

SPIRIT, TRANSFORMATION AND GENDER IN BORDERLANDS: A REPRESENTATIVE CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Questions of “development,” trade, and gender in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (and globally) have attracted considerable academic attention, and other scholars have examined religious changes, particularly the expansion of evangelical Protestantism, in Latin America. This feminist history represents a fresh attempt to blend these two inquiries, describing Protestant Pentecostal growth and Charismatic Catholic Renewal (CCR) in the central U.S.-Mexico Borderlands during the 1970s and 80s. This preliminary study places these spirit-filled movements in the context of gendered socioeconomic change and the declining influence of Vatican II. Interviews, church documents, and newspapers show that while Social Justice Catholicism (and even some Liberation Theology-inspired Comunidades Eclesiales de Base) survived in the region, a conservative shift increasingly marginalized the Catholic Left. Regional and international power brokers, including Roman Catholic leadership, favored (or, at least, salutarily neglected) CCR, which, like Pentecostalism, was more accommodating and often supportive of the industrialization agenda. These gendered constructions, combined with the palliative effect of ecstatic spiritual experiences, likely contributed to the expansion of the maquiladoras and the global neo-liberal order they represent. Noting the dearth of projects that blend feminist and neo-Marxist lenses in the study of liminal spaces, this essay sketches a case that speaks to the potential of that intervention.

Keywords: *Catholic, Chihuahua, Texas, Borderlands, Religion, Charismatic, Pentecostal, Liberation*

Introduction

This feminist work of contemporary history posits that the relative conservatism of the Charismatic Catholic Renewal (CCR) and Protestant

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Pentecostalism, especially compared to Social Justice Catholicism and Liberation Theology, contributed to their success in the central U.S.-Mexico borderlands (Díaz Nuñez, 2005; Smith, 1991; Yong & Attanasi, 2012). Both movements frequently engaged in charitable work, but generally emphasized the individual experience with the divine at the expense of a communitarian emphasis or systemic critique. The Catholic Church, following a period of Vatican II-progressivism in the 1960s and 70s, experienced a conservative takeover in the 1980s. While Social Justice Catholicism (and even some Liberation Theology-inspired *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* [CEBs]) survived in the region (especially, it seems, in the Diocese of El Paso), the conservative takeover increasingly marginalized the Catholic Left. Regional and national power brokers, including Roman Catholic Church leadership, favored (or, at least, salutarly neglected) CCR, which, like Pentecostalism, was less threatening to and more removed from structures of power and, in some instances, clearly supportive of, the neo-liberal *maquiladora* agenda. Though these border factories emerged in large numbers in the 1970s, the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) codified and privileged their use, accelerating the industrialization and urbanization of Mexican border cities such as Tijuana and Cd. Juárez (Alegria, 2009; Ruiz, 1998; and Vila, 2009 & 2013).

The charitable activities of these spiritual movements, especially the educational programs of Pentecostal missions, clearly advocated middle class U.S.-style gender norms, often in tandem with elements of the Prosperity Gospel, sometimes called “Health and Wealth,” “Abundance,” or the “Gospel of Success” (Bowler, 2013; Ryan, 1983; Boudewijnse, Droogers, & Kamsteeg, 1998). These gendered constructions, combined with the soothing effect of ecstatic spiritual experiences, coincided with and, perhaps contributed to, the successful expansion of the *maquilas* and the emergence of the global neo-liberal order they represent. This paper shows that this intersection of religion, capitalism, and borders remains a largely unexplored and potentially fruitful field of study.

Narrative Summary

In the 1970s and 80s, the evangelical Protestant Jesus Movement and the Charismatic Catholic Renewal revitalized and transformed believers’ lives. Even before these dramatic spiritual developments Protestant and Catholic believers of the turbulent 1960s had already begun to explore new spiritual possibilities. While the Catholic Church drudged through the Second Vatican Council, Protestants experienced a Pentecostal resurgence and the expansion of groups including the Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship and the National Association of Evangelicals

(Jensen, 1968; Bowler, 2013). In the Mexican state of Chihuahua, Bishops Manuel Talamás and Adalberto Almeida struggled to address rapid changes in the region, including the threat of Protestant incursion and incipient urbanization. By the mid-1970s, Catholic congregations, seminaries, and organizations in the region became interested in the “option for the poor,” often in response to their involvement in labor activism (Smith, 1991; Witvliet, 1985). Meanwhile, Pentecostals and members of the Charismatic Catholic Renewal (CCR) established *células*, small ministries that would explode in the following decade. Though initially very ecumenical, these small groups may represent a conservative response to Vatican II and the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (CEBs), offering palliative care for working people while avoiding any systemic critique. At the same time, many Catholics on both sides of the border experienced this revival, attending a small home prayer meetings, secret worship sessions at Catholic institutions, or large Charismatic or Pentecostal conferences. The emergence of these spiritual movements also correlates with increased dependence on the *maquiladora* sector and regional economic instability, including a growing disillusionment with the Mexican Miracle (Martinez, 1978).

In the 1980s, Liberation Theology (or, at least, a Vatican II ethos) remained influential in the Diocese of El Paso and the newly formed Diocese of Las Cruces, but the Chihuahuan Church began to suffer the consequences of the conservative takeover of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) and the Mexican Church. Meanwhile, CCR and Pentecostalism exploded, tapping into unmet spiritual and social needs of an increasingly urban population. Believers flocked to the summer retreats at Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey in Pecos, New Mexico and the Lord’s Ranch community near Vado, New Mexico. In El Paso, small group meetings coalesced into the Open Arms Charismatic Catholic Community, and the cross-border ministry of Father Rick Thomas, S.J. blended mysticism with radical social Catholicism. In Cd. Juárez, CCR and the *Sistema Integral de la Nueva Evangelización* (SINE) fomented political success of the Pro-Catholic *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN). Thousands of people attended Pentecostal and Charismatic Catholic conferences in the region and Vino Nuevo Centro Cristiano, a product of *gringo* missionaries, grew to be the largest Pentecostal church in Chihuahua and one of the biggest in Mexico. These events take place against the backdrop of large-scale Central American migration, immigration reform in the U.S., and economic problems in Mexico, most notably a series of monetary crises that upset the consumer market. The latter was especially disruptive at the border, because the collapse of the peso prevented *Juarenses* from making their usual purchases of certain foods and household necessities in El Paso. The decade closed with the

controversial 1988 Mexican elections and the abrupt retirement of Manuel Talamás, the first bishop of Juárez.

By the 1990s, the central borderland had experienced a near-complete flip: social justice Catholicism and the essentially Latin American liberation theology had waned in the Diocese of Juarez but had become well established and influential on the U.S. side of the border. In El Paso, for instance, the *teología de liberación* influenced the creation of organizations serving migrants and broad-based community organizations such as the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization (EPISO) and its daughter initiative Border Interfaith. CEBs in Chihuahua disbanded or reorganized outside the formal structures of the Church, but the Pentecostal expansion continued, despite *Vino Nuevo*'s slow decline and fragmentation. CCR continued on both sides of the border but with its influence greatly diminished. Ironically, it appears some social conditions forced some of these initially conservative institutions to reckon with questions of justice (Wingeier-Rayo, 2011).

Rationale

Like many works of borderlands history the desire to disrupt “traditional” disciplinary, political, and methodological boundaries is foundational to this project. Most overtly, the work from which this essay is drawn, like the people, practices, and beliefs of the region, spans and crosses the U.S.-Mexico border, illuminating processes that a national approach cannot. Using oral interviews (disproportionally of women) as a primary tool, this work builds on that of Chicano, labor, and feminist historians that have reminded us of the importance of documenting the stories of the marginalized. While scholars of U.S.-Mexico borderlands history have more often had to respond to nation-centered studies as part of revisionist efforts, this study represents a break from this tradition (García, 1981; Martínez, 1978; Weber, 1982). It engages longstanding debates about the role of faith and religious practice in capitalist expansion and contributes to borderlands history's effort to describe lived experience in a liminal, contested, and oft-ignored space. That said, this study is a first effort at historical interpretation of the central U.S.-Mexico borderlands in the latter third of the twentieth century and aims to place borderlanders' experience with religion, gender, and capitalism at the center of that new historiographical conversation. Finally, it suggests that to understand late modern capitalism (and its influences and disparities) one must look to global borderlands. Current research and news headlines about Europe, for instance, suggest a simultaneous de-bordering within and re-bordering without has only pushed ugly disparities to the fringe (Mountz & Loyd, 2014; Newman, 2006). The drowning of migrants in the

Mediterranean, the murder of Muslim vendors in Germany, and the resurgence of nationalism in the Ukraine all represent this unresolved tension. Ultimately, the overarching project accomplishes three things: 1) it recovers an undocumented history of structural change and lived experience; 2) it tests several theoretical assertions within an important but overlooked context; and 3) it positions a global borderlands approach within an emerging conversation about development, gender, and religion.

Historiography & Theoretical Engagement

Literature from several different fields informs the design of this inquiry. Borderlands scholars, for example, have highlighted the need for better understanding of identity formation, hybridity, and power relations in the region. Some have argued that an understanding of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is essential for an understanding of the construction of nation, in both the U.S. and Mexico (Bolton, 1917; Spener and Staudt, 1998). As Homi Bhabba has noted, for instance, the experiences of those on the margins of the state are often exemplary for the questions and processes of social construction (1994). The borderlands framework is also useful in understanding economic relationships (Martinez, 1978; Ruiz, 1998). Aside from the unique economic and cultural climate of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, the transnational nature of CCR and Pentecostalism requires a borderlands approach. Borderlanders' resilience and adaptation in the face of "multiple processes of conquest" and their experience with disparity, industrialization, migration, and rapid socioeconomic transformation, make the region representative of global processes and frontiers (Valerio-Jiménez, 2012). Indeed, Chicana/o scholars have long called for critical study of where "the third world grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa, 1987). The Chicana/o identity, a politically and historically conscious blend of Mexican, Amerindian, and U.S. influences, emerged from late twentieth-century U.S. civil rights movements and soon influenced border studies in North America. These multiple, cross-pollinating strains of thought inform the emerging field of global comparative border studies and reinforce the centrality of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands as a global crossroad.

While scholars have begun to take interest in the Protestant expansion in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church's transition from the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on justice and liberation in the 1960s and 1970s to reactionary conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s has been largely ignored (D' Epinay, 1969; Drogus, 1994; Martin, 1993; Stoll, 1993). Historians of religion in Mexico have remained fascinated with the Mexican

Revolution, the Cristero Wars, and the revolutionary state's difficult relationship with the Church, but they have paid little attention to later periods. This said, a few social scientists have acknowledged the tension between Charismatic Catholicism, Pentecostal Protestantism, and Liberation Theology and the need for more research into the latter half of the twentieth century. Philip Wingeier-Rayo, for example, documents competition between Pentecostals and Liberation Theologians for followers in Cuernavaca (2011). Basing his conclusions primarily on observations during the 1980s, he argues that the Pentecostals tend to serve the socioeconomically disadvantaged. Wingeier-Rayo's anthropological study questions much of the literature about Protestantism and capitalist development, and provides insight into the decline of the base communities during the conservative (re)takeover.

Despite the presence of related anthropological studies and historical literature of the preceding period, there is an obvious lacuna to be filled. Very few historians of Mexico or the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have ventured into the second half of the twentieth century, and those who have have not addressed these themes or their broader implications. Historians such as Martin Nesvig (2007) have produced excellent studies of the Mexican Catholic Church in the first half of the century, and others, including Virginia Garrard-Burnet (1999/2010) have explored the Protestant Pentecostal expansion, mostly elsewhere in Latin America. Meanwhile, some of the little historical work on Protestantism in Mexico appears to be deeply flawed (Harch, 2006). With the exception of a few social scientists and religious scholars, the academy has produced very little work addressing the CCR and the conservative shift in response to Vatican II in general, and almost nothing in the Mexican and borderlands contexts. Simply put, there are some studies for comparison, but they are nonhistorical, based on very different communities and contexts, and/or problematic. This project is a first step towards a better understanding of these dramatic events in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, and it contributes to a larger emerging conversation about development and crisis in a globalized late modern world (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007; Yong and Attanasi, 2012).

Examining B/Orders

Drawing on the varied interventions of scholars in border studies, B/Orders in Motion, a research center of the European University Viadrina, has synthesized a systemic schema for the application of border theory ("Research Areas in the Thematic Priority 'B/Orders in Motion,'" n.d.). Highlighting the intersections of durability, permeability, and liminality with the spatial, temporal, and social, this

tool produces helpful fundamental questions, some of which this essay will now explore. In the interest of concision and relevance, three intersections presented in the schema have been selected: Durability/Temporal; Permeability/Social; and Liminality/Spacial. The potential applications of the intersections identified by B/Orders in Motion are explored below through examples this author has drawn from his own oral historical field research in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (Waggoner, 2012/2016).

At the intersection of durability and time, B/Orders in Motion asks how “the new [is] demarcated from the old,” applying a classic question of historians to the “establishment, dissolution and redrawing of borders and boundaries” (“Research Areas,” n.d.). The trajectory of the Charismatic Catholic Renewal in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands suggests a deliberate process of social bordering beginning in the mid-1970s replacing casual ecumenism with Protestant Pentecostals. That is, after worshipping alongside Pentecostals and demonstrating little concern for denominational labels in the 1960s and early 1970s, Charismatic Catholics responded to intra-Catholic accusations of impropriety by distancing themselves from Protestants and embarking on a process of independent identity construction. This project aims to excavate this process and place it within its political, social, and economic context.

B/Orders in Motion’s Permeability/Social juncture proves similarly fruitful in the exploration of “violation of borders”: “Who can and who cannot, pass borders and why?” (“Research Areas,” n.d.). Though many scholars have examined the re-bordering of the U.S.-Mexico boundary and its consequences for north-bound people, this project poses a similar, related question: Why did some U.S.-based religious groups emphasize cross-border missionary activities, while ones with similar beliefs did not? The Charismatic Catholic ministry of Jesuit Father Rick Thomas, for example, was consistently Juárez-focused, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the limited finances of his followers and resistance on the part of the Catholic Diocese of Cd. Juárez. At the same time, Open Arms, a contemporary Charismatic Catholic group in El Paso, put little effort toward cross-border ministry, focusing instead on weekly worship and the organization of CCR conferences, prayer meetings, and retreats. Though Father Thomas’ mystical, apocalyptic vision and strong personality partly explain this stark difference, the socio-economic status of the respective believers might prove a more determinative factor: Thomas’ diverse followers at the Lord’s Ranch and Our Lady’s Youth Center frequently adopted a kind of radical poverty, living in modest accommodations and sharing experiences with the most impoverished. Meanwhile, most of the core members of Open Arms

enjoyed middle-class status and some hailed from well-established, wealthy families. Though the excavation of internal motivations is always a challenge, by interrogating these contrasting socioeconomic orientations it may be possible to better understand the intersection of missionary emphasis and capitalism.

Finally, *B/Orders in Motion* asks us to consider the intersection of liminality and space: “Where do intermediate spaces and marginal zones emerge [and] what specific forms do they take?” (“Research Areas,” n.d.). While the U.S.-Mexico borderland is an archetypal and well-recognized liminal zone, work remains in the effort to describe its forms and processes. For example, multiple religious movements, each with its own history, culture, and theology coexisted and interacted in the central borderlands. Sharp *fronterizos* such as Father Gustavo Fong and Guillermina Valdés-Villalva pragmatically blended varied approaches in order to meet immediate needs and respond to large-scale social change. Fong, a Juárez diocesan priest, sampled elements of the Liberation Theology, CCR, and the Sistema Integral de Evangelización (SINE) in order to activate and politically mobilize his middle-class parish. Similarly, Villalva wore a myriad of hats, alternately styling herself as a Charismatic Catholic, a Feminist-Marxist, a researcher, and a border-violating community organizer. The lives of borderlanders such as these demonstrate that liminal spaces (and the people who construct and delineate them) are dynamic and innumerable.

Conclusions

Noting a lack of studies that incorporate a blended Marxist/feminist approach to the history of religious change in borderlands, this paper has asserted the relevance of a global borders approach, synthesized relevant literature, sketched a representative historical narrative, and posed opportunities for future intervention. Simply put, the challenges of the late modern world demand a better understanding of the historical processes that construct it. Though major, disparate academic fields have recognized the roles of religious transformation and borderlands in the construction of late modern capitalism and its disparities and paradoxes, little has been done to blend those approaches. This essay argues that the burgeoning field of global border studies presents an opportunity to achieve that objective and open new lines of inquiry in established fields.

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