Crossing Over
Redefining the Scope of Border Studies
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We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams.\textsuperscript{1}

—President Jimmy Carter

Some of the problems/conflicts addressed by research performed in the field of traditional “Border Studies” are as old as the history of humanity. Border confrontations are part of the Judeo-Christian tradition; they are equally essential for understanding the development of Islam, or, even more fundamentally, for examining the historical configuration of most of the world’s national borders. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 added an additional, more symbolic element to the realm traditionally interrogated by Border Studies. “Breaking the wall” has become, in a concrete as well as an abstract sense, an opportunity for discussing encounters and conflicts and for creating new dialogues, no less than an opportunity to understand and contemplate the “other.” The more recently instituted area of Post-Colonial studies, with its focus on analyzing the dynamics and the situation of indigenous and “subordinate” cultures, have further expanded the scope of Border Studies in important and far-reaching ways.

The initial definition of Border Studies saw this field limited to the consideration of national boundaries (e.g. the U.S.-Mexican border) or religious borders (e.g. Northern Ireland – Republic of Ireland). After the Second World War, national borders became once more an important topic of conversation for most of the European nations, due to both decolonization and the creation of an European Union. Many of these

\textsuperscript{1} http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/j/jimmy_carter.html
dialogues brought into light incidents of the past, years of subordination, political and linguistic imperialism, and other conflicts not easily solved or even confronted. What began as Border Studies with a focus on political and cultural borders between nations, however, has recently morphed into a more abstract and far-flung project that tasks itself with transcending limitations of any kind: cultural, sexual, spiritual, religious in addition to political, ethnic and national.

Some universities in the American southwest and Europe have created academic programs [in the traditional branch of] Border Studies, thus legitimizing the scholarly occupation with the above listed questions. The State University of New Mexico’s program on Borders Studies has the specific purpose of studying the U.S.-Mexico border and incorporating lessons on problem solving into the curricula of school systems located within the border states. Evidently the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 had an impact on the interest of scholars in this issue, as is evident in the following quote taken from the State University of New Mexico’s website:

The El Paso del Norte region . . . is the most crowded binational metropolex in the world. Because of this we have become the focus of global attention: people sense that our region is a portent of what is to become of borders everywhere, as the interconnectedness between peoples, groups and countries spreads throughout the world. Whether we will be judged successful or unsuccessful will depend on what we do now to alleviate the problems we have accumulated as a result of rapid border growth, and whether we can create a viable economy, a livable community, and mutual respect. . . . Without special attention, increased economic interaction between the two countries . . . will simply aggravate poverty and fragmentation on the border.2

There is a similar attempt in Ireland to research the history of border clashes that have occurred between the parts of the two countries that comprise the island, and to create better routes of communication in the border regions. The “Centre for Border Studies” at Dublin University exemplifies this initiative:

The Centre for Cross Border Studies, founded in September 1999 and based in Armagh and Dublin, researches and develops cooperation across the Irish border in education, training, health, business, public administration, communications, agriculture and the environment, and acts as secretariat for a number of cross-border educational organisations.

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2 http://www.nmsu.edu/~bsc/. This statement was made by the Southwest U.S.-Mexico Border Policy Group in 1994.
is also developing a unique cross-border information system called borderireland.info.\(^3\)

While the programs in New Mexico and Ireland focus on local political, economic, and cultural conflicts, the field of Border Studies is today expanding to encompass a much wider range of interrogations. In this evolutionary cycle, the discipline is defined by what could be termed a more contemporary approach that adds global and interdisciplinary dimensions to its domain. The program housed in the University of Wisconsin-Madison provides an example of this approach to Border Studies; their website proclaims:

> We want to examine intercultural sites of nomadism, migration, creolization, and hybridity: the broad borderlands where cultures blend and clash, where peoples resist and embrace the "other". We hope to shift the focus from the theorization of difference pervasive in identity studies across the disciplines to a theorization of the contact zones of intercultural encounters and the interactive circulation of power that conditions such exchange. Second, we plan to transgress the boundaries between institutionally distinct disciplines of knowledge that address questions of difference and identity—bringing together people across the methodological divide of the humanities and social sciences to establish a middle ground of dialogue and exchange that looks forward to the twenty-first century.\(^4\)

The organizers of the first Symposium on Border Studies at Cleveland State University embraced this last, pronouncedly broader, definition of the field when establishing the scope of their conference. In this more expansive sense, Border Studies can include and spur dialogue, create encounters, and encourage explorations of conflicts between the “borderlands” of nations and races as well as genders, sexes, religions, cultures, and languages.

Cleveland State University hosted the Symposium entitled “Crossing Over: Learning to Navigate the Borderlands of Intercultural Encounters” from October 7-9, 2005. This conference, the first in what the organizers hope to become an annual tradition, provided the opportunity to gather specialists from U.S., Canadian, Mexican, Polish, and Belgian universities. The purpose of the symposium was to initiate an interdisciplinary dialogue on the topic of border conflicts and encounters, with the understanding that all of those terms could be taken as either

\(^3\) [http://www.crossborder.ie/](http://www.crossborder.ie/)

\(^4\) [http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/huminst/border.html](http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/huminst/border.html)
literal and concrete or general and abstract. Our call for papers had invited presentations on a broad spectrum of topics to ensure as wide a variety as possible. The papers we received not only met but exceeded these expectations: besides topics treating political, ethnic and national interactions, thus covering the traditional “Border Studies” subjects, submissions dealt in imaginative and creative ways with cultural, sexual, spiritual, religious, and other clashes, transgressions, and conflicts. Scholars representing a rich diversity of disciplines such as literature and language, education, history, political science, anthropology, and philosophy responded, making the conference an intriguing meeting place for inter- and intra-disciplinary conversation. This feature was particularly fascinating to us, the organizers, as it is rare in the circuit of academic gatherings which are normally more area-specific and specialized. Proving that the borders between the humanities and the social sciences have become frayed and porous, scholars attending the symposium had the opportunity to converse across disciplinary boundaries, thus demonstrating the efficacy of multiple perspectives and theoretical approaches on a variety of issues.

The selection of papers included in this volume represents a cross-section of the voices heard during the symposium. The volume is subdivided into four major areas: international borders, intra-national borders, gender and identity borders, and linguistic and educational borders.

Following is a description of the content of each of the four parts of the book.

The first part of this book examines international borders between Mexico and the United States, France and the World, the United States and Latin America, and the United States and France, respectively. All these articles are a reflection on differences, similarities, conflicts and encounters between two or more different cultures. John Dwyer examines the border region of Baja California’s Mexicali Valley, which was long dominated by American landowners and immigrant (mostly Chinese) labor. By focusing on President Lázaro Cárdenas’s agrarian reform program as well as peasant land invasions, Dwyer demonstrates that elite and subaltern Mexican actors together tried to reduce the foreign presence in the territory and mexicanize the region. He also shows that their respective goals were derived by a variety of socioeconomic and cultural forces. Sita Swami examines Ariane Mnouchkine’s ‘Théâtre du Soleil’ as a means of communication between France and the world. Swami finds that the political framework incorporated in Mnouchkine’s theater works as a tool to create encounters, cultural clashes, establish similarities and
differences, and create dialogue beyond national borders. Philippa Brown Yin analyzes the hybrid world of Dolores Prida’s theater and the conflict it documents, that of being simultaneously Latina and Anglo-American. And finally, Melodee Baines establishes parallelisms in contemporary alcohol consumption between the United States and France. Alcohol and its use are perceived differently in both cultures; legislation of alcohol consumption is different, and Baines’ paper establishes that the interplay between American and French use of alcohol permits novel conclusions on national character. Philippa Brown Yin analyzes the hybrid world of Dolores Prida’s theater and the conflict it documents, that of being simultaneously Latina and Anglo-American.

The second part of this book focuses on intranational borders: it is comprised of five articles, all dedicated to the exploration of social dynamics as depicted by authors representing several world literatures. More specifically, these articles analyze the interactions between insider/majority groups and outsider/minority individuals. Though exploring different societies, the papers conclude that these interactions typically result in collision and rejection rather than connection and acceptance of the loner/outsider protagonist. In several of the contributions of the second part, the search for [welcome by/entrance into] mainstream society reflects the autobiographical grappling with ethnic, racial or sexual identity by the author in question.

In the first article of the second part of this book, Elizabeth Fifer explores the similarities between literary representations of two peasant rebellions: a Mexican rebellion in *The Book of Lamentations* by Rosario Castellanos and a Brazilian rebellion in *The War of the End of the World* by Mario Vargas Llosa. In each work, the political movement is sparked by a charismatic leader who creates a hybrid religion which the Catholic Church in turn attempts to suppress. Fifer suggests that the meaning of a failed revolution may reverberate for many decades causing ripples in a nation’s history that the revolutions’ founders may not have imagined. Kim Fordham’s article examines the pivotal role played by fear in determining the Other in the Jenisch 5 author’s novels. Fordham finds that Mehr’s texts offer evidence for the theory that if one can reduce the Other to “something” less than oneself, less than human, then treatment of this other no longer needs to be humane. Fordham analyzes the sociological function of and process of group definition, specifically how the groups depicted in Mehr’s novels delineate between insiders and outsiders,

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5 A nomadic tribe that settled all over Europe with a language of its own reminiscent of Yiddish. Mehr is one of very few Jenisch authors.
highlighting, among others, key identity markers such as gender, race, and sexual orientation. Stefanie Hundt’s article presents Jim Northrup’s *Walking the Rez Road* book as an exploration of the effects the Vietnam War had on Native American soldiers, specifically the Anishinaabeg. Hundt detects in Northrup’s narrative promising yet nontraditional forms of therapies for post-traumatic stress disorder, as they apply both for the fictional characters and potentially for readers. The protagonist’s unsettling symptoms of PTSD are eventually overcome by engaging in traditional communal activities such as “ricing” and story-telling linked to the Native American trickster tradition. Hana Muzika Kahn’s article explores the work of the Guatemalan poet who writes in both Spanish and Maya K’iche’ and who publishes his work in dual language editions illustrated with Maya motifs. Kahn’s contribution demonstrates how Ak’abal’s poetic work draws attention to the development of a new written literary canon in Maya languages but also raises questions about radical social changes in cultural identity and linguistic expression. Joanna Mitchell’s contribution “Alien Corn: Erotic Encounters in the Work of Rosa Nissan,” analyzes how this Mexican author consciously frays the border between elements of her Jewish and Mexican identity, between spirituality and sexuality, and between her life and her fiction. In Mitchell’s reading, Nissan’s clearest defense of her ethnic and sexual identity is found in her travel memoir *Las Tierras Prometidas* (1997) where Nissan fully realizes the power of her mobile, hybrid subject, able to be Mexican and Jewish, willing to abandon either identity at times and where her fictional self constantly challenges the traditional ethno-religious boundaries through erotic liaisons.

The third part of this book explores ways in which a variety of writers search for more valid definitions of gender and sexual identity. Tama Engelking’s article follows the author’s young female protagonist on a cross-country truck ride through France, as she becomes enmeshed in an intricate weave of French and Algerian influences and discovers the extent to which colonizer and colonized, East and West, have merged into a new type of hybrid “Frenchness.” Kristina Fennelly’s contribution uses bestselling author Khaled Hosseini’s astonishing first novel *The Kite Runner* to examine recent cultural changes in Afghani culture: according to Fennelly, Hosseini repositions the traditional “fallen woman” in a trans-cultural space that compels readers to reevaluate gender roles, paying specific attention to women’s otherness in Afghani culture. Terry Martin’s article newly analyzes the interplay between Freudian and Lacanian positions on identity construction. Martin arrives at the conclusion that Lacan’s theory lends itself to a postcolonial critique of
essentialist and hegemonic notions of identity.” Conversely, he finds that Lacan undermines any viable basis for identity amid the “endless chains and interchangeability of signifiers.” Elizabeth Vogtsberger’s article examines the child protagonist’s deeply conflicted sexual identity and finds the roots of his “queerness” within the colonialist history of Russian and Romanian invasions of his native Moldavia. And finally, Virginia Talley’s work examines the meaning and relationship of transvestism and hybridity in the discussion of Neobaroque writing. This discussion is illuminated through the works of Cuban writer Severo Sarduy to suggest that transvestism is the best metaphor to describe Neobaroque writing.

The fourth and final part of the book examines linguistic and educational borders with special emphasis in cross-cultural differences. All three contributions address issues on language contact with strong political and sociological components. Taking Wilson’s work on Politically Speaking as a starting point, Piotr Cap’s study focuses on discourse analysis utilizing three examples from the political domain. The first is President Reagan’s metaphoric language referring to the Statue of Liberty, the second is the parliamentary questions in Britain, and the third one is the final decree of Afghan Islamic clerics (Ulema), on U.S. demands for the handover of Osama bin Laden. Cap’s analysis contrasts with Wilson’s “in that the goal is to pursue the analytic processes and their textual and non-textual determinants, rather than concentrate on reaching a ready-made conclusion.” Michael Millar’s article takes into account the recognition of cultural/national borders as the first step in the student’s learning process. This recognition, together with acknowledging cultural identity as equally important, leads to a process of cultural interaction and understanding. Conversely, if the reality of borders is ignored, the historical background of each side leads to resistance in the learning process. The final chapter by Ria Snellinx presents a cross-cultural analysis of press activity as it moves between Belgium and the Netherlands. The investigation is based on language attitudes and perceptions taking as a point of departure the life and assassination of Pim Fortuyn; he was the former sociology professor and gay right-wing politician, who rose to prominence after winning a Rotterdam election by a landslide as leader of a new party, “Livable Rotterdam.” Snellinx examines cultural, religious, and political values from a sociolinguistic perspective, in order to stress differences between the Dutch and the Flemish press. The way language is manipulated in the press is significant to understand the values and idiosyncrasy of these neighbor countries. These three contributions by Cap, Millar and Snellinx create a dialogue between different cultures and different languages or dialects, and
highlight the differences in perception and attitudes that attaches to the core of each national or cultural group.

*Crossing Over: Redefining the Scope of Border Studies* presents an array of experiments and suggestions on how to create conversations between cultures and nations. Some of the contributions of this volume explore manners that artists have utilized to confront and encounter conflicted identities, and document attempts by individuals and collectives to achieve interactions and examinations of linguistic borders. Other contributions examine the idea of national identity and the process of acculturation, with positive and negative reactions and accommodations within the people of different nationalities. It is our hope that each article included in this collection may be considered a thoughtful contribution to a discipline that is coming to the fore with innovative ways of examining both deeply personal conflicts, as well as public and global interactions, all probing humanity’s multi-faceted and hybrid nature.

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2007
Part 1

International Borders
On January 26, 1937, a large group of landless rural workers marched to the office of Baja California’s governor and demanded their own farm land in the Mexicali Valley. Since their requests were ignored, the next day four hundred armed agraristas (activists in the agrarian reform movement) seized parts of the massive 850,000 acre estate owned by the Colorado River Land Company (CRLC), a Los Angeles-based land development firm located in the Valley since 1902. The company’s holdings included some of the largest and most well developed cotton producing lands in Mexico. Besides CRLC, at least a dozen other American property owners together held 146,000 acres in the Mexicali Valley. Although the governor paid no attention to the agraristas, President Lázaro Cárdenas did. Within months of the invasion, his government redistributed 240,000 acres of CRLC’s best irrigated holdings to Mexicali field-workers in the form of communal ejidos (land distributed to peasants as part of the federal agrarian reform program). By 1940, nearly 420,000 acres belonging to the company, along with 58,000 acres of additional American-owned property in the Valley, had been expropriated by Cárdenas’s administration. This extensive redistribution dramatically changed the region’s land tenure patterns and decreased its economic dependence on the United States; it also significantly reduced Baja California’s racial and cultural diversification as thousands of mestizo nationals (a Mexican usually of mixed Indigenous and European decent) entered the Mexicali Valley, replacing the thousands of non-

Cárdenas was willing to transfer ownership of nearly a half million acres in the Mexicali Valley from the Americans to his fellow citizens in order to Mexicanize Baja California. He believed that the peninsula required Mexicanization since it lacked an overland route to the Mexican mainland, was more closely tied to the U.S. economy than Mexico’s, had most of its cultivable land owned by foreigners, and had the largest per capita foreign born population in the country (twelve percent), as well as the lowest per capita mestizo population. Also, not only was Baja California’s Chinese population sixty times higher than the national average, but seventy-five percent of the Chinese residents in the territory lived in and around Mexicali.\footnote{Rosario Cardiel Marín, “La migración china en el Norte de Baja California, 1877–1949," in María Elena Ota Mishima, ed., \textit{Destino México: Un estudio de las migraciones asiáticas a México, siglos XIX y XX} (México D.F.: El Colegio de México, 1997), pp. 203, 211, 234. Baja California Norte ended its status as a territory and became a state in 1952, approximately two decades before its southern neighbor.} Addressing Baja California’s racial balance was a central component of the federal government’s regional agrarian and Mexicanization programs. According to Agrarian Department Director Gabino Vázquez, land redistribution in the Mexicali Valley was “the first step toward obtaining a more numerous Mexican population in the peninsula.”\footnote{Gabino Vázquez, \textit{The Agrarian Reform in Lower California}, (Mexico City: DAPP, 1938), p. 4.}

Although Cárdenas met the agraristas’s demands in 1937, federal officials and local subaltern actors had not always agreed on the direction
of the government’s agrarian policies in the Valley. Cárdenas’s initial plan was rather conservative and based on colonization and private land ownership. However, because of the pressure that was exerted from below by Mexicali’s agraristas – most notably through the 1937 invasion of CRLC’s estate – Cárdenas was forced to abandon colonization and redistribute land based on a system of communal agricultural production. Hence, the issue of land and colonization became a contested space where elite and popular views of agrarian reform clashed. The underlying forces that drove the federal Mexicanization and agrarian programs in Baja California stemmed from economic and cultural nationalism as well as social engineering. Meanwhile, the local agrarista movement was driven by the rural proletariat’s class-based material interests and, to a lesser extent, race.

Colonization and the Plan Pro-Baja California

By 1915 cotton was the dominant crop in the Mexicali Valley due to growing U.S. demand and its high global price that resulted from World War I. As the region’s rural economy expanded throughout the 1910s, hundreds of Americans and Asians, and to a lesser extent Mexicans, entered the Valley where they leased land from CRLC. In addition, thousands of Asian and Mexican migrant laborers moved into the area looking for work. Despite this influx, Baja California’s notoriously low population, increasing wartime demand for cotton, and better paying jobs north of the border produced a labor shortage in the Valley. Consequently, in 1915 Governor Esteban Cantú began promoting Chinese emigration to the region. According to some estimates, by 1920 Mexicali’s population was nearly forty percent Chinese. CRLC and its lessees were happy to have Asian contract laborers picking cotton because they usually were paid less than Mexican field-hands and thereby drove down wages and kept costs low. At the end of WWI, CRLC’s holdings were producing $18 million annually, which made the Valley one of the largest and most successful cotton producing regions in the world.⁴

While campaigning for president in September 1934, Cárdenas toured the agricultural camps in the Mexicali Valley. He was dismayed that Baja California’s roads and railroad lines connected the peninsula to the United States, rather than Mexico. As a result, the Valley’s entire cotton crop was exported to U.S. textile factories. Equally problematic for Cárdenas was CRLC’s domination of the local economy on the Mexican side of the border. To reverse these trends, Cárdenas recorded in his diary some ideas on how to restructure the region to Mexico’s advantage. He showed his nationalistic colors early when he proposed “to distribute among Mexicans the enormous latifundio (estate) owned by the Colorado River Land Company through agricultural colonies.” Cárdenas also envisioned linking Baja California to the rest of the country by constructing railroad lines from Mexicali to Puerto Isabel, Santa Ana, and Puerto Peñasco in the neighboring state of Sonora, so the Valley’s cotton supply could be shipped to the textile mills in the nation’s interior.5

Although scholars usually emphasize Cárdenas’s redistribution of land, colonization also played an important part in his agrarian reform program. For example, in 1935 the president established a number of secretarial commissions to study Mexican colonization of the country’s two distant territories, namely Baja California and Quintana Roo.6 In his report, Secretary of Agriculture Saturnino Cedillo called for colonizing CRLC’s property with Mexican families, establishing agricultural


6 The colonization commissions included the Secretaries of Finance, Agriculture, and Interior, the National Bank of Agricultural Credit, and the National Irrigation Commission. See Periódico Oficial, March 20, and May 10, 1935; Magaña to Cárdenas, November 8, 1935, Ramo Presidentes, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas del Río [hereafter Cárdenas Papers], 705.2/26, AGN; Presidential Acuerdo No. 435, April 16, 1935, Ramo Gobernación, Dirección General de Gobierno [hereafter DGG], 2.300(29)518, Box 36, AGN.
experiment stations in the Mexicali Valley, and revising the government’s water concession with CRLC. Shortly thereafter the company was pressured to sign a colonization contract with the federal government. Undersecretary of Agriculture José Parrés warned company officials that unless they agreed to a colonization agreement, their “lands would always be in danger of being affected by other means of land redistribution” (i.e., expropriation). To avoid losing their holdings so abruptly, CRLC officials spent the next year negotiating the terms of a colonization agreement with Mexico City, and in April 1936 they signed one with Cárdenas’s government. Over a twenty-year period the company was obligated to survey, subdivide, and sell all of its agricultural and stockraising property at prices that were below market value. Also, upon the signing of each individual colonization contract, CRLC had to immediately transfer the property title to the colonist rather than retain it until the final mortgage payment was made to the company.

The colonization agreement reflected Cardenista economic nationalism since only Mexicans could become colonists, thereby preventing the large immigrant population that resided in the municipality of Mexicali from purchasing any land. To raise public awareness about the colonization project, in September 1936 Cárdenas announced it via nation-wide radio broadcast, along with a federal program designed to accelerate the economic development of Baja California and hasten its integration into

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7 Secretary of Agriculture, “Memorandum con respecto a la colonizacion en la Baja California, de los terrenos que actualmente está poseyendo la Colorado River Land Co.,” April 13, 1935, Cárdenas Papers, 705.2/26, AGN.
8 Brant, Report from April 12, 1935 trip to Mexicali, Papers of David Brant [hereafter Brant Papers], Box 68, Sherman Library [hereafter SL]; Suárez to Vierhus, October 7, 1935, CRLC; File 99, SL; Loroña memorandum to Haskell, November 29, 1938, General Archives, Unnumbered Box, CRLC; General File, SL.
9 Chandler to Vierhus, February 1, 1936, Cárdenas Papers, 705.2/26, AGN; RG 84, Mexicali Consulate, General Records, File 852, NAW; Archivo Histórico del Estado de Baja California [hereafter AHEBC], Fondo Territorio Norte [hereafter FTN] 852/671.24/3613; Diario Oficial, May 7, 1936, p. 3, and August 14, 1937, CRLC, File 99, Folder: Colonización; Folder: Proyectos y Borradores, Contracto Colonización; Folder: Nuevo Contracto de Colonización; General Archives, Unnumbered Boxes, Box U, Folder: General File CRLC, SL.
10 Chandler to Vierhus, February 1, 1936, Cárdenas Papers, 705.2/26, AGN; Kerig, Yankee Enclave, pp. 345-346; for a sample of an individual colonization contract, see 852/671.24/3613, AHEBC.
“la patria” (the motherland). The latter project, known as the Plan Pro-Baja California, produced numerous government studies and news reports on how to develop the territory’s infrastructure, increase its agricultural output, and incorporate the peninsula into the national economy. Together, the colonization agreement and the Plan Pro-Baja California were nationalistic projects designed to Mexicanize the territory. Mexico City had no difficulty finding recruits to colonize the Mexicali Valley since thousands of peasants from around the country volunteered. When CRLC made its first deeds to the colonists in November 1936, the region’s development along with its Mexicanization got underway.

The Agrarista Movement

The 1936 colonization agreement between CRLC and the Mexican government had one serious flaw: it was a project designed by economic and political elites that did not take into account the alternate vision of Mexicali’s landless rural workers. Because of their low wages and lack of consistent employment, most agricultural laborers in the Valley lived at or below the subsistence level, making them too poor to purchase, colonize, or even rent CRLC’s property. Many of them were young, male mestizos who had migrated to Baja California during the 1920s and early 1930s in search of employment. One migrant turned agrarista, Pedro Pérez, left his home in Nayarit at age twenty-five along with his mother and siblings because of the lack of jobs locally. According to Pérez, when his family arrived in the Mexicali Valley in 1935, they “drove kilometer after

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11 Cárdenas, Obras I, p. 358.
13 Gómez to Cárdenas, July 10, 1936, Cárdenas Papers, 705.2/26; Alvarado to Cárdenas, March 11, 1936, Cárdenas Papers, 503.11/106; Galvez to Cárdenas, July 24, 1937; Ruiz to Cárdenas, July 30, 1936; Cárdenas Papers, 404.2/81, AGN; Kerig, Yankee Enclave, p. 351.
14 Castro Fernández, November 5, 1941, Poblado: Tierra y Patria, Municipio: Mexicali, Estado: Baja California, 23/23066, Archivo de la Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria [hereafter ASRA]. Hereafter poblado (settlement), municipio (municipality), and estado (state) will no longer be listed, but the names of each location will.
kilometer and from ranch to ranch looking for any kind of work.” Like most migrant laborers, Pérez finally found a job picking cotton.\textsuperscript{15}

Even if migrant workers were lucky enough to secure employment during an era marked by global depression, they still toiled under horrendous conditions. Most worked in the extreme Mexicali heat ten hours a day, six to seven days a week as underpaid field-hands. According to Pérez, “we worked like dogs and were given three pesos for picking one hundred kilos of cotton even though a person needed six pesos a day to get by.” Like most unskilled laborers in the Mexicali Valley, Pérez also suffered from underemployment and had a difficult time finding a job during the production cycle’s “dead months,” from December to April. Moreover, the fact that many jornaleros (day laborers) like Pérez worked on estates that U.S. and Asian immigrants rented from CRLC, increased their resentment. In other words, the agraristas in the Mexicali Valley were not only class conscious but racially and nationally conscious as well.\textsuperscript{16}

Living conditions for the Valley’s rural proletariat were as poor as their working conditions. Most lived in one-room thatched huts or cardboard shacks with no electricity, refrigeration, running water, doors, or windows. Not only did they live at nature’s discretion, but their bedding and furniture were minimal and uncomfortable. Finally, the Valley’s landless rural workers occupied the lowest rung on the socioeconomic ladder and lacked access to healthcare and education for themselves and their families.\textsuperscript{17} Not surprisingly, most agraristas were driven more by bread and butter issues than political ideology. Unable to afford their own plot of land, and faced with increased population

\textsuperscript{15} Interviews by author with original agrarista activists Pedro Pérez, Apolinar Pérez García, and Liborio Pérez Fernández, along with initial ejidatarios and descendents of some original agraristas and initial ejidatarios including Jeremías Guillén (Director of El Museo del Asalto a las Tierras), Bonifacio Cabrera Cordova, Manuel Encinos, Pedro Jimenez Figueroa, and Marcelí López, Ejido Michoacán de Ocampo, Mexicali Valley, Baja California, July 12, 13, 19, and 20, 2001 [hereafter Mexicali Interviews, 2001]; testimonial of Pedro Pérez, wall display in El Museo del Asalto a las Tierras, Ejido Michoacán de Ocampo, Mexicali, Baja California.


\textsuperscript{17} Photographs from the Museo del Asalto a las Tierras, Ejido Michoacán de Ocampo, Mexicali; Mexicali Interviews, 2001; Cibrián to Villafuerte, August 4, 1936, Alamo Mocho, Mexicali, BCA, 23/7849, AHSRA.
pressures stemming from Mexican repatriation, along with growing unemployment and several years of falling wages, Mexicali’s rural proletariat were forced to act boldly before it was “too late” (i.e., before CRLC’s colonization agreement made them into a permanent class of landless field-workers who toiled endlessly on other people’s property).18

Mexicali’s rural laborers believed that owning land would enable them to stop moving in search of work and pass their holdings onto their children. They also rightly assumed that landownership would advance their class interests by improving their working conditions and living standards. The agraristas expected that property ownership would enable them to earn enough money to purchase a few modern conveniences, including canned food, an oil stove, and a watch, along with better clothing and housing. They also wanted access to education and healthcare. Many field-hands had acquired their acquisitiveness by working on small and medium-sized properties where they saw the higher quality of life enjoyed by the landowners, colonists, and lessees who rented property from CRLC. According to ejidatario (ejido recipient) Manuel Encinos, who inherited his plot of land, “my father wanted to live like the colonos (colonists). Before the distribution we were so poor we had nothing.” Mexicali’s agraristas also hoped to be treated like the ejidatarios in the Laguna cotton district following the redistribution of millions of acres in that region in 1936. In other words, they expected the federal government to provide them with the financial (e.g., low-interest loans) and physical resources (e.g., machinery, tools, fertilizer, seed, and training) that would enable them to succeed as farmers.19

Inspired by Cárdenas’s call for greater worker and campesino (peasant) rights, in 1936 the agraristas established the Mexicali Union of Peasant Day Laborers. This rural worker union led the Valley’s agrarista movement and aligned itself at the national level with the anarcho-syndicalist Confederación General de Trabajadores (General Federation of

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Workers or CGT). At a June 1936 rally organized by the Mexicali Union – which attracted 3,000 people – one agrarista leader suggested to the keynote speaker, Cárdenas’s Secretary of Gobernación Silvano González, that “the latifundios which belong to the foreigners should be acquired by the government and divided into ejidos rather than be sold under a colonization system.” The following month Mexicali’s agrarista union complained to the federal Agrarian Department that Baja California’s governor had consistently voided their requests for land; they also asked that a Mixed Agrarian Commission be sent to Baja California to resolve the numerous ejido petitions that had already been filed but then ignored by local officials.

There was a good deal of class solidarity amongst rural and urban workers in the region. Urban labor unions, including the Bar and Restaurant Employees Union of Mexicali, supported the agrarista movement. This service sector labor union used fiery class rhetoric when they championed Mexican nationalism and advocated the expulsion of all foreigners from the city of Mexicali and its adjacent Valley. According to one of the union’s representatives, their “comrades,” the campesinos constitute the human machine of those great foreign capitalists, whose only thought is of making money, forgetting the collective welfare of their laborers; and we put as an example the first great institution of this territory, the Colorado River Land Co., owners of the great extensions of land... That is why Lower California tells the governor of this territory that the time has come to do revolutionary work, that the Colorado River Land Co. subdivide its lands among our people. Comrades: We should cry out from our very soul that Mexico is for the Mexicans.... Here in Mexicali, the heart of the city is owned especially by Chinese, Japanese, and Jews [sic] and other nationalities, and we are ready to make them see that the people of Mexicali cannot permit them to continue to be proprietors of large holdings and buildings.... Comrades: The point our movement is the following: That every foreigner, who resides and dedicates to commercial activities, be expelled.

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20 Godinez to Vázquez, August 17, 1936, Alamo Mocho, Mexicali, BCA, 23/7849, ASRA; Acosta Montoya, “Precursores del agrarismo,” pp. 73-74.
21 La Opinion, June 8, 1936.
22 Sindicato de Jornaleros Campesinos de Alamo Mocho to Vázquez, July 24, 1936; Gavira to Prado, June 25, 1936; Cibrián to Villafuerte, August 4, 1936, Alamo Mocho, Mexicali, BCA, 23/7849, ASRA.
23 Declaration of the Bar and Restaurant Employees Union of Mexicali, n/d, General File, CRLC, 1937, SL.
The aim of the agraristas and their local and national supporters was to create a conflict that would force the federal government to intervene on their behalf against CRLC. Thus, in early 1937 hundreds of rural workers invaded the company’s property.24 The invasion gained nation-wide attention and support from numerous national peasant and labor organizations, including the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (Federation of Mexican Workers or CTM), Confederación Campesina Mexicana (Federation of Mexican Peasants or CCM), and the CGT.25 Since these organizations were among the largest peasant and labor unions in the country, and comprised an important segment of Cárdenas’s political base, it made little sense for him to defend a monopolistic American company that dominated the border economy. Had he done so, he would have undermined his strongest supporters and been attacked politically. To maintain his legitimacy with the peasantry after the invasion, Cárdenas canceled CRLC’s colonization agreement and redistributed its property to local field-workers.26 The first expropriations were made in March 1937. By July, forty communal ejidos were established, within which 4,800 ejidatarios had received 240,000 acres of the company’s land.27

24 Sánchez Ogáz, “Lucha por la nacionalización del Valle de Mexicali,” p. 56; Rentería to Cárdenas, January 27, 1937, Cárdenas Papers, 404.1/6708, AGN.
25 Ramírez to Cárdenas, January 28, 1937; Morales to Cárdenas January 29, 1937; Lombardo Toledano to Cárdenas, February 2, 1937; Presidential Secretary Luis Rodríguez to Morales, February 9, 1937, and to Ramírez, February 9, 1937, Cárdenas Papers, 705.2/26, AGN; Garcia to Cárdenas and to Vázquez, January 28, 1937, Alamo Mocho, Mexicali, BCA, 23/7849, ASRA; Haskell to Brant, February 3, 1937, Brant Papers, Box 68, SL.
26 Cárdenas to Crespo and to Guillén, February 12, 1937, Cárdenas Papers, 705.2/26, AGN; Cárdenas to Navarro Cortina, February 17, 1937, 852/671.6/904, AHEBC.
27 Cárdenas to Navarro Cortina, February 17, 1937, Cárdenas Papers, 401/21; Vázquez to Cárdenas, February 24, 1937, Cárdenas Papers, 404.1/4227, AGN; Bowman to Hull, February 26, 1937, RG 84, Mexicali, 350, NAW; Loroña memorandum to Haskell, November 29, 1938, General Archives, Unnumbered Box, CRLC, General File, SL; Memorandum of CRLC Property Expropriated by the Mexican Government, February 10, 1944, File 382, Reports to American Consuls and to the American Section of the Agrarian Claims Commission, SL.
Reasons behind the Federal Expropriation

The government’s rationale behind the expropriation, like the colonization program before it, was driven by economic nationalism. Cárdenas wanted to put the region’s natural resources into Mexican hands in order to direct its development. At no point in its thirty-five year history did CRLC have more than 122,307 of its 850,000 acres under cultivation. Also, the company did not open up any additional lands after 1924, illustrating its limited commitment to the Valley. The president expropriated the company’s property because he believed that redistribution would increase agricultural yields by placing more land under cultivation. Locally, this would reduce unemployment and stimulate the rural economy.28 Ironically, expropriation made it easier for Cárdenas’s administration to carry out its statist project in the region.

Within a year of the invasion, over 400,000 acres of what was once CRLC’s land was being prepared for farming. Also in 1938, the Department of Communication and Public Works began to construct and improve Baja California’s highways. It also began work on railroad lines that connected the Mexicali Valley to ports on the Sea of Cortes and the mainland via Sonora, with the goal of getting the region’s cotton crop to Mexican textile factories.29

For most Cardenistas, unless land redistribution was accompanied by social reforms, their goal of improving conditions for the rural population, modernizing the countryside, and fostering greater agricultural productivity would be in jeopardy. Hence, federal intervention in the countryside via the ejidal system was also designed to remold rural laborers. To Cárdenas, social vices, such as gambling, alcohol consumption, and prostitution, undermined workers’ health and efficiency, and during his 1934 campaign visit to Baja California, he noted that each had inhibited the territory’s economic growth.30

29 Vázquez, The Agrarian Reform in Lower California, p. 12.
Therefore, Mexicali’s saloon culture and its thriving red light and casino districts, which had expanded greatly in the 1920s due to prohibition north of the border and the popularity of vice tourism south of it, drew the president’s attention. The fact that many of Mexicali’s cantinas, casinos, brothels, and opium dens were Chinese-owned and used by Americans, gave Cárdenas’s paternalistic social reforms a nationalistic edge. After the expropriation of CRLC’s land, Cárdenas revoked the liquor licenses from the cantinas that operated within centers of agricultural production and suppressed liquor sales and vice tourism throughout the area.  

For similar reasons, Cárdenas’s administration believed it was necessary to provide ejidatarios with a socialist education that stressed good health, proper hygiene, and positive social habits. Following the seizure of CRLC’s holdings, Cárdenas significantly increased Baja California’s overall budget and built thirty-six new schools and assigned eighty new teachers to the Mexicali Valley. The number of schools throughout the territory increased dramatically by the end of his term in office, from just twenty-one in 1930 to 140 by 1940. Cárdenas’s government also constructed hundreds of sanitation works, introduced drinkable water, and established model ejidos within the Valley. In addition, the Casa del Agrarista was built to temporarily house campesinos and function as a meeting place for the peasantry. Such buildings were used for group activities that empowered rural workers and raised their class consciousness. Educational and socioeconomic advancement were not ends in themselves. Coupled with the belief that land redistribution gave rural laborers a stake in society and increased their morale, the Cardenistas believed that the synergistic nature of their reforms would help to create a more modern and industrious rural workforce.

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31 Cárdenas, Obras, I, pp. 311-312; Sol de Mayo, pp. 3, 33; Schantz, “All Night at the Owl,” pp. 91, 96; Schantz, From the Mexicali Rose to the Tijuana Brass, p. 481.
33 Sol de Mayo, May 1939, pp. 3, 33; Vázquez, The Agrarian Reform in Lower California, pp. 11-12.
Besides molding a new peasantry through progressive socioeconomic policies, the expropriation of CRLC’s land allowed the government to quickly supplant American values – that were seen as exploitative and self-serving – with Mexican ones, which were considered humanistic and communal. Some postrevolutionary thinkers were critical of American mores and their prevalence in the border region. Manuel Gamio, a leading anthropologist and public administrator “deplored the Americanization of Baja California.” Likewise, philosopher and public official José Vasconcelos denounced what he described as “pochismo (the hybrid U.S./Mexican culture of Northern Mexico)” and the region’s “pro-Americanism.”

Mexican intellectuals now championed a new nationalism based on the mestizo. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, eugenicists like Gamio and Vasconcelos believed that mestizo homogenization was essential to the nation’s health and therefore championed mestizaje (a belief in the superiority of mestizos over other racial groups).

The rhetoric of mestizaje allowed the new political elite to distinguish itself from the “cosmopolitan, Europhile ethos” of the Porfirio Díaz regime (1876–1911) and reconstitute the postrevolutionary state on Mexican norms, values, and institutions. By celebrating mestizo culture and making mestizos the “ideological symbol” of the revolutionary nation, Mexican leaders after 1920 fostered a new, domestically-oriented, ethnic nationalism. According to Cárdenas, populating the Mexicali Valley with Mexican nationals would enable the residents there to live within “the economic and social rhythm of our nation” and “maintain the racial characteristics of la cultura patria” (the native culture). After CRLC’s lands were expropriated, Agrarian Secretary Vázquez similarly proclaimed that land redistribution in Baja California was part of a “great recovery program which… strengthens the racial community, cultural solidarity, and economic intercourse between the distant territory and the

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