

CHARRO DAYS: HISTORY, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY
ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents.

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ABSTRACT

Charro Days is a week-long celebration of friendship between the citizens of Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas along the Rio Grande. It began in 1938 to boost the economy and the spirits of the community suffering from the Great Depression and aftermath of a category 5 hurricane. In my thesis, I explain Brownsville's history and social makeup following the Mexican American War. I analyze the celebration and its social evolution decade by decade. I explore the ways in which Charro Days uses symbols of Mexicaness and Americanness to highlight the border's unique position which is situated between cities, countries, and cultures. This thesis examines three events: "Hands Across the Border", Sombrero Festival, and the Grand International Parade. It explores the ways in which Brownsville and Matamoros citizens use these events to manipulate symbols to create border identity. I discuss each event and pair it with a symbolic and interpretive theory. The three styles of symbolic analysis are those of Clifford Geertz, Sherry Ortner, and Victor Turner. Charro Days is a critical node in the process of creating meaning and identity. This thesis provides insights to how the community uses symbols during Charro Days to create, negotiate, and express a unique bicultural identity.



Figure 1.1 – Map of the U.S. - Mexico border and South Texas region.

Source: Wikipedia

Brownsville, Texas

Population (2012 estimate) – 180,097

Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin – 93.2%

Language other than English spoken other than English at home – 87.2%
(United States Census Bureau 2012)

Matamoros, Tamaulipas

Population (2010) – 489,193

(Instituto Nacional De Estadística y Geografía 2014)

1: INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

This thesis is a critical analysis of the South Texas bicultural border celebration known as Charro Days. The annual event celebrates the friendship between border towns Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas and is held during the last week of February. Using an interpretive approach, I will provide an in-depth look at Charro Days and show how it impacts individuals as well as communities. My ethnographic fieldwork will show how through conflict and camaraderie Charro Days proves to be a positive force in the border community.

The yearly bicultural celebration helps create a unique border identity for members of the community. Geographic isolation, language, customs, and food are all characteristics of what makes the South Texas border identity unique (Figure 1.1). I will address these issues in more detail later in my thesis. I will also demonstrate how Charro Days is constantly evolving as each generation experiences the celebration differently. Charro Days erases ethnic and gender divisions and transcends the perspectives of Anglos, Tejanos, and Mexicans. The members of the community come together to keep the spirit of Charro Days alive which helps create and maintain their bicultural border identity.

This research project began with my personal connection to Brownsville and Charro Days. My father, Danny Loff, was a high school basketball star and is a local businessman. He grew up in Brownsville and participated in Charro Days since his youth. In 1986, he founded Sombrero Festival to coincide with Charro Days. The festival helped revive the spirit of Charro Days after it had experienced a decline in community involvement. Like many Brownsville residents, I grew up around the bicultural celebration, but, unlike many Brownsville residents, I had special privileges. Sombrero Festival was my playground (Figure 1.2). I ran in the streets of downtown Brownsville like it was my own backyard. I weaved in and out of the parade crowds, mingled backstage at the festival, and accompanied my parents at their numerous Charro Days events and parties.



Figure 1.2 – My brother (Kirk) and me at Sombrero Festival. He is wearing a store-bought Charro suit, and I am wearing an outfit made by my grandmother.

Today, Charro Days is comprised of three main organizations: Charro Days Fiesta, Inc., Mr. Amigo Association, and Sombrero Festival, Ltd. Even though the organizations work separately to execute their contribution to the celebration, the members of Charro Days Fiesta, Inc., Mr. Amigo Association, and Sombrero Festival, Ltd. all know each other. Furthermore, members of the three organizations know my father and therefore, know me. This special recognition became extremely beneficial once I began my thesis research.

In order to avoid confusion, I will explain the names and titles I will be using throughout my thesis. I will use the term Anglo interchangeably with white. Anglo and white are defined as referring to people who understand themselves (and are understood by other community members) of non-Hispanic descent. I will also use the terms Hispanic, Tejano, Mexican American, and Latino/a to refer to people of Mexican heritage but who are American citizens. Even though Hispanic and Latino/a may refer to persons other than those of Mexican origin, for the purposes of my thesis, I am only focusing on the Mexican American border where all of my participants are of Mexican ancestry. Furthermore, I will use the term Mexican to refer to past and present Mexican citizens living in Mexico or the United States.

SOUTH TEXAS HISTORY

The South Texas border is a place of reinvention, growth, transformation, and celebration. South Texas native, author, and activist, Gloria Anzaldúa, describes the U.S.- Mexican border as “*una herida abierta (an open wound)* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture” (1987:25).

The Rio Grande connects Matamoros, Tamaulipas and Brownsville, Texas to create this “third country.” Anzaldúa’s words articulate the revolutionary changes the border has undergone, and continues to experience, to become its own unique culture.

The Rio Grande Valley is geographically isolated between the United States and Mexico and can be characterized as an anomaly as it may be strange and difficult to identify or classify. For example, the South Texas border has been home to multiple groups of people. Prior to the Mexican American War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the Southern tip of Texas below the Nueces River was Mexican territory. The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo made the Rio Grande the official border separating the United States and Mexico. After the treaty was signed, South Texas became home to many people who were formerly Mexican citizens. The defeated enemy faced “extermination or assimilation” (Montejano 1987:25). In reality, most people were neither exterminated nor completely assimilated. They accommodated to the ways of the land, specifically they accommodated, or were forced to accommodate to new power structures.

Land became extremely valuable in South Texas following the war. Many Anglos traveled south to stake their claims. In order for Anglos to be successful ranch owners, they had to assimilate to the ways of the Mexican population. The new Anglo landowners became somewhat Mexicanized as they adopted the paternalistic relationship the Mexican landowners, called *patrones*, had with their ranch hands, the *peones*. The *patrón-peón* relationship was ideally characterized by inequality, reciprocity, permanency, and loyalty (Montejano 1987:81-82). In many cases, *peones* owed debt to the *patrón*. The *peones* acquired debt by inheriting it from their fathers or by being

provided with medical needs, food, and clothing. Debt kept *peones* close to the *patrón*. The *patrón* was able to supply the *peones* with necessities, and in return, the *peones* worked on the ranch to pay off their debt. Furthermore, *peones* who were debt-free had a hard time working wage labor away from the ranch as conditions were much worse and jobs were scarce. Debt-free ex-*peones* preferred to work on the ranch as it gave them a sense of security. This also kept them close to the *patrón* (Montejano 1987:78-79).

In many cases, the Anglo *patrones* and Mexican *peones* were protected by the company of each other as violence and racism continued to be a strong factor in South Texas following the Mexican American War. The Mexican *peones* were protected from violent and aggressive Anglo lawmakers and authorities, and the outnumbered Anglo *patrones* were less threatened by the large Mexican population in South Texas (Montejano 1987:82). As a result of this close relationship, Anglo and Mexican cultures began to overlap.

Social hierarchy was a significant factor in the merging of cultures. Although Anglo ranch owners became “Mexicanized” as they assimilated to certain aspects of Mexican culture, such as language, they, as well as Tejano landowners, were not on the same social level as their Mexican workers. Historian Arnoldo De León writes, “With time, Anglos could capitalize on Tejano cultural traditions to further their place in the upper stratum” (2009:44). While it was difficult for *peones* to move up the social ladder, Anglos socialized with elite Tejano landowners to gain prestige in the community. Many Anglos married the daughters of Tejano landowners to improve wealth. Also, becoming a godparent, best man, or confirmation sponsor ensured a special bond with the family.

Becoming a *compadre* to a Tejano family gave Anglo newcomers a way to belong without being blood related (De León 2009:44).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Brownsville's population catapulted from 6,000 people in 1900 (Montejano 1987:98) to over 22,000 inhabitants by 1930 (Knopp et al 2009:7). The population grew as Mexicans entered South Texas to escape the suffering and damage of the revolution and Anglos came from the Midwest to Brownsville looking for new agricultural land (Knopp et al. 2009:7). The mix of ethnicities forced cultural awareness for Brownsville residents as Mexican and Anglo populations began living in close proximity, but these changes to the area also created an even more stratified society.

Farms began to take the place of ranches. For example, in the early 1900s as Brownsville's population grew, Brownsville's Cameron County had 709 farms averaging 770.1 acres. In 1920, there were 1,507 farms averaging 198.6 acres and by 1930, Cameron County had 2,936 farms averaging 45.6 acres (Monetjano 1987:109). This data shows ranch land was being divided and sold at a rapid pace with the increase of agricultural development. Furthermore, life on the ranch was much like an extended family where workers and their families lived on the ranch for most of their lives. Farm life was quite different. Farm workers migrated with the seasons. Once the crops were harvested, the workers moved on to the next farm. Due to migration, farmers and their workers were prevented from forming any type of close relations.

CHARRO DAYS HISTORY

Over the next few decades, the South Texas border was transforming economically and socially. For example, the railroad began servicing Brownsville and

Mexico from St. Louis, Missouri in 1904. The new railway brought an influx of Anglo Americans to the region which impacted cultural awareness. The railroad also marked the beginning of modernization for Brownsville (De León 2009:58). The airport (1928) and port (1936) also contributed to Brownsville's cultural and economic transformation.

By the 1930s, Brownsville population was 22,021 and steadily climbing (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1932) but the South Texas community was struggling economically. Brownsville was hit with a category 5 hurricane in 1933, while in the midst of the Great Depression. This economic struggle helped fuel the idea behind Brownsville's largest community celebration – Charro Days.

The women of the Pan American Round Table were the inspiration behind the idea. The Pan American Round Table is an organization of women that promotes cultural awareness and preservation (Knopp et al. 2009:11). The group, originally founded in San Antonio in 1916, was organized in Brownsville in 1932. The club's purpose was "to provide mutual knowledge, understanding, and friendship among the women of the western hemisphere; to foster all movements leading to higher civilization" especially affecting women and children of these countries (Brownsville Herald 1949:68). The women were the wives of upper class Brownsville men, mostly Anglo. The organization's founding women all shared the same love and appreciation of Mexican culture. Their philosophy of "Pan Americanism" and motto "One for All and All for One" continues to be a central focus of their organization.

Brownsville's Table founder, Bessie Kirkland Johnson, moved to South Texas from Mexico City in the early 1930s. She brought with her a collection of authentic dresses and handicrafts. She recognized that through these artifacts, people were able to

learn about Mexican culture and customs. She challenged other women in the organization to acquire garments from different parts of the Americas and learn the history of each article of clothing (Costumes of the Americas Museum 2012). It was this organization that inspired Kenneth Faxon to promote the idea of Charro Days in 1937 (Knopp et al. 2009:7). Kenneth Faxon was a local attorney and civic leader originally from Illinois who moved to Brownsville in the late 1920s with his wife Bernadine.

Brownsville historian, Bruce Aiken, explained the motivation behind the foundation of the Charro Days in the celebration's 60th Anniversary documentary in 1997:

People were in real bad shape. Up the Valley they were beginning to get winter visitors from up north. They'd come down and spend a great deal of time, and the old talk was "don't go to Brownsville it's just a Mexican town, you wouldn't want to go down there." Well, in 1937, they were having a Pan American Round Table meeting and the ladies were dressed up as they do in the costume of the country in which they represent. Mr. Ken Faxon was there with his wife Bernadine, and he looked around and said, "You know, wouldn't it be a colorful thing if every citizen of Brownsville put on a traditional Mexican costume. If they wanna call us a Mexican town, let's capitalize on that point." And somebody else liked that idea and they begin to whip that thing up. And then they decided that, well, let's not do it for one day, let's do it for several days, and they finally decided on a pre-Lenten carnival deal much like Mardi Gras or down in Rio.

Aiken continued to say that Faxon and his Charro Days committee learned a lot from the Port of Brownsville. The port opened in 1936 with "cavalcade of transportation" and used parades, children, and the army in their festivities that lasted several days. The newly formed Charro Days committee quickly learned how to get organized and put on a grand city event. As a result, Aiken said, "From the very beginning, Charro Days went off with a bang...and it brought in dollars that were badly needed and it was an effort by everyone in the community" (Los del Valle 1997). "The

purpose of Charro Days is two-fold,” Faxon said, “to tell the entire world about Brownsville and the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, and to pay tribute to the customs, folklore, handiwork and culture of Mexico” (Brownsville Herald 1948:13-B).

Charro Days followed the foundation of two other Texas border town celebrations: George Washington’s Birthday Celebration and the Texas Citrus Fiesta. Washington’s Birthday Celebration was founded in Laredo by elite Anglos and Tejanos in 1898 with intentions to Americanize the Mexican population along the border (Young 1998:72). The Texas Citrus Fiesta in Mission began a few years prior to Charro Days. It celebrates the grapefruit and orange harvest season. The Citrus Fiesta began as a way to show the rest of the nation the Rio Grande Valley’s subtropical environment during the winter months and promote the citrus industry (Texas Citrus Fiesta 2012). Unlike the Laredo and Mission celebrations which are aimed respectively at Americanization and promoting the citrus business, Brownsville recognizes its Mexican heritage through Charro Days which is aimed at celebrating its friendship with Matamoros.

The new bicultural celebration quickly attracted national attention. *National Geographic* covered the border fiesta in its first year, 1938. *Time* and *Life* magazines also featured the event in later years. In 1939, *Paramount* and *Universal* newsreels contained scenes from Charro Days that were viewed by moviegoers nationwide. In 1942, Macy’s Latin Fair¹ in New York City used a theme inspired by Charro Days. Furthermore, national radio stations broadcasted the events, and in 1952, the International Parade was televised on two networks (Knopp et al. 2009:8).

¹ A cultural event that occurred on January 17-February 7, 1942 at Macy’s department store in New York City. The fair showcased four hundred pieces of art from Latin America. The event promoted goodwill while it aimed to capitalize on Latin American art in popular culture.

The book *Charro Days in Brownsville* names the 1940s and 1950s “the golden years” of Charro Days. It was also during World War II and Big Band Era. Patriotic and military themes were used in the parades and events. Nationally recognized guests such as television star Desi Arnaz and band leaders Xavier Cugat, Skinny Ennis, and many more traveled to Brownsville to be a part of the festivities. In 1948, Desi Arnaz and his band played at Charro Days dances for three nights. Four major television networks broadcasted the performances to a national audience (Brownsville Herald 1948:13-B).

Bands played at private venues organized by clubs that had formed alongside Charro Days. The private organizations typically consisted of upper class Anglos and Mexican Americans. For example, the Triple-L Club members were community leaders of mostly Mexican American descent. The Triple-L Club, which stood for Live, Laugh, Love and was created in 1938, sponsored public and private events for the community (Knopp et al. 2009:51-57). Historian and Professor Tony Knopp said (email to author, October 16, 2013), “The LLL Club was one of several that appear to have been of invitation only.” He continued to explain that while Anglos, Mexican Americans, and Mexicans socially interacted during this time, each ethnic group did prefer to gather “in venues where they felt most comfortable with those of their own ethnicity.” Elites from these groups were less welcoming towards working class Mexicans socially. Also, in this era, the demographic of members involved with the Charro Days organization did not reflect the ethnic makeup of Brownsville. And although there were strong ethnic divisions during the 1940s, Knopp said, “No one would have been ostracized...and there was not an atmosphere of hostility.” Private dances were reserved for upper class

Brownsville and Matamoros citizens, while the public dances allowed more people in the community to participate.

By the 1950s, a new civic center opened and catered to larger audiences. By then, Charro Days featured seven parades and the main parade drew up to 50,000 viewers. Street parties and dances also grew in popularity (Knopp et al. 2009: 8). In 1950 the parade route began crossing over the International Bridge into Mexico, but parade goers were required to pass through customs in order to cross. By 1954, the International Bridge was opened to allow Brownsville and Matamoros residents to cross freely during Charro Days with no identification documentation needed (Figure 1.3). “We had thousands, literally thousands, of people that would take advantage of being able to come over,” Garcia said (Buckley 2012).

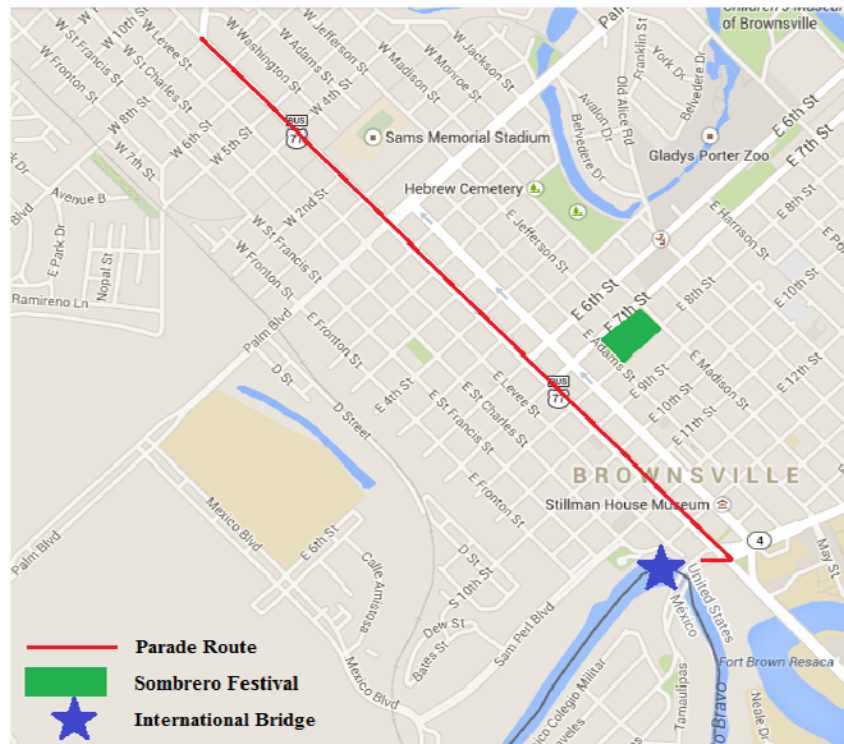


Figure 1.3 – Parade route on Elizabeth Street in downtown Brownsville.
Source: Google Maps

In 1958, Texas Governor Price Daniel and Tamaulipas Governor Norberto Trevino Zapata united for the festivities and called Charro Days “a major contribution to the Good Neighbor Policy², benefitting all peoples in the western hemisphere” (Knopp et al. 2009:8). Brownsville gained momentum economically, socially, and culturally during the “golden years” of Charro Days.

But by the 1960s, Charro Days was losing its appeal. The popular Big Band Era ended and the Civil Rights Movement began. Brownsville residents who grew up in the heyday of Charro Days aged with Big Band music, and the younger generations who grew up during a time of civil unrest did not share the same celebratory experiences or music, as their elders. Music became very political, and the nation’s youth connected to the music as a form of expression. The country faced turmoil and unrest as historically oppressed minority groups fought to improve their legal rights. The Civil Rights Movement coincided with the Chicano Movement which specifically focused on the rights of Latinos in the United States. Furthermore, less than fifty miles away from Brownsville, the Edcouch-Elsa High School Walkout of 1968³ challenged the Texas educational system in an organized effort to change the segregationist culture in the Valley (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004:505). The Vietnam War was also a factor that contributed to the decline of interest in Charro Days. Many Mexican American Vietnam veterans returned home to the Rio Grande Valley disillusioned and radicalized. They tended to view the celebration as trivial and quite possibly offensive. For them, as well

² A foreign policy agreement between the United States and Latin America during Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency. It was designed to bridge relations and create economic opportunities between countries.

³ More than 150 students walked out of Edcouch-Elsa high school in 1968. The mass protest was against the unjust educational system in Texas. The Mexican American students demanded equal education. Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954, public schools were to begin racial integration. Texas schools did not take action until 1970 when a new policy, the Civil Order 5281, put school integration into effect.

as many other young people, Charro Days seemed out of step with the nation and with culture. As a result, Brownsville's original enthusiasm dwindled.

A new organization, the Mr. Amigo Association, was founded in 1964. The idea behind the association was to promote good relations with Mexico. The new organization probably formed partially in response to criticism of segregation in the Valley. The Mr. Amigo Association appointed a well-known Mexican citizen to be the ambassador of friendship between countries; the first Mr. Amigo was Mexican President, Miguel Aleman. This political move demonstrated how Brownsville and the Mr. Amigo Association aimed to connect with the local Hispanic culture while building a stronger relationship with Mexico. At the same time, the rest of the country continued to fight for equality among minority groups. Originally, the association was not coordinated with Charro Days, but by 1969, Mr. Amigo became a fixture in the bicultural celebration.

Charro Days experienced another slump in spirit during the 1970s and 1980s. The Big Band Era was long gone and so were many of the original Charro Days participants. By the next decade, South Texas youth including Mexican Americans were frustrated with the events of the Civil Rights and Chicano Movements. Because Charro Days was tied to the older generation that was rested in a segregationist system in Texas, young people may have perceived the celebration as part of the problem rather than a solution. As a result, Charro Days struggled to find its place in the community, especially with the younger generations. Brownsville native and author, Américo Parades, said the best years of Charro Days were early years when things were more "spontaneous" and "less commercialized" (Los del Valle 1997). In previous years, people informally gathered and danced in the streets alongside the parades. But by the

late 1970s, Charro Days seemed to be losing energy as the atmosphere had become “too formalized and scripted” (Knopp et al. 2009:9). The generation gap caused a decline in Charro Days participation. The celebration lacked unity and enthusiasm; two key components in the foundation of Charro Days.

As Brownsville grew in population and street parties were not as easily executed as before, Charro Days needed to be reorganized if it had any hope of continuing. New ideas began to emerge, including my father’s vision of community involvement on a grander scale. In 1986, my father, Danny Loff, founded Sombrero Festival to boost the Charro Days spirit and to establish a central event for residents to celebrate and maintain their bicultural identity. As Charro Days was revived, the demographics of the organization’s members shifted and better reflected the demographics of the community. Sombrero Festival marked the beginning of a new Charro Days era and revived the unity and enthusiasm of earlier times but with new symbols and new meanings. In March 2014, Charro Days once again made national news. National Public Radio (NPR) did a multipart series about the 1,900 mile U.S.-Mexico border starting with coverage of Charro Days (Inskeep 2014).

CHARRO DAYS ATTIRE

Dressing up is one of the most important aspects of the celebration, and many people, including me, remember wearing Charro Days costumes as children. One of my earliest memories of Charro Days was when I was five years old. My kindergarten class appeared on a float in the parade. I wore a dress from the Mexican state of Chiapas. It was a floor length black dress with large colorful embroidered flowers covering every inch. I acquired this dress on one of my family trips into Mexico. Each Mexican state

has their own representative attire, as each of the United States has its own flower, bird, and so forth. All of my classmates wore some type of Charro Days costume but not all the outfits were acquired in interior Mexico.

Some costumes were handmade by mothers or grandmothers and other garments were purchased in Brownsville or Matamoros (Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.4 – Woman shops for Charro Days attire in downtown Brownsville.

For those who know, the way someone is dressed for Charro Days may reveal much. There are specific distinctions between garments. Charro Days attire can be purchased locally, made by hand, or acquired in Mexico.

The more coveted pieces of clothing are the “authentic” items from Mexico (Figure 1.5). People will go to substantial lengths to display their clothing to those who can read the signs. So who dresses up? What issues are associated with how people dress? And does it matter what you wear and when you wear it?



Figure 1.5 – Authentic dresses worn at a private Charro Days party.

Dressing up for Charro Days has been embedded in the celebration since its origin. As previously mentioned, the idea of Charro Days was inspired by the Latin American dresses worn by the women of the Pan American Round Table. In 2005, the Round Table opened the Costumes of the Americas Museum. The museum is home to the world’s largest collection of costumes from North, Central, and South America. The Round Table continues to educate the public of its cultural heritage through these one of a kind artifacts (Costumes of the Americas Museum 2012).

Historical photographs show a clear class separation based on what people wear and where it is worn. More specifically, there are critical differences between the range of dress options available for women and those available for men. Women from higher social classes, regardless of ethnicity, are pictured wearing highly detailed Latin attire. The elaborate dresses are evidence of high social status because the only way to acquire these authentic garments was to travel their place of origin. For example, one of the most popular dresses was, and still is, La China Poblana. A woman wearing a China Poblana is usually accompanied with man, or Charro (Figure 1.6)



Figure 1.6 – El Charro y La China. The women told me her blouse and skirt belonged to her grandmother. The detailed embroidery and hand sewn sequins make this China a one of a kind.

The outfit is comprised of a white peasant blouse with embroidered flowers around the collar. The floor length skirt is covered with colorful sequins displaying an image, usually an eagle. Accessories typically include a sash around the waist, a shawl draped across the back and shoulders, and a bow or ribbon in the hair.

The China Poblana outfit comes in a variety of qualities and many Brownsville citizens are attuned to these subtle differences in material and workmanship that are indicators of wealth and status. For example, the material and embroidery of the blouse is a key indicator of wealth. A woman of a higher status, who purchased an “authentic” blouse, would most likely be wearing a satin blouse as opposed to a cotton one. Also, a skirt that is high quality and expensive has extremely detailed sequins covering every inch of material and is typically hand-stitched. Furthermore, the types of accessories and their “authenticity” can provide more insight into the wearer’s social position. For example, a sash made of silk and purchased in Mexico is desired over a cotton sash bought downtown. The China Poblana is not the only outfit women may wear. Women have many dress options to choose from compared to the choices available to men. Some women may choose to wear a dress typically worn by a Mexican woman of a lower class. It is the authenticity and attention to detail of the outfit that makes it become a symbol of high class.

A special Charro Days edition of the *Brownsville Herald* (1948) featured pages of articles, photographs, and hand-drawn sketches instructing women how to make their own Mexican dresses, whereas, men are given a short article and one sketch briefly describing the few options they have. Men generally wore either a Charro suit or a peon outfit. The Charro suit is a detailed, multiple piece ensemble that is complete with a

decorated sombrero, belt buckle, and spurs. Similar to the China Poblana, there are more desirable Charro suits and they can be easily detected by those in the know. For example, the stitch work on a Charro suit and matching sombrero is a sign of better quality. A Charro suit with intricate detail conveys the message of wealth and prestige (Figure 1.6).

The peon attire represents the poor man's clothing. It is a linen, beige long-sleeved shirt and pants, typically worn with *huaraches*, Mexican leather sandals. The men dressed in peon attire were called the "*bandidos*", or outlaws. Archival photographs depict them in groups carrying fake guns. Charro Days advertisements in the *Brownsville Herald* (1948) displayed men in the peon costumes alone and facing down or away from the reader. One ad (Figure 1.7) is a picture of a barefoot peon dragging a gun and facing away from the reader with the caption, "Yes I know I look lazy and no good! But where I'm going we'll all look alike, and we'll all be full of vim and vigor."

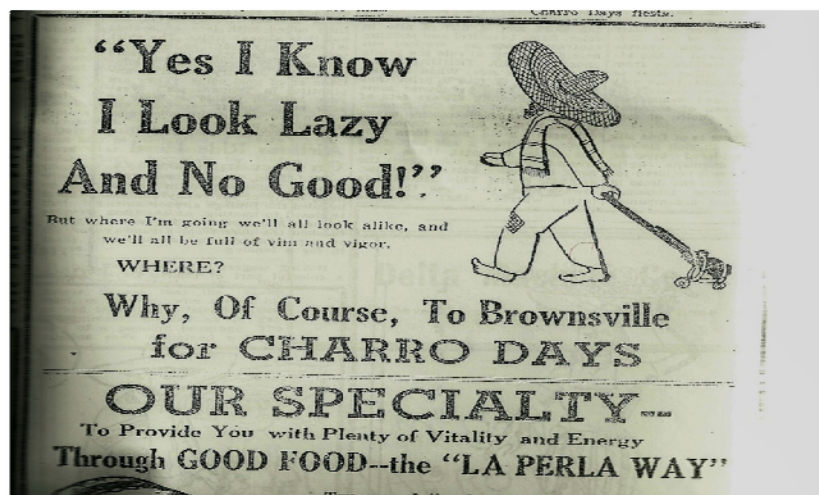


Figure 1.7 – Charro Days ad in 1948 *Brownsville Herald* newspaper.

In comparison, the advertisements show men in Charro suits either paired with women or facing the reader with a look of excitement. Although Charro Days is a bicultural

celebration, the advertisements display a theme of stereotypical racism which would affect Mexican American participation more than Anglo participation.

In addition, archival photographs only show Anglo men in peon outfits. Dressing as *peones* does not threaten the identity of white men. They have the freedom to dress as poor Mexicans because they are white and wealthy compared to real peones. This suggests that Anglo men have assigned themselves to a liminal group, the “*bandidos*”, because they are securing their class structure. Their social position gives them the freedom to take a limited role because their identity is not threatened. On the other hand, Mexicans and Mexican Americans are not pictured in peon attire because their identity would be threatened. By dressing up as peones, Mexicans and Mexican Americans would be buying into the negative racist stereotypes that have oppressed them for generations. They also run the risk of being treated poorly outside the context of Charro Days. Instead, they choose to wear the Charro suit to demonstrate a higher social status and sophistication. A role reversal from low status to high status can only be achieved by white men whose identity is not threatened by wearing garments of lower class citizens because their social position is secure, whereas, Mexicans and Mexican Americans must wear attire symbolizing a high status in order not to be treated or identified as a lower class citizen.

Dressing up is not restricted to only members of the upper class. Boys and men of middle and lower social groups also wear pieces of Mexican style. For example, males will wear the common white, long-sleeved eagle shirt, neck sash, and boots (Figure 1.8). Sometimes, men will also wear a plain sombrero or serape to accessorize (Figure 1.9). Women of middle and lower social groups usually wore peasant blouses and long, full skirts with ribbons in their hair.



Figure 1.8 – Man in casual Charro Days attire.



Figure 1.9 – Men's clothing. Man (left) wearing a custom-made Mariachi suit. Man (right) wearing a festive serape over peon outfit.

This is not to say that men and women of the lower classes did not wear Charro suits or China Poblanas, but they were typically less detailed and less “authentic” than those worn by members of a higher status (Figure 1.10).



Figure 1.10 – Women at a private Charro Days party wearing more “authentic” dresses. Some outfits are hand-me-downs or were made in the Mexican state from where the dress originates.

Charro Days attire has evolved with the celebration. While Charro Days expands to encompass and unify more and more participants, there are still underlying social markers that can divide groups of people through dress. What was once considered upper class apparel can now be seen across multiple social groups. Some items may be more easily acquired nowadays. Merchants will bring items from Mexico to Brownsville and

Matamoros during the Charro Days season to sell. But, there still is a social divide when it comes to the accessibility of particular Latin American garments and accessories, mainly because of cost. Despite more accessibility to Charro Days attire, there are still many interpretive meanings connected to what is worn and where it is worn. The meanings generally express social class status. Regardless of social implications, Charro Days attire has become a symbolic expression of Brownsville's bicultural identity.

CHILDREN AND MEMORIES

Children are an important part of Charro Days. Brownsville Independent School District (BISD) dismisses classes midday on Thursday and all day Friday during the week of Charro Days. Along with the Grand International Parade, there are the Children's Parade and the Illuminated Night Parade. Children of all ages from both Brownsville and Matamoros participate in every parade. Elementary schools also participate in the BISD Fiesta Folklórica which showcases traditional costumes and dances from Mexico. Each elementary school is assigned a Mexican state; the children dress up and perform the dance of their respective state. Children's participation is one source of Charro Days' longevity. Many of the parents who watch their children in the parade or school dances have their own memories of Charro Days.

The earliest memories, like mine, include dressing up and appearing in the parade. I had the privilege of experiencing Charro Days at an in-depth level because of my father's contribution to the celebration. My father was born in Brownsville in 1954. His parents moved to South Texas from Iowa in the late 1940s. My grandfather worked in the shrimping business, then became the high school basketball coach. My grandmother was an English teacher and school counselor. Like many others, my father's earliest memories

of Charro Days include dressing up and appearing in the parade as a young kid with his school. As he grew up, his friends and he continued to dress up and enjoy Charro Days by hanging out downtown and walking across the Gateway International Bridge to celebrate in Mexico.

My father left Brownsville in 1972 to attend college and returned to Brownsville in 1980 after marrying my mother, Suzanne. My mother began teaching for BISD and my father started a new position in pharmaceutical sales. During his time away from Brownsville, the Charro Days spirit declined. After he moved back, he was shocked by what remained of the celebration.

In 1985, he recalls calling his friends, who had recently moved back to Brownsville, and asking them to put on their costumes and celebrate Charro Days. My father tells his story in a 60th anniversary documentary of Charro Days taped in 1997. He said, “Nobody had a costume, nobody was ready to go and I dragged a friend of mine and said you are going. I gave him a hat. I gave him a peon costume.” He continued on to say that when they arrived downtown at the end of the parade site they did not recognize anyone and people laughed and “gawked at these two gringos walking down the street” in costumes. They even walked across to Garcia’s, a Matamoros restaurant, bar, and gift shop, and no one was around to celebrate Charro Days. They returned to Brownsville and encountered a crowd of no more than seventy people socializing. In the crowd was a group of about fifteen to twenty people having a fajita cook-off and drinking beer, and in the middle of the ring were two retired winter visitors from out of state playing horseshoes. Loff says, “That was Charro Days. And that was it, for us, at that time” (Los

del Valle 1997). He was upset with the degree to which Charro Days had diminished in his absence and was determined to do something about it.

METHODS

For over 75 years, Charro Days has been a valuable fixture in Brownsville's community. It has fueled social cohesion as many residents participate and celebrate their bicultural background. Today, there are three main organizations that keep the celebration running: Charro Days Fiesta, Inc., Mr. Amigo Association, and Sombrero Festival, Ltd. Each organization plays a different role in Charro Days but together they function as a whole in order to keep the spirit alive throughout the community. The methods I used to gather data during my fieldwork were participant-observation, interviewing (unstructured and semi-structured), archival research, and social media networking.

THREE MAIN ORGANIZATIONS

Initially, I asked my father to "plant a seed" and mention to people associated with the different organizations that I would be writing my thesis on Charro Days. I also attended Charro Days in 2012 to observe the celebration from a researcher's perspective. I talked to my peers and to Brownsville locals about my interest in writing my thesis on Charro Days. To my surprise, I received a significant amount of positive feedback. It seemed like everyone I talked to wanted to know more, assist me, give me information, or direct me to sources. People were enthusiastic about my endeavors. I contacted each organization during the summer of 2012. I wanted to make sure I would be welcomed to meetings and events once planning and preparation began in the fall. In the following sections, I will briefly describe each organization and my interactions with them.

CHARRO DAYS FIESTA, INC.

Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. is the celebration's founding organization. The group's main contribution to Charro Days is producing the three parades: Children's Parade, Illuminated Night Parade, and Grand International Parade. Along with the three parades, the organization coordinates and sells tickets to public dances that feature live music. It also hosts a street party, Baile del Sol (Sun Dance), that initiates the week of festivities. In addition, Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. manages the carnival which arrives every year during the celebration, but which has no direct affiliation with the Charro Days festivities. The organization is comprised of a salaried executive director and volunteer officers, directors, and honorary life directors totaling fewer than forty members. Community volunteers, who are not regular members, also contribute their time to the organization, especially pertaining to the floats and parade.

I met Carlos Bañales, the 2013 executive director of Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. He works during the Charro Days off-season to prepare for the upcoming celebration. He welcomed me to the Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. headquarters, located in downtown Brownsville, anytime I wished to visit. I made monthly and bimonthly trips to Brownsville from September 2012 through February 2013. I frequently visited unannounced and intermingled while Bañales worked. I was able to observe the daily flow of people in and out of the headquarters. Although I was not allowed to attend any officer or board meetings, Bañales allowed me access to their space. I searched through filing cabinets filled with archival documents and remained in close contact with Bañales and the headquarters for several months leading up to Charro Days. This allowed me to monitor the progression of tasks and procedures of the Charro Days Fiesta, Inc.

organization in preparation for the celebration. I also attended each parade and parties sponsored by Charro Days Fiesta, Inc.

MR. AMIGO ASSOCIATION

The Mr. Amigo Association is slightly different from the other Charro Days organizations in that its primary focus is on one individual, Mr. Amigo. Each year, the Association selects a Mexican citizen who has excelled in his/her professional and personal career to be “Mr. Amigo.” Mr. Amigo appears at dances, parades, and Sombrero Festival during the week long Charro Days celebration. The organization’s premiere event, “Hands Across the Border”, takes place in the middle of the International Bridge that connects Brownsville and Matamoros. Unlike Charro Days Fiesta, Inc., the Mr. Amigo Association does not have a headquarters I could visit regularly. The association has less than twenty volunteer members and meets at various times and places according to their schedules. I contacted Sergio Martinez, public relations officer of the organization. He was able to provide some insight to the organization, but most of my data on the Mr. Amigo Association came from participant observation at their events.

SOMBRERO FESTIVAL, LTD.

The third, and most recently founded, organization is Sombrero Festival, Ltd. Since my father is the founder of the festival, I already had easy access to the organization. It was up to me to develop relations with the officers and members and attend meetings and functions. Compared to Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. and the Mr. Amigo Association, Sombrero Festival, Ltd. requires much more volunteer help and holds meetings regularly to prepare for their three-day event. Their meetings begin six months prior to Charro Days. The earlier meetings were held once a month, but as the festival

date grew closer, meetings were held twice a month and then every week during the last month. Membership mixers were also organized to attract new volunteers and allow the members to interact socially.

The interactions I had with each organization opened new the doors to collect data. I secured formal and informal interviews. I spoke to people involved in the three Charro Days organizations, local historians, university students, and long-time Brownsville and Matamoros residents. Most of my unstructured interviews were with Brownsville citizens who participate in Charro Days as volunteers or attendees.

I was also invited to special events occurring before and during Charro Days. I was allowed special admittance to private functions. I had access to archival documents and photographs from personal and public collections. Social media was also beneficial in my research. During the week of Charro Days, the celebration became a trending topic on Facebook and Instagram. Each organization had a Facebook page. I became Facebook “friends” with each group and followed their social media output. Monitoring social media sources gave to access to insight of public conversations and reflections about Charro Days. I also used Facebook to post questions regarding Charro Days in order to get more feedback from Brownsville citizens.

The three organizations can be contentious and highly political. For example, many older participants in Charro Days treated the founding of Sombrero Festival with skepticism. They were reluctant to change the celebration and doubted the new organization could be successful. It was only after a few years that Sombrero Festival was accepted into the Charro Days family. Other organizations may have conflicts as

well. For example, determining who will be Mr. Amigo in any given year is a complex and highly political process. Factions may develop and groups or individual may fight. Although internal dynamics of the organizations is interesting, this thesis focuses on the role the organizations play in Charro Days and the end product.

PERSONAL CONNECTION

Even though I am a white, middle-class female, I have a strong connection to Mexican culture and identity. I am an example of how culture does not always correlate with ethnicity. I may appear to be a stereotypical white girl, but my background and knowledge of the U.S.-Mexico border has influenced my cultural identity. For example, my peer group growing up was predominately Mexican American. I was regularly surrounded by my friends' families and their Mexican customs and traditions. My cultural identity also includes my knowledge of the Spanish language. My fluency in conversational Spanish also includes knowledge of border lingo. The border truly is a bicultural place. As a child, I remember thinking we were already in Mexico once we had entered downtown Brownsville. Many of the storefront signs are in Spanish, and many of the shop employees will initially greet you in Spanish, and I will respond in Spanish. Living in Brownsville makes some knowledge of border culture unavoidable. I have also traveled extensively throughout Mexico since I was a young child. My close relationship to Mexican culture through exposure and language is an advantage in my thesis research.

My multicultural background has enabled me to gain entry into the community and move around with relative ease between the Anglo and Hispanic setting. My understanding of Spanish, my knowledge of border culture, and the fact that I am the

daughter of a community leader have allowed me much more access to the community and its organizations than likely would have been the case had I been a monolingual outsider. As a member of this culture, I am already familiar with the cultural setting and can recognize things rapidly. In other words, I do not have to learn the whole border culture; I already understand much of it. On the other hand, I have spent years away from Brownsville. This, along with my educational training, has allowed me a degree of outsider's perspective as well.

In Chapter 2, I will examine Charro Days using three theoretical perspectives. I will use the interpretive and symbolic theories of Clifford Geertz, Sherry Ortner, and Victor Turner to analyze Brownsville's border culture and Charro Days celebration. In Chapter 3, I will discuss Mr. Amigo's "Hands Across the Border" ceremony and explain how this performance plays into the imbalanced social structure that has been a part of Brownsville throughout history. In Chapter 4, I will analyze key symbols of Sombrero Festival and show how its community participation and contribution is trying to blur the historical social inequality and make Charro Days a level playing field. In Chapter 5, I will articulate how the parades create and generate border identity. In Chapter 6, I will conclude my thesis by explaining how I have given a clear and insightful analysis of Charro Days. I will briefly reexamine each case and reiterate how I have given a complete, in-depth look at Charro Days and the identity it creates along the border.

2: THEORY

GEERTZ THEORY

Clifford Geertz writes, “Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses” (1973:20). For Geertz, culture is a display of symbols and signs. Geertz suggests we focus on cultural symbols and behavioral signs to uncover meaning. He stresses the importance of detailed ethnographic reporting which he calls “thick description.” “Thick description” paired with historical knowledge can allow us to interpret the text of culture and unravel social discourse.

In “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” Geertz analyzes Balinese culture by analyzing the cockfight. He argues that the cockfight does not function as a way to maintain social solidarity, but rather, the cockfight is a performance in which the Balinese express their cultural values; it is a story the Balinese tell about themselves. Geertz suggests that public rituals, such as the cockfight, are a main source of cultural meaning. Geertz deconstructs the cultural text of the cockfight in order to provide a deeper understanding of Balinese culture.

Geertz begins his essay by positioning himself in Balinese culture. During his time in Bali cockfights were illegal. Geertz claims he was accepted into society after he fled a cockfight with locals. Geertz writes, “It was the turning point so far as our relationship to the community was concerned, and we were quite literally ‘in’”

(1973:416). He argues that because he was well-accepted into Balinese culture, he can give a credible interpretation drawing from his experiences of over fifty fights. His privileged position in society and his knowledge of Balinese culture allows Geertz to provide a “thick description” of the cockfight and explore its meaning.

Geertz suggests the cockfight is a symbolic representation of Balinese culture. Metaphorically speaking, males in Bali are identified with their cocks. Geertz writes that men treat their cocks as extensions of themselves. They have an intimate relationship with their cocks and provide special care for them. The cock is a symbol of Balinese manhood and all Balinese men are “cock crazy” (1973:419). So when the cocks fight, the Balinese understand it metaphorically as if the men are fighting.

In Geertz’s “thick description” of the fights, he explains how Balinese culture is acted out in the ring. Men will gain or lose prestige in the ring depending on how their cock performs. However, performance at the cockfight does not change social hierarchy outside of this context.

The ritualistic system of betting provides a closer look into Balinese social structure. Geertz explains how betting on matches is not necessarily focused on the money to be won or lost, but rather, the matches demonstrate social stratification. Geertz outlines betting patterns which, he says, replicates social interactions. He says betting creates meaning and the “deeper” the match, the more meaning it creates for the Balinese. For example, along with the cocks being symbolic extensions of the men, the manner in which the men bet also has symbolic meaning. The betting system follows strict guidelines that most Balinese men respect. Men bet according to their social status,

kinship ties, and alliance affiliations. Geertz provides a lengthy analysis of the unspoken understanding of the betting system. How men bet are a representation of who they are in society.

In addition, a “deep” match is one that is intense and has many power players involved. For example, if two high status cocks (men) are about to fight, they are supported by their kin and allies. Opposing groups that are critical rivals will bet against each other. The higher the stakes, the deeper the match. Geertz asserts that the cockfight is in actuality a dramatization of men fighting and competing. Balinese social structure is over-determined. There are many institutions and customs in Balinese society that teach people their place in social hierarchy and reinforce those teachings. The Balinese do not need cockfights to understand their place in society; however, the cockfight gives them the opportunity to experience temporary changes in social status that really do not affect society. Thus, in the cockfight, the Balinese experience triumph and defeat and social mobility that is otherwise not available to them. The cockfight creates meaning for its participants as Balinese men symbolically relate to their cocks in order to act out their cultural values.

Geertz analyzes further in a section called “Playing With Fire.” He compares “shallow” and “deep” matches and their impact on individuals and society. As previously mentioned, the Balinese are less interested in the actual money value and more interested in the prestige at stake if their cock wins or loses. He suggests shallow matches that do not entail high amounts of money reveal issues of “pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness” (1973:433). For example, if a cock wins a “shallow” match,

which only a few low bets are placed, the cock's owner will feel a brief moment of joy as his opponent suffers defeat.

On the other hand, a "deep" match does not simply provide feelings of joy or defeat; it is about status. Geertz says that the high money at stake symbolically represents the men's honor and dignity. He continues, "no one's status is actually altered by the outcome of a cockfight; it is only, and that momentarily, affirmed or insulted" (1973:433). It is the intense feeling the winning cock (man) and his supporters get when they have defeated an enemy in the ring. The short period of extreme exuberance lifts the winning cock on a pedestal for all the community to see. It is in this moment that cocks (men) feel the tremendous sensation of annihilating a fierce competitor in the ring in front of the entire town. For a brief moment, the Balinese who are constantly aware of their over-determined status are able to play with social hierarchy in the context of the cockfight. While this temporary status boost in the ring does not carry on past the cockfight, Geertz says that people will remember the "deep" matches according to whose cock won rather than how much money was won.

Charro Days is similar to the cockfight in many ways. The ritualistic community celebration is a commentary about Brownsville for better or worse. It is a symbolic representation of Brownsville's possible hopes and fears on public display. Charro Days creates meaning for its participants by giving them a sense of belonging. For example, the South Texas border town is situated between the margins of countries and cultures. Residents do not feel completely American nor do they feel completely Mexican. It is through Charro Days that Brownsville residents do not feel like an anomaly. The celebration allows them to have a sense of belonging and gives its participants meaning.

A “thick description” of cultural text and symbols will provide a deeper understanding of Brownsville’s social divisions and of the way in which Brownsville’s citizens understand and reveal them. The cultural texts I will read are the actions and performances by participants during Charro Days. These text form the basis of my interpretation of symbols in order to apply a deeper meaning to border culture.

In Geertz’s term, Charro Days is “Playing With Fire”, because it allows people to experience different types of identity. In Brownsville, where ethnic identity has historically been very important in its social structure, Charro Days gives people an outlet to publicly push the boundaries of their place in society. Charro Days attire is a symbol of status and participants are judged publicly by their choice of Mexican garments. Dressing up in Mexican attire during Charro Days creates different meanings for different groups of people. How someone dresses can symbolize class status, but it goes deeper than that. Individuals and groups can gain social power during the week of Charro Days, but similar to the cockfight, after the celebration is over everything goes back to the way things were. In the following chapter, I will explore the dress and actions of people at Mr. Amigo Association’s event “Hands Across the Border.” Using Geertz’s method of analysis, I will peel back the layers of meaning on display at this particular Charro Days performance.

ORTNER THEORY

In the essay “On Key Symbols”, Sherry Ortner defines and divides key symbols. She says that a key symbol is one that plays a role in the cultural system (1973:1343). It is how the symbol interacts with the culture and what it does in the system that determines its “keyness.”

Ortner outlines two approaches to determine the key symbols in a society. One approach is to first analyze the cultural system and then look for symbols that might represent it. For example, Ortner uses Ruth Benedict's work *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1967) to explain this approach. Benedict chose the sword and the chrysanthemum as her key symbols. Ortner explains that Benedict chose these two key symbols from an array of symbols after analyzing the tension in the Japanese system. The second approach is more widely used than the first. It entails observing the things that seem of particular interest of members of the culture. Ortner outlines numerous ways to indicate the cultural symbols such as what the natives say is important, whether the natives respond positive or negative to something, and when something is visible in many different contexts. Ortner says that there may be more indicators and adds that there can be multiple key symbols in a culture. Although Ortner says any nitwit can figure out a culture's key symbols, it is not really true. In fact, figuring out symbols can be difficult and people may not agree on the same key symbols.

Once key symbols are uncovered, Ortner proposes a way to subdivide the symbols. She splits them into summarizing and elaborating symbols. She defines summarizing symbols as symbols that encompass a group's emotions as a whole. These symbols are dense because they pack meaning and attitude. The Christian cross is an example of an emotionally charged summarizing symbol. It symbolically stands for and sums up the emotions and feelings of a particular group of people, Christians (although different groups of Christians and individuals would disagree with its meaning).

Ortner's second class of symbols are elaborating symbols. Elaborating symbols are instruments that provide people a way to work through their issues and achieve their

goals. Unlike summarizing symbols that are “thick”, Ortner defines elaborating symbols as “relatively clear, orderly, differentiated, and articulate” (1973:1342). These symbols help sort out and organize the cultural system so that it may be successful.

Ortner subdivides elaborating symbols into root metaphors and key scenarios to further explain how elaborating symbols help manage a cultural system. A root metaphor is an analogy that stands for many aspects and experiences of cultural life. Ortner uses Godfrey Lienhardt’s analysis of the Dinka to provide an example of a root metaphor. When the Dinka think about their society they compare it metaphorically to cattle. All aspects of Dinka culture relate to the symbol of cattle, the root metaphor.

While root metaphors focus on the thoughts of members of a society, key scenarios guide the actions. Rituals might be key scenarios, but so are reoccurring cultural experiences of everyday life. Ortner provides the Horatio Alger myth as an example of a key scenario. This is the rags to riches story of achieving the American Dream. The key scenario is replayed in American culture to symbolize that with hard work and determination anything is possible. Ortner says that these scenarios exist in every culture and that they display cultural values and goals and show ways of achieving them.

I will use Ortner’s method of subdividing symbols to categorize the key symbols of Brownsville and Charro Days. Choosing summarizing and elaborating symbols to represent Brownsville and Charro Days was no easy task. Once I narrowed down my key symbols and categorized them accordingly, I was able to understand border culture.

SUMMARIZING SYMBOL: RIO GRANDE

I propose that the Rio Grande is the summarizing symbol for South Texas. The river's physical location is between two cities, countries, and cultures. As previously mentioned the Rio Grande, which was once Mexican territory, became the official border between Mexico and the United States generating mixed emotions. For the defeated and displaced Mexicans, the Rio Grande now represented a dividing line from their homeland. On the other hand, the victorious Anglo landowners built settlements on their newly acquired property along the river.

The emotional tension along the Rio Grande can be heard in the *corridos* of the Lower Border. A *corrido* is a Mexican folk ballad. Following the Mexican American war, *corridos* became border ballads of conflict along the Rio Grande. The conflict is usually between Border Mexicans and Anglo Texans. The songs tell the story about a lone Mexican fighting the *rinches* (Texas Rangers). The legends may vary, but the central theme is the emergence of a Border hero similar to Robin Hood (Paredes 1958). This is a piece of a well-known Border ballad called *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*.

*Luego dijo el comisario,
Como sí fuera a llorar,
"Cortez entrega tu arma:
Te queremos llevar vivo."*

*Luego dijo Gregorio Cortez,
y su voz sonó como campana
"Nunca tendrás mi arma
asta que me metas a una celda"*

*Luego dijo Gregorio Cortez
con su pistola en mano,
"Ah, tanta caballería
para apresar un solo Mexicano!"*

Then the Major Sheriff said,
As if he was going to cry,
“Cortez, hand over you weapons:
We want to take you alive.”

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
And his voice was like a bell,
“You will never get my weapons
Till you put me in a cell.”

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
With his pistol in his hand,
“Ah, so many mounted Rangers
Just to take one Mexican!”

Border ballads like *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez* and many others are examples of Border Mexican’s ongoing struggle and courage. Anglo Texans, on the other hand, did not have oral ballads to tell their story. Their stories were told in print through newspapers, history books, and autobiographies which portrayed border Mexicans as “inferior”, “cruel”, and “treacherous” (Paredes 1958:16).

Nowadays, depending on who you ask, the river unites or divides cities, countries, and cultures (Figure 2.1). For many Brownsville and Matamoros residents it is a symbol of unity.



Figure 2.1 – View of Matamoros from the middle of the Gateway International Bridge.

Many people have friends and family members living on both sides of the river.

Brownsville residents will venture across to eat or purchase items that are less expensive in Mexico. For example, my orthodontist's office was in Matamoros. I would walk across for my appointments because it was cheaper to get braces in Mexico. On the other hand, Mexicans attend school in Brownsville. They will also come across to shop.

Unfortunately, due to current violence along the Mexican border the Rio Grande is more of a dividing line. Stronger rules and regulations are now enforced by Border Patrol, and it is strongly advised that Americans do not travel across to Mexico.

As a symbol, the Rio Grande, because of its history, has emotional depth for those living along its borders. Early Brownsville settlements were ranches and farms. The area was isolated from the rest of the country until the railroad was built in 1904. The Lower Rio Grande Valley is still somewhat isolated from both the United States and Mexico. For example, the closest American cities to Brownsville outside of the Valley are Corpus Christi 160 miles away and San Antonio 280 miles away. The closest Mexican city to Matamoros is Monterrey 190 miles away. In a sense, the Rio Grande unites Brownsville and Matamoros geographically because that is all there is within a 150 miles radius.

According to Paredes, historically,

The Lower Rio Grande people lived under conditions in which folk cultures develop. They lived in isolation from the main currents of world events. They preferred to live in small, tightly knit communities that were interested in their own problems. Their type of social organization was the family holding or the communal village ruled by patriarchal authority (1958:242).

This atmosphere continues to be present in Brownsville. Because of their isolation, border residents have created their own identity that merges pieces of Mexican and

American cultures. In this isolation the river is the thread that joins the two cultures together. It is a symbol of unity that binds people together as they are isolated from the rest of the world. From the river, people derive their livelihoods which would not have made life possible in any other situation where the Rio Grande was not present.

As a symbol, the Rio Grande has great emotional power and significance to those living along its banks. While no two people share the same feelings, there are core meanings that are widely felt by many border residents. The Rio Grande is a symbol of connection to Mexican heritage. For Mexican Americans, it is a portal into their ancestry and culture. The river is also a symbol of growth and prosperity. Many people utilize the access to two national markets and do business on both sides. Another core meaning shared by many citizens is that the river helps create a border identity. The Rio Grande is a summarizing symbol that creates a sense of pride and uniqueness shared and experienced by those living along *la frontera* (the border).

ROOT METAPHOR: FAMILY

The most powerful root metaphor for Brownsville is the family. In my research, I often heard people claim that Brownsville or Charro Days is like a family. Family symbolizes many aspects of border life. Like a family, Brownsville may not always be stable and may have internal issues, but like the ideology if not the actuality of family in America, it remains together for the greater good of the community. Brownsville residents also often regard people who are not blood relatives to be part of *mi familia*.

The family or *familia* has a deep emotional resonance for those living along the border. Historically, it took more than the support of the immediate family unit to

survive while working and living on South Texas farms or ranches. The *patrón-peón* relationship was beneficial to those living on isolated land. Other working families also contributed to the broader understanding of *familia*. The extended family members were co-workers, peers, and support group all in one. Mexican families tended to be large and this produced workers who helped contribute to the family. Over time, generation after generation, families in Brownsville continued to grow and many members remained along the border. Now in the twenty-first century, families in South Texas are not restricted to farms or ranches, but family ties remain close.

As the Valley became more urbanized and people earned more from wage labor rather than ranches or farms, they no longer depended on one another for survival. But, they did maintain the same close family ties. This could explain why some Spanish words that pertain to members of the family contain multiple meanings. For example, Brownsville residents often refer to a person who is not a blood relative as *primo* (cousin) or *tío* (uncle). While the two familial names hold slightly different meanings, calling someone *primo* or *tío* brings the person into the family circle.

Using the names *primo* or *tío* to address someone also declares certain behaviors. For example, *primo* is used when speaking to someone of a similar age. Joking and making fun of each other goes along with this part of the relationship. On the other hand, someone being called *tío* is typically an elder and *tío* is a title of respect. Both names are terms of endearment and establish certain family rights and obligations.

An even stronger title given to a family friend is *compadre* or *comadre*. The direct translations for these words are co-father and co-mother. These words, once

specifically reserved for a child's godparents in the Catholic Church, are now used to symbolize a deep connection with a family friend who is acknowledged as if they were part of the family and are treated appropriately. It is an unspoken understanding that people who call each other *compadre* or *comadre* will look out for and support one another as if they were family.

The symbol of family is also used outside its immediate context. For example, the Spanish word for boss is *jefe* or *patrón*. These terms can also be used to refer to a father figure. In a predominately patriarchal society such as Brownsville, the terms used for the head of a business are also used to refer to the head of a household. But, when the terms are used to describe a father figure, *jefe* and *patrón* are considered slang words. In both cases, the names are positive ways to address someone. The terminology suggests that border residents view family as a bigger entity than simply blood relatives. Family is a symbol of unity, support, relations, business, and respect.

For many Brownsville residents, whoever is considered to be a part of your *familia* is unquestionably invited to family functions. For example, Sundays in South Texas are typically reserved for family cook-outs. A household, usually the one that can accommodate the most people, will fire up the grill. The *jefe* tends to the meat while joking around with his *compadres* and drinking beer. The women gather inside preparing side dishes and visiting. Children are playing and staying out of the adults' way. This is not a formal gathering and there is no set time to arrive or eat. It is a relaxed environment where immediate family, extended family, and family friends come together to enjoy each other's company. This type of automatic invitation is also seen in religious ceremonies such as baptisms and first communions, quinceañeras, weddings, and other

family celebrations. It is understood that extended family and non-related family members are always invited and expected to show.

Charro Days is in many ways like a Sunday family gathering on a larger scale. Visitors from out of town travel to Brownsville during Charro Days to enjoy the food, music, and festivities. Most importantly, Brownsville residents and visitors anticipate seeing their *familia* during Charro Days. It is like a family reunion, and people come every year to be a part of the Charro Days family. Similar to family traditions, Charro Days also has traditions that have been passed down generation after generation. This can make it difficult for those on the outside to understand or appreciate Charro Days because they are not part of the *familia*. Brownsville and Charro Days have many aspects relating to the symbol of family, and I will provide greater detail about family as a root metaphor later in my thesis.

KEY SCENARIO: A FAMILY THAT PLAYS TOGETHER, STAYS TOGETHER

Charro Days, and more specifically Sombrero Festival, are also organized like a family. I will use this root metaphor to explore the key scenario that runs through Sombrero Festival. The basic script of Charro Days is: a family that plays together, stays together. This script is played out during Sombrero Festival. For example, the festival has many events. Individuals and groups compete in these events, but the competitions are geared towards fun rather than rivalry. The key scenario outlines ways to achieve solidarity over conflict even though there is competition.

There are two main mechanisms that allow the key scenario to play out at Sombrero Festival. They are how the teams are constructed and the types of prizes

awarded. Depending on the event, there may be one competitor or up to a team of ten or more participants. Many teams are constructed by family and friend connections or businesses. Usually, the same teams return every year to compete in the same events.

For example, the Frijolympics is *a la charra*⁴ bean cook-off. The event is held under a large tent that holds between thirty and forty teams. The Frijolympics begins in the morning and ends in late afternoon. The Frijolympics gives people the opportunity to showcase their *frijoles*. *Frijoles* are an essential side dish in South Texas and many people have their own special recipe to make the perfect beans. Many team members party under the tent by drinking beer and enjoying the musical entertainment that is provided throughout the day.

The teams are made up of groups of families and friends ranging anywhere between five people to over twenty teammates. Familiar faces and amusing camaraderie strengthen the event as groups return year after year to be a part of it. Aside from having the tastiest *frijoles*, teams are recognized and awarded by their team spirit and table decorations. Also, many teams will have personalized shirts or other accessories made to show-off their unity and team spirit. At the end of the day, festival-goers will walk through the Frijolympics tent sampling as many beans as they wish. A panel of judges will make the final decision. Typically by the time a winner is announced, the teams have had a full day of fun and the 1st place award is the simply cherry on top. The award does not define the entire experience of the competition. The Frijolympics and other

⁴ Frijoles a la charra is a traditional Mexican dish. The dish is pinto beans simmered with tomatoes, onions, cilantro, spices, and usually has bacon or some type of meat in it.

events at Sombrero Festival fit the key scenario because they focus more on the positive camaraderie that is experienced within the Charro Days *familia* year after year.

The other mechanism that plays into the key scenario and allows competitions to be about solidarity rather than conflict is the types of awards given to the winners. Prizes are carefully selected to not be strong motivators of conflict or controversy. My father founded Sombrero Festival on the philosophy of fun and the Charro Days spirit. In order for the philosophy to work, the festival, in the past, has awarded nominal prizes such as t-shirts, trophies, and medals to the winners rather than anything of significant financial value. Because of this, people play for fun, not for the prize.

Within the last six or seven years, cash prizes are used as an incentive to get people to participate and add to the excitement of the event. Sombrero Festival CEO and Chairman, Roy De Los Santos, Jr., told me that it has not affected the spirit of the event or sportsmanship of the participants. If anything, he says that it has helped boost the energy and fun; he has not witnessed any negative side-effects thus far. The festival continues to attract people because it is Charro Days, not because they might win a prize. Focusing on the spirit of the events allows participants to play together and stay together for the greater good of the Charro Days *familia*.

Using Ortner's approach, I have uncovered key symbols that helped me analyze aspects of Brownsville and Charro Days. I determined that the Rio Grande is a summarizing symbol because it packs deep emotional meanings for many people living along its borders. I chose family as the root metaphor of Brownsville. The border town is like a family and I have provided different examples to show this. The idea of family

also goes along with the key scenario of “a family that plays together, stays together.”

While there are competitive events throughout the Charro Days festivities, I have explained how the events create solidarity rather than conflict. I will address these key symbols in a later chapter and provide a more in-depth look at each one as it pertains to the border and Charro Days.

TURNER THEORY

Arnold van Gennep was a French ethnographer and folklorist during the first half of the twentieth century. He was the first person to use the concept of liminality to study culture. In his work, he examined the rites of passage in different cultures. Van Gennep (cited in Turner 1992:48) is credited defining rites of passage as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age.” Cultural rituals, such as rites of passage, are used as a transitional mechanism to move from one status to another.

Van Gennep explained that rites of passage are experienced in three parts: preliminal, liminal, and postliminal rites. During a rite of passage individuals are first detached from their original states in society. They are then situated within the margins; they are neither in their old position and nor have they reached their new one. This experience in the margins is what Van Gennep called liminality. It is during liminality that a transition occurs and the individual’s identity is in the process of passing on to its new state. In the final stage individuals are reconnected into their societies into their new positions.

Victor Turner discovered and revitalized Van Gennep’s concept of liminality decades after it was first introduced. He also introduced the term liminoid as a way to

analyze modern day societies within the three-stage pattern, but I will only use the term liminal in my thesis. During the early 1970s, Turner started to use the concept of liminality in his anthropological research. He applied the three-step pattern to other aspects of culture beyond rites of passage (Turner 1992:48).

According to Turner,

Liminality itself is a complex phase or condition. It is often the scene and time for the emergence of society's deepest values in the form of sacred dramas and objects... For a while almost anything goes: taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted, indicative mood behavior is reversed; the low are exalted and the mighty abased (1988:102).

Liminality occurs when the social walls come down for a brief period of time.

Turner explains that cultural performances, like rites of passage and other rituals, force societies to grow and move forward. For example, an initiation rite excels an individual from a childlike state to adulthood, hence forcing society to expand. Turner argues that a "performance is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of, an evaluation of the way society handles history" (Turner 1988:22). Through performance, members of a society view themselves and handle their internal issues. On the other hand, cultural performance provides outsiders a way to understand society.

The liminal stage is critical in part because of ritual's ability to affect society. This middle stage invites social antistructure, or what Turner calls "communitas." He defines communitas as, "a relational quality of full, unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities" (Turner 1992:58).

Antistructure, or communitas, is a place of ambiguity situated between the structures of

society. It is during the liminal stage that change happens. For example, upper and lower social classes may become equals and interact with one another at this time.

Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory further explains how hierarchies are temporarily halted and low culture becomes high culture during ritual. For Bakhtin, carnivalesque is a "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (1968:10). During the temporal period of antistructure, Brownsville's residents on all social levels experience unity and the sense of being on the same social level. Things that are otherwise inappropriate are accepted during the liminal stage of ritual.

Max Gluckman (1956) explains that the inappropriate actions people do during cultural rituals function as a way to maintain social order and cohesion. Gluckman does not focus on the three part structure of rites of passage like Van Gennep and Turner, but he does observe what happens during the liminal stage and would agree with them that it is a significant part of ritual.

In his essay, "The Licence in Ritual", Gluckman provides different examples of how societies in Africa use rituals to create social solidarity. The rituals he describes focus on conflicts and rebellious acts that turn society upside down for a brief period of time. In Van Gennep and Turner terms, these acts happen during a period of liminality. For example, Zulu society functions on the idea that if certain rituals are performed the group will prosper. Zulu rituals break taboos and allow things to happen that are normally unacceptable in order to reinforce social order and bring good fortune. If

ritualistic actions are not played out, the Zulu believe negative mystic powers will affect their society, specifically the headman. The Zulu believe that this ritual expression of rebellion and role reversal will ensure a good harvest and, according to Gluckman, the ritual maintains social cohesion.

The South Texas Border is a place in the margins and is geographically and culturally liminal. Physically, the border is situated between metropolitan Texas and metropolitan Tamaulipas. It is also emotionally situated between American and Mexican cultures. Within this context, rituals performed during Charro Days become particularly interesting. If the border in itself is a liminal region, Charro Days is doubly so. It is a period of liminality within a liminal place. As so, it lends itself to analysis using ideas from Van Gennep and Turner. Charro Days is a time of antistructure that occurs in a liminal state. Things that are considered inappropriate any other time of the year are accepted during the week of Charro Days.

As previously mentioned, wearing costumes has always been a considerable part of Charro Days. The act of dressing up allows people to transform themselves within the liminal space. Communitas is favored when people alter their outward appearance which tends to have an effect on their personality. This altered appearance gives them license and full range to change their personality in ways they cannot do so in their everyday lives. They may display themselves differently in ways that would be considered inappropriate in normal settings. This identity shift coincides with elements of carnivalesque.

For Bakhtin,

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom (1968:7).

In many ways Charro Days fits Bakhtin's description of carnival. The community is suspended of its regular schedule and is focused primarily on Charro Days. Schools and businesses close and everyone is encouraged to take part in the celebration.

Carnavalesque highlights how social order is briefly diminished and the marginalized population is celebrated and exalted. In the temporal space of liminality, Brownsville residents are encouraged to alter their appearance and character in ways that celebrates the frequently marginalized Mexican culture of the border. This shift in character during Charro Days both creates and reinforces a sense of identity shared by its participants.

Dressing up allows the individual to act out a new persona and temporarily change their identity. For example, someone dressed up as a Charro may be yelling *gritos*⁵ and drinking tequila on the streets of downtown Brownsville. In any other context this would be inappropriate and illegal, but in a period of antistructure it is acceptable. Outsiders may think it is odd that the community dresses up and acts out of character, but for Brownsville citizens it creates a sense of unity and solidarity. Ultimately, actions that are customary during Charro Days are considered antisocial and peculiar during any other time of the year. I will explain in more depth later in my thesis

⁵ A yell of celebration in Mexican culture. It is usually performed using one breath and lasts as long as possible.

how the liminal state of Charro Days is in fact a celebration of Brownsville identity and the source of social cohesion.

3: MR. AMIGO

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

After growing up around Charro Days, I attended the Mr. Amigo Association event “Hands Across the Border,” for the first time on Thursday, February 28, 2013. The event took place in the middle of the Gateway International Bridge between the United States and Mexico. Each year, the Association selects a Mexican citizen who has excelled in his/her professional and personal career to be “Mr. Amigo.” In 2013, the honor went to Eduardo Yañez, a Mexican *novela* (soap opera) star. The honoree is recognized at “Hands Across the Border.” The event helps begin the Charro Days festivities and is a celebration of unity and friendship between Brownsville and Matamoros. I will provide a “thick description” of the event. Using Geertz’s method of interpretive analysis, I will peel back the layers of meaning to show how this particular Charro Days performance is a public symbol of status and identity.

My unfamiliarity with the event made me *try* to secure a game plan. I had been in contact with the Mr. Amigo Association public relations officer, Sergio Martinez, who also does marketing for University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB). He was nonchalant and assured me I would have no problem attending. His only solid piece of advice was to bring my passport. Despite Martinez’s assurances, when I arrived at the event it seemed chaotic and not what I expected. I parked along International Boulevard, the main road that leads to the bridge entrance. The street also runs along the UTB campus, which is

located downtown on the border. From there, I walked about a quarter of a mile toward the Gateway International Bridge. The bridge was closed to vehicles trying to enter Mexico but open to those trying to enter the United States. The pedestrian pathway was open both entering and leaving the United States.

The scene was busy. The usual morning border hustle and bustle was heightened by the arrival of Mr. Amigo. Some people sat on benches visiting. Other people were leaving the U.S. with bags full of merchandise they purchased downtown. But the majority of people present this particular morning were there to see Mr. Amigo. Extra security was on hand to monitor the crowd. Onlookers lurked around to see what the commotion was all about. I was scrambling to figure out where to go and how to get there. There was a fairly large crowd of women crammed along the fence that separated automobile and human traffic; they hoped to get a glimpse of their *novela* star when his bus pulled up to the bridge entrance. The women, who were either Mexican or Mexican American, assembled behind the fence near the pedestrian entrance. There was no security forcing them to stand behind the fence. I walked around the women and toward the pedestrian entrance. I was confused. Normally, I would pay the fee of thirty-five cents to walk across the bridge, but in this case, I did not know if I was supposed to pay a couple coins to witness the event or if I had another option. Because of overwhelming crowd, I assumed that my chance to attend “Hands Across the Border” was slowly diminishing until I saw a person dressed in Charro Days attire.

Even though there were dozens of eager fans crowded around the bridge entrance, none of them except this individual were in Charro Days attire. He was dressed head to toe in a navy blue Charro suit complete with a sombrero and spurs. He looked as puzzled

as I felt. He turned around and I recognized him. He was a friend of the family and was heavily involved with the city of Brownsville and Charro Days. Mariano “Bean” Ayala was also trying to figure out how he was supposed to get on the bridge because he had a role in the event. I ran up to Bean. We turned to ask an officer standing next to the pedestrian entrance if we could get through. He simply told us to go around and walk straight through the vehicle entry point.

We looped around the group of women and made a beeline for the middle of the bridge. The car free bridge was now littered with Border Patrol, federal agents, and police officers. Bean rushed a few steps ahead of me, and I was stopped by a border patrol agent. I thought I might be prevented from going any further, but the agent just reminded me I would need my passport to come back. I quickly checked my bag to be sure I had it and proceeded.

So what began as a complicated ordeal really *was* as simple as Martinez implied. But why was he so sure I would not have a problem? And why didn’t any of the growing number of spectators attempt to walk through as easily as I had?

SOCIAL HISTORY

Historically, Brownsville has seen its fair share of segregation. Originally part of Mexico, society in this area was highly stratified. Social classes in Mexican Texas were characterized by socioeconomic status over ethnicity. Historian Arnolfo de León explains that, “Government position, membership in a prominent family, business achievement, and land ownership might make one eligible for elite status,” whereas, “*peones* (commoners) who performed unskilled labor and were of a mixed-blood or

Indian stock constituted the lower stratum” (2009:29-30). Mexicans of elite status were typically not mixed-blood or Indian. However, lower class citizens could be upwardly mobile if they were fortunate enough to acquire wealth. Education and literacy helped separate high society from low society and assisted in gaining wealth (De León 2009:30). Following the Mexican American War, Brownsville came under U.S. control and those who were previously oppressed by society became even more deeply oppressed. Lower class Mexicans were pushed down even further as newcomers to South Texas added a new layer to the already stratified society. Anglo farmers from the Midwest viewed all Mexicans the same and the Mexican elites fell into a subordinate position.

By the early twentieth century, the former Mexican ranch landscape had shifted to commercial agriculture. Anglo farmers relied on a commercialized relationship with their Mexican laborers, which contrasted with the paternalistic relations on the ranch (Montejano 1987:159). Montejano writes that cultural differences and unfamiliarity between the newcomers and Mexicans “was likely to create suspicion and uneasiness” (1987:165). The cultural diversity was experienced on both sides. Each group saw the other as different and had a hard time communicating due to language barriers and cultural conflicts. The new Anglo population created boundaries within the community. The Mexicans who were now Mexican Americans living on U.S. soil were at the mercy of the Anglo landowners who were now in control. However, wealth continued to play a role in social stratification.

Over time, some Mexican Americans became socially equal to their Anglo counterparts. Wealth was regained and gradually the pre-existing power reasserted itself. Once again socioeconomic status was valued over ethnicity. As more and more Mexican

Americans received an education, they were able to take on leadership positions within the city. Rudy Valle, a Mexican American dentist from Brownsville, said when he was in school in 1946 most teachers and students were Anglo. He went on to say that as the Mexican population became more educated, they began teaching and relations became more integrated. This was also at a time when soldiers were returning home from World War II and demanding rights. The G.I. Bill was introduced in 1944 to support war veterans, many of them Mexican American, and enabled them to receive higher education free of charge. The Civil Rights Movement also had a huge impact during this time. Momentous events, such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, which forced the nation to begin the process of desegregation in schools, and *Hernandez v. Texas*, which decided the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution equally protected all racial groups. These national changes and ideas eventually trickled down to South Texas. It forced awareness and created a shift in the attitudes of many border residents. Inter marriage between Mexican Americans and Anglos also contributed to the blending of ethnicities along the border. The two groups gradually grew together in the public sphere. What began as an ethnic separation grew into a socioeconomic separation of classes.

The one group unaltered by these changes was the lower class Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The lower class has been oppressed by the elite class throughout Brownsville's history. Class divisions may not be obvious to casual observers but are evident both to residents and to careful observers. For example, let us look at the large group of women waiting for Mr. Amigo's charter bus to arrive. A few things make their social status obvious. First, they were of Mexican descent and mostly female. Second, they spoke only Spanish. In addition, none of them wore any type of Charro Days attire.

This could mean they either do not care about Charro Days because they are only there to see the *novela* star, or they cannot afford festival clothing. Furthermore, they organized themselves along the fence that separates the walkers and drivers entrance to the bridge. The fence was not restricting or policed, but there were a large number of security personnel around the bridge that would make anyone a little nervous about breaking the rules. But what *are* the rules?

KNOW YOUR ROLE

Each social class is regulated by an underlying set of social rules. For example, lower class women know they are supposed to stand back and watch behind an imaginary boundary. Authorities do not have to tell them what they can and cannot do. There are no traffic cones or yellow tape to contain the masses. Most of the Border Patrol, federal agents, and local police officers are not even paying much attention to the screaming admirers. The women created a self-governing barrier between social classes. I suggest they did so because they are expected to “know their role” in society and take their place accordingly. They are members of the historically oppressed lower class. Social boundaries have trained lower class citizens to think and act a certain way. The women did not consider the ability to move freely without considering the consequences of their actions. In the past, these consequences might have included physical beatings. Current day consequences could result in arrest and would have a more devastating effect to them as opposed to someone like me. Because of history and everyday reality, the women conclude it is safer and economically better to stay behind the fence.

On the other side of the social boundary were the people attending the “Hands Across the Border.” While the *novela* star’s true fans are only allowed a glimpse of the

celeb, others on the bridge share his space in close proximity. These people were of a higher social class. They were a mix of Anglo and Mexican ethnicities. They spoke English and Spanish. Many were wearing Charro Days attire. They freely roamed the bridge, as opposed to being crammed along a fence.

Even though I may have not realized it at the time, I also understood my role in society. I knew my boundaries were different from the boundaries of the women at the base of the bridge. My biggest fear that day was being told “no.” I was willing to push my limits because I knew my consequences would not be severe. Luckily for me, no one told me “no” and I was able to go wherever I pleased, which was even further than I had expected.

THE SCENE

A stage was constructed in the middle of the bridge situated directly above the Rio Grande border line. A podium and microphone were set up on each end of the stage, one positioned on the American side and the other on the Mexican side. American and Mexican flags decorated their respective sides but did not overlap onto the other side. A row of approximately twenty chairs filled the space between the podiums (Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1 – The scene on the middle of the bridge before the arrival of Mr. Amigo.

Moments ago I thought I would not attend the event, and now I was early and awaiting the arrival of Mr. Amigo. I found a good spot along the street and sidewalk barrier, right next to an armed officer and a flag holder. I knew no one would try to crowd them. Since I am six feet tall, I also had a pretty solid view of my surroundings.

It was a sunny but chilly morning. I wore jeans, boots, a peasant blouse with a black leather jacket, and a turquoise scarf from Mexico. Many people around me wore some type of festive clothing. Some women wore peasant blouses with bows in their hair. Men donned the button down Charro shirt and boots. Some people dressed in full costumes or wore leather jackets from the state of Tamaulipas. A group of about ten children, all in full costume, played on the bridge while their parents watched them. People who were not in some sort of Charro Days attire were mostly from media outlets (cameramen, photographers, journalists). There were also a handful of uncostumed observers on the Brownsville side of the bridge. Even though I had a pretty good view of my surroundings, it was difficult to see what was happening on the Matamoros side.

Not long after I had arrived, I saw Mr. Amigo's large, light blue tour bus pull up to the foot of the bridge in Brownsville. I could hear the women's high-pitched screams of excitement when Mr. Amigo stepped down from the bus.

As Yañez made his way toward the stage, he was surrounded by a tight circle of about ten security personnel (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2 – Mr. Amigo and the association’s president walk to the stage.

More officers were standing at various points along the bridge. Outside the uniformed circle surrounding Yañez were photographers, journalists, and event participants and attendees trying to get a closer look. Inside the circle walking with Yañez were Mr. Amigo Association president, Yesenia Patino, Patino’s husband, and a young boy and girl dressed in a Charro suit and China Poblana respectively.

From the moment Mr. Amigo stepped out of the bus, he became the focal point for the afternoon. Surrounding him were layers of people, each representing a specific job or special interest regarding Mr. Amigo. As the group reached the stage, Yañez took a seat in the middle chair. This is a symbolic representation of Yañez’s position as the ambassador of friendship between the cities, countries, and cultures. But he did not sit

between the Brownsville and Matamoros representatives. Sitting on his left side were Mr. Amigo's president and her husband followed by Sombrero Festival, Ltd. and Charro Days Fiesta, Inc.'s presidents and spouses. On his right side were Brownsville's mayor and his wife followed by the Matamoros mayor and his wife. The other people representing the Matamoros side were the Fiestas Mexicanas⁶ president and spouse followed by local dignitaries and Mexican celebrities.

THE MAIN EVENT

Once everyone on stage took their seats, two speakers approached the podiums. The Brownsville speaker was a Mexican American male in his seventies dressed in a navy blue and gold Charro suit. The Matamoros speaker was a Mexican male in his forties or fifties wearing the state of Tamaulipas leather jacket over a button down dress shirt and slacks (Figure 3.3).



Figure 3.3 – Children exchange gifts while Mexican man stands at the podium.

⁶ A celebratory event in Matamoros similar to Charro Days that began in 1936. The two celebrations go hand in hand as they both celebrate friendship and culture along the border.

They took turns telling the story of Charro Days. They also alternated between speaking English and Spanish, but overall, Spanish was used more than English. They spoke of the unique festivities the border has to celebrate unity, friendship, and togetherness through Charro Days and Fiestas Mexicanas. The Brownsville speaker listed some of the previous Mr. Amigos and the different public positions they have held over the years such as politicians, artists, and musicians. The Matamoros speaker added the phrase, “*espíritu de comunidad*” (spirit of the community) to describe the celebration between border towns.

Girls on the Mexican side were screaming throughout the speeches. People crowded the pedestrian sidewalk in the middle of the bridge to get a better look at the event. Others tried to squeeze through the mob with bags in tow to get through to the Mexican side without even caring about the event. The Mexican National anthem was played, followed by the United States National anthem. Then the speakers took turns introducing the people on stage. Guests from both sides received warm welcomes from the audience, but the Mexican audience was by far the more energetic and boisterous crowd. As previously mentioned, Brownsville’s lineup included Charro Days representatives and civic leaders while the Matamoros group were public figures and celebrities. Everyone on the American side was dressed in festive Mexican attire. However, fewer among the Mexican group were dressed up. Most were dressed in casual clothes and a few wore the Tamaulipas jacket over their button-down shirts.

After introductions and anthems, the children, who had been playing on the bridge, began exchanging gifts. One by one a child representing the United States and a

child representing Mexico, both dressed in a traditional⁷ Mexican outfit, walked to the center of the stage to exchange a gift and national flag (Figure 3.3). About five or six pairs of children followed suit to the cheers of the crowd. One of the little girls from Mexico went straight to Mr. Amigo and offered him her gift and flag. The crowd laughed.

Once all the children had given their presents, it was now time for the adults to demonstrate their friendship. Brownsville's mayor approached the podium. He addressed the crowd first in Spanish commenting on the children, then switched to English. He spoke of Brownsville native Américo Paredes who was among one of the first Mexican American professors hired by the University of Texas. He was an author who wrote about how the Rio Grande both forms the border between the United States and Mexico and unites us as brothers and sisters.

The Brownsville mayor continued:

The border has faced many challenges economically, politically, and violently, but we are rich in history. It is what unites us that is greater than what divides us. We pass these beliefs onto our children. What keeps us strong is education and family. We are family with Matamoros and it is a spirit that endures. Charro Days has a past and a future. Charro Days has a history and we continue to be successful because we are family.

After his speech, the Brownsville mayor presented the Matamoros mayor with a plaque and framed photo of them hugging. This is a symbolic action reaffirming their friendship. The Matamoros mayor then took the podium and described the relationship as "*somos amigos; somos hermanos*" (we are friends; we are brothers). He compared

⁷ Clothing recognized by a Mexican state.

Brownsville and Matamoros's relationship metaphorically to a family. He said that the way parents care for their children is similar to the love Brownsville and Matamoros have from one another. Together the mayors begin yelling "*Viva! Viva! Viva!*" This boosted the crowd's energy.

One by one the adults from both sides took turns stepping forward and exchanging gifts like the children had done. The Association presented Mr. Amigo with a Tamaulipas brown leather jacket that was too small in the sleeves. Yañez spoke briefly in Spanish saying that it was a great honor to be named Mr. Amigo and seemed thrilled about the experience. The rest of the Mexican guests were also given jackets. A few representatives from each side said a few words to the audience. A good looking Mexican man in his late twenties or early thirties said in Spanish that America is known for hard work, but Mexico is about love. He asked for support for Mexico during their current difficult times. The Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. president code-switched during his short talk, while the Sombrero Festival, Ltd. president spoke only in Spanish. Both relayed their organization's upcoming Charro Days events to the audience.

Once all the gifts were exchanged and speeches communicated, the mayors, Mr. Amigo, Mr. Amigo president, and her husband took center stage to release white doves together. This is another symbolic expression of friendship between Brownsville and Matamoros.

This was the end of the “Hands Across the Border” performance (Figure 3.4). The crowd pulled themselves away from the stage and little by little began making their way back to the base of the bridge. The people crammed along the pedestrian walkway gradually dispersed and either continued into Mexico or backtracked to the United States. Cars that had paused on the other side of the bridge entering the U.S. slowly accelerated toward the border patrol checkpoint.



Figure 3.4 – Mr. Amigo, along with the mayors and guests, hold white doves to symbolize friendship.

I stood in the same place for a moment trying to observe any last details I may have missed. I recalled Sergio Martinez telling me that UTB has an event to recognize Mr. Amigo after the bridge ceremony, but I was unsure of the details and how to get there. I overheard a man, who was wearing a bright green Mr. Amigo Association shirt, telling another man he would see him at the next location. I quickly said to the Mr. Amigo representative, “Yeah, Sergio told me about it, where is it again?” He told me it was at the UTB Arts Center, but I was not quite sure where that was located on campus.

I had been fortunate to secure a prime position for the “Hands Across the Border”, but by this time, I was not sure I would be so lucky again.

I made my way to the customs building prepared to show my passport and re-enter the U.S. The building was packed with American and Mexican nationals coming from the event along with people who were not at the event. I stood in the middle line. One entrance line was reserved only for the Mexican participants, while the Mr. Amigo representatives and public figures took up the line next to me. The man who I had spoken to on the bridge stood next to me in the other line. He leaned over and told me to get on the yellow bus and it would take me to the Arts Center. I thanked him.

I showed my passport and was cleared by customs. I walked out the exit door and sure enough there was a large, yellow charter bus parked along the sidewalk. Once again, acting like I knew what I was doing and where I was going, I walked straight to the bus and entered. I was one of the first people to board and sat down a few rows behind the bus driver who handed me a bottle of water. About three other people who I did not recognize were seated in the back. No one questioned me. I did not know them; they did not know me. Not long after I took my seat, other people showed up. They were the Mexican public figures and celebrities who were on stage at the event. Mr. Amigo and the association were on a different bus. I sat quietly and observed their actions. No one sat next to me, but they did take the seats all around me. Their energy was jovial. They admired their new leather jackets. They spoke in Spanish about how “Hands Across the Border” was such a nice presentation. I sat and wondered what would come next.

Once all the guests took their seats, the bus drove away from the bridge. The UTB campus is next to the bridge, so in less than five minutes we were at our final destination. We parked in the back of the Arts Center and were ushered in the side door. I continued to follow the crowd. I waited in the lobby with all the other people coming from the bridge. A few minutes later we were led through a side door that opened into the auditorium. When we entered the venue a band on stage was playing Spanish music and the theatre was packed from floor level to the balcony with screaming UTB students and attentive professionals. I followed the group inside and a girl escorted us to two empty rows that had been reserved for “us.” I spotted a single aisle seat a few rows up and sat there instead. Once everyone was situated, the band stopped playing and the curtain rose. To my surprise, the people sitting around me on the bus were now sitting on stage with Mr. Amigo. The crowd went wild. Mr. Amigo had a long week of festivities ahead of him, and the Charro Days celebration had officially begun.

POWER IN PERFORMANCE

Throughout the performance Brownsville symbolically demonstrated power and control over Matamoros. At “Hands Across the Border” speakers repeatedly compared their relationships to the relationships within a family. Speakers evoked that Brownsville and Matamoros have a big brother-little brother or parent-child type of relationship. For example, the Matamoros mayor said that the way parents care for their children is the love Brownsville and Matamoros have for one another⁸. But what does this mean? Families are not egalitarian and usually consist of dominant and subordinate positions. Brownsville and Matamoros fit this characteristic with Brownsville holding the dominant

⁸ Matamoros mayor said these words in Spanish to the crowd.

position. In this section, I examine specific parts of the “Hands Across the Border” performance and give a more in-depth look at the power relationship between Brownsville and Matamoros. Figure 3.5 illustrates the location of different groups at the Mr. Amigo event. I will analyze these layers to show that the people closer to the center circle are more powerful than those further away.

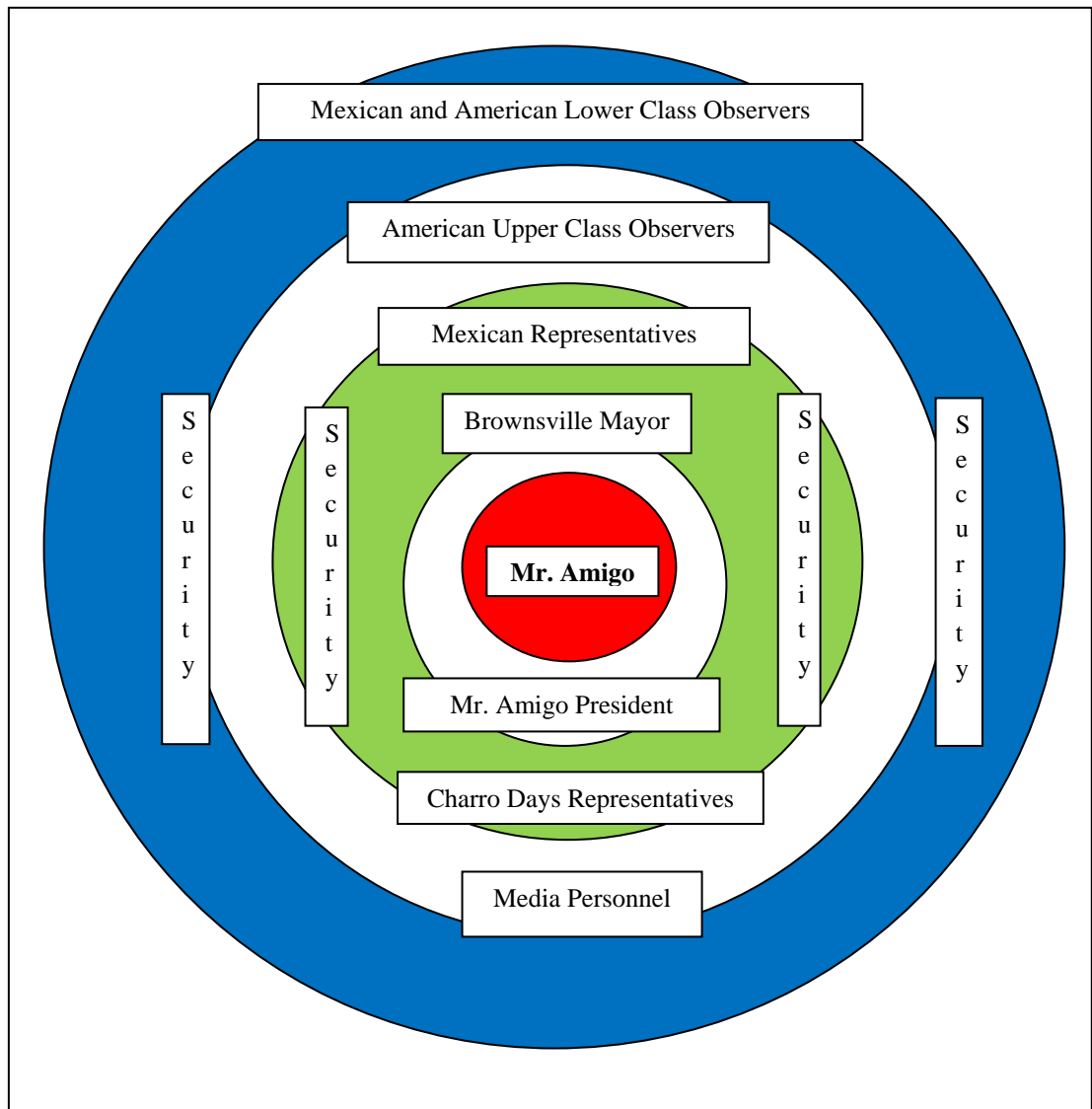


Figure 3.5 – Layers of people surrounding Mr. Amigo at “Hands Across the Border”

Among the first things I noticed when I arrived at the bridge was who was and who was not wearing a costume. Most of the people at the foot of the bridge were not in any type of Charro Days attire. As I pointed out earlier, most of the people around the bridge entrance were either part of the usual morning border traffic or they were members of the group of women waiting to see Mr. Amigo. The first person I saw wearing a Charro Days outfit, before recognizing Bean, was involved in the event. He was the only one dressed as a Charro in a sea of casually dressed citizens. The closer I got to “Hands Across the Border,” the more people I saw dressed up.

The people dressed up that morning were members of an elite class of Brownsville citizens. I recognized many of them. Most of them were high-ranking Charro Days personnel or they held leadership positions in Brownsville. They were also the closest group of people to Mr. Amigo. Their presence in the inner circle was a visual representation of their wealth and power. On the other hand, I did not recognize any people that were further away from the center. This group was not involved with the city or with Charro Days. The further away from Mr. Amigo someone was, the less likely they would be in costume and the less likely they would be a prominent citizen. For Brownsville elites, dressing up was a symbol of status and was it easily recognized by the general public and officials.

Wearing costumes also exhibited control over Mexican culture. No one on the Mexican side was wearing garments from any Mexican state other than their own Tamaulipas attire. Also, none of the people in the outer circle, including the Mexican and Mexican American women along the fence, were in costume. Members of the Brownsville middle and upper-middle classes have taken traditional Mexican dress and

made it their own for this occasion. At this event, the material items represent power and prestige. This is a symbolic representation of Americans taking control over a part of Mexican culture through dress.

Another example of how Brownsville showed control over Matamoros is through language. All of the Mexican representatives spoke in Spanish, while the American representatives switched between English and Spanish. The Americans demonstrated mastery through language because they code-switched and the Mexicans did not. Even though more Spanish was used throughout the event than English, the Americans proved to be more powerful. They positioned themselves to communicate to a larger audience of English and Spanish speakers. They demonstrated their Americanness by showing they are bilingual whereas many Matamoros residents are not. While the Americans do control the power of language by speaking Spanish and English, the fact that they have chosen to speak more Spanish shows that they want to include and honor Mexico during the event. It is a form of endearment that the Brownsville speakers display while still maintaining control.

There were many symbolic representations of friendship at “Hands Across the Border.” But many of these symbolic representations of friendship have deeper meanings of power and control. The direct translation of Mr. Amigo is Mr. Friend. However, specific parts of the performance showcased that he is more Brownsville’s friend than Matamoros’ friend. For example, Figure 3.5 illustrates that Mr. Amigo was surrounded by Brownsville citizens as he walked from the United States’ side. He took a seat in the middle of the stage, but American citizens sat on either side of him. During the week of Charro Days, Brownsville and the Mr. Amigo Association control the

presence of Mr. Amigo and decide where he goes and what he does. Brownsville uses Mr. Amigo to show appreciation of the Mexican community while maintaining control. Mr. Amigo is paraded around town for a week and receives a great deal of positive publicity. Symbolically, the public's reactions toward Mr. Amigo are a reflection of the Brownsville's power because Brownsville controls Mr. Amigo. Honoring a Mexican citizen as Mr. Amigo highlights Mexico's strengths and enables the Brownsville to connect with Mexico on a more personal level while still maintaining the power and imbalance in the relationship.

Another symbolic representation of friendship was the gift exchange, but as Marcel Mauss (1967) argued, gift giving was never a free action. Giving a gift was a well thought out process that obligated the recipient to return the favor at a later time. In the case of "Hands Across the Border," both parties gave and received gifts. It was a symbolic act to have children from both sides exchange gifts first. This highlights the fact that friendship and brotherhood on the border begins at a young age. But, it is during the adult's gift exchange where the scale becomes lopsided.

The Mr. Amigo Association chose to give Tamaulipas leather jackets in various colors to each Mexican guest. These jackets can be priced in the hundreds of dollars, especially when they are of good quality leather. Matamoros representatives, on the other hand, gave gift baskets filled with random candies and trinkets from Mexico. Even though there was a reciprocal exchange of gifts, Brownsville's gifts were by far more expensive and elaborate. This is a symbolic representation of a parent-child type of relationship. Parents can afford and are expected to give their children more costly gifts. On the other hand, parents do not expect their children to match their gift.

The unequal gift also leaves the Matamoros representatives in a position of debt. It is likely that Brownsville representatives could later use their high-priced gift as leverage, whereas Matamoros representatives could not. Also, what does it mean when Brownsville chooses an item that is representative of Matamoros and not of the United States? I suggest Brownsville is exhibiting power by not only choosing a pricey gift but also by taking the control of an item that is Mexican and specifically from Tamaulipas. In addition, the event itself also gives Brownsville the upper hand. Even though “Hands Across the Border” takes place between border towns, it is clearly a Brownsville event and Matamoros is the guest. Brownsville symbolically takes the role of parent or older sibling and invites Matamoros to participate and take the role of child or younger sibling.

In conclusion, a deeper look at the performance shows that this is not a celebration of equality. There were many instances throughout “Hands Across the Border” where both sides acknowledged an unbalanced, big brother-little brother type of relationship. For example, both mayors made comments about Brownsville and Matamoros being like a family. The Brownsville mayor referenced Américo Paredes to describe how the border unites us as brothers and sisters. The Matamoros mayor agreed by saying “*somos amigos; somos hermanos*” (we are friends; we are brothers) and continued to say that the way parents care for their children is the love Brownsville and Matamoros have for one another. These are examples that show how the border towns view themselves as family, but when the young Mexican man on stage briefly spoke to the crowd, we see the imbalance of the relationship. He said America is known for hard work, but Mexico is about love and asked for American support during their difficult times. He is blatantly asking for help from his “family” across the river.

The event praises Mexicans while showing control and superiority over Matamoros. The people closest to Mr. Amigo were of a higher status within the Brownsville community. Brownsville representatives in the inner circle demonstrated many forms of imitation that symbolized power and control. The Americans imitated Mexico's dress, language, and culture. They took Mr. Amigo, a Mexican citizen, and paraded him around for a week. But isn't imitation considered to be the greatest form of flattery? The actions during Charro Days and at "Hands Across the Border" are more Mexican than American. The event is designed to flatter Mexico, while at the same time, their subordinate position is reaffirmed. Brownsville is reasserting its power over Matamoros by controlling aspects of their culture.

Returning to Geertz's idea of culture as a text, if Mr. Amigo Association's "Hands Across the Border" is a text we are reading over the participant's shoulders it seems to say that Matamoros wants Brownsville to look after them and willingly take the subordinate position. On one hand, the cultural text shows that Brownsville asserts control and positions itself as the parent or older sibling. On the other hand, the text shows that Matamoros accepts the position as the child or younger sibling. Matamoros recognizes Brownsville's power and allows them to control aspects of their culture expecting to be looked after in return.

4: SOMBRERO FESTIVAL

In the last chapter, I provided examples of symbolic representations of family at “Hands Across the Border.” But, the theme of family is not restricted to a specific event during Charro Days; it is seen throughout the week of festivities. In this chapter I argue that family is a key symbol of Brownsville and Charro Days. Sherry B. Ortner (1973) says a key symbol is one that interacts with the culture and plays a fundamental role in the system. Key symbols represent important or highly-visible things in a particular culture. Ortner also explains that key scenarios display the basic cultural script and how it is ideally acted out.

In this chapter, I will use Ortner’s symbolic approach to show how Sombrero Festival, Ltd. is like a family and how family ties are emphasized within Sombrero Festival itself. The organization may have internal issues, but like a family, its members continue to work together. In addition, I suggest the key scenario for Sombrero Festival is “a family that plays together, stays together.” I will show symbolic representations of family on display during Sombrero Festival and explain how they demonstrate solidarity over conflict.

FAMILY TIES

Family ties run deep in South Texas. As previously mentioned, historically, life on the ranch was difficult and required a large support group for survival. Mexican families were typically large in order to produce workers. But immediate family members also

relied on extended family members, friends, and co-workers to contribute to their *familia*. *Familia* members maintained family-like relationships with one another in South Texas. Mexican ranch families also had a paternalistic relationship with their *patróns* who gave them shelter and necessities in return for labor. Nowadays, most families do not rely on ranch work for survival, but ideas about *familia* are still very present in South Texas culture.

The ideology of family in American culture and *familia* in border culture in particular, is that families are supposed to stay strong though the good times and the bad. The reality, however, is that many families do not make it through the bad times. When I say family or *familia*, I am referring to the ideology of what a family is supposed to be like in America, not that actuality of it in the real world. In this chapter, I will use the ideology of *familia* and show how it plays an important role in the culture of Brownsville and more specifically Sombrero Festival.

LIKE A FAMILY: THE ORGANIZATION

Before Sombrero Festival is open to the public during the last weekend of February, the members of Sombrero Festival, Ltd. and volunteers have worked together for six months. Sombrero Festival, Ltd. is a non-profit organization, and, aside from start-up money for the following year, all proceeds filter back into the community. About \$110,000 comes from corporate sponsors who pay to advertise at the festival. The remaining proceeds come from entrance admission, vendor fees, and beer and beverage booths. Sombrero Festival, Ltd's annual gross income is \$400,000. The organization's website states, "Sombrero Festival has returned approximately \$1.5 million back to the community through nonprofit organizations and direct donations for tourism,

beautification and recreation venues in the city of Brownsville” (Sombrero Festival 2014).

The organization holds board member meetings, officer meetings, and membership mixers regularly leading up to Charro Days. Sombrero Festival, Ltd. has a headquarters located in the historic district of Brownsville near downtown. The property holds a large warehouse, half of which is used for storage and the other half has space to facilitate meetings and parties. It is decorated with Sombrero Festival memorabilia and is complete with a cantina and back porch. The headquarters becomes a second home to many people who work closely with the organization during the six months leading up to Charro Days.

Sombrero Festival, Ltd. is divided into four groups: board members, officers, members, and volunteers. There are twenty-six board members; this group includes past presidents and the current president. The active board members hold meetings separate from officer’s meetings but will sit in on officer’s meetings occasionally to their follow progress. Board members help guide and assist the officers in planning the festival. The officers are led by an elected president. In 2013 there were twenty-eight officers, plus a newly developed marketing team of approximately fifteen people. Beside the president, there is a president-elect, secretary, treasurer, and a minimum of seven vice presidents. Vice presidents oversee different areas such as events or entertainment and are encouraged to have assistants who are also recognized as officers. People become officers by first becoming a member and are usually introduced to the organization by a friend or family member. As a member, he or she will work on a committee under a vice president. If the member shows leadership skills and officer potential, an officer will

recommend them to an assistant chair position so that they may learn a particular area of the organization. After a couple years, if they continue to show officer potential, they will be ratified by the board and appointed to a position.

The third group is the members. In 2013, there were over 600 members. Sombrero Festival, Ltd. CEO and Chairman, Roy De Los Santos, Jr. said (email to author, February 1, 2014), “Last year (2013) saw a strong increase in the membership numbers...as we’ve engaged in social media and better utilized our website as a tool in promoting membership.” He broke down the numbers for me and they showed a 102% increase in membership from 2012 to 2013. Members pay a fee that varies between \$30 for a single member and up to \$125 for corporate members. All members receive an annual Sombrero Festival t-shirt, entry passes to the festival, and an invitation to each membership mixer held at the headquarters. Members are not required to volunteer at the event, but it is greatly appreciated if they do. The membership mixers are designed to attract people who want to help and be a part of the organization. There are also corporate sponsors, but they are more interested in advertising at the festival and are dealt with separately by the marketing team.

The fourth group is the volunteers. Board members and officers volunteer their time, but hundreds of volunteers are needed during the festival to work ticket booths, main gate booths, and beverage booths. They also help set-up and take down vendor booths, the big tent, and the main stage. Volunteers are also in charge of food, which is a main attraction at Sombrero Festival. There are approximately twenty-eight vendor booths scattered around the park. Each booth houses a local (Brownsville or Matamoros) restaurant, business, or organization. They typically cook and sell food common to the

border like *tacos de bistek*, *gorditas*, y *tortas*. Each booth is decorated in proper Charro Days fashion and the best looking booth is given an award (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1 – Decorated booths at Sombrero Festival serving local border food.

Many vendors return year after year to be a part of the Sombrero Festival family and reunite with friends. De Los Santos, Jr. said (email to author, February 1, 2014),

We have consistently sold out food booth spaces and continue to have a waiting list for vendors wanting space. [Each vendor's] product has to be reviewed by Sombrero Festival, Ltd. and has to be complimentary to the festival and in line with the spirit of our event.

FAMILY FIRST

Sombrero Festival, Ltd. is structured like a family. The board members are like the grandparents who oversee their children's work. The officers are like the parents who do a large part in producing the festival. And the members and volunteers are like the children who come for the fun and are instructed by their elders on what is needed for their contribution. And like a family, life in the organization is not always as it seems. For example, one member told me that there were many disputes over money. She said

people argued in a meeting about whether to give more money or keep a little extra for the organization since they raised more that year. She said a board member spoke up and said, “The point is to give back to the community; so, the more we make, the more we give.” Organization members will argue and their feelings may get hurt, but like a family, they are determined to be strong and stay together for the greater good, which is putting on another successful Sombrero Festival for the community.

Sombrero Festival, Ltd.’s first membership mixer for Charro Days 2013 took place at their headquarters on September 15, 2012. It was a potluck mixer and all the board members and officers were asked to bring a dish. The atmosphere was like a family reunion. The warehouse was festively decorated with colorful *banderas* (flags) hanging from the ceiling, images of Mexico painted on the walls, and Sombrero Festival artifacts dating back to the 1980s. The back deck had round tables and chairs, streams of lights, and an area set up where part-time DJ, De Los Santos, Jr., played Spanish and country music. This was the first time since last Charro Days that everyone was together to kick off the upcoming season. People laughed, joked, and teased one another.

I was greeted by most people with a kiss on the cheek, which is a customary greeting in Mexican culture, especially in a family-like setting. I talked to new marketing team member and high school friend, Victoria Perez. She joined the Sombrero Festival organization after being invited by a family member who is on the board. Also present was a coach from my high school who is an active member. He brought his wife and five relatives to the mixer. Many of the people I spoke with were introduced to the organization by a family member or friend.

On the way to the mixer, Sombrero Festival founder, Danny Loff, talked about Sombrero Festival, Ltd. being a “family.” He said that at first he was annoyed because people become members of the organization but do not always help with the event. They pay their fee in return for goodies. Their money goes towards more mixers and that is it. But then Loff realized that, “members are like tentacles through the community and Sombrero Festival is like the core or nucleus.” When the members come to Sombrero Festival they bring their family and friends. Loff asks, “Don’t you want to see more of your friends at the festival? And wouldn’t you want to meet their friends and family over strangers?” The idea behind his analogy is that Sombrero Festival, Ltd. is a family and tries to get more families within the organization and community to partake in the celebration to create an even bigger family unit.

LIKE A FAMILY: THE COMMUNITY

Sombrero Festival was founded to appeal and cater to Brownsville residents from every social class during Charro Days. Entrance is free during the first three hours of each day (Thursday-Saturday) and children under twelve are always free. The festival takes place at Washington Park in downtown Brownsville. Brownsville residents anticipate seeing their *familia* at Sombrero Festival year after year. In this section, I will show how *familia* plays an important role in the celebration.

For many Brownsville residents, Charro Days is a border culture tradition and Sombrero Festival is a reunion of friends and family. The celebration is multigenerational and its participants have decades of memories. I asked Sombrero Festival, Ltd., Mr. Amigo Association, and Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. to post a question on Facebook asking the community their favorite memories of Charro Days. Much of the

feedback revolved around childhood memories and family. For example, Monique Danae Garza said her best memory was, “My dad taking me to the parades every year as a little girl, I still go to all three and I can’t wait for this year’s.” Rosa Belia Ramos Ramirez remembers, “Mother sewing different costumes for us to wear, a different one every day of the festivities.” Norma Carrizales added, “Priceless childhood memories.”

The responses show that for many Brownsville citizens, Charro Days begins at a young age and has continued as a tradition year after year. Sandra Ybarra’s favorite memory is, “Taking time off from work to drive down to the Valley to spend Charro Days with my dad.” John Kenney adds, “Being with my cousins, nephew, niece, sister-in-law, and of course my brother marching with the dancing sombreros [in the parade].” Brownsville citizens will return year after year to continue the tradition of Charro Days and spend time with family and friends. Norma Harfeny enjoys, “Seeing old friends that I hadn’t seen in ages and sharing a few beers over a great visit.” Nago Garcia said, “Always being with great friends and people there.” Esmeralda Galicia adds, “I have been going to Sombrero Fest since the first one. I’m so sad that I’m gonna miss my first ever! It’s a big event for my kids and I. It’s a tradition that makes us sad not to be there this year!” These quotes and many others share the same idea of *familia*. Many people’s fondest memories begin as a child with family. As each generation ages, it continues to celebrate Charro Days traditions while creating new memories with their *familia*.

A FAMILY THAT PLAYS TOGETHER, STAYS TOGETHER

Washington Park is situated between the Historic Brownsville Museum and the parade route on Elizabeth Street. The park is reminiscent of a Mexican plaza and is complete with a gazebo and water fountain. During Sombrero Festival, one end of the

park is a main stage with floor space and bleachers. On the other end is an enormous tent that houses a smaller stage, tables, and chairs. Both are designed for musical acts and special events. Between endpoints, there are numerous activities and events so that community members of all ages can participate. Sombrero Festival's ideology is focused on unusual events and community participation, rather than generic festival attractions and big prizes. The festival creates an atmosphere for children and adults to play together and compete. I will describe different events at the festival and show how they focus more on camaraderie rather than competition.

Popular Tejano bands may bring the big crowds to Sombrero Festival, but it is the events that bring out spirit of the community. Sombrero Festival is successful because it encourages the community to play together, which in turn helps them stay together. Organizers of the festival coordinate children's and adult's events for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Many local participants return every year to take part in their favorite events. For example, in a Facebook response Luis Rosales said, "My best memories were seeing my dad win the tug of war. Man those were good times. And now we pull and are the returning champs. Puro⁹ Mr. Taco¹⁰ tug of war team!" Rosales' quote shows the excitement people have competing year after year. It is also an example of generational and family participation. Lily Orive-Salazar also enjoyed, "Watching my sister on the old Brownsville Medical Center tug of war team!" The music acts will come and go, but it is the memories shared watching or competing with or against family and friends that are remembered.

⁹ Spanish slang. Translated, "Forever Mr. Taco tug of war team!"

¹⁰ Brownsville 24 hour taco restaurant.

The competitions allow people to play while they build friendly rivalries with others in the community. In chapter 2, I mentioned the Frijolympics (bean cook-off) as a friendly, but highly interactive event that takes place under the big tent all day Saturday. Teams adorn themselves with custom-made shirts and decorate their cooking areas while they rejoin their *familia* year after year. Participants and observers anticipate the Frijolympics because it is like a family reunion. For example, Team Suelo is a group that has their own Facebook page with ninety-eight members (Figure 4.2). Obviously, not all of Team Suelo actually cooks the *frijoles*, but they are all there to support the team. Team Suelo members post messages, pictures, and updates on Facebook. They design team shirts, caps, koozies, and mini towels to add to their team spirit. Most of the members are in their late-20s or early 30s and grew up together in Brownsville. Facebook allows them to stay in touch, but Sombrero Festival gives them a place to reunite and play.



Figure 4.2 – Team Suelo waves team towels at the Frijolympics.

Frijolympic teams are not only for the younger generations. The Beard Posse – Order of the Brush is another group who competes to have the best beans in Brownsville (Figure 4.3). This group is made up of bearded men averaging fifty years of age. Their team uniform consists of boots, dark blue Wrangler jeans, a red bandana, Mexican eagle shirt, and sometimes a sombrero.



Figure 4.3 – Beard Posse socializes in their area at the Frijolympics.

They designated a person in charge of the beans while they harassed the crowds by throwing beardless men in their mini jail. Beardless men must pay a fine to get out of jail and all of the money is donated to the Historic Brownsville Museum. Growing a beard for the Charro Days season has been a tradition dating back to the early years, but the Beard Posse is making an effort to revitalize the beard.

As I approached the big tent on Saturday afternoon after coming from the International Parade, I was greeted by the aroma of simmering pots full of spices, secret ingredients, and *frijoles*. A U.S. Army Band entertained the crowd while teams drank beer and socialized in their designated cooking areas. I walked between the decorated tables and started to see groups of people I knew but had not seen in ages. A childhood friend, who had returned for Charro Days, joked with me saying, “It is better than a planned high school reunion.” My father introduced me to a friend he has known since the third grade and has not seen in decades. The Frijolympics is an event specific to the border and Sombrero Festival that gives the community a place to celebrate their culture and reconnect with their *familia*.

Other Sombrero Festival events that involve the same type of team camaraderie include the Waiter’s Race and Hat Stack Relay. Both events take place at the large fountain in the middle of the park. Obstacle courses circling the fountain are designed for each race. In the Waiter’s Race, each team member must run through the course wearing a sombrero while holding a tray with aluminum cans. The contestants must balance the cans on their tray while keeping the sombrero on their head all while running through the complex course. Then they must pass the items along to the next team member and so forth. The fastest team wins. The Hat Stack Relay is similar, minus the tray of cans, and involves more sombreros. Both events create a high level of competitiveness. Unlike the Frijolympics, where most participants simply hang out and let the beans boil, race and relay participants must be ready to prove their athleticism and agility. But, similar to Frijolympics and Tug of War, teams in the Waiter’s Race and Hat Stack Relay tend to return every year to represent their business, organization, or *familia*. The competitions

create solidarity between team members while maintaining camaraderie with opposing teams.

Team events are not the only ones that follow the key scenario and reinforce solidarity over conflict. Individual events are equally as popular as the team competitions. Individual events stay true to the idea or stereotype of border culture. For example, there is the Grito Contest, Jalapeño Eating Contest, Costume Contest, and Beard Contest. Each event is idealizing a part of Mexican culture, while giving it a competitive American flare. Contestants for these events have a maximum twenty-five or so people, but the crowds can be in the hundreds, especially for the Jalapeño Eating Contest and Grito Contest which are back to back events.

In the Jalapeño Eating Contest, men and women line the main stage standing behind a long table. They are given five (originally ten) minutes to eat as many jalapeños as they can. Beer and water are on hand to quench their thirst. Once time is up, the stems are counted to determine the winner. An EMCEE encourages the participants while firing up the crowd. Some contestants may only participate once in their lifetime, but there are returning champions who compete every year for the title. Audience members pick their favorite contestants and cheer them on. The crowd grows as the Jalapeño Eating Contest winds down and the Grito Contest is on the horizon.

For me, and many other Brownsville residents, the Grito Contest is the highlight of Sombrero Festival. The contest takes place on the main stage on the last day of the festival right before sunset. The park fills up fast as popular Tejano bands are scheduled to perform at night. Men line up along the fence on one side of the stage, women on the

other. In 2013, master of ceremonies, Bean Ayala engaged the audience by dancing with spectators and joking with the crowd in Spanish and English. He quickly reviewed the only rule: a *grito* is one breath long. Once all the contestants lined up, Bean called them to the stage one by one and handed them the microphone. A familiar Mexican Huapango¹¹ song called “Las Tres Huastecas”, which has become the staple anthem for the contest, began to play. This was their cue. Each contestant gave his/her best *grito*. Bean teased the participant about his or her walk, dress, attitude, *grito*, or anything else that he found amusing. The crowd roared with laughter.

The man and woman who receives the loudest response from the crowd’s reaction, as judged by Bean, is the winner (Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4 – 2013 Grito Contest winner announced.

¹¹ Type of Mexican folk dance and music style.

Some people will cheer for the best sounding or longest *grito*, while other people will root for someone they know. This was the case for a Team Suelo Frijolympic member.

Team Suelo made their way across the park to support one of their *familia*.

Unfortunately, their loud cheers could not compete with the rest of the crowd. The winners for the 2013 Grito Contest were an Anglo twenty-something year old female from Brownsville and an African-American thirty-something year old male who was part of the Army band from San Antonio. They both belted *gritos* that lasted close to half a minute on one breath. The Grito Contest is the last event of Sombrero Festival. The excitement and enthusiasm of the *grito* is symbolic of the way people in Brownsville feel about Charro Days. People come to celebrate the spirit of their culture with their *familia*.

Brownsville residents appreciate and anticipate the camaraderie of the events rather than the material prizes. All participants are awarded an annual Sombrero Festival t-shirt with the same of the event on the back. Trophies and medals are presented to winners of certain events like Tug-of-War. Cook-off teams are awarded a cutting board plaque to display at their table for years to come at Sombrero Festival.

Within the last six or seven years, former president, De Los Santos, Jr. prompted the organization to use cash prizes as an incentive for participation and community excitement; he also added, “It was easier than trophies.” He said that the organization was going through some through times back then and needed to make some changes. When I asked De Los Santos, Jr. if he worried about friction caused by awarding prize money, he said, “I don’t see that that’s happened...the spirit still prevails overall.” Prizes are also not advertised on the Sombrero Festival website or on any printed publications. Downplaying the awards, along with the spirit of Charro Days, helps create a lighthearted

environment where people focus on the fun they are having with their *familia* rather than being focused on the prize.

Another way Sombrero Festival helps create a positive atmosphere of competition and solidarity is the unusual type of events featured at the festival. In Geertz's terms, the events are "shallow." There are no "deeper" levels of meaning associated with the events. Sombrero Festival is the only place individuals and teams can compete in these particularly odd events like the Frijolympics and Grito Contest. There is not much practice and preparation involved other than making team shirts and decorations. Participants compete only one time a year and do not advance to higher levels of competition if they win. They must wait until the next Charro Days to play again. As results, many events are shallow, not deep.

The teams themselves are also shallow. Teams exist only for the purposes of the event, similar to a "pick-up" team. Sombrero Festival teams are formed out of convenience and are not structurally different in the context of Brownsville. Unlike Geertz's analysis of the cockfight and the deep layers of meaning associated to each group and their longtime rivalries, Sombrero Festival teams do not represent structural relationships of different groups in Brownsville. The events work because they *are* shallow and lack depth. What *do* have deeper meanings are the relationships between the participants. Many people are *familia* and they participate every year to play together. Most of the individual and team participants are from Brownsville. They play for the experience and fun they share with their *familia*. Therefore, the shallowness of the teams combined with the close relationships of the participants helps maintain solidarity rather than conflict.

KEEP IT IN THE FAMILY

Sombrero Festival, Ltd. officer Dillon Vanderford told me he had been interviewed by a journalist from the *Brownsville Herald* who asked him what they did if things get out of control or violent at the festival. Vanderford told her it does not get that way. He told me the reporter kept digging for something, but he did not have anything to tell her.

Vanderford said,

I think that because Charro Days and Sombrero Festival focuses on our community and friendship people don't get out of hand. They grew up with this and it would not be proper for people to act up any different than they always have. Maybe if we did get more out-of-towners, bad things would pop up because they don't know how it works in Brownsville.

Sombrero Festival, Ltd. uses two types of policing during the festival. First, the organization spends up to \$20,000 on security personnel which the organization places in particular locations around the park. Their degree of visibility is minimal. The hired security team position themselves around the perimeter of the park mainly near public and private park entrances and only move from their position if needed. Second, city police arrive during the evenings once the bands begin to take the stage. Police are more visible to festival-goers because they will walk around the park at night. Sombrero Festival, Ltd. does not ask city police to be there. The organization prides itself in being self-sufficient in every way; they bring in their own restrooms, benches, vendor stands, and security. Within the last decade, Brownsville's parks and recreation department has helped Sombrero Festival, Ltd. by bringing in bleachers and a clean-up crew. The city's assistance and extra security is greatly appreciated by the organization, but Loff said,

since the beginning, “We didn’t want to ask the city to provide anything. We didn’t want to burden anyone.”

De Los Santos, Jr. believes (email to author, February 13, 2014) that Sombrero Festival, Ltd’s self-sufficient approach of contracting their own security staff greatly contributes to a feeling of safety for volunteers and attendees. He said that the security company the organization hires has a lot of experience working at Sombrero Festival and is effective in handling situations efficiently. De los Santos said there have been minor incidents over the years but nothing has ever gotten out of control. He said, “I’m proud to say that last year (2013) I saw no major or even minor incidents attributable to violence.”

Sombrero Festival is equipped with a strong security force, but their presence is not the only thing that stops violent or out of control behavior. A major factor that contributes to a safe and friendly Sombrero Festival is the family-like atmosphere. Festival goers bring their children, grandparents, and friends from out of town. In a family-like setting, people are less apt to react negatively. De los Santos, Jr. said,

In a family environment if any incident were to pop up, even among a crowd, I think the human instinct and reaction would tend more toward diffusing a situation, ensuring the safety of loved ones, and notifying security.

He also noted that the organization has increased children’s events and activities, which has had an effect on the fewer number of violent incidents.

De los Santos, Jr. said that Sombrero Festival goers may get out of hand from time to time, but like a family, they stick together to ensure a fun atmosphere. The community of Brownsville is one big *familia* and its members come together to celebrate

their culture. The community takes pride in Charro Days. It is a place where friends and family unite and celebrate. The family-like environment is the main reason why there are minimal conflicts. De los Santos, Jr. added,

People don't bring their family to a place where there are likely to be incidents of violence and they are more likely in those scenarios not to be influenced by violence and to help to keep the peace.

People of every generation have special memories of Charro Days stemming from their youth. Since the early 1980s, Sombrero Festival, Ltd. has introduced new ways to get people from every social class in the community involved. The organization does not target a specific group or age. De los Santos, Jr. said, "We target the family as a whole." Team and individual events for all ages allow attendees to play and compete in the spirit of the Charro Days celebration. Year after year, people return to see their *familia* while they observe or participate in numerous events like the Frijolympics, Waiter's Race, Jalapeño Eating Contest, and Grito Contest. Prizes may help attract participants, but events are "shallow." As a result, each competition promotes camaraderie and solidarity between teammates and opponents.

5: PARADES

I left Sombrero Festival around noon on Saturday to watch the Grand International Parade. The parade route is two blocks from Washington Park on Elizabeth Street and travels across the Gateway International Bridge into Matamoros. The downtown Brownsville area was packed with spectators hailing from both sides of the Rio Grande. The sun was bright and hot; many people used umbrellas to shield themselves from the heat. Some people lined the streets, while others tried to shuffle between the masses. Most businesses and shops were closed. Instead, people set up tables and sold Mexican candies, trinkets, and cold beverages. Food vendors sold tacos, tostadas, fajitas, and other border cuisine out of small booths along the streets. I navigated through alleyways behind street blocks and stopped at different points on Elizabeth Street looking for a good, less crowded spot to view the parade. I was not having much luck.

I walked down the parade route closer to the starting point and further away from the International Bridge entrance. Before the parade officially began, Border Patrol, local police, a motorcycle group, the Beard Posse, and other local clubs made their way down the street. Over thirty minutes passed. I was worried people would get restless standing in the steamy midday sun waiting for the floats, special guests, marching bands, and dancers. This type of uncomfortable anxiety can trigger repercussions quickly. Luckily, everyone reminded calm and in good spirits while they waited.

I saw a friend across the street and crossed to meet her. She was with her mom and a few others in front of their friend's store. I finally had some breathing room and was ready for the action. The International Parade features not only schools, businesses, and organizations from Brownsville, but Matamoros groups as well. I noticed more people spoke Spanish in the crowd than English.

PARADE TRADITION

The International Parade has been part of Charro Days since its inception. Every year the parade begins with a troop of men and women on horseback. They are all dressed head to toe in elaborate Mexican Charro and Charra ensembles. The front runners of the group carry the Mexican and American flags (Figure 5.1). The riders show off to the crowd by having the horses click their heels and march with complete accuracy. The parade's introduction is symbolic of the Mexican Charro and the merging of two nations. To even further emphasize this symbolism, the parade continues over the International Bridge and ends in Matamoros.



Figure 5.1 – The official start of the Grand International Parade.

Parade organizers promote it as the *only* parade that begins in one country and ends in another. Participants come from both sides of the Rio Grande to appear in the International Parade. Former police captain Ruben García served the city of Brownsville between 1948 and 1991. He said that in earlier years Matamoros police would help with security during Charro Days because there were so many people coming from both sides of the Rio Grande. “We had thousands, literally thousands, of people that would take advantage of being able to come over,” García said (Buckley 2012). In an interview, Matamoros resident Clemente Rendon recalled his father coming across the border to Brownsville during Charro Days and never returned to his home in Mexico. Residents from both sides of the Rio Grande engaged in a unifying celebration. This demonstrates how Charro Days is a binational celebration that has created a unique border identity for the members of the community. It is a symbolic act of closing the gap that has separated Brownsville and Matamoros since the end of the Mexican American War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

2013 GRAND INTERNATIONAL PARADE

I waited thirty minutes after the scheduled start time for the parade to start. Over seventy riders on horseback strutted through downtown Brownsville (Figure 5.2). Children and adults cheered with excitement. The parade had officially begun. Following the Charros and Charras, was Mr. Amigo. He was dressed in a rich dark brown and gold trim Charro suit. Next to him was the organization’s president dressed in a floor length cream colored Mexican dress. They stood up in the back of a white jeep driven by a Mr. Amigo Association representative. Mr. Amigo had a smile from ear to ear and waved to the crowd non-stop.



Figure 5.2 – Riders from Brownsville and Matamoros strut down Elizabeth Street.

Mr. Amigo's screaming admirers calmed down as he moved out of their view and the floats made their way up the street. Floats have been the main attraction of the International Parade since the first parade in 1938. In the early days of the parade, some floats were pulled by horses. Nowadays, horse-drawn floats are a thing of the past but what still remains are the Mexican images and themes on display. Participants from both sides of the Rio Grande spend countless hours decorating their Charro Days floats to be paraded down Elizabeth Street in front of tens of thousands of Mexican and American spectators. The 2013 Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. executive director, Carlos Bañales, said in an interview that parts of the parade have evolved since 1938, but, "To me, it's the same. It's tradition. It's culture. Tradition has remained the same. What has changed are the people and the floats." There are over 150 parade entries and approximately seventy-five are Brownsville and Matamoros floats that represent schools, businesses, and organizations. In addition, Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. designs and creates about a dozen floats which are sponsored by local businesses. The organization also produces the three

Charro Days parades: Thursday afternoon's Children's Parade, Friday night's Illuminated Parade, and Saturday afternoon's Grand International Parade.

The sponsored floats are stored at the organization's headquarters located in downtown Brownsville, a few blocks from the parade route. When I visited Bañales at the Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. headquarters in December 2012, he gave me a tour of their float warehouse and was excited to tell me about a new float they were introducing at the 2013 International Parade. He said they hired a *piñatero* (piñata maker) from Matamoros to illustrate the organization's ideas of what to draw and what Mexican state it should represent. The design was then transformed into a 3-dimensional work of art that was built to fit on a flatbed trailer. Some floats have moving parts and lights to add to the creativity and excitement. Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. is specific about every element of the float. They hold meetings leading up to the International Parade informing float sponsors about transportation regulations; the organization will provide vehicles and a driver if sponsors cannot. They hold a mandatory dress rehearsal to make sure float participants are wearing the proper attire according to the theme of their float.

Traditional Mexican dress, recognized by its respective Mexican state, must be provided by the sponsors (Figure 5.3). The organization also checks to make sure the float's final look is appealing and not too overcrowded.



Figure 5.3 – Float made by Charro Days Fiesta, Inc.

The floats in the 2013 Grand International Parade were indeed impressive (Figures 5.4 and 5.5).



Figure 5.4 – Float with young Tejano band and dancers.



Figure 5.5 – Float representing a Matamoros radio station.

Some floats had full bands or mariachis playing for the crowd. One Matamoros float had local pageant winners waving to the crowd while sitting under an over-sized sombrero. Another Matamoros float had a life-sized Charro themed carousel with children riding on the *caballos* (horses). A Brownsville gymnastics team performed on the uneven bars atop their float, while their teammates followed behind doing cartwheels and back handsprings. Daycare centers and churches also participated by colorfully decorating their floats with large tissue paper flowers and images of Mexico. Children and adults occupied every float and waved enthusiastically as they rolled through downtown.

Between the floats were elementary, middle, and high school participants. Each elementary school is assigned a Mexican state to represent throughout the week of festivities. Aside from the three parades, the elementary school children dress up and perform their state's dance at the BISD Fiesta Folklórica which is held earlier in the week at Sams Memorial Stadium near downtown. For example, Russell Elementary

represented the state of Michoacán. Every year a group of young children dress up in traditional Michoacán garments and does the danza de los Viejitos¹² (Figure 5.6). Middle schools are represented by their marching bands and drill teams or cheerleaders who will typically wear some type of festive attire whether it be a blouse, dress, or ribbons in their hair.



Figure 5.6 – Elementary student performing danza de los Viejitos.

The high schools are led by their ROTCs, followed by the bands, dancers, cheerleaders, and sometimes an athletic team. For example, Lopez High School football players walked the street wearing camouflage and stopped periodically to do push-ups.

¹² Dance of the old men

In an interview, Brownsville native Rachel Franceschi said,

One thing I really loved ...the marching bands from Mexico...were always so much fun because they danced and they had all these choreographed moves and they would play songs you probably recognized from the radio as opposed to traditional Mexican stuff that all the Brownsville high schools were playing.

Facebook respondent, Alex JSs said, “The Mexican schools were always entertaining!”

Eva Marlene Moreno agreed, “The bands from Matamoros! They gave an awesome show!” The Matamoros groups tend to bring a different sound and flavor to the parade.

Filling the gaps between floats, schools, and other organizations that followed the route were decorated cars escorting local politicians, dignitaries, school board members, and special guests. Most of the Brownsville representatives wore some type of Charro Days attire whether it was a Mexican shirt or full costume, whereas, most of the Mexican representatives did not. They wore nice dress clothes, but nothing representative of Mexico to add to the Charro Days spirit.

Once the parade reached the Gateway International Bridge, the American experience was over and about fifteen Matamoros floats, bands, and cars continued into Mexico to join their parade that celebrated Fiestas Mexicanas. Unfortunately, Bañales told me that 2013 was the fifth year Brownsville parade participants did not follow the Matamoros participants across the Rio Grande due to the current border violence situation.

Bañales said,

Hopefully, one of these days we can travel back across with our floats and people because the [Mexican] people miss us. People get into it. They loved it. I miss that.

Bañales continued to say that the connecting link that starts in the U.S. and ends in Mexico is missing. He said, “What better parade can you attend? An International Parade where you can cross on a float. Hopefully one of these days we will be back again.”

CHARRO DAYS LIMINALITY

Ritualistic performances like the International Parade allow the community to act in ways they normally would not. Liminality is what is experienced within the inbetweenness and suspension of normal reality that can occur between the boundaries of ritual. In this case, Charro Days creates a space of liminality that is both metaphorically and physically between the borders of the United States and Mexico. The margins, in this case, are each side of the border and Charro Days is a celebration of life in between. As previously mentioned, Victor Turner said that antistructure or “communitas” occurs during liminality. It is during this brief period where things that are normally considered inappropriate or unacceptable are allowed and, in some cases, favored. Within this liminal state, Brownsville residents can live out their desires and emphasize their border identity. During this brief period of antistructure, Brownsville symbolically becomes Mexico within the margins of Charro Days. In this section, I will provide examples of communitas that occur during Charro Days and show how they help create border identities. I will also refer to Bakhtin’s carnevalesque to show how during certain episodes of antistructure role reversal occurs and images of low society are briefly exalted.

The liminal period of Charro Days extends over the last week of February. Baile del Sol begins the festivities with a free admission street party Sunday afternoon at the Charro Days Fiesta, Inc. headquarters. Parties and events go on throughout the week and end the following Saturday with the final day of Sombrero Festival and the International Parade.

In 2013, Wells Fargo Bank, located downtown, hosted a party Wednesday evening. My mother and I arrived around 5:30 to meet my father, who was there with members of the Beard Posse. We each paid a five dollar entrance fee and wrote our names on a nametag. The lobby of the bank was transformed into a fiesta complete with a margarita bar, *botana*¹³ buffet, and Charro Days decorations. Many people in attendance were dressed for the occasion, including my mother and me. She wore a maroon Charra ensemble with white trim and I wore a royal blue outfit; the top and skirt were covered in sequins that depicted vibrant Aztec images. We each got a margarita and began making our social rounds.

The crowd was a mix of bank employees, people involved in Charro Days, city leaders, and friends. I greeted people with a kiss on the cheek. A small stage was set-up in the middle of the lobby. A DJ played music for a crowd of about eighty people. We made our way to the other side of the lobby to the *botana*. I grabbed a small plate and filled it with rice, beans, guacamole, salsa, and a couple of corn tortillas. My mother served herself some fajitas. With our hands full of Mexican food and margaritas, we looked for a place to eat. We found the perfect spot and placed our items down at a bank teller booth.

¹³ Mexican snack food or appetizers.

At the peak of the party, mariachis, in full costume with their instruments in tow, entered the bank. They belted out a few songs for the party-goers. As we stood there chatting, drinking, and eating, a bank affiliate wearing a sombrero and Charro suit got on stage to address the crowd. Speaking into a microphone, he thanked everyone for attending and let out a loud *grito*. Other people followed suit by *gritoing* back.

These actions, considered outrageous in a normal context, are actions of *communitas* that occur during liminality. In any other context, it would be absurd to have a fiesta with alcohol and loud music mid-week at a bank; however, during Charro Days it is completely acceptable and encouraged. It is almost impossible to escape the festivities.

Priscilla Rodriguez, former executive director of the Brownsville Historical Association and co-author of *Charro Days in Brownsville*, knows this well. She grew up about forty-five minutes north of Brownsville in Weslaco, Texas and was unfamiliar with Charro Days when she first moved to Brownsville years ago. She lived and worked downtown her first year in Brownsville. She said that during Charro Days she tried to go to work but literally could not. Her neighborhood streets were blocked including at times her driveway. She said she tried to fight it but eventually gave in and enjoyed the celebration with the rest of Brownsville.

Charro Days gives the community a reason to party. The actions publicly displayed during this liminal state are typically inappropriate at other times but thrive within *communitas*. One example is the *grito*. During any other time of the year, if someone let out a *grito* in public, people would think they are either *loco o borracho*¹⁴.

¹⁴ Crazy or drunk.

On the other hand, if a *grito* is yelled during Charro Days people will probably *grito* back and think he or she is full of Charro Days spirit(s).

Drinking is publicly acceptable and encouraged, and some might say it is heavily abused. Public intoxication is still illegal, but police are more forgiving during the festivities than at any other times during the year. During the week of Charro Days there are parties and events happening every day. It is not uncommon for people to attend multiple events, even if it is a “work night.” Outside of liminality, people may judge someone who drinks mid-week, for multiple days in a row, or in excess. *Communitas* makes it a normal, acceptable occurrence.

Not everyone in Brownsville attends parties, many of which are closed events or require people to purchase tickets. However, as the week progresses there are large scale events that are well attended. The first of these is the Children’s Parade on Thursday afternoon which draws large numbers of people. Participating in the parade as a child is a memory shared by many Brownsville residents. Facebook commenter, Brenda Alicia Gámez said her favorite Charro Days memory was, “Being in elementary school and dancing in the children’s parade!” Lil N Eddie Castro agree saying, “Coming out in the parade when I was in elementary and middle school.” People attend to relive their favorite memories and cheer on the next generations of Charro Days participants.

EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY – COMMUNITAS

Brownsville native and author, Oscar Casares, wrote,

Everyone I knew had been in, or wanted to be in, the parade. Charro Days was the biggest, most special thing that happened in Brownsville, an annual celebration, since 1938, of our cultural ties with our sister city of Matamoros. Like a second Christmas only two months after the first one, we couldn't wait for it to come around. Men and women, boys and girls, young and old, we all attended in the thousands, many dressed up as the Mexican cowboys that the four-day festival was named after. Regardless of where you were from or how long you'd been here or how well you spoke Spanish or what your last name happened to be, it was the one time of year that everyone in Brownsville was Mexican (2014).

I attended the Children's Parade in 2013. There was not a cloud in sight.

Students were dismissed midday from school. Parents left work early to support their children. The rest of the spectators were there to enjoy the show and the beautiful day.

Children and teens lined Elizabeth Street waiting to cheer on their friends and schools.

Thursday's parade is not as crowded as Saturday's International Parade. I walked up and down the street peering over the heads of spectators who sat or stood along the curb. The parade only featured Brownsville schools; there were ninety-three entries. Every school had two or three students carry a banner with the school's name.

Each elementary school is represented by about twenty-five children garbed head to toe in traditional Mexican dress. Their attire was paired with their assigned Mexican state's cultural music and dance (Figure 5.7). Boys and girls, some as young as five years old, walked the parade route stopping periodically to perform the dance they practiced at school all week. Teachers, also dressed to match their group, walked along the children in the parade.



Figure 5.7 – Children representing the state of Chiapas dance in the parade.

Middle and high school bands marched along while dance teams performed to the music (Figure 5.8). Many people in the crowd, even if they are not students or parents, will know someone in the parade.



Figure 5.8 – High school drill team dances behind their marching band.

I continuously heard people in the crowd yelling children's names to get their attention. The children were focused on their routines, but many took the time to wave back at someone they know (Figure 5.9).



Figure 5.9 – Children on float waving to the crowd along the street.

The Children's Parade is youthful and colorful. It stimulates and creates many old and new memories. Following the parade, many families attended Sombrero Festival which opened its gates at 1:00.

The biggest contributor to the antistructure exhibited during Charro Days is dress. When people "play dress-up", they tend to take on different personalities. The community dresses up like a particularly stereotyped image of Mexicans. Brownsville residents take on the roles of these labeled Mexican personas by doing *gritos*, drinking heavily, and living life to the fullest. Men often grow beards for Charro Days to symbolize a care-free attitude. This carnevalesque atmosphere allows people to wear things that make them behave in a way that match a fantasy of Mexican behavior.

The historically oppressed Mexican class is celebrated in extreme ways during Charro Days. The roles are reversed as acting according to particular stereotypes of Mexico is demonstrated and applauded. People are expected to dress up during Charro Days, especially at the parties. For example, The Order of the Serape is a group of Brownsville elites who throw two private parties during the week of Charro Days. Club member, Laurie Ray (email to author, February 27, 2014), said that The Serape Club (anglicized version of the Spanish word Zarape) was founded in 1964 to celebrate and preserve traditional Latin American dress. Club members must be from Brownsville and pay yearly dues that are used to sponsor the parties. All attendees must wear an official costume, meaning the clothes must be recognized by a Latin American state, tribe, or country as being their own (Figure 5.10).



Figure 5.10 – Serape Club members wearing matching traditional Tamaulipas attire.

Some members have acquired one-of-a-kind outfits passed down from family members. Others will seek out authentic, hand-made garments that can cost hundreds of dollars. There are people on site to critique and approve the outfits. For example, last year my mother wore a beautiful dress that she assumed was linked to a Mexican state and therefore acceptable. Someone at the party told her it was a Mexican dress, but not recognized by a Mexican state and therefore, not official. A week later she received a letter from the club telling her that her dress was not officially recognized and if she needed help in the future, members of the club would assist her. The wealthy and powerful of Brownsville reverse roles with Mexicans, who are the traditional underclass, by controlling Mexican dress and making it a highly-acknowledged possession.

Other Charro Days events that are less private also encourage and expect participants to dress up. Roles are reversed in this case because the people who are not dressed up stand out. Across class lines, Mexican dress is required. For example, if someone participating in the parade or attending a Charro Days party is not dressed in some sort of Charro Days attire, they will be noticed and will probably feel out of place. “Everybody wears them,” said Zelma Mata, professor and director of the Folklórico Tizatlán at University of Texas at Brownsville. In a *Brownsville Herald* article (Montoya 2013:A6), Mata said,

The emphasis is that people get involved in the celebration, and they express it in different ways. Some people sew their own costumes; others purchase them from Mexico and others buy them at stores here.

As soon as Charro Days is over, men will shave their beards and women will hang up their dresses, and the community will resume its normal attire and way of life.

Parents also paint beards or mustaches on young boys. Little girls wear makeup to accessorize their Mexican dresses. Roles are reversed as children are dressed up to imitate adults, and adults dress up to relive some of their earliest memories of Charro Days. For example, former Sombrero Festival President, Mary Jane Jackson, said her ninety-three year old mother was one of the last living people from the first Charro Days parade. According to Jackson, her mother remembers, “wearing a costume [in the parade] and the teacher taking them from Pugenant Elementary and walking them down the street to Mexico and then walking them back to class.” Dressing up allows members of the community to briefly suspend their adulthood and relive their childhood. Whereas, children, on the other hand, “play dress-up” to appear and act more adult.

The parades showcase children taking on the role of adults. Hundreds of children are paired with dance partners of the opposite sex to perform many dances originally designed for adults (Figure 5.11).



Figure 5.11 – Children walking hand-in-hand throughout the parade.

The children dance together while adults cheer them on. The parades create intense excitement for participants and spectators. In this moment of antistructure, people lose themselves in the celebration: flashes of vibrant colors, sounds of music and cheers, children dancing in unison, adults giddy with excitement, and images of Mexico broadcasted and celebrated across downtown Brownsville. Since their origin, the Charro Days parades have created memories for every generation of Brownsville residents (Figure 5.12). Rituals performed during Charro Days allow the community to live out their desires and connect to their heritage. Through these memories and actions, identities are shaped and generated.



Figure 5.12 – Spectators, young and old, dress up and watch the parade.

The Rio Grande border is a wonderful example of a liminal space. It is physically and emotionally situated within the margins of two nations and cultures. Charro Days celebrates liminality and allows *communitas* to occur. Within *communitas*, Brownsville

residents act out of character and do things that are in any other context considered inappropriate. Charro Days helps create a border identity for Brownsville residents while maintaining social cohesion and solidarity.

6: CONCLUSION

STORY OF DRESS

A couple of weeks prior to Charro Days, I walked around downtown Brownsville and entered a normally empty building that had been temporarily transformed into a store for Charro Days. Beautiful handmade dresses hung from the ceiling. One-of-a-kind jewelry and hand-painted trinkets were sprinkled across makeshift table tops. A couple of women had traveled to Brownsville by bus from Oaxaca in southern Mexico to sell their items. In recent times violence in Mexico has prevented many people from traveling south to acquire special attire, so the Oaxacan women, with the help of a few Brownsville locals, have been bringing their merchandise to sell during Charro Days.

Sitting in the improvised Mexican boutique was an elderly Brownsville woman named Lita Pashos. She sat surrounded by colorful textiles and spoke fluent Spanish with a young Oaxacan woman. Mrs. Pashos is a member of the Pan American Roundtable. In 2005, the Table turned their entire collection of Latin American dresses into a museum called Costumes of the Americas in order to care for their costumes and educate the public. She said that the costumes are collector's items. The dresses have changed over the years because the craftsmanship and time needed to make the traditional Mexican garments are not practiced as much as it was in the past.

Mrs. Pashos is an active member of the Table and museum and volunteers to help preserve the rich history. She has participated in Charro Days since moving to

Brownsville in 1952 with her husband, who was in the shrimping business with my grandfather. Mrs. Pashos said she loved the street parties and dancing with her husband during Charro Days. She said that it's not the same anymore, but she still loves going to the parades because she is still a "kid at heart." When I asked her what has changed, she said she noticed there is not as much emphasis on costumes in the parade. She said, "Kids will wear jeans and a peasant blouse, which is not the same as a full costume." She told me that they do not have to be "authentic" but that more thought should be put into it.

A few weeks later I returned to Brownsville for Charro Days. As I observed the parade and watched the floats go by, I paid particular attention to what the children and adults wore. I expected to see a lack of effort in the costumes. I was pleasantly surprised and pleased to say Mrs. Pashos was wrong. That is not to say she has always been wrong, but everyone on every float was dressed head to toe in a Mexican ensemble. Mrs. Pashos perceives a generational gap between the old days and the present times demonstrated in people's participation in dressing up. Her observation may have been correct in the past. There was a generational gap as we have seen earlier in this thesis with the decline of the Charro Days spirit. My observations show that the gap has healed with the revival of Charro Days. The gap once separating generations is diminishing as grandparents, parents, and children all participate in Charro Days and dressing up is in.

As mentioned throughout this thesis, dressing up holds many symbolic meanings associated with class and status. But, these articles of clothing are also symbolic in Mexico and reference rich cultural history. Historically, and in some places currently, traditional garments were used in rituals, festivities, and in everyday life. They may

symbolize class status, occupation, or geographic location of the wearer. Dressing up during Charro Days may not be as historically attached to Mexican dress as where the garments originate, but the South Texas community experiences similar symbolic representations of ritual and celebration as their Mexican neighbors. Since Charro Days began, Brownsville has taken elements of Mexican culture, like dress, and recreated them to fit its border culture. The border community may not view the clothing the same way as Mexicans view it, but both groups have symbolic connections to the garments. It creates meaning for all participants which spawns a border identity that is not quite Mexican, but not completely American. Many elements of Charro Days have remained throughout the years, while other traditions have diminished. Through these events, the community creates and continues to come together over a shared identity.

For many outsiders, Charro Days may seem like a silly event where Americans dress up like Mexicans. While this statement is in many ways true, the celebration contains much deeper levels of meaning and symbolism. Despite the fact that dressing up for Charro Days may seem silly, or even racist, community participation and enthusiasm shows that it is still a critical node in Brownsville's identity. The reason is because Charro Days is one of the key ways that Brownsville residents symbolically negotiate, debate, and reinforce their border identity.

In this thesis, I have presented three instances of interpretive analysis where the community has symbolically negotiated their identity. I used Geertz's interpretive theory to uncover deeper layers of meaning at the Mr. Amigo Association's "Hand Across the Border" performance. I applied Ortner's methods of categorizing key symbols to Sombrero Festival. I showed how the organization and festival are symbolically like a

family. I used Turner's methods of analysis to show the feelings of liminality and *communitas* that dominate the parades.

However, it is important to understand that Charro Days is not simply a celebration of static meaning. The celebration is historically, politically, socially, and economically charged. It is a balance of celebrating Mexican culture and parodying Mexicans in ways which are emotionally charged and culturally fluid.

BEARD POSSE STORY

The Beard Posse – Order of the Brush, originally called “The Grand Order of the Brush”, is a tradition dating back to the early years of Charro Days. The group of men dressed as *bandidos* and grew beards in the spirit of Charro Days. They went around town and fined men who did not have a beard. The group, until recently, was unable to be a permanent component in the celebration because they were unable to find the balance between celebrating and parody that was acceptable to people, and, in fact, many people found them to be insulting.

The Order, commonly known as “Brush Court” was founded in 1938 by A.A. “Daddy” Hargrove, who was a civic leader and friend of Charro Days founder, Kenneth Faxon. Starting January 1st, the men would grow beards to commence the upcoming Charro Days season. The members made sure that men adhered to growing a beard for Charro Days. The Brush Court held meetings and outlined special beard judging criteria. Every year they had a beard contest and the winners appeared on their float in the parade. They harassed beardless men and handed out fines to those lacking whiskers.

Their rowdy, drunken behavior eventually got them into trouble when dignitaries from Monterrey, Mexico came to network during Charro Days. The story goes that the Mexican businessmen were at a Charro Days event when the bearded Brush Court stumbled in barefoot wearing peon garbs and sombreros strapped with bullets and *pistolas* acting *loco y borracho*¹⁵. The Mexican dignitaries thought they were making a mockery of Mexicans. This act severely hurt the Brush Court's popularity. The way the Brush Court portrayed Mexicaness not only offended the Mexican dignitaries, but the Brownsville population as well. Their actions of portrayal pushed parody and celebration into embarrassment and resentment.

By the 1950s, the Brush Court had a negative public image. Members of the Brush Court were known as "good guys" in the community who took things too far during Charro Days. This shows that there are limits to antistucture and liminality. The community did not accept the inappropriate behavior exhibited by the Brush Court. While acts of inappropriate behavior are allowed during Charro Days that are not normally accepted, the Brush Court proved to be an exception. The members of the Brush Court may have viewed their own behavior as extreme, but the community viewed it as disrespectful to the Mexican culture. The image of the Brush Court portrayed Mexicans as dirty, rude drunks. They were playing a role that was not well-received by the public and it backfired on their group.

As a result, the Brush Court diminished. The times were changing. Actions displayed by the Brush Court in the early years were now seen as racist and discriminatory. By the early 1980s, beards were long gone and Charro Days was close to

¹⁵ Crazy and drunk.

extinct. A new border culture was emerging along with national trends raising ethnic cultural awareness.

The Court had a short-lived revival around the time Sombrero Festival was founded in the early 1980s. The Sunrise Rotary club took on the project as a fundraiser and set up a jail at the festival. Beardless men were thrown in jail and paid a fine for release. Once the rotary club found a bigger fundraising project a few years later, the Brush Court once again fizzled out.

In the twenty-first century, Sombrero Festival founder Danny Loff was not as involved with festival preparations as much as in the past. The organization was being run by board members and officers. He wanted to continue to be involved in Charro Days and decided to revive the Brush Court but with an image makeover. Instead of dressing like *bandidos* and acting like town menaces, the new group, called “Beard Posse: Order of the Brush”, would wear starched white Eagle shirts, dark blue jeans, a red bandana, and boots. For the first couple of years, the group set out to educate the public about growing beards in the spirit of Charro Days. Their image slowly transformed and the public became more accepting.

After a few years, the Beard Posse teamed up with the Historic Brownsville Museum. Together they emailed local businessmen and displayed posters that warned the public that the Beard Posse was on the prowl. The Posse does “round-ups” where they “break-in” and surprise local businessmen at their office. Loff said, “We’ve found people hiding from us. One guy was lying down under his desk!” If they are caught beardless in their office after being warned, they are fined \$100 and given a “get out of

jail free” card in case they are approached again. The museum sells “get out of jail free” cards for \$20. The only men who are safe are those not from Brownsville and the Posse does check id’s. The Beard Posse currently consists of about twenty-five members. They follow a document of “unpublished” rules that instructs Posse members how to maintain a good public image. In 2013, the Beard Posse raised \$6,000 for the Historic Brownsville Museum and has raised about \$20,000 overall.

The new version of the Brush Court has found the balance between celebrating and parodying Mexicanness. They have reinvented their image to resemble a type of Robin Hood figure who is on a mission to educate, enlighten, and support the community. This change is also related to a shift in ethnic makeup and control of the group that was primarily Anglo. The Posse members are now a more accurate reflection of Brownsville’s ethnic makeup. The border community is emotionally laden with scars of a history of oppression. While Brownsville residents embrace and encourage images of Mexicaness, the extreme actions and images portrayed by the earlier Brush Court members were not accepted. It is not an identity the community wants to create and associate with.

BORDER IDENTITY

Charro Days allows Brownsville residents to create their own identity while they seek to find a balance between reality and fantasy. The border community has constantly had to balance themselves between cultures and countries. Charro Days is a critical point in which this identity is created. This identity constantly shifts and evolves with the celebration. Brownsville residents use symbols of Mexicaness and Americanness to

understand and negotiate identity. Charro Days allows the community to establish, experience, and express their cultural history in the present day.

In conclusion, this entire experience has helped me reconnect to *my* border identity. Growing up in Brownsville, I have always thought that Brownsville was different but not exactly in a good way. Every Charro Days I would get excited for the festivities but not quite understand the nature of the celebration. Through this process, I have rediscovered my roots. I may not be a Latina, but living on the border does not confine one to a certain group. We are all an anomaly living between cultures, customs, and countries. Brownsville has come a long way from its deeply oppressed past that had stark class and cultural divisions between Anglos and Hispanics. Identity today is far more blurred than in the past. There are more bilingual speakers and intermarriages now they have been in the past. Residents, young and old, wealthy and poor, and of all backgrounds come together in the spirit of Charro Days to celebrate and create their own border identity.

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