Borderlands of Modernity and Abandonment: The Lines within Ambos Nogales and the Tohono O’odham Nation

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Only sixty miles west of tall steel border walls in Ambos Nogales on the U.S.-Mexico border, people pass casually through staggered fences on the Tohono O’odham reservation. These border spaces are adjacent points along the same international boundary, but the contrast between them could not be more apparent. Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, together are known as Ambos Nogales and assert a single community identity despite different histories (the Spanish word ambos means “both”). Ambos Nogales has continuous border fencing, storefronts, and homes that crowd as close to the international line as laws permit, and hundreds of U.S. and Mexican government agents police everything that moves across the border. (See cover illustration for a view of this border fencing in the mid-twentieth century). Heading west from the city, steel walls turn into chain link and barbed wire fences, and vehicle barriers spaced far enough apart for cattle and people to cross through. These fences soon reach the lands of the Tohono O’odham, a binational indigenous group divided by the border. Their borderlands remain rural, sparsely populated, and comparatively less policed. They lack the fortress-like walls that symbolize the border’s militarization; brick and mortar businesses that represent cross-border commerce; and customs and immigration compounds that embody U.S. and Mexican states on the frontiers of both nations.1

This article explains how two borderlands so close together developed so differently. It begins in the mid-nineteenth century, with the demarcation of the border after the U.S.-Mexico War, but moves quickly to the mid-twentieth century. After World War II, the U.S.-Mexico border region boomed. Hundreds of thousands of people with varied citizenships, races, and identities streamed into borderlands cities. U.S. and Mexican officials enforced the border, but they also encouraged cross-border social, cultural, and economic exchanges that promoted harmonious international relations and shared visions

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1 Tohono O’odham enemies called them Papagos, or “bean eaters.” In 1986 Papagos changed their name to Tohono O’odham, or “people of the desert.” I use O’odham or Tohono O’odham instead of Papago, except in quotations. On the Papago name change, see Philip Burnham, “O’odham Linguist Comes to Washington,” Indian Country Today, Jan. 4, 2006, p. C1; and Eric V. Meeks, Border Citizens: The Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Arizona (Austin, 2007), 16, 228.
of progress and modernity. These developments, however, did not affect Ambos Nogales and the Tohono O’odham nation in the same way.  

The construction of international gateways in Ambos Nogales during the 1960s symbolized the border region’s modernity, contrasting with the comparative abandonment of O’odham lands and people. By the late 1960s, U.S. and Mexican states saw border cities as symbols of the frontier’s capitalist development, while often viewing sparse O’odham lands as synonymous with O’odham antimodernity. Those differences became imprinted upon the land, confirming the literary scholar Mary Pat Brady’s argument that the border is “a state-sponsored aesthetic project” intertwined in the “swirl” of history and narrative. Post–World War II ideas about modernity and abandonment—the state-sponsored aesthetics examined here—put in sharp relief U.S. and Mexican histories of capitalist development, border regulation, and citizenship based on national belonging; support of state projects and ideologies; and access to services. Finally, during the late twentieth century, even though the appearances of these borderlands remained different, perceptions of them converged as many increasingly saw the entire border as a zone of criminality.  

The contrast between these two border spaces during the postwar era demonstrates a paradox made visible by the historian Samuel Truett: state visions of a uniform border were at odds with the reality of a border that national governments invested in, developed, and tightly policed in certain areas, while leaving others comparatively unattended. It is a paradox that represents contradictions within U.S. and Mexican approaches to the border: both nations encouraged and engaged in cross-border quests for modernity but then abandoned areas and peoples that did not conform. These approaches segmented metropolitan Ambos Nogales and the Tohono O’odham nation into quadrants—Nogales, Arizona; Nogales, Sonora; O’odham land in Arizona; and O’odham land in Sonora—enabling comparisons between Mexicans and indigenous peoples, Anglos and Mexicans, and indigenous peoples in Arizona and Sonora.  

Focusing on the recent histories of borderlands within Ambos Nogales and the Tohono O’odham nation offers new perspectives on North American borderlands more broadly. As a field, borderlands history has focused on Spanish, Mexican, and early American borderlands into the nineteenth century, when imperial relationships were still being determined, nations were still being formed, and racial categorization was more fluid. The few works that move into the twentieth century argue that U.S. borders hardened by the 1930s as a result of new immigration restrictions, establishment of the border patrol, and depression-era xenophobia. These works then leap forward to connect those developments with present phenomena. But contemporary meanings of the border owe as much to the period after World War II as to earlier moments, remaining fluid into the present. Even with nation-states consolidating by the early twentieth century and borderlands becoming borders, as the historians Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron have argued,

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3 Mary Pat Brady, Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space (Durham, N.C., 2002), 52.

national governments still struggled to maintain authority in the border region—through not only armed enforcement but also the deployment of ideas about modernity and abandonment.5

Comparing these borderlands also illuminates transnational histories of Mexicans, indigenous peoples, and North Americans. Scholars have written histories of binational indigenous groups straddling the U.S.-Mexican and U.S.-Canadian borders. They also have written about indigenous groups and Mexicans together, offering either transnational histories of the pre–World War II period or nation-based histories of the postwar era. A comparison of postwar U.S., Mexican, and indigenous borderlands grounded in transnational archival research enables insights that histories of one group on both sides

of the border or two groups on one side cannot, challenging traditional assumptions about relations among nations, groups, and individuals.6

A comparison of Ambos Nogales and O’odham borderlands enables other new perspectives as well. These border spaces provide opportunities for conceiving of distinctions between particular border segments, but migration, economic, and kinship practices undermine the rigidity of perceived differences. Many observers, even historians, have presumed an ontological divide between a modern United States and a primitive Mexico. Ambos Nogales and O’odham borderlands challenge that understanding by tilting the border’s east-west axis ninety degrees to reveal mid-twentieth-century understandings in both Mexico and the United States of a modern Ambos Nogales and primitive Tohono O’odham nation. But these borderlands were more complicated still. Officials and reporters noted the modern habits of O’odham in Arizona and Sonora; conversely, border vice in Ambos Nogales manifested the disorder and backwardness more commonly associated with the Tohono O’odham nation. As such, the border became a point not only of division or unity but also of multiple refractions of meaning.7

Soon after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which formally ended the U.S.-Mexico War, the 1854 Gadsden Purchase cut through the Mexican state of Sonora and annexed an additional 30,000 square miles of land to the United States. U.S. and Mexican surveyors marked the new international line between Sonora and Arizona, which formed part of New Mexico Territory until 1863. For many, the border became an opportunity for profit. Wagon-based freight companies, transnational mining interests, and cross-border cattle ranches became industries of moving goods between the United States and Mexico. So did cross-border raids. Article 11 of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo singled out Native Americans and obligated the United States to prevent their raids into Mexico, even though U.S. filibusters and “white Cowboys” raided as well. The raids prompted early calls for border enforcement, but the physical character of the border remained unchanged into the late nineteenth century, when locomotives led to the growth of Ambos Nogales. Until then, sporadically placed cairns were the only objects that let anyone know where one country ended and the other began.8

The railroad’s arrival in this borderland region signified industrialization and an emerging capitalist economy. The U.S. Southern Pacific Railroad and the Southern Pacific Railroad of Mexico met in Nogales, linking the border with the Mexican interior. When


railroads arrived, the U.S. and Mexican governments erected customshouses to regulate international exchange, which in turn led to the creation of ancillary occupations including customs brokers, border agents, and importers and exporters. Border towns became border cities, and national governments resurveyed the boundary line, seeking to clearly demarcate the border as new businesses crowded against it. In 1897 President William McKinley created “a public reservation of a strip of land sixty feet wide” on the U.S. side of the border where businesses could not operate. As they sought to make the boundary a more concrete reality, government officials replaced cairns with guardhouses and obelisks.  

Just as market capitalism reshaped the border within Ambos Nogales, it also affected the Tohono O’odham land base. From the seventeenth century onward, Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. political regimes enacted laws that prioritized private land ownership. Bourbon reforms during the late Spanish colonial period and Mexican legislation during the early to mid-nineteenth century expedited the division of communal lands into private plots. Following the U.S.-Mexico War, the United States did the same. After first establishing O’odham reservations at San Xavier and Gila Bend in 1874 and 1882, the U.S. government passed the 1887 Dawes Act—or General Allotment Act—which divided communal lands and redistributed them to individuals and families. Some O’odham became ranchers and small farmers, while others sought off-reservation work alongside Mexicans, in mines, on farms, and on railroads. Market-oriented capitalism and popular movements against it helped spark the Mexican Revolution, which, along with World War I, transformed Nogales and O’odham borders again.  

The border militarized as U.S. soldiers guarded the international line in the wake of Pancho Villa’s 1916 raid on Columbus, New Mexico, and as revolutionary violence threatened to, and sometimes did, cross the border. At the same time, O’odham ranchers in Arizona complained that Mexican soldiers stole their cattle and horses, driving them deep into Sonora where they were difficult to recover. In response to O’odham demands for protection the United States established the Sells Reservation in 1916 and built the first border fence on O’odham lands. Security concerns also drove border policies during World War II, but so did the rise of cross-border commerce. Fearing enemy invasions, U.S. and Mexican governments required border residents to register with local authorities and closed segments of the border. Residents of Ambos Nogales carried special border-crossing cards, and U.S. officials padlocked reservation gates. But the simultaneous growth of cross-border exchange also triggered an economic and demographic boom. The 1934 Indian Reorganization Act had prompted the Tohono O’odham to adopt a constitution, establish tribal government, and increase participation in regional capitalist economies. Meanwhile, Mexican government officials appealed to the United States


for financial assistance with infrastructural developments that were part of the binational defense effort and would benefit cross-border commerce into the postwar era.  

After World War II, customs and immigration gateways in Ambos Nogales symbolized the modern transformation of border cities. Not long after the war ended, local officials, businessmen, and economic boosters pressured their national governments to build new ports of entry and facilitate international exchange, the economic livelihood of border communities. The imminent completion of a highway from the border to Mexico City had many in Ambos Nogales worried that the cities would not be able to accommodate the anticipated traffic increase. A 1953 report by the Nogales, Arizona, Chamber of Commerce characterized cross-border traffic as “very bad,” and predicted that following completion of the road to Mexico City the situation “will become impossible.” The report offered impressive statistical data to support gateway construction, which promised to facilitate the rapid passage of vehicles in and out of the region. Between 1951 and 1952 local border traffic—individuals who crossed by foot or automobile and remained in the border region instead of traveling to the interiors of Mexico or the United States—increased by 3 million people, from 9 million to 12 million. Between 1949 and 1952 the value of exports that passed through Ambos Nogales to Mexico increased from $18 million to $41 million, and the value of imports into the United States increased from $25 million to $42 million. In 1952 Mexico invited even more retail trade by making Nogales, Sonora, a free-trade zone. On a Sunday in 1953, “a day of no particular significance,” the author of the chamber of commerce report observed bumper-to-bumper traffic stretching from the border deep into Mexico. Business was booming and something had to be done, not only to solve the problem of congestion but also because doing nothing would be an opportunity lost.

Supporters of new gateways prepared information pamphlets, deluged politicians with requests for support, and invited government representatives to the border to decide where a new gate might be placed. All agreed that new international gateways were necessary but had yet to determine their form. During the early 1950s, ports of entry in Nogales, Arizona, stood at Grand and Morley Avenues, two of the city’s busier commercial strips. One leading proposal, supported by business owners tired of trucks idling in front of their stores, was to establish a third gateway west of the downtown business districts especially for trucks (Ambos Nogales got a third gate, but not for decades). For the moment, the U.S. government planned to improve the Grand Avenue gate and widen the one at Morley Avenue. Planning took place in consultation with Mexican businessmen, engineers, and government representatives. But according to U.S. officials, because Mexico was unable at the time to say what the “final outcome of their deliberations” would be, the United States moved forward on its own.


13 Louis Escalada to Barry Goldwater, Feb. 10, 1953 (microfilm cd 1, pdf no. 9, mss 1), Personal and Political Papers of Goldwater; Sam Marcus to Goldwater, telegram, March 2, 1953, ibid.; Goldwater to Don Smith, March 4, 1953, ibid.; Ernest Martan to Goldwater, telegram, March 6, 1953, ibid.; W. E. Reynolds to Goldwater, March 13, 1953, ibid.; Smith to Goldwater, March 23, 1953, ibid.; Margaret M. Moore to Goldwater, May 18, 1953, ibid.
As government officials and border residents made these plans, the *Saturday Evening Post* published a profile of Ambos Nogales in May 1952 that economic boosters could not have written better themselves. Brushing aside past conflicts to suggest how much the cities had progressed, the author wrote, “A two-nation border town where Mexicans and gringos used to kill each other on sight, Nogales is now the place where Anglos and Latins mix like peaches and cream.” Just months after the article appeared, Congress passed the restrictive McCarran-Walter Act over President Harry S. Truman's veto. The act extended a national origins quota for immigration and, at the height of Cold War-inspired fear, allowed the deportation of immigrants and naturalized citizens suspected as subversives. But in the gateway proposals, nobody openly suspected that an increased flow of people across the border would mean trouble. Government officials in Ambos Nogales still reported subversive activities—marijuana busts, prostitution, and wartime black markets in oil and rubber—but in the two decades after World War II, these concerns paled next to promotions of cross-border economic development. Residents of Ambos Nogales fought for their gateways and won, and then they waited. Politicians and businessmen hoped to have the gateways finished by January 1954, at the peak of trucking, tourist, and vegetable-importing seasons, but government bureaucracies did not fund the projects until 1963.14

As if to make up for lost time, the border gateways were executed on a much larger scale than either the United States or Mexico had imagined. Instead of undertaking simple expansions, the U.S. and Mexican governments built new border complexes. The design and appearance of the projects on each side of the border differed greatly. The Mexican edifice had two large arches that resembled the wings of a bird. Seen from above, the arches looked like an airplane headed north, toward the United States. Just south of the monument stood a circle of flags representing nations throughout the Americas. Nogales, Sonora, also got a new customs facility, a new telephone building, an overhauled telephone grid, an “ultra-modern” railroad station, and a new pediatrics and maternity hospital. The U.S. building, meanwhile, was rectangular, nondescript, and functional—a two-story, steel-frame building with exterior walls made of blue mosaic tiles. The ground level was for automobile and pedestrian inspection facilities, while the second floor housed offices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Public Health Service, and U.S. Customs. Mexico spent $12 million on its border projects; the United States spent $1.9 million. Architects chosen to design these projects further suggest the different approaches taken by Mexico and the United States. Mexico chose Mario Pani, one of the country’s most prominent modernist architects. Pani’s many buildings could be seen throughout Mexico City, including several at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. One newspaper described him as “Mexico’s top young architect.” Meanwhile, the U.S. government chose the Tucson architect Emerson Scholer, whose later obituaries praised his designs for local hospitals, schools, and libraries, but not the work he did on

the border. The *Nogales Herald* put it simply: the project in Sonora was “more elaborate” than the one in Arizona.¹⁵

Mexican construction crews sliced away portions of the hillsides that hemmed in downtown Nogales, Sonora, suggesting through this literal transformation of the landscape the importance that Mexico attributed to the border projects. During the early 1960s, the Mexican government attempted to make the northern border region attractive for investment, tourism, and settlement by combating images of its remoteness and backwardness. During the mid-twentieth century, Mexican leaders recognized the area as one of the country’s main engines of economic and demographic growth. In 1960, U.S. tourists spent $520 million there compared with $150 million in Mexico’s interior. Also, salaries in northern Mexico were higher than in other parts of the country, in part because goods in the North cost more due to the influx of U.S. dollars. The average annual income in northern Mexico was $652 per person, 135 percent higher than the $280 one could

expect to make elsewhere. As a result, northern Mexico’s population exploded in the decades after World War II, becoming the country’s fastest growing region. It grew by more than 83 percent during the 1950s, compared with 34 percent in the rest of Mexico. Between 1940 and 1960, the population of Nogales, Sonora, in particular, nearly tripled, growing from 14,000 to 38,000. Pani’s designs for the new gateway reflected these developments, evoking the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer’s 1950s designs for Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, the layout of which also resembled an airplane. Aviation-themed designs demonstrated not only the influence of modernist architecture throughout Latin America but also the popularity of technological innovations enabling the cross-border movement of people and goods among the Americas.16

Sonoran border projects signify not only industrial development but existential maturation as well. Established in 1961 by President Adolfo López Mateos, the National Border Program (Programa Nacional Fronterizo, or PRONAF) became the grandest of Mexico’s efforts to link the border region’s postwar economic and technological development with Mexican modernity itself. López Mateos called PRONAF a “top priority” of his domestic policy, and PRONAF director Antonio Bermúdez—the former director of the nationally owned oil company Pemex and former mayor of Ciudad Juárez—said, through “urbanization, new highways and beautiful public buildings . . . Mexico is making a complete change in the image of its northern cities.” The projects in Nogales would make the city a “showplace,” he continued, echoing claims that PRONAF would convert the border region into a “show window 1600 miles long.” Putting words into practice, the Mexican government budgeted $300 million for PRONAF projects along the northern border.17

Mexico’s extravagant opening ceremony heightened the sense that modernity had arrived in Sonora’s largest border city. On November 12, 1964, the day the gateway opened, López Mateos visited Nogales with his cabinet. He boarded a train at the new depot and took a three-mile ride to the border, where he unveiled a plaque and spoke before a crowd of thousands. After Nogales he visited a dam near Hermosillo and toured farms surrounding Navojoa. With his whirlwind tour of Sonoran progress complete, he returned to Mexico City by nightfall. Upon learning that López Mateos had traveled to Sonora, Arizona newspapers reported, local officials and business leaders vowed that “efforts will be made to bring a prominent American here for the occasion.” Planners invited President Lyndon B. Johnson, Senator Barry Goldwater, Senator Carl Hayden, and others. None of those invited attended except Arizona’s governor-elect Sam Goddard. The incongruity of attendance by Mexico’s highest official and a state official from Arizona suggested a discrepancy in how U.S. and Mexican officials viewed the projects. But mismatched efforts were typical in many U.S.-Mexican diplomatic ceremonies; Mexican officials frequently projected displays of pomp, modernity, state influence, and wealth for their northern neighbors.18

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Despite the unfavorable comparisons it received, the new U.S. border building also signified modernity in the Arizona border region. Construction of the Arizona gateway coincided with the 175th anniversary of the U.S. Customs Service, first established in 1789 by Congress and signed into law by George Washington. On January 1, 1964, President Johnson declared that 1964 would be “United States Customs Year.” To link that national commemoration with the new customs building in Arizona, state officials declared that November 1964 would be “U.S. Customs Month in Arizona.” The anniversary inspired lectures by officials and businessmen, who described customs collections as necessary to provide revenue, regulate commerce, prevent fraud, thwart smugglers, and protect U.S. agriculture, industry, and labor. They told the story of Arizona’s first collector of customs, George Christ, who rode the “iron horse” into the territory during the 1880s. Explaining how things had changed since then, one speaker noted that when Christ came to Arizona—George Christ, that is—there was “no fence between the two countries.” Speakers in 1964 considered his arrival pivotal because it gave “the small community of crude adobe structures a position of importance as a port of entry.”

As during the 1950s, not a single U.S. or Mexican report on the projects mentioned immigration restriction as a factor motivating their construction. In 1964—the same year that the U.S. and Mexican governments ended the Mexican guest worker arrangement known as the bracero program and the U.S. Congress was debating a new immigration and nationality act—Ambos Nogales politicians and residents were more concerned with securing their ability to engage cross-border commerce than with securing the border itself. Because Mexico and the United States demonstrated similar interests, the border projects also suggested that Ambos Nogales embodied national and internationally shared ideologies of modernization and economic development.

The new gateways enabled even greater increases in cross-border exchange into the 1970s. Customs collections grew exponentially each year after the new gates opened. In 1964–1965, agents in Nogales, Arizona, collected $9 million, which “shattered all records” for the Arizona district and were even greater than those collected in San Diego and El Paso. Leaders of the West Mexico Vegetable Distributors Association, headquartered in the city, became powerful lobbyists and demanded yet another port of entry. The result was the construction in 1974 of a truck inspection station west of downtown, which many in the city had lobbied for in the early 1950s. To recognize the significance of trade in Ambos Nogales, Presidents Luis Echeverría Alvarez and Gerald R. Ford met there later that year. After their meeting, commerce between Arizona and Sonora continued unabated, even though debates about border criminality soon eclipsed public celebrations of international commerce like those of the mid-1960s.

The idea during the 1960s that the border at Nogales could be a “show window” to promote Mexico contrasted sharply with the image projected by Tohono O’odham borderlands. Mexico and the United States shone a spotlight on progress in certain border...
spaces, while ignoring others. Whereas metropolitan Ambos Nogales became a symbol of the modern U.S.-Mexico border, the Tohono O’odham nation remained a borderlands marked by abandonment, despite rhetoric in both countries of indigenous uplift and investment in indigenous communities. Nogales and O’odham borderlands evolved side by side, but with different results.

Even if the border on O’odham lands had no customs house or steel barriers and few government agents to patrol the international line, it served some of the same functions as the border in Ambos Nogales. Like gateways in Ambos Nogales, the San Miguel gate presented informal opportunities for profit. One newspaper claimed that every weekend scores of O’odham would “swarm” San Miguel, where Mexican O’odham sold chimichangas and tortillas; fruits and vegetables; and crafts at a deep discount compared with stores in the United States. Also like in Ambos Nogales, legal trade operated alongside a black market in illicit goods, especially liquor, which was prohibited on Arizona’s O’odham reservation. The San Miguel gate also created a quandary for authorities seeking to enforce cultural and political boundaries. U.S. officials noted how, as a matter of “habit” or “tradition,” the border at San Miguel was “always open” to O’odham who crossed “without hindrance.” During the 1950s, though, U.S. authorities attempted to corral O’odham cross-border movements to official ports of entry. When O’odham complained, Indian Affairs commissioner Glenn Emmons acknowledged that the new policy contrasted with the “promiscuous crossing” of earlier years. Believing they were O’odham instead of Mexican or U.S. citizens, the “idea of citizenship” as belonging to one nation or the other for the first time “became of any importance” to them, Emmons claimed. Finally, in contrast with the Ambos Nogales border, the San Miguel gate divided indigenous lands in the United States and Mexico.21

After the Gadsden Purchase, each country established different practices for acknowledging aboriginal title, which shaped O’odham relationships to land in Arizona and Sonora from the nineteenth century onward. Simply put, the United States created reservations while Mexico created ejidos, or communal lands granted by presidential decree. Beginning in 1874, with the creation of the San Xavier Reservation southwest of Tucson, the U.S. government established reserves ostensibly to protect O’odham from the onslaught of nonindigenous migrations following the territory’s incorporation into the union. The United States then established the Gila Bend Reservation in 1882 and the Sells Reservation in 1917. Nonindigenous peoples protested at every step the creation of reservations, decrying the resulting “lack of access” to O’odham lands and claiming that O’odham were racially unfit to cultivate them. Still, over time the United States acknowledged titles based on habitation “since time immemorial,” or habitation in the “Indian fashion,” the technical term by which U.S. government officials recognized migratory land use.22


Mexico’s *ejidos* remained vulnerable to encroachment despite being granted by the president himself. O’odham in Sonora also claimed longtime habitation of their land, arguing that Moctezuma had given it to them. But because they were unable to prove their title, the Mexican government granted them *ejidos as dotaciones*, or endowments, instead of *restituciones*, recoveries of land that the government acknowledged had once belonged to indigenous peoples. Beginning during the Mexican Revolution and reaching a high point during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), Mexico carved up national lands in Sonora that held various legal statuses, including *ejidos*. The Mexican government did not “officially” distinguish between indigenous people such as the O’odham and mixed-race mestizo peasants, who could also receive *ejido* lands. *Ejidos*, therefore, rarely represented the reclamation of traditional O’odham homelands or claims to sovereignty. In the central valleys of Sonora, Yaqui Indians and nonindigenous small farmers received a majority of *ejido* lands. While the O’odham in the northern part of the state received some small *ejido* allotments near the border, cattle ranches—largely exempted from Cárdenas-era agrarian reforms—surrounded and often impinged upon their holdings.23

Even though Mexican government officials did not explicitly articulate land policies in the language of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*—two postrevolutionary ideologies related, respectively, to the veneration of the country’s mixed-race population and to the incorporation of indigenous peoples into mainstream society—the creation of *ejidos* did have the effect of those ideologies. Their creation led to the absorption of many Sonoran O’odham into Mexican towns, or the “Mexicanizing” of the “Indian himself,” as President Cárdenas put it. The Mexican state, particularly *indigenistas*, the intellectual and political elite who advocated indigenous progress first through assimilation then through pluralism, upheld these ideologies as social and cultural ideals. *Mestizaje* and *indigenismo* supposedly represented a renewed commitment to indigenous progress, and contemporaries interpreted them as progressive because they countered ideas about Anglo supremacy then prevalent in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. But the supporters of those ideals ignored the racial hierarchies that continued to exist in Mexico, as well as the impact that incorporation had on traditional O’odham landholdings.24

Because the United States granted reservations, O’odham land in Arizona appeared to benefit from government protections that Sonora’s O’odham land did not. But despite the insulation that reservations nominally guaranteed, reservations did not prevent encroachment. Throughout the twentieth century, O’odham in Arizona struggled against forces that threatened to strip away their land or use it in a way they had not approved. When the U.S. government allotted individual parcels of land or created reservations, it left Native Americans the right to lease or sell the land as they chose. This provision aligned with government interests in capitalist development and encouraged many Native

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Americans to lease to outside mining, ranching, and oil interests. On the Sells Reservation, O’odham who lived closest to Tucson and Nogales were most likely to negotiate with outsiders. These O’odham, according to the historian Eric Meeks, were “generally more receptive to the prospect of private property” and chose to “abandon the older practice of village government by consensus.” The decision to grant outsiders access to their lands created rifts between O’odham communities on the Sells Reservation. Therefore, notwithstanding the establishment of reservations in the United States, efforts to dispossess O’odham of their territories and resources was an experience common to O’odham on both sides of the border.25

Still, even more than reservations, ejidos were islands surrounded by a rising tide of nonindigenous peoples who persistently threatened O’odham land. Despite postrevolutionary agrarian reforms intended to protect communal land, Sonoran O’odham protested encroachments into the late twentieth century. A particularly provocative case unfolded in 1957, when the director of Mexico’s National Indigenous Institute (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, or INI), Alfonso Caso, sent his associate, the anthropologist Alfonso Fabila, to investigate complaints by O’odham living on Sonora’s Pozo Verde and El Bajo ejidos. Fabila traveled from Mexico City to one O’odham settlement after another, where he collected ethnographic data that led him to conclude that mestizo encroachment had created an “alarming situation,” which, if allowed to continue, would constitute a “grave injustice.”26

According to the O’odham, the aggressors were members of the Zepeda-Wood family, who owned a cumulative 70,000 hectares of land in northern Sonora along the international border. Jesús Zepeda was the patriarch of the family. His son was Rudolf Zepeda, a vice president of the Valley National Bank of Phoenix. His daughter was Fresia Zepeda, who had married a U.S. citizen named Robert Wood. They owned the land together, revealing the dense family and commercial connections that shaped cross-border relations between Anglos and Mexicans. But O’odham complaints likewise revealed how the border region’s indigenous communities could be victims of those collaborations. Particularly troubling, the O’odham and Fabila both agreed, was the fact that foreigners owned Mexican land along the border. The O’odham claimed that Hermosillo’s Colonization Commission, the local branch of the national agency responsible for disbursing land, had sold the Zepeda-Wood property despite knowing that foreigners could not own land within sixty miles of the border.27

While foreign ownership of Mexican land made O’odham complaints against the Zepeda-Woods somewhat distinctive, Fabila learned of similar encroachments during his travels. Representatives for the 250 O’odham in Caborca, 50 in Quitovac, and 40 in Sonoita recounted how the Colonization Commission in Hermosillo divided up O’odham land to sell it to mestizos and other nonindigenous peoples. Invaders enclosed the property they purchased with wire fences, marked with their own brands cattle that belonged to O’odham ranchers, diverted O’odham water sources, and inhibited O’odham animals

26 Fabila to Caso, March 6, 1957, in “Apuntes sobre los Papagos de Sonora,” by Fabila, 41–44.
from grazing. Finally, when the O’odham complained, nobody listened. In Caborca, O’odham governor José Antonio Acosta told Fabila that, on the very day of their interview, the Colonization Commission had announced the boundaries of O’odham properties it planned to acquire. In Quitovac, another O’odham told him that when Manuel Ávila Camacho campaigned in 1940 to become the president of Mexico, he promised to mark clearly the boundaries of O’odham lands. But after becoming president, he “did nothing.”

Having suffered injustices for decades, many O’odham claimed that the Mexican government had abandoned them. Since 1928, when a presidential decree established the Pozo Verde ejido, Mexico had been sending representatives of various government agencies—agricultural specialists, irrigation engineers, livestock veterinarians, indigenous-affairs experts, and foreign relations advisers—to do “everything necessary” to develop O’odham land and defend it against “all forms of plunder.” But because the federal government also turned a blind eye to divisions and sales of O’odham land by state agencies such as the Colonization Commission, its mandate lacked credibility. While government interventions on their behalf brought short-term comfort to some O’odham, evidence over the course of the twentieth century reveals a Mexican government that neglected its

28 Fabila, “Apuntes sobre los Papagos de Sonora,” 8–11; Fabila to Caso, March 6, 1957, ibid., 41–44.
O’odham citizens. Many O’odham, at least, believed this to be true. As one O’odham representative put it, the actions of the Colonization Commission demonstrated that the Mexican government only considered “mestizos as Mexicans” and granted “better concessions to American colonists,” who benefitted from their “contacts with the governors of the state” and their “greater cultural and economic resources.” The American colonist Rudolf Zepeda substantiated O’odham suspicions. During Fabila’s conversations with him, Zepeda, in the same breath that he claimed a right to national lands, offered a list of the prominent men he counted as friends, including President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Luis Padilla Nervo.29

The Mexican government and nonindigenous mestizos, however, did not believe that they had abandoned the O’odham, but rather that the O’odham had abandoned them by refusing to fall in line with postrevolutionary visions of a modern Mexican state. For members of the Zepeda-Wood family, that rationale had a culturally and racially biased bent. According to Robert Wood’s son, Sonoran O’odham were obstacles to overcome, a bunch of “lazy, drunken . . . thieves.” His uncle Rudolf Zepeda also considered O’odham a “problem,” arguing for their removal inland to a proposed “Mexican O’odham Reservation.” Coming as Zepeda did from Arizona, the placement of indigenous peoples on reservations must have seemed a natural solution. Even though Mexican Americans also were victims of racial discrimination, they nevertheless distinguished themselves from indigenous peoples. Zepeda established a contrast between himself and Sonoran O’odham by noting that his bank offered loans to mestizo cattle ranchers, indicating that his business supported the goals of the Mexican government, while O’odham endeavors did not. Even Fabila, whose writings revealed him to be an advocate for the O’odham, sometimes reinforced that logic by comparing the productivity of mestizo and O’odham farms. Not only did mestizo farms produce greater quantities of fruits and vegetables, he explained, but a greater diversity as well. Mexican farmers produced oranges, grapes, peaches, apricots, and watermelons—much of which made its way to the United States through Ambos Nogales—while O’odham farmers grew only melons. Fabila also succumbed to stereotypes about the O’odham as “wandering people,” which contributed to false perceptions of them as unorganized members of free-floating groups rather than coherent communities.30

Descriptions of O’odham lack of productivity and dispersal mirrored Fabila’s musings on the desolation and remoteness of their lands, homes, and selves. Even though metropolitan Ambos Nogales and O’odham lands both experienced deadly heat, Fabila argued that O’odham lands were dangerous to outsiders. Many “who are not from this region,” he wrote, “already have died” in this “unfamiliar” and “hostile” environment. Moreover, O’odham homes were “rudimentary,” made of ocotillo branches, adobe, and earthen floors. Fabila noted with surprise every time he encountered “modern” accoutrements such as sewing machines, American-made beds, and pewter and aluminum pots. Similarly, despite their “bad” hygiene and “open air” defecation, he noted their “modern” haircuts, leather jackets, and shoes. U.S. reporters made similar statements about Arizona

29 “O’odham Timeline”; Fabila, “Apuntes sobre los Papagos de Sonora,” 8–10; Jones to Collier, Dec. 21, 1956, ibid., 40–41; Fabila to Caso, March 6, 1957, ibid., 41–44.
30 Fabila to Caso, March 6, 1957, in “Apuntes sobre los Papagos de Sonora,” by Fabila, 41–44; Fabila, “Apuntes sobre los Papagos de Sonora,” 6–7, 12, 16.
O’odham. A 1962 *Los Angeles Times* article quipped, “The 20th Century has arrived, although 60 years late.” Pick-up trucks replaced the “horse and wagon,” and Native Americans used knives, forks, “cups, plates, telephones and furniture.” In a sense, these statements highlighted the supposed success of U.S. and Mexican assimilation projects. But they also perpetuated notions that indigenous peoples on both sides of the border lived outside modernity. That tension led Fabila to waver awkwardly between proclaiming that O’odham in Sonora were economically stable and that their situation was desperate. His participation in the circulation of these ideas demonstrated how prevalent conceptions of modernity grounded in maximized productivity, mastery of nature, and ordered settlement—as in Ambos Nogales—had become. To become productive citizens, many believed, the O’odham needed to strive toward those goals. Their failure to do so implied their betrayal of the states that claimed to protect them.31

For nonindigenous mestizos, nothing symbolized Sonoran O’odham’s abandonment of Mexico more than their increasing emigration to the Sells Reservation in Arizona. Since the border’s creation, O’odham had traveled back and forth across it, but over time their movements became increasingly unidirectional, from Sonora to Arizona. Until the early twentieth century, binational residence was common, as many O’odham worked seasonally in both states. Migration patterns changed, not only because Sonoran O’odham sought access to services provided on the Sells Reservation but also because of the border region’s changing economic environment. The growth of mining, ranching, and agricultural industries in the United States drew O’odham from both sides of the border into regional economies of labor and consumption. Sonoran and Arizona O’odham increasingly found work in Arizona cities as wage laborers at ranches, farms, and mines; and as domestics, railroad workers, truck drivers, and construction workers. They made trips back to their home villages only for social, family, and religious gatherings. Fabila described similar developments in Sonora, noting his encounters with “urbanized O’odham” working for mestizos. As a result of O’odham migrations, by 1960 Arizona’s O’odham population grew to more than 10,000, Sonora’s O’odham population dwindled to less than 1,000, and Tucson became home to the largest O’odham population anywhere.32

To the Mexican government, O’odham emigration was a stinging reminder of Mexico’s inability to provide for its citizens and of the increasing power of the United States relative to its own. Rudolf Zepeda portrayed O’odham emigrants as a more immediate threat, claiming that, in conspiracy “with the leaders of Sells,” they planned to “move the border between Mexico and the United States further into Mexico.” Zepeda’s claim was fanciful, but it evinced fears of the looming influence of Arizona’s Sells Reservation. Mexico’s INI director Alfonso Caso only learned of O’odham complaints, in fact, because U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agents brought them to his attention. Sonoran O’odham

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reached out first to Sells Indian Agency superintendent Alden Jones because the BIA had helped them in the past. Jones forwarded their complaints to the former BIA commissioner John Collier, who forwarded the news to Mexico’s famed anthropologist and government official, Manuel Gamio. Gamio then informed Caso, who instructed Fabila to investigate. The wide circle that O’odham complaints traveled before reaching Mexican officials—from Sonora to Arizona to New York to Mexico City and, finally, back to Sonora—offered clear evidence of the mutual betrayal and distrust felt by Sonoran O’odham and the Mexican government.

The increasing dependence of Sonoran O’odham on services provided by the Sells Reservation further heightened that sense of division. Foremost among these services were schooling for O’odham children, medical attention, and even places to pick up mail. Because there was no school for O’odham children in Sonora, a bus from Arizona picked them up at the San Miguel gate and took them to reservation schools where they learned English. The Mexican government tried at least twice to establish schools that served their O’odham communities—in 1945 and 1950—but these efforts failed because teachers fled their posts. Because there were no hospitals for O’odham in Sonora, many sought treatment in Sells. Sonoran O’odham, moreover, depended on priests from Arizona who visited them to baptize children, perform marriage ceremonies, and say mass. Finally, because there was no post office nearby, Sonoran O’odham often had mail sent to them in Topawa, San Miguel, Sasabe, and elsewhere in Arizona.

BIA agents recognized that U.S. influence potentially compounded O’odham alienation from the Mexican government, but they argued that responsibility to correct that problem rested with the Mexican government and mestizos who invaded their land. The “Papagos of Sonora are Mexican citizens and can be good citizens,” Jones wrote, but that will not happen if the “only government they know is the [U.S.] Papago Indian Agency, the only education they receive is the one given them by American schools, the only non-indigenous language they speak is English, and the only contact they have with other Mexican citizens is with Mexicans who oppress them.” The BIA therefore continued to provide services.

American teachers schooling Sonoran O’odham in English, American priests serving O’odham religious needs, and American doctors vaccinating indigenous children aggravated Mexican officials who felt impotent when confronted with the reality of a stronger nation providing for its citizens. Whenever Mexican officials had the opportunity, they argued for diminishing the influence of the Arizona O’odham and the BIA. Their insecurities about the O’odham inversely influenced their drive to display Mexico’s modernity, strength, and power at the gateway in Ambos Nogales. But their vague statements about limiting U.S. influence failed to address the fact that the ground beneath their feet had already shifted, and the gulf had widened not only between Sonoran O’odham and the Mexican government but also between Sonoran O’odham and O’odham in Arizona.

The border itself became a point of demarcation for the rifts that had grown between the O’odham in Arizona and Sonora. Each group came to inhabit different “ethnic

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33 Fabila to Caso, March 6, 1957, in “Apuntes sobre los Papagos de Sonora,” by Fabila, 40–41; Jones to Collier, Dec. 21, 1956, ibid., 40–41.
34 Ibid., 25, 34–35; Jones to Collier, Dec. 21, 1956, ibid., 40–41.
35 Jones to Collier, Dec. 21, 1956, ibid., 40–41.
spaces,” as the historian Cynthia Radding has described the union of land and community. Because of their multiple migrations—not only south and north but also west and east between reservations and cities in Arizona, as between ejidos and cities in Mexico—many O’odham lost their traditional language and cultural practices. In general, when Sonoran O’odham learned a nonindigenous language they learned Spanish, while Arizona O’odham learned English. Sonoran O’odham “lost” the arts of basketry, pottery, and weaving, but Arizona O’odham maintained them, in part to satisfy the demands of American tourists who created a market for O’odham crafts. Naming broader socioeconomic disparities, while at the same time articulating the Sells Agency’s motivation for working to eliminate them, Jones explained, “it’s difficult for us to remain content and satisfied on our side of the border, seeing that the O’odham in Arizona are improving in health, they have better education, and advance in everything having to do with their prosperity, while their brothers on the other side of the border lose what little they have.” To be sure, Jones could make claims about the advancement of Arizona O’odham only in relation to O’odham in Sonora. At midcentury, fewer than 40 percent of Arizona
O’odham spoke English, less than 20 percent could read or write, only two of every three O’odham children in Arizona enrolled in school, and only one in three attended regularly. Arizona’s Supreme Court only granted O’odham the right to vote in 1948, making them some of Arizona’s most marginalized citizens into the mid-twentieth century. The O’odham in Arizona and Sonora were indeed brothers (and sisters), as Jones had noted, but by the mid-twentieth century the international boundary had precipitated changes that made them unrecognizable to each other. Describing the consequences of these transformations, one scholar wrote: “slowly, the two sides drifted apart.”

For two decades after World War II, the experience of modernization and abandonment shaped borderlands in Ambos Nogales and the Tohono O’odham nation. In Ambos Nogales, the United States and Mexico built new international gateways that physically imprinted modernity on the land. Meanwhile, O’odham borderlands often signified modernity’s flip side, allowing U.S. and Mexican states to justify their abandonment. Perceptions of difference between these borderlands eroded as many observers began proclaiming that criminality increasingly characterized the border as a whole.

Increased Mexican migrations changed perceptions of Ambos Nogales. Post–World War II promotions of international commerce culminated with the 1965 establishment by the Mexican government of the Border Industrialization Program (bip), which facilitated the construction of one thousand maquiladoras between Tijuana and Matamoros. These factories, owned by global corporations, exploited Mexican labor to manufacture goods sold around the world. The bip constituted Mexico’s effort to provide work for nationals returning from the bracero program, which had ended in 1964. But it also encouraged the migration of hundreds of thousands of workers from Mexico’s interior to the border region. By the 1980s, maquiladoras accounted for half of the income generated in Nogales, Sonora. The area’s population had tripled between 1940 and 1960. It tripled again between 1960 and 1980, and yet again between 1980 and 2000, reaching 400,000 inhabitants. Once in the border region many migrants moved north to the United States, with or without papers.

In combination with economic downturns in Mexico and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, the rising numbers of Mexican immigrants in the United States sparked intense racism against Mexicans in general, regardless of their citizenship or immigration status. In the same year that Mexico established the bip, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which removed limits on family reunification visas and led to increased immigration from Latin America and Asia. As more immigrants arrived, vigilante groups patrolled the border, and several newspapers rearticulated stereotypes of Mexicans as thieves, drug smugglers, and competition for jobs. Facing extreme pressure, the U.S. Congress, after fifteen years of debate, passed the Immigration Reform

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and Control Act of 1986, which included employer sanctions, increased border enforcement, and amnesty provisions.\(^{38}\)

Cross-border tourism industries, export-import businesses, and maquiladoras, all of which signified the modernity of Ambos Nogales during the mid-twentieth century, continued to generate great profits. But public conversations about the border focused increasingly on border enforcement rather than cross-border economic exchange. The arched gateway on the Sonoran side of the border still stood, but its magnificence had faded. It became obscured by new and higher border walls constructed during the 1970s and 1990s, and by groups of migrants gathered in plazas awaiting their opportunity to enter the United States, either by climbing over the border wall or tunneling under it. U.S. tourists still visited Nogales to buy alcohol, cheap medicine, and sex, and cars still drove through the wings designed by Pani. But passersby, viewing the gateway through the lens of globalization, associated it with the arches of McDonald's instead of the wings of a plane.\(^{39}\)

Meanwhile, conditions on O'odham lands remained poor. Despite an increase in job creation, federally sponsored programs such as ones for economic development, relocation, self-determination, land grants, and monetary compensation for land largely failed to improve the O'odham's economic situation. Some became relatively prosperous ranchers and land leasers; others became integrated into regional power structures as cultural brokers and leaders of O'odham government. But the vast majority lived in poverty. Many lived without electricity or running water, suffered continued encroachments upon their lands, and eventually left Mexico. The abandonment of O'odham lands left a vacuum that opened the way for migrants and smugglers. During the 1970s, the Tohono O'odham Tribal Council granted the U.S. Border Patrol greater access to O'odham lands to police the movement of people and drugs. The O’odham themselves participated in smuggling operations. While the historian Robert Perez has argued that O’odham smuggling activities constituted acts of “resistance” against their “trajectory from abundance to scarcity,” the tribal council, seeing smuggling as a negative development, called for tighter enforcement. Finally, increased smuggling led customs officers—twelve O’odham men on horseback looking for illegal activities—to patrol reservation lands for the first time.\(^{40}\)

The O’odham expressed cross-border solidarity in response to the increased pressures from immigration, smuggling, and state failures to solve these problems no matter how

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many government agents patrolled their lands. During the late 1970s, the Tohono O’odham Tribal Council called on the U.S. and Mexican governments to recognize land on both sides of the border as O’odham “patrimony”; guarantee their right to cross the border freely; protect their lands and resources; and open up tribal enrollment to Sonoran O’odham, entitling them to share land-claims awards. One particularly provocative resolution suggested that Sonora cede Mexico’s O’odham lands to the United States, to be held in trust for all O’odham, or, alternatively, establish a government-recognized reservation within Sonora. These efforts culminated twenty years later, in 2000, with the unsuccessful demand that the United States grant citizenship to all O’odham in Arizona and Sonora.41

Despite expressions of solidarity, many Sonoran O’odham rejected help from their so-called brothers living north of the border. During the 1990s, O’odham from Quitovac, Sonora, expressed “energetic protest” against the meddling of Arizona O’odham, arguing that Arizona O’odham thought only of their own economic interests as determined by the United States. The Sells Agency, they concluded, negatively affected the “progress of our communities” and “pitted us against the programs and authorities of our own Mexican government.” Solicitation of Mexican support, however, did not suggest renewed faith in the Mexican state. As a group from Caborca explained, during the twentieth century the Mexican government repeatedly denied “rights and privileges” promised by the Mexican Revolution. During the late twentieth century, the O’odham articulated more clearly than ever the failure of Mexico’s efforts to protect them. In both Mexico and the United States, citizenship guaranteed access to services, and the lack of citizenship did not always prevent access. Nevertheless, citizenship failed to protect indigenous peoples against encroachment and other injustices. The O’odham therefore increasingly echoed emerging indigenous demands throughout the Americas for justice and autonomy.42

During the early twenty-first century, U.S. anti-immigrant activists and security hawks called Arizona’s borderlands the most dangerous of the southern border’s two-thousand-mile expanse. Arizona became the leading point of undocumented entry, and the second-leading point of drug seizure behind Texas, a state with a border more than three times as long as Arizona’s. In a sense, this narrative of modernity and abandonment offers a history of the present that demonstrates how the United States and Mexico wrought this situation. But a comparison of Nogales and O’odham borderlands also offers historical lessons for how to think about the U.S.-Mexico border, and all North American borderlands, more broadly.

Post–World War II projects of modernity in Ambos Nogales demonstrated U.S. and Mexican hopes for what the border region might become. But their vision largely excluded


O’odham who lived only sixty miles away. During the late twentieth century, the ephemeral quality of the Nogales border projects and the continued poverty of O’odham on both sides of the border demonstrate U.S. and Mexican disinvestment in the border region as a whole, except for national security operations that have received lavish funding. But even though concepts of modernity and abandonment were associated most clearly during the mid-twentieth century with Ambos Nogales and the Tohono O’odham nation, respectively, those concepts were not confined to one or the other of these spaces. Instead, the border refracted these and other ideologies every which way, undermining conceptions of an ontological divide between the United States and Mexico and demonstrating the deep sense of affinity and alienation experienced by borderlands residents. Understanding these dynamics in no way guarantees we will solve problems that have mired North America’s borderlands in so much injustice, violence, and inequality; but ignoring them, choosing to see borders as a single uniting or dividing line rather than multiple lines at once, guarantees that we will not.