

Peons and Progressives: Race and Boosterism in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1904-1941

The history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands has garnered increasing attention in the past decade.¹ Thinkers of the Borderlands who were once obscure, like the Chicana feminist Gloria E. Anzaldúa, are now common references amongst an ever-widening group of scholars. A diversity of historical approaches including transnational, decolonial, and social perspectives have been used to grapple with the complex set of relations that mark South Texas and the borderlands more generally. Although increasing attention from a widening array of perspectives has been focused on the history of this region, there are still many primary sources that are underutilized or undertheorized in the current scholarship.

This article makes use of such primary sources by examining the promotional land sales materials from deep South Texas now housed at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, the University of North Texas, and the Museum of South Texas History in Edinburg, Texas.² These promotional materials were produced by land developers in order to entice Northern farmers to move to the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) of South Texas.

Existing work has documented the impact that the promotional materials, both in the LRGV and across the West, have had on immigrants' and existing residents' attitudes and actions. In the only other extant article solely on the land booster materials from the LRGV, Brannstrom and Neuman's *Inventing the "Magic Valley" of South Texas, 1905-1941*, they focus

¹ For two works that discuss the growing literature on the borderlands see Tim Bowman, "Negotiating Conquest: Internal Colonialism and Shared Histories in the South Texas Borderlands," *Western Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2015): 335-353; Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 2 (2011): 338-361.

² Few works have their primary focus on the promotional materials. Some of the few examples include Christian Brannstrom and Matthew Neuman, "Inventing the "Magic Valley" of South Texas, 1905-1941," *Geographical Review* 99, no. 2 (2009): 123-145; S. Zulema Silva-Bewley, *The Legacy of John H. Shary: Promotion and Land Development in Hidalgo County, South Texas 1912-1930* (Edinburg: University of Texas Pan American Press, 2001). Increasingly, more work is citing the promotional materials to support its arguments. For two current examples of this see Bowman, *Negotiating Conquest*, 344-6; Timothy Bowman, *Blood Oranges: Colonialism and Agriculture in the South Texas Borderlands* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2016); Alicia M. Dewey, *Pesos and Dollars: Entrepreneurs in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1880-1940* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014): 84-94.

on detailing how the materials worked to construct a “place-myth.” They define a place-myth as a “discourse” that “legitimize[s] social practices that alter the material landscape.”³ Brannstrom and Neuman make the argument that the promotional materials “legitimized” new conduct that transformed the LRGV in a deep and pervasive way. In a recent book by Timothy Bowman, *Blood Oranges: Colonialism and Agriculture in the South Texas Borderlands*, he agrees that the promotional materials aimed to “construc[t] an imagined future for the region’s new inhabitants,” again emphasizing the transformative impact of booster materials.⁴ David Wrobel, looking through geographically largely lens, wrote in *Promised Lands* that promotional materials across the West had the function of shaping people’s conduct and attitudes, especially in relation to race: “the promotional genre both reflected and, because of its pervasiveness helped shape the racial attitudes of the white majority.”⁵ He further concluded that the promotional materials “surely played an important part in shaping people’s perceptions of the West.”⁶ Terry Jordan offers some empirical evidence of the effectiveness of land boosters’ propaganda to shape conduct in a 1978 survey administered to 3,860 residents of the LRGV. In *Perceptual Regions in Texas*, he finds that in the counties of deep South Texas the “spatial perception of average people” still follows the contours of the “vernacular region” promoted by the boosters.⁷

The aim of this article is not to duplicate existing research demonstrating the importance of booster materials within the LRGV and across the West for shaping peoples’ conduct, relationships, and understanding of place; instead, it begins with it. If booster materials are as impactful as has been widely argued, then it bears deep reflection and analysis on exactly what kind of discourse they are producing. This article hones in on the discourse on race produced in the booster materials of the LRGV, 1904-1941 and traces not only its construction of race but also how raced ideas permeate the entirety of the sense of place given to the LRGV. This is important, not just for filling in the accounts of Wrobel and Bowman, but because of the ongoing and outsized impact that the racial attitudes of the LRGV have on the national stage. Just

³ J.S. Davis, “Representing Place: “Deserted Isles” and the Reproduction of Bikini Atoll,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 607-625 as quoted in Brannstrom and Neuman, 125.

⁴ Bowman, *Blood Oranges*, 53-54.

⁵ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ Terry G. Jordan, “Perceptual Regions in Texas,” *Geographical Review* 68, no. 3 (1978), 293.

recently, the “migrant crises” of 2014 and 2015 were played out in the national media from reporting based in the LRGV, today much of the human drama surrounding DACA is being played out there, and the first sections of the border wall that Trump proposes to build are scheduled for a Wildlife Refuge squarely in the center of the LRGV.⁸ While other areas of the United States are important for the formation of national attitudes about race and especially Latinos, the LRGV is certainly notable among them and worth close attention.

Brannstrom and Neuman’s *Inventing the Magic Valley* generates important insights about the promotional material and its impact on the LRGV but their work also has significant shortcomings. In particular, Brannstrom and Neuman are surprisingly shy on the issue of race, never using the term racism and only once offering up the term “[h]ispanophobia” to describe the systematic forms of racial oppression imagined by White South Texans in the promotional materials. Translating “Hispanophobia” into plain language—‘fear of Spanish speakers’—shows just how beside the point and inaccurate this term is to describe race relations in the early 20th century United States. As Anzaldúa herself wrote as a person from the LRGV about the ties of language to identity, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language.”⁹ Linguistic discrimination, even if that was the only form of discrimination present in the LRGV, is never only about language but about crafting a systematic means of oppression tied to race.¹⁰

Bowman’s more recent work in *Blood Oranges* is a significant step forward in the analysis of the promotional materials. He is much more sensitive to the politics of the promotional material and rightly finds race to be a core part of its “imagined future”:

8 Markon, Jerry, and Joshua Partlow, “Unaccompanied children crossing southern border in greater numbers again, raising fears of new migrant crisis,” *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2015, accessed September 25, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/federal-eye/wp/2015/12/16/unaccompanied-children-crossing-southern-border-in-greater-numbers-again-raising-fears-of-new-migrant-crisis/?utm_term=.84681d8aaebc; Angilee Shah, “DACA Recipients Won’t Go Back into the Shadows Quietly,” *Public Radio International*, September 5, 2017, accessed September 25, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-08-30/daca-recipients-won-t-go-back-shadows-quietly>; Michael Hardy, “IN South Texas, Threat of Border Wall Unites Naturalists and Politicians,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2017, accessed September 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/in-south-texas-threat-of-border-wall-unites-naturalists-and-politicians.html>.

⁹ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” in *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987): 53-64.

¹⁰ John Metta, “It’s Not About Race! Why Do Black People Think Everything is About Race?,” *Those People*, last modified Sept. 18, 2016, <https://thspl.com/its-not-about-race-fb140bac8f1>.

Notions of themselves as neopioneering farmers wringing profit from the backs of Mexican laborers in a modern agribusiness sector would inform Anglos' ideas of collective self-identity and race relations in the Valley and South Texas for decades. Much of the well-documented maltreatment of ethnic Mexicans in the region stemmed directly from and became systematized through the king-sized profit motives of early South Texas growers as sold to them by local boosters.¹¹

Bowman's work on race focuses on Mexicans as subservient labor to create wealth for Anglo farmers. His frame of analysis is the colonial model and, while relevant, leads to racial discourse serving only as a handmaiden to profit-making. Bowman states that for growers "[a]ll other considerations remained secondary" to profit.¹² While our conclusions are broadly complementary, we find that race structures social relations in ways not reducible to labor and profit, though those were surely important motivations.

The primary perspective this essay takes is that of discursive analysis, particularly as developed in the Essex school by Laclau and Mouffe. Discourse analysis in this vein takes the identities established in any discourse—for instance, racial and economic identities—to be the result of "a relation among elements."¹³ Taking identities as relational rather than as primary kinds means that identity is produced not by some kind of natural inhering essence but through the mutual positioning of the different elements to one another. A discourse is the set of such relationships between elements that is productive of their identities, a kind of larger system of identities.¹⁴ In the promotional materials, race is an important element in defining the creation of the identity of the other elements in the discourse such as nature, civilization, leisure, order, and morality. Pierce in *Making the White Man's West* notes that was common in the booster materials across the West for race to play an important role in the formation of identity for place and self.¹⁵ Stanley, in *The Loyal West*, makes the more specific argument that race and racism served as a point of unification after the Civil War for Whites in Middle America, especially in

¹¹ Bowman, *Blood Oranges*, 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 105.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁵ Jason E. Pierce, *Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2016), 152.

the Midwestern states that served as the base of recruitment for the LRGV.¹⁶ This essay will trace out the discursive relationships productive of identity in the booster materials, with a focus on the role of race; these identities and their impacts will be discussed in comparison with the booster materials from other areas in the West.

The first section examines the relations through which “the Mexican” was produced in the promotional materials of the LRGV. The booster materials produced a deep equivalence between the Mexicans inhabiting the region and the environment they lived in. The result was that the equivalence between the Mexican and nature was so deep that the Mexican was reduced to one of the natural features of the area, which could be legitimately exploited in the same way that the other natural features of the area, like the plants, animals, land, and water were.

The second section serves as an abbreviated connection between the first and third. This section explores how the racial discourse developed in the first section is established in the context of labor. While Brannstrom and Neuman, Bowman, Dewey, and others have recognized how Mexicans have figured in the booster literature as a source of cheap labor, there is more to the way that Mexicans were figured as labor than has yet been revealed.¹⁷ More specifically, as Mexicans mirrored the land and nature of the LRGV in their essential qualities, so too did the strategies of exploitation mirror those of the land and nature. The booster propaganda proposed the same types of subjugation for the land, the vegetation, and the river as it proposed for the Mexican, encompassing them all as part of the natural resources of the LRGV.

The last section plows new ground and deals with racial segregation in leisure and aspects of life outside of labor. The promotional materials aimed to show that newcomers would be able to participate in social institutions comprised of “people [who] are generally of a class that have been successful in the North—people with means, who have been used to the best of society.”¹⁸ The literature promised northern immigrants their own institutions of worship and schooling for their children, their own social events, and their own leisure and sporting activities. Moreover, significant emphasis was placed on the reconstruction of the institutions of policing and justice in order to insure would-be land purchasers that the force was present to safeguard

¹⁶ Matthew E. Stanley, *The Loyal West: Civil War and Reunion in Middle America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Brannstrom and Bowman, *Inventing the Magic Valley*, 129; Dewey, *Pesos and Dollars*, 86.

¹⁸ Jackson-Vreeland Land Co., *The True Story of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*.

white privilege in all aspects of life. This third and final section draws out clearly the implications of the first two sections; namely, that race is key element of the promotional discourse whose impact extends well beyond the justification of exploitative relations of labor.

Before we turn to direct consideration of the promotional materials, it is important to set the context in which they appeared. The LRGV is comprised roughly of the land that lies along the Rio Grande from where it empties into the Gulf of Mexico to about 100 miles inland. This land did not become part of the United States until the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Almost immediately after the treaty, frictions arose between the influx of Anglo settlers and the local ethnically Mexican population. During the transfer of land titles from Mexico to the United States, some Anglos used “devious means” to expropriate land from its previous Mexican landowners.¹⁹ Although tensions often ran high between Anglos and Mexicans, it would be wrong to suggest that something like the racial segregation that later characterized the area became the norm in the 19th century. From 1848-1870, Alonzo’s research into ranching in the region reveals that *Tejano* stock raisers dominated the region and that there were many partnerships between Anglos and *Tejanos*.²⁰ In the mid- and late 19th century, the Northerners were frequently men of means who bought land in South Texas but they also often married the daughters of elite local landowners. The children of these marriages served as a bridge between communities and they were familiar with both cultures and languages.²¹

It was this mixed group of wealthy local landowners that worked to bring a railroad line to South Texas in 1904.²² They rightly figured that the ability to transport produce out of the area to the northern markets of the United States would raise land values and create an opportunity to profit more from farming and land sales than they were from ranching. There was nothing new about this partnership of railroads and wealthy landowners—Western lands were being promoted and sold this way since at least the 1850s.²³ The introduction of the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railway (SBM) on July 4, 1904, brought the results expected: farm produce began to be

¹⁹ Armando C. Lozano, *Tejano Legacy: Ranchers and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998):145.

²⁰ Lozano, *Tejano Legacy*, 189-190.

²¹ Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 13-14; Pierce, *Making the White Man’s West*, 154.

²² Dewey, *Pesos and Dollars*, 46-53; Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 107-113; Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 26-37.

²³ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 20.

exported in great amounts, wealthy ranchers began to sell off their newly subdivided land, and developers profited off of pumping stations and the sales of irrigation services. The immediate losers were the poor Mexican subsistence ranchers who could not make enough money ranching to pay the taxes on the ever-increasing property valuations; Dewey writes that “[t]he *ranchos* of Hidalgo county were virtually all gone by 1920.”²⁴

Even dispossession due to tax delinquency or sales due to immanent dispossession was not fast enough to provide new lands for the arriving “colonist.”²⁵ Some Whites began squatting on the land of the poor ranchers; Johnson writes that “The growing value of real estate prompted some to resort to the simple expedient of occupying a desired tract and violently expelling the previous occupants.”²⁶ The use of violence in the LRGV to acquire land was also shared with other regions across the West as Pierce notes bluntly, “Violence therefore provided the most powerful tool for marginalizing non-white peoples and protecting the white man’s West.”²⁷ Natalia Molina sees this process as an extension of Manifest Destiny which “is inherently a racial ideology that pivots on ideas of who is deemed worthy of access to resources and fit for citizenship.”²⁸ The immediate problem for the poor ranchers was that they were too cash poor to hire lawyers to evict the squatters so the choice for them was to lose the land to outright theft or to sell it to pay the legal bills. In the end, the victory was the same for the Whites who either squatted on the land illegally or purchased it from the rancher to pay the legal bill against another white immigrant.²⁹

Jovita Gonzalez, a resident at the time, called this an “American invasion” in which *Tejanos* found themselves “segregated into their own quarters.”³⁰ Extant research has already documented that the White farmers recruited to South Texas by the land sales materials formed the most vocal and violent wing of South Texas residents who, as one local *Tejano* leader

²⁴ Dewey, *Pesos and Dollars*, 140.

²⁵ Shary, *The Golden Story of Sharyland*.

²⁶ Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 33.

²⁷ Pierce, *Making the White Man’s West*, 209.

²⁸ Natalia Molina, “The Long Arc of Dispossession: Racial Capitalism and Contested Notions of Citizenship in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2014): 441.

²⁹ Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 33.

³⁰ Jovita Gonzalez, “America Invades the Border Towns,” *Southwest Review* 15, no. 4 (1930): 469-470 as quoted in David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987): 113.

critically remarked, “wanted ‘Mexicans’ as farm labor and nothing else.”³¹ The wealthy Mexican ranchers and businessmen that helped fund the railway had serious regrets and many fell in with the anger and frustration common amongst *Tejanos*. These developments were not just humiliating to poor Mexican ranchers who lost their lands but also to the wealthy Mexican elite who, regardless of their wealth, were lumped in with the undifferentiated group, ‘Mexicans’ by the newly arriving Anglo farmers. In the promotional materials at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, none of them referenced the upper class of *Tejanos* and Mexican nationals who lived in and frequented the area, nor did they significantly differentiate *Tejanos* from Mexican nationals. While such a distinction was present in fact, it did not form a part of the booster discourse. In 1914, the regional newspaper *Regeneración* told its oppressed and infuriated audience that “A day will come when the mesquite trees of the state will hang with the bodies of the white bandits...who have denied the Mexican the right to life in this savage state of the south.”³²

All through the early decades of the 20th century, land continued to be sold to incoming white farmers and segregation intensified. The Klu Klux Klan grew popular in the Valley in the 1920s and by the 1930s, the schools were 90% segregated and commercial establishments with ‘No Mexicans’ signs were ubiquitous.³³ This result was not inevitable; until the SBM railroad came to South Texas and with it hordes of Anglos looking to establish a racially segregated society, relations between Anglos and *Tejanos* had proceeded on better if not ideal terms. Instead, what happened was a unique reimagining of race relations, similar in many ways with Jim Crow segregation, a kind of segregation that has elsewhere been referred to as “Juan Crow.”³⁴ As others have persuasively argued, the inculcation of this segregated vision in immigrants through the promotional materials and land boosters was key to its establishment.

³¹ Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 177.

³² *Regeneración*, “A los hijo de Cuahtémoc, Hidalgo y Juárez en Texas,” Jan. 24, 1914, Archivo Venustiano Carranza, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México, Departamento Cultural de Condumex, S.A., México, D.F., Carpeta 39, doc. 4263, as quoted in Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 37.

³³ Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 178.

³⁴ Bowman in *Blood Oranges* devotes a whole chapter to the way that South Texas came to resemble the Jim Crow south in the 1920’s. Strange then given his broad knowledge of the impact of race on society in the LRGV that he remained committed to the thesis that racism was, at base, a form of class exploitation. See also Jose Jorge Garcia, “Doing Away with Juan Crow:

Before we enter into the analysis of the materials to further develop the important notion of race there, it is important to clarify the racial language used in this article. As noted previously, the promotional literature made no distinction between *Tejanos* who were citizens of the United States and thus entitled to the same benefits and protections as Anglos and immigrants from Mexico who came to work; *Tejanos* become “foreigners in their native land.”³⁵ Likewise, no difference was recognized between the families descended from the Spaniards who settled the area through land grants and the indigenous people of Mexico who were frequently their subjugated labor. Montejano writes that “In the rural society these commercial farmers were creating, there were no longer any significant differences between the displaced “Spanish” elite and the landless “Mexican.” Now a Mexican was simply a Mexican.”³⁶ Montejano’s general summary of local Anglo attitudes is echoed in the promotional materials. Although there were certainly important social and economic differences in the LRGV between *Tejanos* and Mexican nationals, the wealthy and the poor, European descendants and indigenous peoples, these were not visible in the booster literature. There were a number of euphemisms used in the literature for ‘Mexicans’—“primitive,” “quaint and plebian,” “Peons,” “goat herders,” “gleaners,” “cheap” and “satisfactory labor”—but these terms are not meant to mark different people but to note the qualities of an undifferentiated lot.³⁷

As Wrobel demonstrates in the booster literature from the wider West, race was a sensitive topic in land sales. At the same time that the boosters wanted to reaffirm the economic benefits of living with those considered inferior, they also wanted to allay whites’ fears of living with the racial other.³⁸ Race had to be emphasized but not too much and in careful terms. What is

Two Standards for Just Immigration Reform,” *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 15, no.2 (2015): 14-19.

³⁵ Robert Calvert and Arnold De Leon, *The History of Texas*, 5th edition (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 86 as quoted in Pierce, *Making the White Man’s West*, 217.

³⁶ Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 115.

³⁷ American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company, *See Texas First*, 1930, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; Missouri Pacific Lines, *The Lower Rio Grande Valley*, 1927, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 2, Library Archives & Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; Jackson-Vreeland Land Co., *The True Story of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*, 1914, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives & Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

³⁸ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 15.

unique about the materials from the LRGV in regards to almost every other area Wrobel discusses in the West, is the uniformity of its racial vision and its vastly simplified binary system of race. Unlike California, for instance, where boosters spoke with a multiplicity of perspectives about Indians, Mexicans, Blacks, Chinese, and the various types of European Americans, the materials from the LRGV largely just acknowledge two groups, most commonly referred to as “Mexicans” and “Northerners” and speak with a more homogeneous perspective about race. This is not just unusual for the way in which it simplified the category of racial other but also for the way that it simplified whiteness.³⁹ In *Making the White Man’s West*, Pierce notes that in many cases boosters took great care to differentiate between the desirable and undesirable Europeans.⁴⁰ Boosters in the LRGV nowhere discriminate in print amongst the various Europeans. Side-stepping common progressive era ideas on the relative racial worth of the various European races, Europeans in the promotional materials are lumped into a single broad category. The literature describes European Americans in a variety of ways: “Americans,” “pioneer[s],” “crusader[s],” “colonizers,” “colonists,” “developers,” “thrifty and enterprising people,” “prosperous,” “Northerners,” “big visioned men,” “thinking men,” “high-type,” “successful leaders,” “progressive,” and “honest to goodness country gentlemen.”⁴¹ All these distinctions differentiate the incoming farmers from “the Mexican Peon” rather than from each other.

Land, River, and Race:

Bowman’s *Blood Oranges* rightly recognizes that cheap labor was an important selling point in the image of the LRGV constructed in the booster materials. His chapter on the booster materials in *Blood Oranges* presents a list of six themes in the booster materials but neglects to

³⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁰ Pierce, *Making the White Man’s West*, 151-174.

⁴¹ Julia Cameron Montgomery, “A Camera Journey through the Lower Valley of the Rio Grande,” 1929, *Monty’s Monthly News*, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives & Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; John H. Shary, *The Golden Story of Sharyland*, 1941, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; C & H News Co., *Greetings from the Rio Grande Valley*, 1937, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; C.E. Barritt, *A Call From the Southland*, n.d., Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; Southwestern Land Company, *In Rio Grande Valley Paradise*, 1930, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; Missouri Pacific Lines, *The Lower Rio Grande Valley*.

explore their deep interconnections and mutual articulation; after listing six themes, Bowman reduces the complexity of his discussion to the claim that, “profit, above all, was the underlying concern”—reducing all the other themes to a mere means to profit.⁴² This next section aims to consider the themes of land and race as they mutually articulate one another in the South Texas place-myth, we do not find that race is reducible to a single cause but serves many ends. The discourse of race had to frame “the Mexican” to fit a multiplicity of needs beyond merely profit; as we shall see, a narrative had to be constructed that served legalistic, leisure, moral, and social ends as well. The nature of the task was such that a racial other had to be created such that it justified Anglo supremacy while, at the same time, enabling recuperation of those racial others as bodies capable of disciplining into useful workers and docile citizens across the multiplicity of interactions and relationships that would connect them to Anglos. The promotional materials do this by equating the Mexican with the land, creating analogically exploitable natural resources.

An image from the American Rio Grande Land & Irrigation Company sales material captures well the portrayal of Mexicans and their ties to the land and nature (Fig. 1).⁴³ The background of this image is a mass of unfruitful shrub and dirt. The vegetation and lighting in the image present a dry and hot climate that is desert-like. Residing in these conditions are the two primary elements of the piece: a Mexican and a donkey. The donkey is a calm, complacent creature led by an old rope while carrying the load of the day’s work on its back; the load appears to be a pile of debris. The master of this animal is presented similarly to the donkey: as the animal naturally spends its day forging for weeds and grass, so too does this Mexican man. With a rope in hand, he stands in simple work garments, and demonstrates a complacent expression and posture. This photo in the sales brochure introduced the Northerner to the Mexican population of the LRGV and conveyed directly that the land is being unprofitably used by a people who, like the donkey, spend their days rooting about for whatever minor bounty nature spontaneously provides.

Accompanying this image is a short text which confirms this interpretation of the racialized figure of the Mexican. The text reads, “The Mexican Peon of yesterday was innately a gleaner. The present generation takes advantage of our modern schools and many of them are high school graduates. With an education they make excellent tradesmen and citizens.”⁴⁴ The use

⁴² Bowman, *Blood Oranges*, 70.

⁴³ American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company, *See Texas First*.

⁴⁴ American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company, *See Texas First*.

of the word gleaner is of particular interest as it sums up what is “innately” the essence of Mexicans. A gleaner is someone who “gather[s] or collect[s] in a gradual way” or who “gather[s] grain or other material that is left after the main crop has been gathered.”⁴⁵ The “Mexican Peon” is a “gleaner” like the donkey and in fact like most animal species. Just as most all non-human species survive by ‘gleaning,’ so too does the Mexican. The photo serves as means to dehumanize the Mexican through associating him with the animal and the natural. The text generalizes the qualities of the Mexican man in the photo to all Mexicans, claiming that scavenging amongst the leavings of nature is the “innate” behavior of the “Mexican Peon.” The natural and animalistic gleaners who populate the area explain its current unprofitable and therefore unappealing state. The caption also looks forward to the future of the “Mexican Peon” in “our modern schools.” Though the Mexican could never look forward to being the equal of Whites, those who studied hard could become the employees of Whites as “excellent tradesmen and citizens.”

A promotional magazine entitled *In Rio Grande Valley Paradise* echoes these points. This magazine informs its White audience that “The past years have wrought a miracle in the Valley. From a few thousand people, mostly Mexican, living in clusters of “jacals” the section now has a population of over 200,000 persons...the progressive, liberal, enterprising and thrifty people of a dozen middle western states...”⁴⁶ (Figure 2) A jacal is a hut made up of found materials: mostly sticks, mud, and grasses, and resembles a primitive adobe. *In Rio Grande Valley Paradise* only ever uses the term house in reference to Whites’ dwellings, Mexicans always live in something other than houses. The use of the word “cluster” in describing the jacals is of particular interest because of its contrast in the booster materials with the depiction of Northerners’ gridded and orderly organizational systems. As will be taken up in the last section, northern immigrants’ houses, orchards, roads, and institutions are shown in gridded and disciplined spacing, rationally ordered and never randomly clustered. What were clustered were the “Mexicans,” their jacals, and the random piles of debris and shrub shown in the photos of unimproved South Texas. The sense of the passage is that Mexicans populated the land like

⁴⁵ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “gleaner,” accessed May, 4, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gleaner>.

⁴⁶ Southwestern Land Company, *In Rio Grande Valley Paradise*.

animals, sparsely clustering in natural dwellings, gleaned from the materials available in the environment without transformative labor or “enterprise.”

It is important to note that the dominant image of the Mexican as of a kind of gleaner that meanders according to no progressive or disciplined scheme, wasting its possibility is mirrored in the descriptions of land and especially the Rio Grande River. For instance, in a small booklet titled *McAllen, City of Palms* the depiction of the Rio Grande in its natural state is linked with Mexicans. In the booklet, there is a series of four images bordering a central text (Fig. 3). The layout of these images forms a sequential and historical narrative about the river reading from left to right and top to bottom. The first of these four images depicts an aerial view of the Rio Grande River as it carves its way across the valley in a winding pattern which dwarfs the elements surrounding it. The aerial view of the river serves to instill in the viewer a sense of its tremendous size and inexhaustibility; however, aside from demonstrating to the viewer the size of the river, the image presents to the reader the natural tendency of the river to wind and meander. This image shows us the massive power of the river, yet untapped and undisciplined, waiting to be harnessed. The neighboring text reads, “The Rio Grande, pictured from the air on this page, has indeed proved a river of flowing gold. For untold centuries, it has been slowly building a delta of marvelous fertility. Through the ages this delta has been fertilizing itself by producing such vegetation as thrives in semi-arid country. It remained for man to bring the water of the river to the soil.”⁴⁷ The Mexican is narratively linked to the river in two ways by this first image and its text. First, Mexicans are marked as something other than “man” as they have failed to do what “man” does, which is to “bring the water of the river to the soil.” The winding river and its wasted bounty are evidence that no true men have inhabited the LRGV; again, Mexicans are marked as part of nature rather than civilization. Second, the meandering and undisciplined nature of the river mirrors similar descriptions of Mexicans across the booster literature.

The second image shows the water and silt of the river flowing down a canal, its path engineered efficiently narrow and straight to its destination. In this photo, the river had been tamed and made available to the progress of civilization and is captioned “...water when and

⁴⁷ McAllen Chamber of Commerce, *McAllen Texas, The City of Palms*, 1927, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives & Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

where he [the farmer] wants it.”⁴⁸ The third image is set in the corner of a large field which is split by a small channel of water. On foremost left hand side are three Mexicans laborers looking down and focused only on what is immediately laid out before them on the ground. On the opposite side of this division is a single clean and well-dressed White land owner gazing into the distance. This individual is overseeing the entire operation and is responsible not just for the productive employment and harnessing of the Rio Grande but also of the local Mexican population. The same operation that productively harnesses and directs the river and the land and the river also harnesses and directs Mexican labor. The narrative culminates in the fourth image depicting the rich yield of the land. This image depicts the abundance and profit that derives from the “desire and initiative” of White men disciplining the river, the soil, and the “Mexican Peon”—in other words, disciplining nature and natural forces—through the application of civilization and progress.⁴⁹

The images are an important part of the discourse produced through the promotional materials. It is hard to completely understand the racial identities established through the “cluster” of jacals or the linking of the Mexicans with the wildly oscillating river until it is understood how the northern immigrants are comparatively framed. The work of the White immigrants to the LRGV is depicted through gridded, disciplined, and organized uses of space. In the magazine, *In Rio Grande Valley Paradise, Sharyland*, the cover presents to the viewer the imagined future of the area should it come under the productive and disciplined organization of “progressive” and “thinking men.” The illustration is an imagined aerial view of orderly rows and columns of crops and citrus trees, evoking notions of productivity, order, security, regularity, and discipline over the natural forces of land, water, and labor (Figure 4). No longer is the land littered with masses of dry shrub and cactus and randomly dotted with clusters of mud huts but rather the gridded profit bearing trees and crops are regularly intersected by paved roads and planned infrastructure. These grids provide clear boundaries for property rights, provide efficient controlled channels through which capital can travel, and through the institutions, provide for the proper social relationships. The old, chaotic, and meandering have been erased by the modern,

⁴⁸ McAllen Chamber of Commerce, *McAllen Texas, The City of Palms*.

⁴⁹ American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation, *See Texas First*.

ordered, and productive practices of the “progressive intelligent good people.”⁵⁰ As the reader will see in the final section, this linking of whites with images of gridded and disciplined space is common across many areas of life in the boosterism.

In sum, others like Dewey and Bowman have noticed that the promotional materials establish a place-myth about the LRGV that emphasized white supremac and Mexican subservience. This discursive analysis of the promotional materials adds to those findings by showing how “the Mexican Peon” was not an isolated figure in the booster materials but was related to the ways in which the animals, water, and land—in short nature—was framed in the literature. Just as pioneers tamed the West and wrought wealth from its natural bounty, so too would the conquest of the Mexican fall into the same pattern. The natural order of the LRGV—from its chaotic and scrubby landscape, to its meandering river, and its gleaners rooting about leavings—was without planning or discipline and simply followed the path chance provided. Just as the plant seeds fertilized where they blew, the animal followed its nose, and the river followed the path of least resistance, so too did the “Mexican Peon” glean his existence by picking up whatever was immediately at hand.

The Intersection of Race and Class in Labor

As Dewey and Bowman have noted in the booster materials from the LRGV and just as Wrobel has noted across the West, the supposedly inferior races were promoted as low cost sources of labor for White immigrants.⁵¹ This section does not aim to recreate their findings but to summarize them and add to them in a modest way by drawing on the findings of the first section. An illustrative discussion of race as it pertains to labor in the LRGV comes in this passage, which is new to the literature, entitled “Labor” from *The True Story of the Rio Grande Valley*:

One of the greatest assets in the valley is our cheap Mexican labor. This labor comes across the river from Mexico, by the hundreds and thousands. We are enabled to hire them for but a fraction of the cost of what northern labor would cost.

⁵⁰ W.M. Sparrow, *Selling Irrigated Farmland*, n.d., Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 2, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

⁵¹ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 168, 176.

This enables us to clear our lands and farm them at a lower price than can be done elsewhere in the United States.

This Mexican labor, when directed by our people, is most satisfactory. Our settlers generally select the Mexican families they need to do their work, furnish them some cheap material, with which they erect their own houses and board themselves, relieving the housewife of this trouble and expense. They live very cheaply, the man doing the farm work for from sixty to seventy-five cents per day, while the Mexican woman will assist the housewife with her duties at a very low cost. The entire Mexican family, man, wife and children are always eager to work. Thus, we are enabled to clear up our lands, plant and harvest our many crops and market same at a much lower price, and with much more satisfactory labor than is had elsewhere.⁵²

The piece is a narrative description of the type of labor White settlers can expect to find in the LRGV. The section describes the transformation of the Mexican population from gleaners into a “low cost” and “most satisfactory” labor resource “when directed by our people.” The “hundreds and thousands” of Mexican laborers “are always eager to work” and ready to “assist.” Investors can purchase an entire family unit with each member of the family being put to work. The men will tend to the fields, and the women will assist in house chores, while the children will labor where needed. The promotional material goes on to ensure readers that the Mexicans are content with this new reality and are eager to work.

The docility, gratitude and subservience of the Mexican family of laborers is further reinforced by the suggestion that the Mexican laborers will be happy with the homes they can construct for their families if only the landowner can “furnish them some cheap material.” This comment on the needs of Mexican families for shelter also reaches back to the idea of Mexicans as gleaners, who are adept at making due with the leavings of nature. This thought is further reinforced by the comment that employers need only to pay the bare minimum for labor because “[t]hey live very cheaply,” presumably scavenging for what is not provided.

Other thinkers have not been wrong to recognize the emphasis in the booster materials on the Mexican, here the Mexican family, as a source of cheap labor. But this is just one instance of

⁵² Jackson-Vreeland Land Co., *The True Story of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*.

a hierarchy that extended well beyond labor into almost every other facet of life as well. The mobilization of the raced body of the Mexican was not just as laborer but as a disciplined resource that could contribute to the production and maintenance of a superior White race, whose contours can be traced across leisure, religion, beauty, fashion, morality, education, and justice.

Segregation of Social and Leisure Activities

During the 1920s, leisure activities became a significant part of American life. An "emphasis on consumption and leisure" in American popular culture combined with a middle-class interest in attaining a "high standard of living" motivated businesses to supply this demand with a variety of activities.⁵³ Promoters of South Texas real estate combined this burgeoning interest in leisure activities with a vision of a racially segregated society that could afford modern leisure activities to Whites and the policed racial boundaries to enjoy them securely. These racial divisions were also linked to gender and class in that women and men were largely portrayed as partaking in gender differentiated activities while the Mexican population was portrayed as the labor that facilitated Anglo leisure. In the following section, we will explore how the material envisioned a Rio Grande Valley that was segregated in leisure, education, religion, and shopping along the lines of race, class, and gender.

Leisure and social activities in the promotional material were often clearly directed along gender lines. One piece of promotional material that makes distinctions of race and class while tending to the interests of "high-type" (i.e. White) women is *The True Story of the Lower Rio Grande Valley*.⁵⁴ This pamphlet contains text which describes the then current state of the Churches in the LRGV:

Our settlers coming to this district represent most all of the Northern states, and represent nearly every religious faith. They have organized numerous church societies and organizations, and built houses of worship of all the leading denominations. Generally, the first building erected in one of our new towns is the church. These people are generally of a class that have been successful in the North—people with means, who have been used to the best of society and immediately on their arrival here, proceed to affiliate themselves with some of the

⁵³ Dewey, *Pesos and Dollars*, 84.

⁵⁴ Missouri Pacific Lines, *The Lower Rio Grande Valley*.

different church organizations, and contribute in a substantial way to the building and settlement of this district.⁵⁵

The text anxiously made it clear to prospective land buyers that religious life was segregated by race and class: there were a whole crop of churches built by and for people who were “generally a class that has been successful in the North—people with means, who have been used to the best of society”—just like those prospective buyers reading the pamphlet. This pamphlet assures the white women reading it that they could expect a variety of religious communities composed of other well-to-do whites who had migrated from the north. *The True Story of the Lower Rio Grande Valley* appealed not only to the women’s desire to fraternize with other successful Whites but assuaged any fears that moral degeneration might accompany a move into the heavily Mexican south.

The Golden Story of Sharyland depicted the best-angled views of new Catholic, Presbyterian, Christian, and Methodist churches in order to highlight the racially and morally upstanding (segregated) nature of the Lower Rio Grande Valley’s moral institutions (Figure 5). Looking back to the previous sections on land and labor, the reader already has a sense of how Mexican lives and buildings were portrayed as the haphazard creations of unplanned bricolage; the clean, landscaped, and orderly lines of the photographs of the Churches contrasted with those natural features and mirrored those disciplined Cartesian arrays of white housing, farms, and cities.

The same fears that linked racial mixing and moral contagion in the discourse on religion were also echoed in the presentation of schools in the LRGV. The passages on the schools made clear that new institutions built by and for “Northerners” were ready for their children. Looking again to *The Golden Story of Sharyland*, Sharyland High School and Grade School are given center billing in the pamphlet with a large pictorial layout. All the school buildings pictured in this pamphlet and in the many others depicting the schools, show newly built schools with well-kept lawns and a minimal and orderly style of landscaping much like the depiction of churches.⁵⁶ These images presented pristine, costly, and ordered educational institutions that had been newly

⁵⁵ Jackson-Vreeland Land Co., *The True Story of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*.

⁵⁶ Montgomery, *A Camera Journey Through the Lower Valley of the Rio Grande*, 40-43; American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation, *See Texas First*; *The Golden Story of Sharyland*; Missouri Pacific Lines, *The Lower Rio Grande Valley*.

made for the arriving Northern “intelligent good people.”⁵⁷ *The Lower Rio Grande Valley* explicitly described the patrons of the LRGV’s new moral and educational institutions as an elevated type of being, drawn in from the northern parts of the United States. The text reads, “The Valley is unique in that it is populated by men and women who formerly were successful leaders in other parts of the country. That it has attracted an unusually high type of citizenship cannot be doubted after inspection of the Valley’s churches and schools.”⁵⁸

The desired effect of the educational and religious sales materials was to give women entrusted with their family’s moral and intellectual education the impression that the LRGV had become civilized and safe for families and the rearing of moral and intelligent youth. This religious and educational segregation would grow in time at the insistence of these White settlers to include a larger segregation spanning almost the entirety of the public sphere: “Often, Mexican Americans could not commingle with whites at barbershops, restaurants, funeral homes, churches, juries, theatres, or numerous other public places.”⁵⁹ White segregation and supremacy in the LRGV was not just about the extraction of surplus value but about the creation of a moral and educational elite that could be differentiated from Mexicans not just in terms of dollars but in terms of their civilized and refined nature. The land and its order, both before Northerners and after, was depicted as a reflection of racial character. For Whites not to fall into racial degeneration and their business to collapse into gleaning, racial purity had to be ensured. These churches and schools were institutions made to continue and perpetuate these differences insofar as they were directed at the next generation, the children of the settlers.

The depiction of the justice and court system also followed along the lines of the churches and schools, dealing with related moral issues of justice and law. “Typify” was the byline used to mark the photo of the new Edinburg courthouse in the 1915 *Sharyland Viewbook*.⁶⁰ (FIGURE 6) In this context, “Typify” indicated that the new courthouse was typical of the justice system and its improvements in the LRGV since Anglo settlement began in earnest. The

⁵⁷ W.M. Sparrow, *Selling Irrigated Farms*.

⁵⁸ Missouri Pacific Lines, *The Lower Rio Grande Valley*.

⁵⁹ Robert A. Calvert and Arnoldo De León, *The History of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990): 234-236.

⁶⁰ John H. Shary, *Sharyland Viewbook*, 1915, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 2, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

text reveals that it cost \$80,000 to construct the courthouse, which was then a large sum. Alongside the portrayals of religion and schooling in the area, the emphasis on changes in law enforcement serves as further notice to the White reader that new institutions of morality, education, and justice have been built to sustain the intellectual, moral, and bodily integrity of the White community not only in this generation but in the next. Given the violence between Whites and Mexicans in Texas due to the 1915 *Plan de San Diego* uprising and the Mexican Revolution 1910-1920, it is hard not to read this 1915 publication as a promise to permanently keep Mexicans in their assigned place.⁶¹

Additionally, beauty was an important dimension of the promotional material. There was significant emphasis on the area as a sub-tropical paradise and there were often illustrations and photos of young attractive women amidst exotic plants like palms, hibiscus, or citrus. The vision of beauty was heavily racialized and images were almost exclusively of Anglos in the literature.⁶² The beauty in the LRGV was White beauty; the association of the young beauties with the landscape reinforced what the rest of the literature already made inversely known through its associations of Mexicans with gleaning—that the new fertility, productivity, and order of the land was the result of the northern civilizing influence.

A telling example linking the beauty of the area with the beauty of the northern immigrants can be found in the city of Weslaco's promotional material. In 1929, Weslaco threw its first "Weslaco Birthday Party" and it evolved into a yearly event.⁶³ The promotional material emphasized the style shows that were held to celebrate the city and its beauty. The shows were similar to beauty pageants with the added twist that each contestant represented a particular

⁶¹ For more information on the *Plan de San Diego* and episodes of violence due to the Mexican Revolution in the LRGV see, Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*.z

⁶² Much of the promotional literature contains images of women, displayed for their attractiveness and they are almost entirely Anglo women with non-Hispanic surnames. For further examples, please see Texas Citrus Fiesta, *The Home of the Grapefruit, Mission, Texas – The Golden Spot of the Rio Grande Valley*, n.d., Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.; Montgomery, *A Camera Journey Through the Lower Valley of the Rio Grande*, 22; Review Printing Company, *The Lower Rio Grande of Texas The Magic Valley*, 1940, Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.; and Jackson-Vreeland Land Co., *The True Story of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*.

⁶³ Alicia A. Garza, "Weslaco, TX," *Texas State Historical Association Online*, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hew04>.

social club or business who dressed solely in local plant materials like leaves, fruit, and flowers (Figure 7). The entrants from these clubs and businesses were almost exclusively white. Only 7 of the 226 participants over 25 years had Hispanic surnames.⁶⁴ These white women's bodies manifested their racial fertility in a celebration of Whites for Whites: they wore the vegetal fertility that Northerners had brought to the region with disciplined and profitable farming enterprises and their sexuality marked the locus of the future generation of the regional overlords.

The promotional material presents men's pursuits outside of work also as racially segregated. Northern men were targeted with images that carefully balanced depictions of the lucrative business opportunities available and the year-round leisure activities made possible by the warm weather. For example, *The Beautiful Valley of The Lower Rio Grande of Texas* bragged that South Texas is a place "Where work is a pleasure, and where pleasure can be combined with work in all seasons."⁶⁵ Another piece of promotional material called on sportsmen to visit the Rio Grande Valley to fish and hunt in virgin areas that had "never been hunted extensively," apparently not counting the Native Americans and their descendants, including the *Tejanos* who had hunted the land for centuries.⁶⁶ This piece describes how one can incorporate hunting with other leisure activities stating, "you can shoot deer in the morning, golf in the afternoon, and billiards at night." These leisure activities were said to be within close proximity to "modern conveniences and luxuries," soothing the reader than they would not have to stray outside of the order they had created, even when visiting the wilderness.⁶⁷

The promotional materials do not just create a place-myth based on racial supremacy in labor as other historians have indicated, they also did so in nearly every other area of life as well. These racial divisions produced divisions across the social sphere, aiming at a broad and enduring White supremacy that was able to ensconce itself in luxury and leisure, maintain itself through institutions of social reproduction indefinitely, and celebrate itself through rituals of recognition and commemoration.

⁶⁴ *Agricultural Design: Creating Fashion from Fruit, Vegetables, and Flowers*, accessed May 5, 2017, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/ADCF/>.

⁶⁵ Missouri Pacific Lines, *The Beautiful Valley of The Lower Rio Grande of Texas*.

⁶⁶ McAllen Chamber of Commerce, *McAllen Texas, City of Palms*.

⁶⁷ McAllen Chamber of Commerce, *McAllen Texas, City of Palms*.

Conclusion

This essay, backed by previous research showing the effects of the booster materials on shaping conduct and perception across the West and specifically in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, focused on the discourse of race produced by boosters. As the LRGV continues to impact issues and debates about race in the United States, it is imperative to offer a critical eye to the discourses and mythologies that frame race in that region. The discursive analysis of race in booster materials showed that race was not just an isolated aspect but one that shaped almost every aspect of its construct of place, from land, to beauty, to policing. The discourse on race did much more than just produce Latinos as low-cost labor; it wove together “the Mexican Peon,” the soil, and the natural resources of the area and spoke of them as joined by the ethos of the gleaner: meandering bodies who flow through the path of least resistance, acting only through the opportunities that spontaneously arrive. As the “Peon” wanders about in search of the day’s lottery of detritus and scavenging, the land hosts whatever wildlife and plants that chance to find a place on it, and the river flows the irregular and indirect path it finds genial, only irrigating the plains around it haphazardly and in inutile intervals. The “Mexican Peon” is not just cheap labor in the booster materials but part of the natural resources of the Rio Grande Valley that all could be similarly ordered and disciplined by Whites. Race not only formed not only a key element of who Mexicans were but what the Rio Grande Valley as a whole was.

The figure of the “Northerner” was joined to images of discipline, regularity, and the scientific maximization of resources. Rows, columns, regular spacing, and the mechanistic division and assignation of time were hallmarks of the portrayal of Anglos and have to be seen in contrast with the area in its natural and “undeveloped” state. The difference in these racial accounts was that the Mexican participated in nature with no sense that the Mexican ordered or produced it—like the river and the wildlife, the Mexican followed chance—while the Northerner brought and imposed a mastering discipline that structured life from business to leisure. This racially marked ordering went well-beyond economic order and found expressions in morality, religion, education, leisure, shopping, and justice as well. Race is coincident with an economic division of labor in the place-myth of the LRGV, but it is also much more than that; it is tied into its very being, from its physical arrangement to the relationship of the things inhabiting it. Race is an ontological element in the promotional literature, not just an economic one: race represents

two different kinds of being for the LRGV, one gleaning and the other orderly, subordinated, and progressive.

Pierce documents in *Making the White Man's West* how the West worked as a “dream of a white refuge” that “never fully died.”⁶⁸ The dream of the Magic Valley shared in that racialized vision of paradise with the rest of the Western booster materials insofar as it too made glowing promises about the abundance of the area and offered a racially stratified vision of life. But it also differed as well in ways that brought it closer to Southern Jim Crow than what one might find in California and across the West. Whereas Californian booster materials reflected a host of non-White racial and ethnic divisions (Native Americans, Black, Japanese, Mexican, and Chinese) and divisions within Whiteness reflecting the relative social ranking and desirability of various Europeans, the discourse produced in the LRGV was radically simplified in a way similar to Jim Crow. In the booster materials, there are only Northerners, who encompassed an undifferentiated body of Europeans, and Mexicans, which gathered *Tejanos*, Mexican immigrants, Mestizos and Indigenous people, lower and upper class alike into one blunt grouping. Also like Jim Crow and unlike some booster materials that focused only on economic opportunity, the booster materials of the LRGV offered a systematic form of segregation that extended the length and breadth of society forming a holistic system of oppression and exploitation tied into an ontological account of race.

⁶⁸ Pierce, *Making the White Man's West*, xii.

FIGURES:



Figure 1. "Mexican Peon." Photo in American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company, *See Texas First*, 1930. Photo courtesy of Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

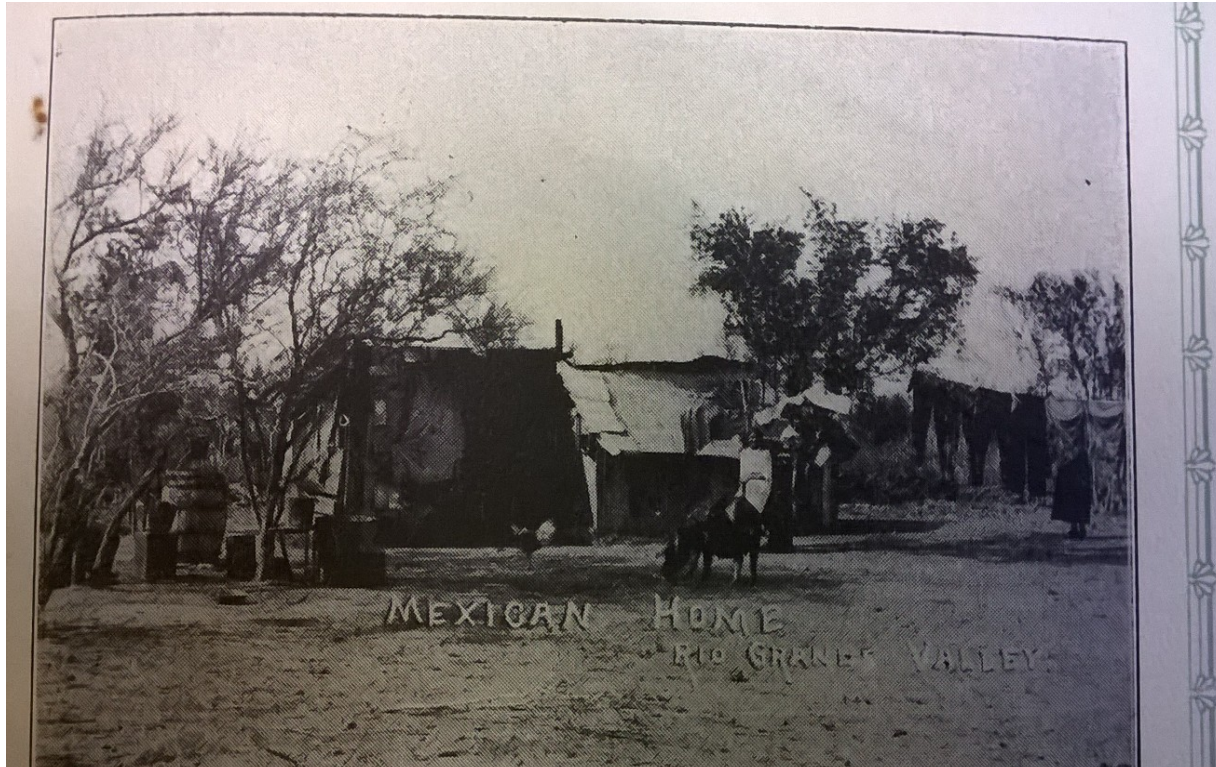


Figure 2. "The Mexican Home: Rio Grande Valley." Photo from McAllen Chamber of Commerce, *McAllen Texas, The City of Palms*, 1927. Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives & Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

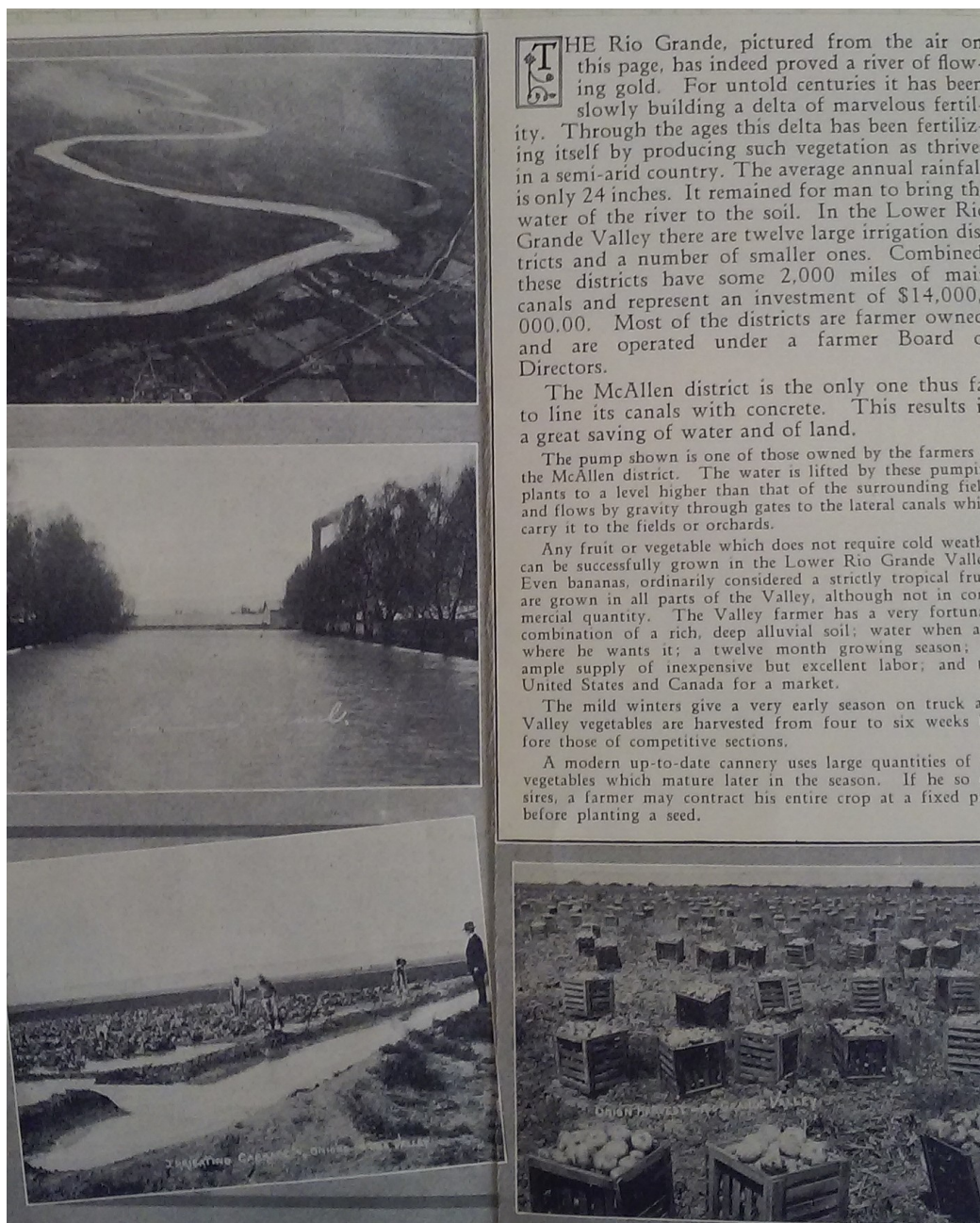


Figure 3. "Narrative of Progress." Photo from McAllen Chamber of Commerce, *McAllen Texas, The City of Palms*, 1927. Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives & Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

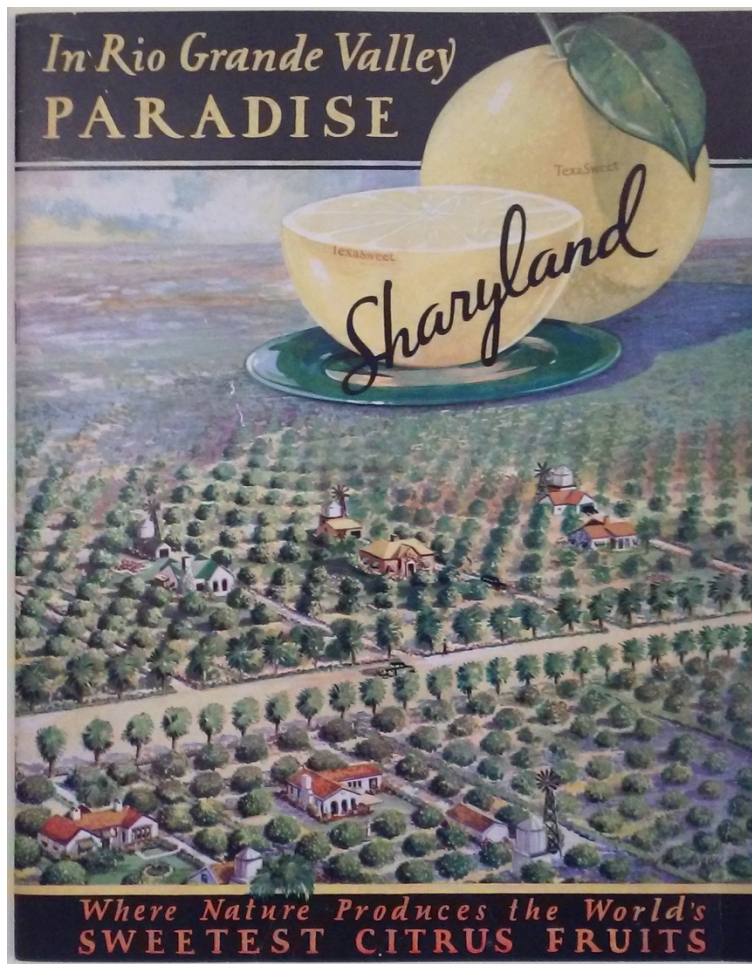


Figure 4. "Imagined Future." Photo Cover of *In Rio Grande Valley Paradise*, 1930. Photo courtesy of Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

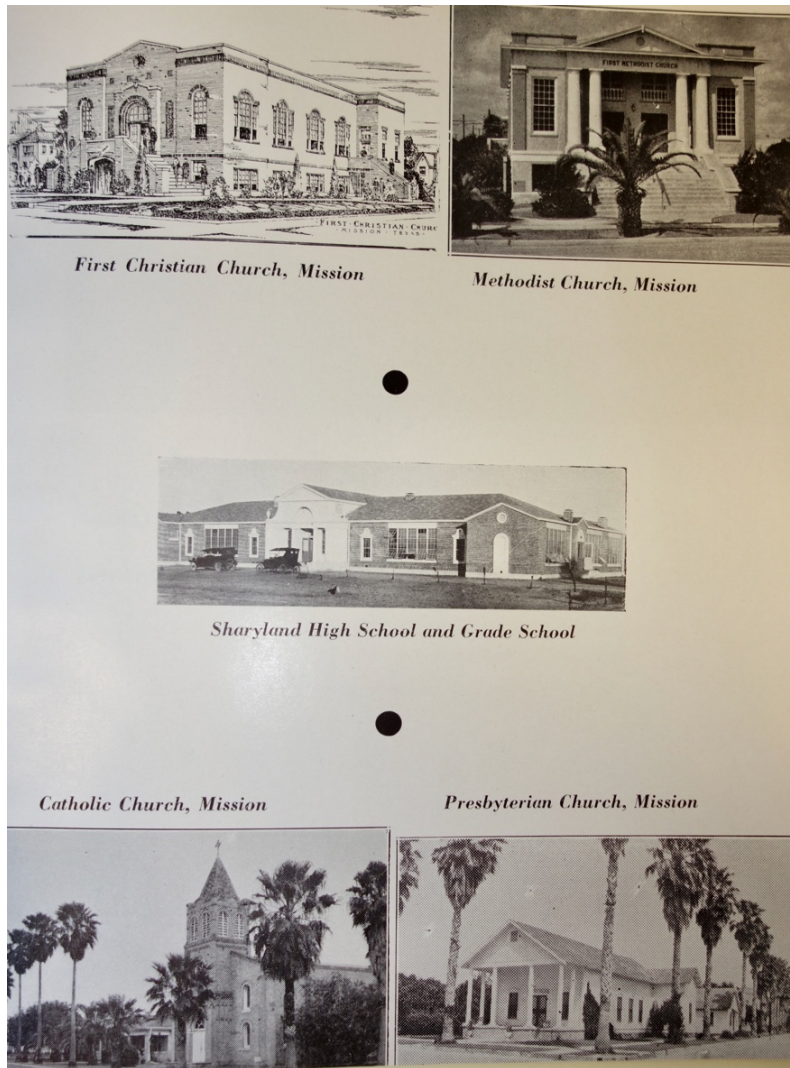


Figure 5. "Churches of the Lower Rio Grande Valley." Photo in John H. Shary, *The Golden Story of Sharyland*, 1941. Photo courtesy of Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 2, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.



Figure 6. "Typify Courthouse." *Sharyland Viewbook*, 1915. Photo courtesy of Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.



Figure 7. Group Entry in Weslaco's Birthday Party, 1941. From left to right: Miss Kathryn Farina, Mrs. Marie Beeler, Miss Bettie Sue Robinson, Miss Clara Mae Isham, Mrs. Frank Dorsey, Miss Dorothy Hager, and Mrs. Virgil Lehman. "Group Photo." Weslaco Museum. Photo courtesy of University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph21248/, photo taken 1941, accessed September 29, 2017.



Figure 8. "Work is Pleasure." Photo in Missouri Pacific Lines, *The Beautiful Valley of The Lower Rio Grande of Texas*, n.d. Photo courtesy of Rio Grande Valley Promotional Literature Collection, Box 1, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.