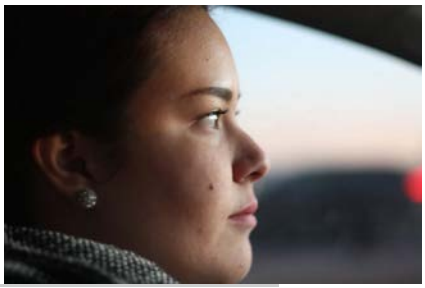
Crossing the Mexican-American Border, Every Day

Thousands of people in the El Paso-Ciudad Juarez region live a binational existence. It's not easy.

ALANA SEMUELS | JAN 25, 2016 | BUSINESS



Alana Semuels

EL PASO, Texas—She leaves university around 5 p.m., just as the sun is falling behind the dark mountains to the south, and steers her white Honda Civic down the hill toward the border. It's a short drive, maybe 10 minutes, past the fast-food restaurants and strip malls of El Paso and over the I-10, where Texans sit in traffic to head home to the suburbs, then alongside the two fences—electric and brown metal—that divide Texas from Mexico.

Then, she waits. Valeria Padilla is accustomed to waiting—for four years she has commuted from the home she shares with her mother and grandmother in Ciudad Juarez to the campus of the University of Texas-El Paso, where she, like many other Mexican nationals, qualifies for in-state tuition. But the wait used to be to get into the United States. Now, she waits to get out, too.

"It's horrible right now. It's like, 'no, no, no to crossing,'" she tells me, as she sits in the long line of cars waiting to get out of the United States. Wait-times to get into Mexico have become longer after U.S. Customs and Border Protection began requiring Mexican agents to

check cars entering Mexico for guns and money, according to Tony Payan, the director of the Mexico Institute at Rice University.

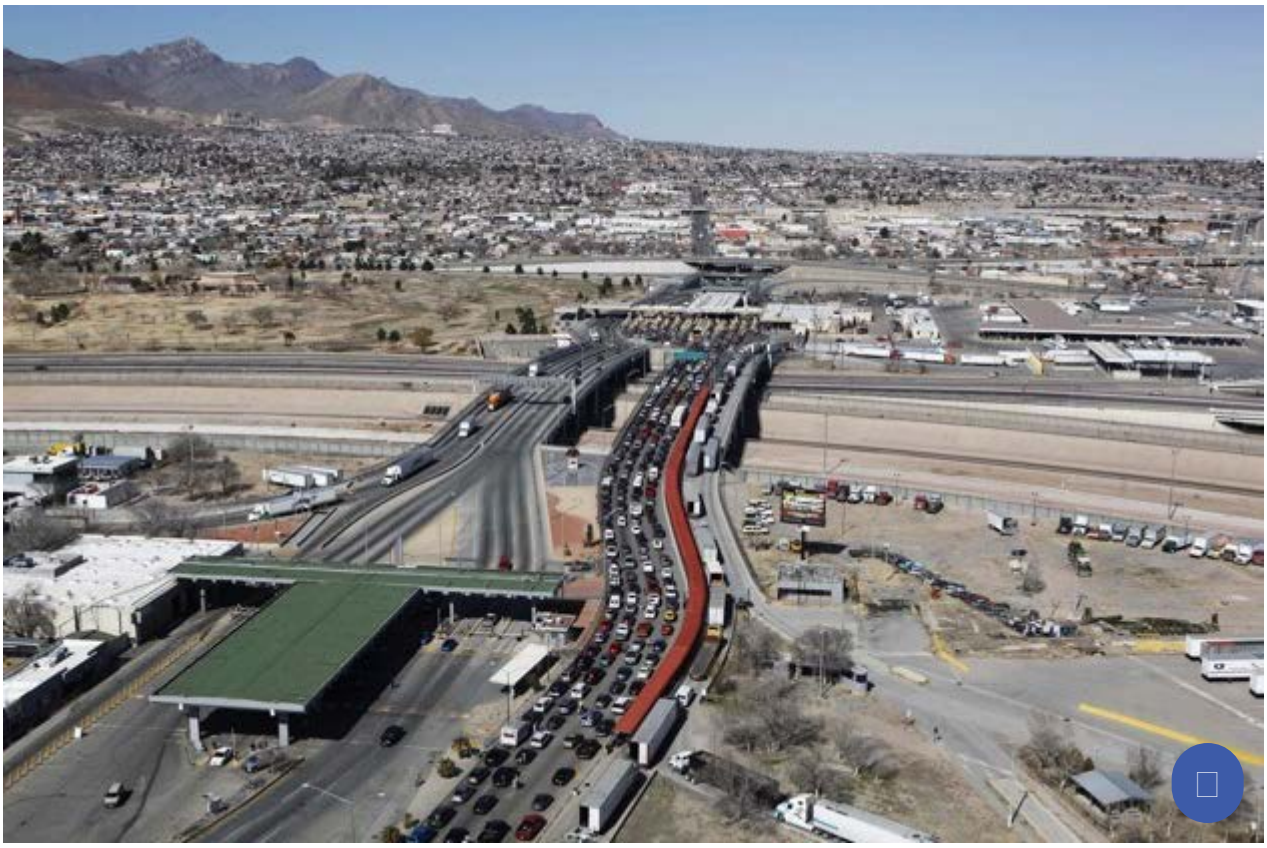
"We are truly making the border a difficult place to live. It seems that this is by design," he told me.

Indeed, as Padilla and I cross the border after about an hour of waiting, crawling slowly down El Paso streets and then past gun-toting Mexican agents whose faces are covered, supposedly so they won't be identified for bribery, our car is flagged and a Mexican agent asks Valeria to pull over and open her trunk. This is typical, and it's the reason that it can take Padilla an hour or two to travel the three miles from campus to Juarez on any given day. Traveling from Juarez to El Paso has gotten faster since she joined a program that allows for rapid border crossing—before, it could take two hours each direction. Now it's just the trip into Juarez that requires a long wait.

"Oh you're lucky today," Padilla jokes to me as we pull over in the dark, and the agent shines a flashlight in the car.

This is the life of someone who lives on the Mexican side of the border:

pesos and pennies in the little container between the seats, Chihuahua license plates and a mining-pick emblem on the back of her car (the University of Texas-El Paso's mascot is a miner).



Traffic between El Paso and Juarez in 2010 (Alexandre Meneghini / AP)

El Paso is the largest metropolitan area on the Texas border, and the El Paso-Juarez-Las Cruces region calls itself one of the largest binational regions in the world, with 2.5 million people. Thousands of people cross both ways over the border every day—Mexican elementary kids heading to U.S. public schools, U.S. residents working in Ciudad Juarez, students like Padilla attending U.S. colleges and universities. But binational doesn't mean unified—not when it's so difficult to get back and forth between two countries, and when there's such a strong us-versus-them mentality coming from one side.

"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're

sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us," Donald Trump has said, to cheering crowds.

He's presumably not talking about Padilla, since she's actually a U.S. citizen. She was born in El Paso, when her parents lived there, but then her parents split up and moved back to Mexico. Her father can't cross into Texas anymore, since someone stole his passport and used it to run drugs. Her mother simply doesn't want to.

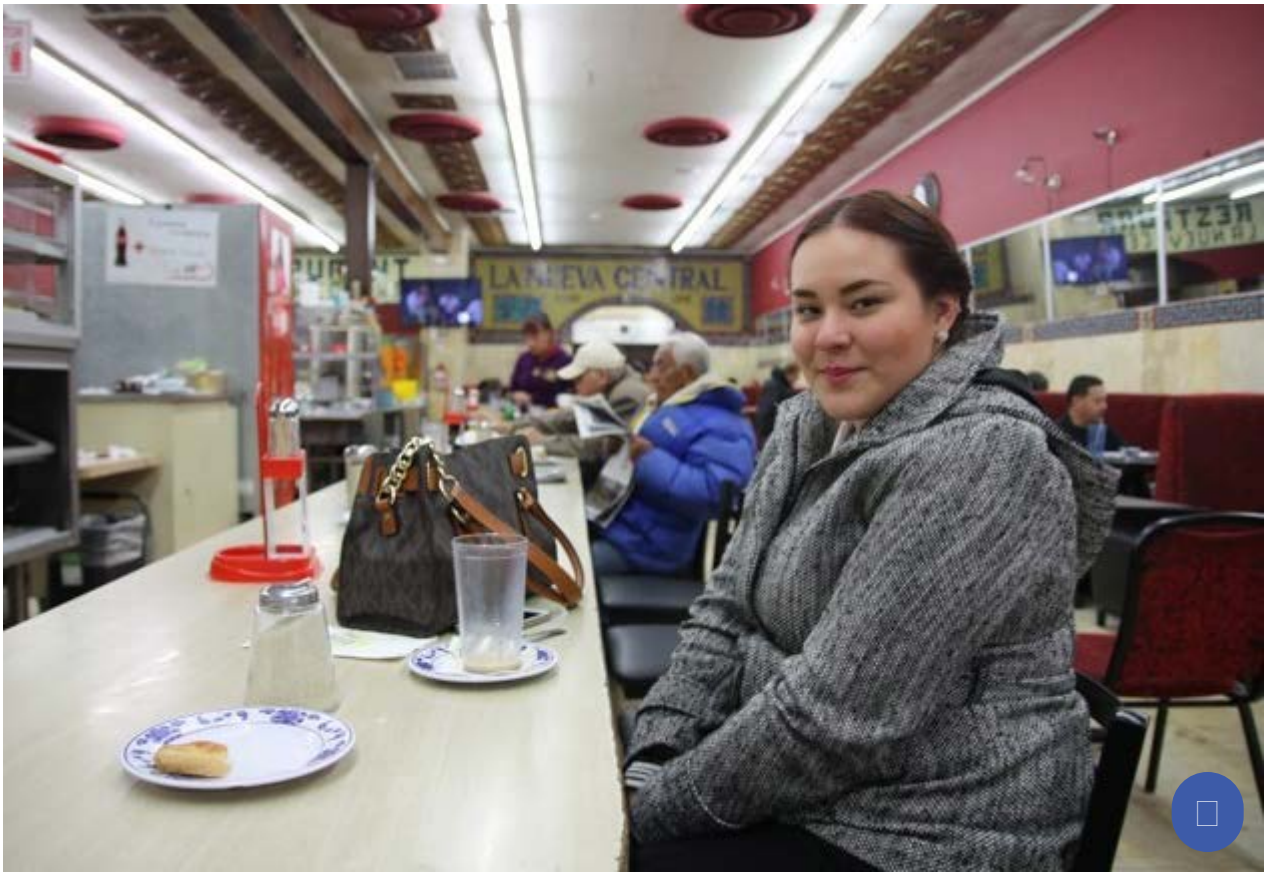
Since she lives in Juarez, she has to deal with the daily humiliations that anyone who crosses the border has to face, if their skin is brown. Because she is who she is, she laughs them off.

"When you live in Juarez, you know your status. You just say, 'Okay, I'm going to wait two or three hours in line,'" she says.

Padilla's daily life, and indeed that of many people who live on the U.S.-Mexico border, makes vivid the weight of the fates that are determined by accidents of birth. Padilla has more freedom to move around than many of the kids she went to high school with in Juarez

because of where her mother gave birth.

But what if Padilla had been born in Juarez? She'd still be the same person: Valeria who grew up in Juarez, who loves La Nueva Central, the old timey-café that serves lattes and pastries and Chinese food in Juarez just down the street from the cathedral, who prefers her beer with Clamato juice, absolutely loves her eyebrows and has never dated a gringo, as she puts it. She'd still be the Valeria who wants to be a film producer, to head to Hollywood after school if she can somehow find the money, who is working on a documentary on the strip clubs of Juarez. She'd just be that Valeria without a U.S. passport and with a harder life.



Padilla in La Nueval Central, a Juarez cafe (Alana Semuels / The Atlantic)

Not that it has been easy crossing to school every day from Juarez. This is the first year she's had a car. She took out student loans to pay for it.

Walking for three years was miserable. To get to the border crossing without a car she had to take three buses. Once, she tried to walk and suffered a heat stroke. Then her mother started dropping her off at the border. She'd walk over the Bridge of the Americas, the cement walkway that spans two countries over the dry gulch of the Rio Grande, under bright spotlights and series of fences, and catch a bus up the hill to school. She broke her ankle crossing in the winter of 2013. It was icy and she was running late—she's always running late—and she was hurrying across the bridge to catch the bus and slipped on the ice. She convinced her boyfriend to drive her to school so she wouldn't miss classes. When she finally got home, her mother suggested she could heal it with arnica, a cream that mothers everywhere say can cure all. When she finally went to the doctor and found out it was broken, he assured her arnica would not have worked.

There are other indignities. Padilla overheard a student call her mother a wetback when the two went to an admitted-students' weekend. Latinos in Texas can be just as judgmental about Mexicans as white people, she says.

"Even though we're on the border, people are racist against Mexicans," she sighs. But you're American, I point out. "They still stereotype you anyways. They see the last name, they hear the accent."

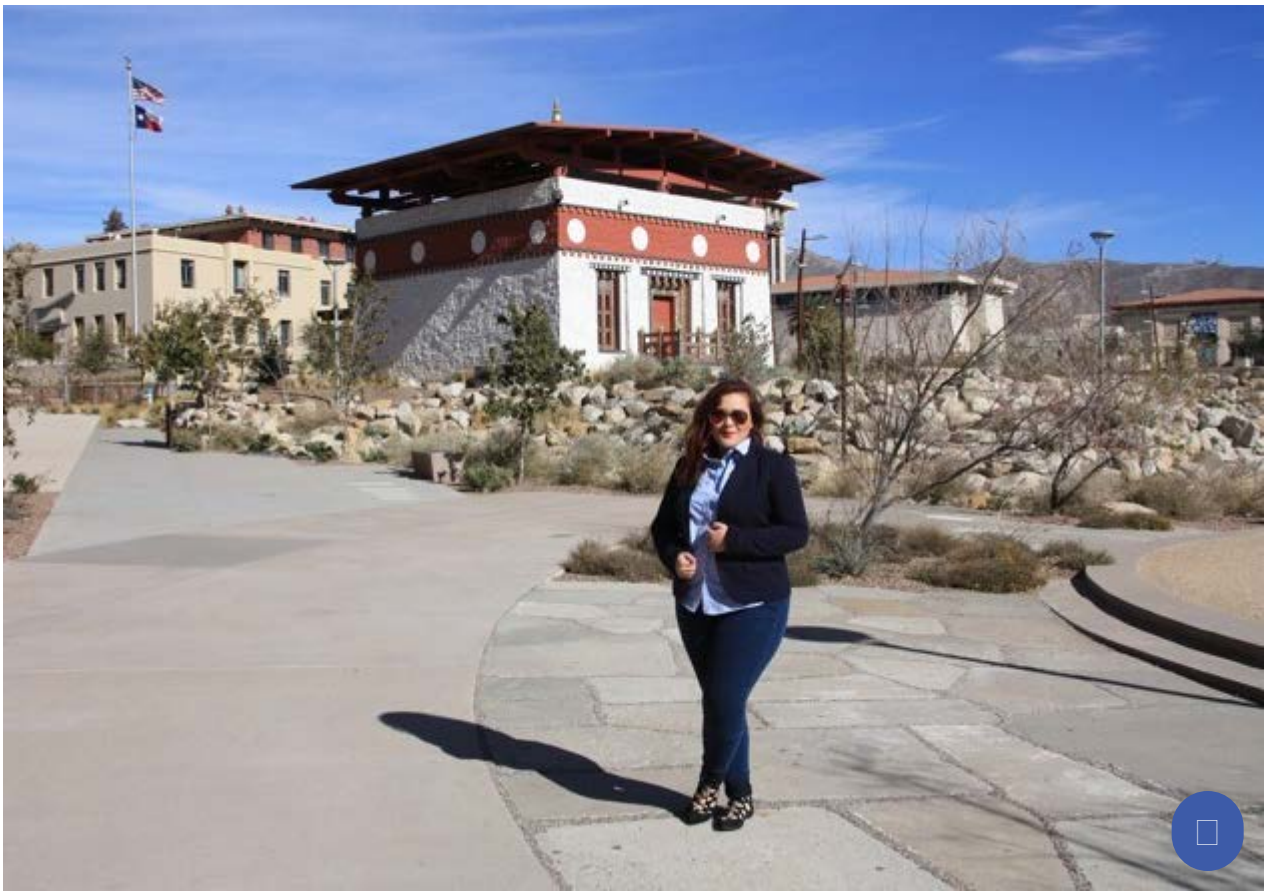
There was the border-patrol officer who asked her, when she carried a tripod, if she was transporting a firearm. (She wonders: Did he expect her to answer yes? Did he think she was that dumb?) There was the border-patrol officer who would ask her to marry him every day she crossed on foot, telling her that he'd make a nice life for her, that she wouldn't have to work so hard. He was the first officer she came across once she got a car —he asked her to marry him again. She could get a nicer car, he said.

Padilla's mother never wanted her to go across to school across the border.

"Every day, she was like, 'You don't have to do this. Come back to Juarez. You will have money in Juarez,'" she says. Her mother thinks it's humiliating to wait in the lines to get in and out, to go to school beside people who look at you and think, "wetback." She thinks it's humiliating to pay $150 to the U.S. government and $300 to the Mexican government to join the Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection program, or SENTRI, which allows her to enter into the U.S. without waiting in line. When Padilla got accepted as a transfer student into UT-Austin, her mother put her foot down. It was too expensive and too far away.

Padilla goes to UTEP because she wants to set out on her own. She wants to be adventurous and escape the bubble of a world her parents have created in Juarez. If her car breaks down in Juarez, she can call her mom. If she has trouble with a cranky pharmacist who refuses to serve her in Juarez, she calls her dad. In El Paso, she needs to figure things out herself. She figured out how to take two buses to a job at a tax-preparation office in El Paso that netted her $60 a day and free food. She figured out how to get elected as a senator-at-large in UTEP's student government. (She reached fellow Mexican students by walking the Bridge of the Americas to hand out her campaign literature. She is the only Juarez resident on the student government.)

Besides, she likes walking between the strange, towering red-and-gold buildings of the UTEP campus, which were modeled on Bhutanese architecture. She likes giving tours, pointing out the administration building featured in the film *Glory Road*, chatting about the UTEP basketball team's first-in-the-NCAA all-black starting lineup.



Padilla on UTEP's Bhutanese-inspired campus (Alana Semuels / The Atlantic)

There aren't the same opportunities in Juarez. Her mother, who has a graduate degree and works for the Mexican federal government, makes less money than Valeria makes in her minimum-wage job at the university. One professor who works at UTEP and gets American wages but lives in Juarez has a house with a cinema and two swimming pools. Mexico doesn't have the same internships or film classes as Texas has. Its universities in Juarez don't have the same sweeping campuses and sports teams as Texas universities do.

When Padilla graduated from high school in 2011, just about everyone was trying to get out of Juarez. The violence there had claimed 3,000 lives in one year alone. (In 2014, by comparison, there were 424 killings.) Around that time, Valeria's mother, driving down a busy road, saw a man put a gun to another man's head and pull the trigger. She saw his head explode.

On the UTEP campus, Padilla and I ran into a friend of hers named Isaac Bencomo, who left Juarez during the violence, moving in with a friend in a trailer in El Paso. He finished high school there, went to UTEP, and has since graduated and is becoming a pediatric nurse practitioner. He wants to legally immigrate to the U.S.

"Personally, Juarez for me is a lot of bad memories," Bencomo told me. "A lot of my friends left. It's just very sad there."

Padilla isn't so sure she wants to forever leave Juarez behind. She loves walking the streets and seeing the murals of a young Juan Gabriel, a famous singer from Juarez, of going to the nightclubs and gossiping with childhood friends in Spanish, of being a part of a community that is trying to rebuild itself after years of being known as the murder capital of the world.

"Some people don't like their roots, but that's what I'm trying to embrace," she says, after the border agents have let us through to Juarez and she takes us on an uncrowded highway along the border. We pass trucks lined up for miles, waiting to enter the U.S., and can see the bright lights of a stadium of a Texas high school just a few hundred feet away, on the other side of the border. We visit her high school and the Plaza de Armas, where we gaze at a historical cathedral with two

picturesque bell towers. Padilla feels at home here, but she won't stay forever: She knows she'd be crazy to give up the opportunity to live on the other side, among people who maybe don't want her there—people who don't think twice about the luck of their birth, who don't have to wonder about where they belong.

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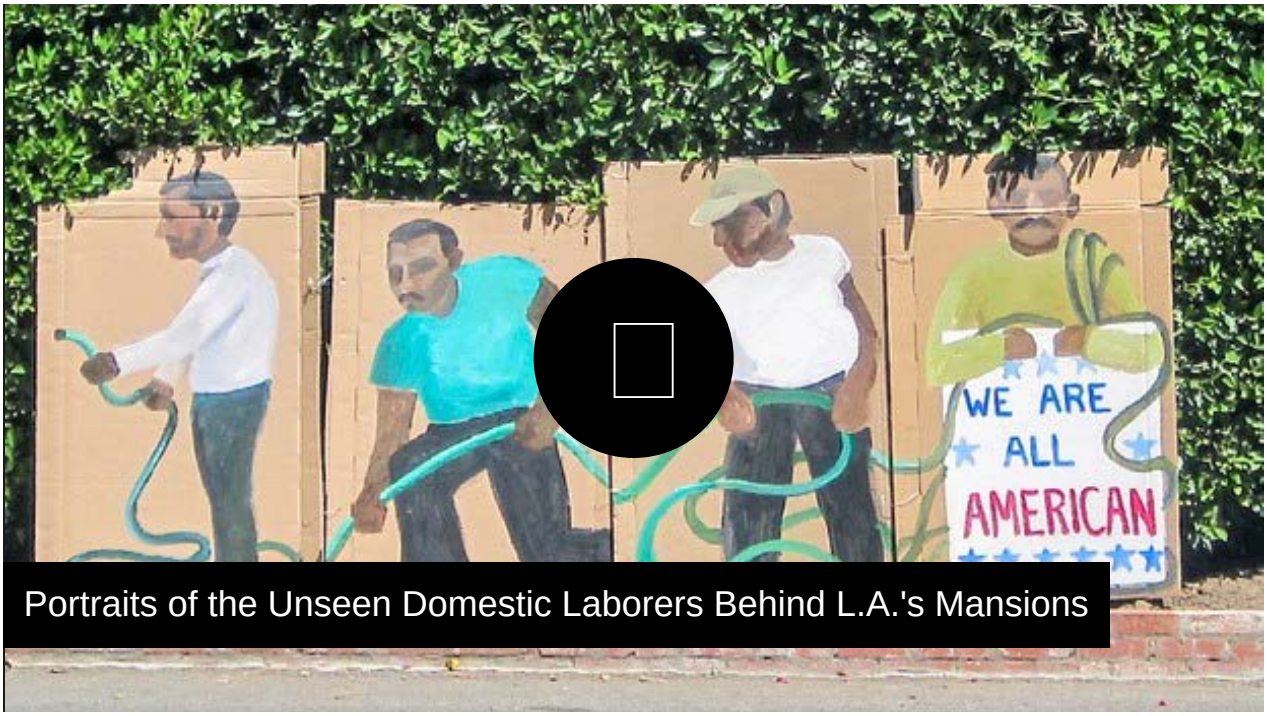

Artist Ramiro Gomez paints the immigrants who shape and maintain Southern California luxury

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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