closer to oil rigs than larger cities like Midland, Odessa, and El Paso. Oil field workers also make up some of the upper middle-class population of towns. If a household does not have a member working in administration for the school district, owns their own business, or works at the hospital, they most likely house an oilfield worker.<sup>358</sup>

Some of the students that Whaley knew in both Imperial and Pecos were granted scholarships for sports or academic scholarships but later left higher education to work in the oil industry.<sup>359</sup> He shared the example of Carlos Fernandez the valedictorian of his graduating class and Ethen Evans, the salutatorian, who both were accepted into colleges.<sup>360</sup> As valedictorian and salutatorian in Texas, they were given the opportunity to pursue their first year for free with a scholarship awarded by the Texas Higher Education system.<sup>361</sup> Despite the advantages and accolades, they both dropped out to pursue a career in the oil industry.<sup>362</sup> Even with talent and opportunities, students may find themselves at a crossroads deciding whether to continue their educational studies or pursuing a lucrative career in oil.

Emmanuel Rojas was another student that Whaley knew on a personal level. He was best friends with Whaley's son, and fortunately I was able to have a conversation with Emmanuel concerning his decision to discontinue pursuing a degree in Petroleum Engineering. In high school at BVISD, Emmanuel was an A/B student academically and a tri-sport athlete – football, basketball and track.<sup>363</sup> Emmanuel's father, Edgar, has 20+ years of work experience in the oil industry and his mother was an educator.<sup>364</sup> Edgar works in a position that is directly alongside petroleum engineers. At times he helps them gain hands-on experience, since most of the time engineers are remote on a computer. Emmanuel shared, "he doesn't have a degree, but I believe that my father could be a really good petroleum engineer. But since he doesn't have that degree, he can't get the job."<sup>365</sup> Edgar only has a high school diploma but has been making it work for his family. He wanted something better for his son because he knew the limitations in the industry an aspiring petroleum engineer would face without the right accreditation.<sup>366</sup>

One day during the fall of his senior year in high school, Emmanuel came home from school and his parents were sitting at the kitchen table alongside two of his father's colleagues. He thought he was in trouble for something because the two men were dressed very nicely which is atypical for West Texas attire. Emmanuel asked his parents, "what did I do?" Then his parents encouraged him to sit at the table and listen.<sup>367</sup> The men introduced themselves as Daniel Lewis and Alonso Rodriguez, they were petroleum engineers, an occupation that Emmanuel had shown a recent interest in.<sup>368</sup> Emmanuel, though excited to speak to them, did not know where to begin or the questions to ask. Finally, he asked the simple question, "so what do you do, exactly?"<sup>369</sup> They explained that most of what they do is math, and for Emmanuel this was great news because all throughout high school he was known as a "math whiz." It was after that conversation that he thought "why not pursue a degree in petroleum engineering?"<sup>370</sup>



To become a petroleum engineer he would have to receive at least a master's degree, which he was never 100% sure about. However, one thing he was sure about was staying closer to home. To his surprise he came across an incredible program at the University of Texas at the Permian Basin located in Odessa, Texas. At the time they had just finished constructing a building specifically dedicated to Petroleum Engineering.<sup>371</sup> This opportunity seemed like it would be the next best step as it was a program close to home and in the heart of the oil capital of the United States.

After being accepted and starting the semester in the fall of 2018, the workload was mentally exhausting. It was difficult balancing being away from family, the school schedule, and trying to support himself. One day in the middle of the semester, he had three major tests back-to-back, with only about 10 minutes of a break to walk in-between classes. Despite the amount of programming, conversations with school administrators, and his parents, he questioned whether this truly was the right decision for him.<sup>372</sup> Then, “three quarters into my first semester, I felt burnt out,” he explained to me.<sup>373</sup> He made the decision to finish the semester, then to transition into the workforce. “Everyone around me just kept telling me that it was okay for me to leave, just to make sure I stayed busy.”<sup>374</sup> Emmanuel shared that he feared other people’s opinions more than he feared not being able to make money without a college degree.

### ***Social Status and Its Connection to Financial Freedom***

There were people around him that spoke negatively about pursuing a collegiate degree. He explained that “they don’t see the point of it, they feel like college is blinding you from the real world and how it works. Yeah, you're learning all this educational stuff, but you need experience in the job you're pursuing or whatever career you're pursuing.”<sup>375</sup> There is a lure to the oil industry because of the opportunities to social climb speedily. Financial freedom is valued

more when considering social mobility. Blue collar work is considered more valuable than wearing a white collar as an educator. Unfortunately, in West Texas, education is simply a longer pathway to success. In this day when there is a high market for oil, it is not so simple to justify spending tens of thousands of dollars on an education when the job market is at an extreme high in the oil industry.

After discontinuing his education, Emmanuel received a job in a pulling unit which is one of the mechanisms used in the extraction side of the industry.<sup>376</sup> His job consists of physical labor, and he works from sunup to sundown. He does not mind the work because it is around people that are more knowledgeable about the oil industry than he is.<sup>377</sup> He shared, “the quicker you learn, the more quickly you move up.”<sup>378</sup> Young adults may associate the oil industry with financial stability; however, they can be misguided. Just as it may be a surprise to learn that administrative educators have control over surrounding communities in West Texas, it may be a surprise to learn the oil industry is not as financially sustainable as it is idealized to be.

The oil field provides a mirage of success, especially for young adults who are right out of college, or perhaps college dropouts.<sup>379</sup> Because they do not understand the ebb and flow of the oil field and how it has times and seasons of highs and lows, they believe that the oil field is sustainable for an indefinite amount of time.<sup>380</sup> However, this is not the case, although they are making six figures at the time that they are working, able to afford a new truck, a house, and all of the luxuries that a person who makes six figures could enjoy, they do not realize that every now and then there will be a dip in the oil fields activity.<sup>381</sup> In those seasons of the dips, many layoffs take place, and within a blink of an eye, the recent college graduate who is making six figures is now fighting to find another job or two in order to maintain the lifestyle that they once could afford.<sup>382</sup> What recent high school graduates don't realize is that education could provide a

more consistent flow of income, although it is not six figures for several months at a time and then no income at all, it does provide a way for a sustainable lifestyle.

When the oil field goes bust, those working it are forced to find a job to help sustain their livelihood until the oil field recovers and their jobs become available again. This happens a lot in the oil industry. If someone works in this field, then they know they must plan for the seasons of downtime. It is just part of the job and a way of life for many in West Texas. Many oil field workers are forced to do this type of job because it is very lucrative, and you can obtain it without needing a 4-year degree or education.<sup>383</sup> In fact, according to salary.com the average oilfield hand averages \$57,000 a year straight out of high school, which is a similar average for a bachelor's degree holder after they have graduated with their four-year degree.<sup>384</sup>

The work that recent high school graduates enter is a much more dire field than education; they delve into the work in the oil field. Oil rigs tend to be far away from civilization, the only people they interact with are those that stay out on an oil rig location living in travel trailers for weeks at a time.<sup>385</sup> Whaley explained, "If those [people] are all white, or male, that becomes your habitat, your environment."<sup>386</sup> At times workers may find themselves the only representative of a population in a 30-to-40-mile radius.<sup>387</sup> People tend to sacrifice their comfort around diversity for the payoff of working out on the location. My father shared how there were multiple times where he went out on location and as an engineer, he and the small group of two or three other engineers were surrounded by 40-50 blue collar workers.<sup>388</sup> This meant in a 30-to-40-mile radius they were potentially the only people with bachelor-level degrees.<sup>389</sup>

Some companies have different requirements for background checks, and perhaps allow or are more lenient with potential employees with a criminal record.<sup>390</sup> So not only could a person potentially be the only degree holder in a 30-to-40-mile radius, but they could also be

surrounded by a group of people where 2/3 of the working population had been involved in some sort of criminal activity at one point. My father shared that “it was crazy that it was the norm, I would seem like some sort of anomaly, but I am not. They’d be like ‘you went to college? Y’know college isn’t for everybody.’ So, there I am, with 40 people talking like this, I am now on the outskirts because I went and got a college degree. They’d look at me and the other engineers like ‘what kind of idiots are y’all?’”<sup>391</sup> When workers that otherwise would be considered in alignment with the norm in greater society begin to pick up idiosyncrasies from a particular rig location, it projects the culture of the rig upon the greater population – even if it’s wayward from a large population of society.

### *Rethinking Success*

Education is not the sole pathway to success in West Texas, or anywhere else in the United States. The ambivalence surrounding education in the region is not necessarily rooted in a debate over its merits, but rather in its perceived utility. It raises the question of whether education is essential for achieving success. Is education necessary to “make it?” Emmanuel shared that, “[he] wouldn’t say that [it is].”<sup>392</sup> Emmanuel's perspective reflects this sentiment, as his story highlights that there are individuals who have achieved the American dream both with and without a degree. He emphasized that the choice to pursue higher education is a personal one: "You're going to make it with or without the degree, but if you want to pursue it, it's there if you want it."<sup>393</sup> West Texas may be unique in providing such abundant and prosperous career options that do not require a college education. By embracing a broader perspective on success and fostering opportunities across different spheres, we can ensure that the American dream remains attainable for all, regardless of their educational path.

## **Epilogue**

### *Lessons from a Changing World*

As I reflect on my research and the impact it has had on my personal ideas of success, I cannot help but think about how recent events have changed our world. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of community and the role it plays in shaping our lives. This research has allowed me to see the impact of political identity, the role of women in the oil industry, and the ambivalent approach to education in shaping the communities of West Texas. It has also allowed me to see the power of resilience and the importance of persistence in achieving success. Recent events have forced us to confront the fragility of our lives and the systems that shape them. As I conducted my research, I witnessed firsthand how these systems can either support or hinder social mobility and success. This underscores the need for a more equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Adaptability and flexibility are key in the face of unforeseen challenges. As we navigated uncertainty and disruption, we were forced to adjust our expectations and goals. It made me realize that success is not a fixed concept, but rather a fluid and ever-changing one that is shaped by our experiences and circumstances. It also highlighted the need for a more comprehensive approach to success that includes not only financial and material prosperity but also mental and physical health, community involvement, and personal fulfillment. Overall, the pandemic has emphasized the interconnectedness of our lives and the need for collective action to overcome challenges. As we move forward, it is essential that we continue to prioritize equity, inclusivity, and perseverance in our communities and our society as a whole.

### *West Texas: A Region Evolving Amidst Challenges*

West Texas has long been known for its conservatism, and political identities continue to play a significant role in shaping the region. The oil industry also shapes social mobility and the economic prosperity of the region although women are sparsely represented in the industry. In addition, there remains an ambivalent approach to education, with some seeing it as essential to success while others see it as unnecessary. Now that the pandemic has subsided, things have changed. The region is slowly recovering from the economic impact of the pandemic, and people are re-evaluating their priorities. Women are understanding that to see a difference in a male-dominated industry, they must petition for equal treatment. The pandemic has also shifted the view of the importance of education and the need to invest in it to prepare for future challenges.

Despite the pandemic's impact on the region, political identities remain a strong influence on West Texas. The region has long been considered a conservative stronghold, and this trend shows no signs of abating. However, there is also a growing recognition of the need for more diverse voices and perspectives to shape the region's future. The pandemic has forced people to confront the interconnectedness of our lives and the need for collective action to overcome challenges. As such, there is a growing sense of community and a renewed focus on working together to create a more equitable and inclusive future. The oil industry has also undergone significant changes in recent years, with women having an influence on the industry's policies. In the face of the industry's long-standing male-dominated culture, women have shattered barriers and, like Maricela, have assumed roles that were once solely occupied by men. This trend is expected to continue as the industry adapts to new technologies and a changing global landscape.

While there continues to be varying views of the importance of education, there is agreement on the need to invest in technology for students to be prepared and relevant in the future workforce. Many students and educators have had to adapt to online learning and new technologies. This experience has underscored the need for more investment in education to ensure that students are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in an increasingly digital and interconnected world. There is also a growing recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and the need to provide opportunities for people to continue to develop their skills throughout their lives. While the pandemic has had a significant impact on West Texas, it has also created opportunities for positive change. As the region recovers and adapts to the new reality, there is a growing focus on community, equity, and inclusion. The region's political identity, the role of women in the oil industry, and the approach to education are all evolving. It is up to the residents of West Texas to ensure that these changes are positive and beneficial for everyone in the region.

### ***Trends and Insights: Resilience, Persistence, and Beyond***

During my research, I noticed several trends. First, many people in West Texas see success as being closely tied to their political identity. Second, women are still having difficulty navigating the terrain of gender dynamics in the oil industry, despite the advancement in technologies and professional development opportunities the industry provides. Finally, despite being a relatively stable industry in contrast to the volatile oil industry, education is not considered the predominant route to success in the region. I also noticed that many people in West Texas are incredibly resilient and persistent, and these qualities are essential to achieving success in the region. Despite the challenges they face, they continue to push forward, adapting to change and finding new ways to succeed or to think about success.

In terms of political identity, I found that many people in West Texas identify as conservative, but their workplace is where their political identity was shaped. Thus, many people view success as being closely tied to their political beliefs. This is particularly true when it comes to issues related to entrepreneurs and those who are in large capital industries. For the region, this includes, but is not limited to, the oil and gas industry, financial service industries, and agricultural industries. Those who support these industries tend to view it as a critical aspect of the region's success, while those who are critical of it tend to view it as a source of degradation and inequality. This divide has led to a sense of polarization in the region, with many people feeling that their political beliefs are essential to their personal sense of success.

Regarding the role of women in the oil industry, I found that there is a growing recognition of the importance of diversity and inclusion. Many companies are actively seeking to hire more women and promote them to leadership positions. However, there are still challenges to be addressed, such as ensuring that women receive equal pay and are not subjected to discrimination or harassment. Despite these challenges, the increasing presence of women in the industry is a positive trend that is likely to continue in the future.

In terms of education, I found that there is a mixed approach to its value. Some people see education as essential to success, while others view it as unnecessary, especially in industries such as oil and gas that place more emphasis on experience and on-the-job training. This mixed sentiment can be attributed in part to the region's historical focus on industries such as oil and gas, which may not necessitate formal education for success. However, as the region continues to diversify its economy and faces new challenges, such as the impact of the pandemic, the importance of education is likely to become increasingly recognized.



In general, I found that the people of West Texas possess a sense of resilience and persistence that is essential to achieving success in the region. Despite facing significant challenges such as economic downturns and natural disasters, they continue to push forward, finding new ways to succeed and adapt to changing circumstances. This resilience is likely to be critical in the coming years as the region faces new challenges, such as the need to address climate change and prepare for a more technologically advanced future.

### *Implications for a Changing America and Academia*

This research has significant implications for the United States of America and academia. The political identities of individuals have become increasingly important and will remain relevant when considering how individuals perceive success in the region. Understanding the impact of political identity on success is essential to developing policies and programs that can help people succeed, regardless of their political affiliations. Women share space with men in the oil industry and that will not change in the region, so equity must be at the forefront in discussions about making the shared spaces safe and secure. Understanding the unique challenges that women face in the industry and developing strategies to support them will be critical to promoting gender equity and ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. Finally, the uncertainty around the utility of education is a challenge that must be addressed. While pursuing higher education is not critical to success in West Texas, educators should continue to adapt and cultivate a high-quality education for K-12 students. Shaping the youth positively is essential to promoting economic growth and prosperity.

In addition, this research highlights the importance of understanding the intersectionality of various identities and factors that contribute to success. For instance, the role of gender, race, and socio-economic status cannot be ignored. The study found that women, particularly women

of color, face unique challenges in the oil industry, and those from rural areas are less likely to have a technologically sound education, given the lack of access. Therefore, accounting for the intersectionality of these factors can help create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Moreover, the findings of this research also have implications for academia. Understanding the unique challenges and opportunities in West Texas can help shape educational and research programs that are better tailored to the region's needs. For instance, developing programs that address the skills gap in the oil industry or providing greater access to technology for those from rural backgrounds could have a significant impact on the region's economic growth and prosperity.

Additionally, this research highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches to understanding success and social mobility. By integrating perspectives from sociology, psychology, economics, and other disciplines, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to success and create policies and programs that better address the needs of individuals and communities. Ultimately, this research highlights the need for continued attention to the factors that contribute to success and social mobility, particularly in regions like West Texas. This research on the West Texas region has also provided an opportunity to see microcosms of underlying vulnerabilities in other regions during the Trump-Era.

In conclusion, the research I have conducted sheds light on the impact of political identity, the role of women in the oil industry, and the ambivalent approach to education in shaping social mobility and success in West Texas. It is essential to understand these factors' intersectionality and bring awareness because although the region is often neglected in mainstream research and media when solutions are developed for this region, they could benefit

all American society. Developing creative solutions will require more interdisciplinary work and continued research to gain an understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities in different West Texas communities.

### *Community, Equity, and Collective Action*

As we look to the future, it is essential to understand the trends and challenges facing West Texas are the challenges of the United States of America. We must develop policies and programs that support individuals, regardless of their political affiliations, and promote economic growth and prosperity. We must also work to support women in male-dominated industries and ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. Finally, we must determine the role of education with success and social mobility to ensure that the education systems remain adept. By bringing awareness to the unique challenges and trends facing West Texas and the United States of America, we can develop strategies to support individuals and promote economic growth and prosperity.

Looking ahead, it is important to recognize the impact of political identity, especially as it pertains to the success of individuals in the United States. With polarization becoming increasingly common, we must create spaces for individuals to be able to express themselves regardless of their political affiliations. A successful nation is one where everyone can achieve their potential, regardless of their background or beliefs. Moreover, the unique challenges that women face in male-dominated industries like oil, need the support of individuals to change their work culture and environment. As women continue to play an increasingly important role in these economically lucrative industries, promoting gender equity is essential to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. This is not only a matter of social justice but also

an economic imperative, as studies have shown that gender diversity can lead to increased profitability and innovation in companies.

Finally, education remains a crucial factor in understanding social mobility and success. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of rethinking the utility of education. It has provided space for individuals to have job security, but as a pursuit, young adults remain hesitant of placing value on a traditional education. Remaining adaptable and open to rethinking higher education's utility is essential as we move into the future. In conclusion, by recognizing the impact of political identity, supporting women in male-dominated industries, and rethinking the utility of education, we can create a more prosperous and equitable future. Community, resilience, and persistence remain essential to achieving success, but for individual growth, and to address the challenges that we are facing today, we must continue to share individual stories like that of Ana Maria Jimenez, Stephanie Carrasco, Maricela Fuentez, David Whaley, and Emmanuel Rojas that shape our country.

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- 290 Ibid.
- 291 Ibid.
- 292 Ibid.
- 293 Ibid.
- 294 Ibid.
- 295 Cruz Gomez, Imperial Texas History and School Board Interactions., interview by Dayla Weems, 2018. Cruz Gomez is the President of the School board and is also the first Hispanic to hold that position.
- 296 Eric Gomez, History of Imperial Texas, interview by Dayla Weems, 2018. Eric Gomez is the son of Cruz Gomez, School Board President, and serves as one of the youngest members of the school board.
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- 314 Causal: A relationship between two things in which one causes the other. (For more information on causal relationships see Matt Petronzio, “Google Maps: Tree Density Tells the Story of Income)

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<sup>318</sup> “Imperial, Texas Population 2022,” worldpopulationreview.com, 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/imperial-tx-population>.

<sup>319</sup> See map in appendix.

<sup>320</sup> School Board President, Cruz Gomez shared explicit information about the agreement. The agreement allows for the county to occasionally occupy school property and use its facilities for meetings, trainings and other services in turn for assisting the school when it needs to repair those facilities. For example the county provided a manlift to repair the lights on the school football field, filling in potholes in the parking lot, repainting the crosswalks, etc. The agreement had been in place since the establishment of the school, however, it was not really utilized until the school was on the brink of closing down around 2012. In 2000 the town population was about 430 and in the 2010s the school population declined to 90 students from Pre K-12th grade. The county believed shutting down the school and providing transportation for Imperial students to Fort Stockton would be the best option. However, they were able to keep the school open by hiring a new Superintendent and providing a school bus route for transfer students from other local districts. The school made themselves attractive by promoting their school on websites and word-of-mouth from people who had friends or relatives that decided to make the switch to BVISD in earlier years. It promotes the small class sizes, athletics, and the dual-credit opportunities.

<sup>321</sup> Eric Gomez, History of Imperial Texas, interview by Dayla Weems, 2018.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid..

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Cruz Gomez, Imperial Texas History and School Board Interactions., interview by Dayla Weems, 2018. There had been a discussion with the school board and the county about building affordable housing in 2014, however, since the town had no other business, gas station, grocery store, restaurant, etc. the county denied the proposition because it was very unlikely for people to desire to live there.

<sup>325</sup> Rooney Inc’s influence is limited because so much land is owned or operated by the school. Their influence may be on who is able to reside on the plot of land that they own. Their plot of land is considered “untouchable” by school board member Eric Gomez.

<sup>326</sup> Cruz Gomez, Imperial Texas History and School Board Interactions., interview by Dayla Weems, 2018. Fund balance is leftover money from the year for BVISD. They are allotted so much for taxing to be kept in the district, and oftentimes they don’t use it all. So instead of just sending the state what they had leftover, they decided to utilize the leftover money to buy land and houses for the teachers and employees of the school district. The majority of the homes and land are paid for, if they are not, they will pull from the schools fund balance to pay them off. This happens annually.

<sup>327</sup> Cruz Gomez, Imperial Texas History and School Board Interactions., interview by Dayla Weems, 2018.

<sup>328</sup> There were a variety of homes, the few were dispersed throughout town had four or more bedrooms, a backyard and large front lawn. The others were walking distance from the school which were a little smaller, they consisted of 3 bedrooms and a front lawn.

<sup>329</sup> Cruz Gomez, Imperial Texas History and School Board Interactions., interview by Dayla Weems, 2018.

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

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# Appendix

