

## **Borders, Migration and Art - The U.S.-Mexico Experience**

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### **Introduction**

The organization of the Mexic-Arte exhibition into diverse sections, particularly the section entitled, "I Am an Immigrant -You Are- Life and Experiences in the U.S./Mexico Borderlands" inspired me to reflect on my research on migration beginning in the late 1960s to about 2017. My work focused on the border and the greater border region and on the territorial migration and circulation of Mexican throughout the U.S., including return and forced movements back to Mexico by Mexican workers.

My presentation began by sharing photographs from this early period and then moves to our research on Mexican migration in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Next, I shared photographs that I took covering the border and places in the Midwest concerning Mexican immigrant labor as well as artwork created by Latino artists that addressed the immigrant experience in the 1970s through the 1990s. This phase of my presentation drew on images of artwork shown in exhibitions that we mounted over the years that traveled throughout the country and beyond our borders, the last being the exhibit at the Blanton Museum of Art here at UTA, entitled "Arte Sin Fronteras: Prints from the Self- Help Graphics Studio, 2019-2020 and also another exhibition at San Diego State University in 2020, "Chicano/a/x Printmaking- Making Prints and Making History."

Many of these exhibitions have been accompanied with catalogs and related publications as well as interviews that were shared with diverse publics. Several of these exhibitions were held in conjunction with the Colegio de la Frontera (COLEF) in the 1980s through the mid 1990s as well as a major exhibition brought together by the Snite Museum of Art in 2006. During this time, I had the pleasure to work with scholars and artists to provide support to artists, art collectives, art centers, print studios and museums to create limited edition fine art prints, portfolios and to at time to create exhibition spaces, including the establishment of a print studio headed by Joe Segura under the auspices of the Segura Print Studio, Notre Dame Center for Arts and Culture.

#### **THE U.S. -MX BORDER AND MIGRATION STUDIES PROJECT**

I entered graduate school at the University of Notre Dame in 1969 to study with Professor Julian Samora in the Department of Sociology. Dr. Samora had received a grant from the Ford Foundation to study the entire border region and he gained the assistance of several scholars, including labor activist, Ernesto Galarza. I was fortunate to be part of his team along with Jorge Bustamante. I should comment that Dr. Bustamante passed this year. He was a very close friend of mine and a great leader- founder of COLEF- Tijauna Mexico and an advocate for migrant rights for the past 52 years. Jorge and I testified before the House Sub-Committee on the Judiciary hearings in Chicago in 1971. These hearings were led by Congressman Peter Rodino whose legislative proposal to penalize employers for knowingly hiring undocumented workers – “employer sanctions act” did not get passed until 1986- “the Simpson- Mazzoli Act. - amnesty law.” This triggered a very big debate about border crossings that has yet to be handled correctly.

Our attention to migration across the Mexican border began in 1969 with primary attention to the broad question about how to study this phenomena, what data sources were available, how reliability of the data, and how complete was this data- time series-wise.

We were also interested in the methodologies that we could utilize to gain full insight into the complexities of the migration process- direct observation and interviews, participant observation, ethical questions of interviewing detained migrants and prisoners, visits to the border patrol training station at Port Isabel, survey research strategies, locating and using archival data including the availability of government records, availability of secondary sources, etc. – all of which we were able to utilize in our research. We also met with high level officials of the immigration service as well as key politicians at various points in time. Julian Samora included us as co-authors of the book that resulted from this early research, Julian Samora, Jorge Bustamante, and Gilbert Cardenas, *Los Mojados- The Wetback Story*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1971.

## **RESEARCH ON BORDERS AND MIGRATION, 1969 - 2018**

As I began writing this essay a major court case was recently heard by the Supreme Court involving access by labor unions to labor camps where farm workers reside during their employment- a case that brought back memories of a case that a group of us had been involved with sometime back. Things don't ever seem to go away. The U. S. Supreme Court hearings in mid-March addressed a lawsuit prohibiting /limiting the rights of organized labor/unions for ingress and regress into and out of labor camps. In 1972 our group known as the Farm Labor Aid Committee joined in a lawsuit asking for a temporary injunction against James Morgan in

the Southern District Federal Court of Indiana. We won this case and the received a permanent injunction challenging the idea that property rights were the basis of all other rights!! Let's see what the US Supreme court rules on this same issue today. I hope that they do not re-instate serfdom again since the majority of farmworkers, today, as in the past, are immigrant workers, most of whom do not have papers.

## **OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS ON MIGRATION POLICY PERTAINING TO THE US-MEXICO BORDER**

Mexicans have a pre-immigrant territorial history in the U.S. Our presence in these territories precedes the formation of the U.S. Mexican society & culture continues to be foundational culture to the U.S. American experience

The Mexican experience in American society is fundamental to the understanding of the Mexican migration experience since the advent of large-scale migration that began in the 1910s. The origins of U.S. migration policy toward Mexico stems from this important social relation that preceded migration.

The immigration problems facing our country today has a direct connection to this historical process in part due to the problematic conditions of social contact, including two wars: the Texas Revolution & the U-S Mexico War which resulted in the transfer of Mexican territories to the U.S. by the mid 1800s. This in turn resulted in a minority non-Mexican population controlling the majority in all areas of the economy & political domination- in the U.S. Southwest. Open hostility toward Mexicans persisted and emergence as the "Mexican problem". Spanish language was viewed as problematic and foreign. Catholicism, Mexican heritage, and ethnic identity were viewed as problematic and un-American. During this time land transferred from the hands of Mexicans to non-Mexicans. A shift from informal and formal

social relations to institutionalized social policy aimed at controlling the Mexican population developed resulting in segregation, discrimination, and impoverishment of Mexicans throughout the Southwest. Nevertheless, Mexicans were needed in the economy, but not wanted in society.

Despite Oscar Handlin's statement, "We are a nation of immigrants"- Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, Mexicans have the longest & most continuous migration flows to the U.S.: 1900-present. Yet the most distinctive and most important feature of the Mexican migration experience is labor migration which stands in contrast with the U.S. migration experience of all other immigrants from throughout the world. What we are witnessing today regarding our reception to the Central America, South America, and the Caribbean migration flows to the U.S. to a large extent is based on the treatment of migration from Mexico. With significant exceptions throughout this time, the primary experience for most other immigrants has been legal immigration for the purpose of settlement.

In 1908-1910 the Federal government took an in-depth look at European migration as migration was shifting from Western Europe to Southern and Eastern Europe. These immigrants were largely unwanted and the need to control these flows grew in many parts of society. A special commission was established, and a report was issued calling for controls. While little attention was given to the southern border, the Commission summary findings concluded that "In the case of Mexicans they are desirable as workers, but not as settlers." Congressman John Box from Texas argued on the floor of the U.S. Congress that "Mexicans were ignorant peonies, illiterate, often diseased and vicious, unskilled and undesirable".

## **MEXICAN MIGRATION IS DISTINCTIVE**

Unlike European migration and migration from most of the world, the dominant feature of Mexican migration has been temporary labor migration-labor circulation- and illegal migration from the very beginning to the present. There is a fine line between legality and illegality. The majority of legal immigrants admitted from Mexico have previously resided in the U.S. without documents. This was true in the 1920s, the 1970s, and new research shows that this is occurring in the present. We witnessed the emergence of the international system which developed based on a growing preference for cheap labor based on employer dependency and preference for Mexican labor and greater dependency/necessity by Mexicans to work in the U.S. to maintain their families in Mexico resulting in the expansion of separation between place of residence and place of employment for Mexican workers.

The Border Patrol was established in 1924- with initial emphasis on regulation and management and less on control of labor flows. We saw the emergence of middlemen- labor contractors, transporters, advertisers, smugglers as primary components of this temporary labor migration as well as overland migration that later emerged as a significant pattern of entry-commuter migration. Government sponsored migration programs developed during World War 1 and World War 11 and beyond to 1965.

## **INDISPENSABILITY OF MEXICAN LABOR**

Mexican labor was now indispensable in both labor markets & product markets. Labor migration is not permanent settlement migration. The discretionary authority of the State Department in issuing visas enabled an even large-scale migration flows from the interior of Mexico to various parts in the United States. Temporary labor migration continued to greatly

outnumber flow of legally admitted immigrants from Mexico. The overwhelming majority of legally admitted immigrants from Mexico had previously worked in the U.S. before admission- unauthorized/ undocumented status.

Mexican labor migration became the most distinctive form of migration to the U.S.- the longest, largest, most continuous, and most complex forms of migration in the history of our nation. As stated earlier, origins of the migration problem stemmed from the desire for cheap labor, thus a long-standing preference for temporary workers. Labor migration rather than settlement migration has been the defining characteristic of Mexican migration intentional, not by accident and cannot merely be explained as resulting from a mix of conjunctural factors. Labor migration and circulatory flows of undocumented workers were the result of high demand, high use, and high levels of profitability of Mexican workers. Most workers were at their prime stage in their life cycle 17 to 34 years of age- male workers. This high level of selectivity lead to a strong, but cheap labor force. Despite separation between place of residence and place of work across international borders that required families to stay behind for the most part, an increasing number of families would migrate later.

Greater efforts placed on disenfranchising undocumented immigrant and legally admitted immigrants. This included placing greater reliance on criminalization efforts by the U.S. government to control “illegal migration” resulting in major expansion of the border patrol and immigration service from the 1950s to the present. At the same time, we saw a rise in the backlog of immigrants applying for admission in the preference system. Legislation was not passed for years, but national debate continued to intensify.

As a result, “illegal” immigrants are blamed for a wide range of social problems- unemployment, de-industrialization, rising crime, housing problems, poverty, rising health costs, crime, costs of education, drain on the economy, etc. Scapegoating and defining illegally continued to emerge as the singular cause of the immigration problem. Reliance on criminalization has strengthened the underground system by forcing the flow of migrant workers to depend on it and continues to have a firmer grip on the migration process.

Blaming the “illegals” will not lead to a solution to the problems. The international system that has emerged and facing us today was not caused by these workers past and present, but by the U.S. Government.

Proposals to control the border such as allocating some \$40 billion –walls & and deployment strategies sound good and are presented as rational approaches to regulate migration, yet they have all been tried and have failed as a primary strategy. History has shown that these approaches are guaranteed to fail. The migrant worker who responds to the international system that I just described, did not create problem, yet gets tagged for criminality and gets targeted as the law enforcement solution to the problem because of their “illegality”.

Meanwhile, these workers and their families are driven further to rely on the underground system, thus making this system more necessary and guaranteeing the likelihood of the continued survival of the underground system.

The best solution to illegal migration is legal migration. President Reagan and President Bush understood the benefits that this approach brought to the nation. President Reagan



signed the Immigration and Control Act in 1986. President Bush put immigration as a high priority, but 9-11 changed everything during this period, thus it was impossible to address the immigration problem.

## **CARDENAS AND GARCIA COLLECTION OF LATINO ART**

A large part of the Cardenas and Garcia collection pertains to migration, borders, Mexican culture, and Chicano and Latino struggles for justice. In my presentation I took an opportunity to briefly share some aspects of our collection, many of which reflects the collecting spirit followed by Juan Sandoval and other collectors many of whom have been collecting Chicano/Latino art for many years.

I showed many works of art that are in the exhibition at Mexic-Arte that were provided by Juan. Like Juan we have given priority to collect works by artists who have dedicated their lives to fight with others to eliminate inequalities in society and to improve the living and working conditions of our community. Work from our collection specifically address migration and borders and a multitude of images that aim to present attention to the daily lives and experiences of immigrant workers and their families. The formation of our collection, including the establishment of the Galeria Sin Fronteras, Inc. in Austin, TX in 1986 also entailed a series of collaborations with individuals and organizations, artists, and educators to undertake talleres, exhibitions and related programming pertaining to migration and borders as well as the Chicano and Latino experience at the border and the greater border region.

This entailed a mix of projects that I became involved with at Self Help Graphics and at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana (1982-1996 and 2014). Many publications emerged

over the years (1982-1996 and 2014) from these collaborations. Several catalogs, portfolios and limited editions of fine art prints were created and published during this time.

I became Director of the Inter-University Program for Latino Research in about 1994. I left UT in 1999 to become the founding director of the Institute for Latino Studies and Assistant Provost of the University of Notre Dame with a professorial appointment in the Department of Sociology. This resulted in moving the national headquarters of IUPLR to the Institute of Latino Studies. We quickly established a gallery space at the Institute for Latino Studies, Notre Dame-Galeria America @ ND where we showcased many exhibitions of outstanding Latina/o artists from the Midwest and throughout the country. We were very pleased to receive a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to organize an exhibition on migration from my collection curated by Amelia Malagamba, a professor at Arizona State University. A very insightful catalog was published entitled, "Caras Vemos/ Corazones no Sabemos" (1986).

The exhibition was first presented at the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame, traveled to a museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA and to San Antonio, TX. Several other exhibitions on migration from my collection were also organized and presented at other museums in Lafayette, Indiana and in Illinois.

We have also loaned a great deal of art work from our collection some of which pertained to migration and borders among other areas. The last exhibition was organized by the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin in 2019, entitled, "Arte Sin Fronteras" and curated by Florencia Bazzano -Nelson.

In 2015 the Notre Dame Center for Arts and Culture received a Humanities grant from the University of Illinois to launch a new series of talleres pertaining to migration and live in the Midwest and to showcase this work in exhibitions and related public programming in Omaha, Nebraska, South Bend, IN, Columbus, Ohio and Minneapolis, Minnesota. This project drew on collaborations between Latino scholars and artists. The final showing of this exhibition was held at the University of California Casa in Mexico City in 2017.

### **CREATING DISCOURSE AND PRESERVING MEMORY**

Given the continuing efforts to block migration across our southern border it is imperative that Latino artists and others work together to raise political consciousness and attention by the larger society to the needs of immigrants and their families as well as to the many problems facing Latino communities in various areas of the U.S.

There is a strong visual record that has been established by Latino artists and scholars who have worked to create, present and analyze artwork in multiple media, such as- printmaking, drawings, paintings, photography and murals to bring attention and to invoke action by Latinos and to reach broader audiences concerning migration and border experiences.

This notion of “art for the people” to quote the French born artist who went to Mexico in the early 1920s, Jean Charlot, I believe underscores the intention of artists such as Malaquias Montoya to be community activists who dedicate their lives to create artwork that aims to motivate and inspire others to take action.

Latino artists continue to create images that seek to motivate the poor and oppressed people to take collective action to address issues, laws and public policies and practices

deemed harmful to community interests. These artists often formed collectives and worked with other organizations and special interest groups to address compelling social and political issues that required attention and immediate action, including political engagement in the form of voting, protesting legislation and administrative action that was deemed harmful to Latino interests.

We can see examples by Malaquias Montoya over six decades to the present-farmworker struggles, the war on Vietnam, crisis in Central America, immigration, civil unrest and struggles in the Middle East, globalization, work that reflects a tradition followed by many other artists at the time. Works by Malaquias Montoya and artists from Consejo Grafico Nacional demonstrate the importance of creating activist art that will continue to accomplish social change.

I am confident that artists will work with scholars and activists to raise consciousness regarding specific issues in the migration arena. This can be accomplished by participating and contribute to organizations and events that prioritize the importance of addressing migration issues in public arenas. The circulation of images and messaging to broader publics help greatly a means of contributing to the larger efforts to sensitize the importance of these issues to broader publics and leaders who are directly involved in shaping agendas in the political arena. Incorporation of these images in political mobilization efforts to get out the vote, but specifically in areas of the community where it has been hard to effect voter turnout. The work of artists can help to sensitize voters in the general public about the connections of these issues to our national interest and future.

Artists and others can proceed in the present and the years to follow in addressing hard issues like migration over the southern border. We can all connect with artists, art organizations and artist collectives to find ways to support and to stimulate interest in generating socially relevant art on a national scale. We can work together to enable Chicano/Latina/os to have access to these works – cost wise - and with the goal to address their lives specifically - enhancing pride in their culture & motivation to address issues that impact them. We can work together to provide resources and financial support to these organizations and artists collectives to produce and to broadly circulate work created for social change. We can also provide support for presentation and installation of this work in exhibition venues and related opportunities for public engagement through community forums and publication, mass circulation and installment of this artwork in poster format in areas that are widely utilized by Latinos in highly densely populated and in less densely, yet populated areas throughout the country.

We can provide support to circulate these images and related stories through mass media outlets to reach specific audiences - Spanish and English. We can work to promote placement of these works- original prints- in libraries, museums, art spaces and organizational headquarters throughout the country to secure their place in our national heritage. In addition, we can promote the reproduction and circulation of these images in other sources- newspaper articles, newsletters, TV, display at conferences and annual fundraisers as well as in scholarly publications, presentation at conferences, classroom showings, etc. These efforts utilizing art have played a big role in the past and can continue to make to make a significant impact in the present and in the future.

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