NEGOTIATING CONQUEST: INTERNAL COLONIALISM AND SHARED HISTORIES IN THE SOUTH TEXAS BORDERLANDS

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This essay conceptualizes the post-1848 South Texas borderlands through the internal colonial model. South Texas Mexicans, rather than being the passive victims of domination by a colonial power, actively negotiated their places within the South Texas internal colony, similar to colonized peoples in formal colonial settings throughout world history.

Recent developments in borderlands history scholarship have contributed to new understandings of the North American Southwest, as historians examine the shared histories of people who live at the edges of social groups, empires, and nation-states.¹ These approaches are not without their critics. For example, Canadian scholar Bryce Traister argues that postnationalist intellectual trends that downplay the importance of nation-states reflect the neoliberal concerns of the globalizing American state, wherein stories of national concern give way to narratives that purposefully blur the boundary lines between national polities.²

But the current emphasis on shared histories in borderlands settings need not obscure the nation’s role or questions of power inequities in borderlands settings. This article argues


that historians should reconsider stories of conflict, difference, and oppression that take place within the confines of borderlands spaces. Internal colonialism, in particular, speaks to borderlands history specifically because it emphasizes shared histories that are unveiled through narratives of conflict and oppression. Further, internal colonialism is useful to borderlands history because expanding borderlines often bring people who are essentially foreigners into nations undergoing processes of reconstituting national boundaries and because it displays the shared histories of ethnic peoples who live in borderlands spaces in modern nation-states and their similarities to nonwhites in formal colonial situations throughout world history.

I offer the case study of South Texas—the region between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande, which Anglos forcibly took from Mexico at the end of the U.S.-Mexican War. Internal colonialism provides an apt framework for understanding interactions between Anglo-Americans and ethnic Mexicans in the region from the drawing of the borderline in 1848 through the rise of the Chicano movement during the late 1960s. Understanding this period through the lens of internal colonialism need not displace other forms of analysis in order to retain analytical or explanatory power. Similarly, stories of transborder or transcultural cooperation, as opposed to the history of colonialism or the imposition of power, do not usurp the utility of understanding the longue durée sweep of internal colonialism as a driving force in over a century's worth of South Texas history. This article shows that internal colonialism and borderlands history dovetail nicely, not just because Anglo-Americans colonized South Texas after 1848 but also because the border played an indispensible role in attracting American colonists to the region. Finally, this article draws some parallels between the experiences of South Texas Mexicans after 1848 and colonized peoples in other parts of the world—some living in internal colonial situations themselves, others in formal settler colonies. Understanding these connections ultimately helps fulfill the great potential of borderlands history. Human experiences in diverse parts of the world are remarkably similar, despite the imposition of borderlines that divide people and nations.

Notably, the history of the South Texas internal colony is far from a story dominated by victimization. After Anglo-Americans conquered and colonized the region, South Texas Mexicans eventually negotiated the region's conquest by challenging notions of racial and cultural hegemony imposed by colonizers in the early 1900s. This negotiated conquest is

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1 Daniel D. Arreola, Tejano South Texas: A Mexican American Cultural Province (Austin, 2002), 30–3.


5 For the purposes of this article, I use the admittedly imperfect term Anglo American to describe anyone of Euro-American extraction in South Texas; Mexican American to describe anyone of Mexican ancestry born in Texas or able to claim American citizenship; and Mexican national to describe anyone born on Mexican soil. The terms ethnic Mexican and South Texas Mexican are used occasionally and interchangeably to refer to all peoples of Mexican descent in the South Texas border region.
thus ongoing and shows how actors in colonized situations reassert self-determination in the face of a massive power sweep into a once-isolated social and cultural homeland. Colonized peoples are active participants in negotiating influence and social space inside of colonial power structures. Some South Texas Mexicans engaged in processes of Americanization. Some sought better lives as wage laborers, working north of the border and earning higher wages than could be had in Mexico. Others rejected colonial power through events like the irredentist Plan de San Diego uprising in 1915–1916, by joining the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), or through the mechanisms of the Chicano movement and farmworker protests of the 1960s and 1970s. Aside from negotiating space in contested territory, recent research has shown that Mexican Americans in early twentieth-century South Texas negotiated their very status as U.S. citizens on a daily basis. Natalia Molina argues that without access to “racial capital” in the form of landownership, American citizens of Mexican descent in South Texas were subject to arrest and deportation during the 1920s, fulfilling what Molina refers to as “the long arc of dispossession” that dates back to the noxious influence of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth-century North American Southwest. Indeed, as Molina states, “anyone associated with the colonized group,” aside from the relatively small number of ethnic Mexicans in the South Texas borderlands who had access to racial capital in the form of wealth or land ownership, “is always considered a foreigner.”6 Thus did the “long arc of dispossession” stem from the establishment of South Texas as an internal colony of the United States and affect the lives of ethnic Mexicans in the region for generations. The dynamic narrative of South Texas borderlands history from 1900 to the present cannot be properly understood without casting our historical gaze through the lens of internal colonialism, which deeply shaped the histories of Anglo-Americans and ethnic Mexicans alike.

South Texas, or perhaps even Texas as a whole, has long been a crossroads between social groups, empires, and nation-states. Competing claims to this borderlands space have long existed, even during the pre-contact period, when no single group dominated the region. The Anglo colonization of South Texas after 1900 was only the latest layer of colonialism forced upon people native to the region. Spaniards arrived in 1749, establishing a colony they dubbed “Nuevo Santander” that subsumed the Lower Rio Grande Valley and much of modern-day South Texas. By 1755 the colony’s leader, José de Escandón, had settled the region with 6,000 people who lived in twenty-three towns and fifteen missions, the latter’s goal being to force local Indian groups into becoming Christianized Spaniards. Recent scholarship has shown that not only did Indians frequently utilize Spanish missions in Texas as stops in seasonal migratory patterns, but certain Indian groups, like the Comanches, behaved more like colonial powers toward their Spanish “subjects” in parts of Texas and New Mexico—a situation that one scholar refers to as “reversed colonialism.”7

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7 David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, 1992), 194; Pekka
Notably, although any narrative intersection between Native Americans and formal colonialism in Texas history faded by the mid-nineteenth century, relatively few scholars have attempted to understand late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Native American history through the lens of internal colonialism (although internal colonialism is congruent with the settler colonialism model, which seems dominant in the field of Native American studies). One notable exception is Cardell K. Jacobson, who concludes that U.S. corporations directly benefited from the U.S. colonization of Native American lands. Clearly, overlapping complexities exist within the phenomenon of colonialism across space and time that are only beginning to be understood.

But the imposition of the modern U.S.-Mexico borderline at the Rio Grande was the key component in allowing a new colonial situation to take root in post-1848 South Texas, despite the inability of the U.S. government to control border space in the years following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Ania Loomba writes that “colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods.” Colonialism is also a set of beliefs by a colonizing power that relate to settling in a new place. As such, internal colonialism, for the purposes of this article, is best understood as when one population conquers and controls another inside the borders of a modern nation-state and implements the practices of colonialism. Naturally, when a powerful state expands its borders by some margin—such as when the United States signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—the native inhabitants of annexed regions become vulnerable to the same sets of expansive tendencies as when formal colonial powers expand overseas to other parts of the world. The nearby borderline allowed Americans to colonize a region that was essentially foreign land inside of their home country. Like formal colonies, an internally colonized society becomes divided along the lines of ethnicity: one group from the colonizing state controls society from the top-down while the once autonomous population native to the colonized region finds itself largely shut out from social, political, and economic mobility.

The antecedents of internal colonial theory developed during the 1950s. Critics of French imperialism in Africa, such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, analyzed colonialism from the point of view of the colonized, whom they cast as victims of brutal outside
powers. As traditional colonialism crumbled during the middle of the twentieth century, a number of critics noted the persistence of neocolonialism, whereby once-colonized nation-states were now politically free but remained economically subordinate to the colonizing power. As opposition to the Vietnam War increased, American minority groups began to see parallels between their existence and that of the Vietnamese, considered victims of a renewed post–World War II American imperialism by many opponents of the war.\(^{12}\)

The intellectual step between overseas colonialism and its internal counterpart developed apace with the tumult of the era. Pablo González Casanova produced two articles during the early 1960s—“Sociedad plural, colonialismo interno y desarrollo” and “Internal Colonialism and National Development”—in which he became the first scholar to describe a colonial situation as existing inside of the borders of a modern nation-state. González Casanova’s studies focused on the abuses that Indians suffered at the hands of Spaniards and criollos (generally speaking, this word referred to pure-blooded Spaniards born in New Spain) inside Mexico. Notably, Mexican independence did not improve the situation of Mexican Indians, who found themselves perhaps even worse off than they had been during the Spanish colonial period.\(^{13}\)

Sociologist Joan W. Moore first applied internal colonialism to Mexican Americans in a 1970 article, arguing that it explained the situation of Chicanos in the U.S. Southwest so well that it transcended the realm of analogy. Moreover, sociologist Robert Blauner utilized internal colonialism to explain the racial oppression of ethnic minorities in his landmark 1972 study *Racial Oppression in America*.\(^{14}\)

Despite the model’s application by some scholars, its popularity faded during the 1980s. Leading Chicano historian Rodolfo Acuña, who originally embraced internal colonialism, dismissed its usefulness in subsequent editions of his classic survey of Chicano history, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York, 1980). Gilbert G. González’s 1974 article, “A Critique of the Internal Colony Model,” summarizes the many critiques advanced by scholars. González argues that because Chicanos did not technically constitute an actual nation—which, to him, meant occupying a continuous territorial space and having a national economy—they could not be classified as living in internal colonies. Others, too, dismiss the model, alleging that it augurs simplistic tales of the victimization of people of color.\(^{15}\)

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These shifting intellectual currents aside, internal colonialism’s historical applicability has not been fully rejected. Theorist Fred A. Cervantes argues that internal colonialism no longer applies to the contemporary Chicano experience in the United States (but, by implication, that it once did) because it casts the reformist policies of Mexican American leaders within the paradigm of Chicano nationalism instead of displaying them as pragmatic political reforms working within the modern polity. Cervantes describes modern Mexican Americans as a postcolonial minority working to overcome a legacy of past colonialism. He also argues that despite the fact that “South Texas still suggests the reality of colonialism . . . for most, this is the legacy of colonialism.”

Either way, his argument implies internal colonialism’s historical applicability.

Other scholars have written more directly about the continued historical applicability of internal colonialism, particularly to Chicano history in the U.S. Southwest. Most notable among these is John R. Chávez. Chávez writes that the “displacement and out-numbering” of South Texas Mexicans by Anglo colonists during the early twentieth century “had all the markings of the larger internal colony” of the U.S. Southwest. Furthermore, the establishment of commercial farming in South Texas, as well as the armed rebellion of some Mexican Americans against Anglo-American dominance in the region in 1915–1916, parallels the larger experience of colonialism and armed resistance against colonizing powers throughout world history.

Chávez writes that “internal colonialism is the domestic subset of a larger colonial (or imperial) paradigm,” which includes “formal colonialism, neocolonialism, postcolonialism, borderlands theory, and postnationalism.” He also argues that the larger colonial paradigm can be used to explain “broader relationships of ethnic inequality across history and geography.” Even beyond comparisons between internal colonialism and overseas colonialism, similarities throughout world history abound between world powers colonizing stateless people inside of national borders. Steven Sabol argues, for example, that the processes whereby Americans colonized the Great Plains and Russians colonized the Kazakh Steppe during the nineteenth century are remarkably similar, not to mention the outcomes of said colonizations for the Sioux Indians and the Kazakhs.

Stateless peoples
within international borders, as such, share similar histories and provide certain nuances to the larger story of colonialism and colonization throughout world history.

As colonialism unfolded in twentieth-century South Texas, it shaped the lives of everyone who lived in the region. It was the underlying driver in the major components of the region's modern history: race, farming, rebellion, and social justice.

From a cynical point of view, the invasion of Mexico in 1846 from South Texas was nothing more than a large-scale land grab supported by James K. Polk, the expansion-minded American president. Mexico had long claimed the southern boundary in Texas to be the Nueces River, whereas the U.S. government recognized the Texans' longstanding claim of the Rio Grande. The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at war's end on 2 February 1848 had two important results. First, the United States acquired Texas, New Mexico, and California, setting the modern U.S.-Mexico borderline where it stands today (excluding a large chunk of northern Sonora acquired via the Gadsden Purchase in 1853 that includes the city of Tucson). Second, the treaty gave the Mexican inhabitants of these territories a choice: they could either stay in their current homes and become American citizens or they could retreat south within the newly defined boundaries of Mexico and live as Mexican nationals. Naturally, most people, not wanting to leave their homes and properties, elected the former, which made them subject to rule from the distant confines of Washington, DC.

The group that generally resigned itself to accepting U.S. citizenship included the Mexican population of South Texas, who negotiated for themselves the changeover in political power and national affiliation. Critics of internal colonialism might argue that such a group could not possibly be considered a "colonized" people because they made the conscious choice to become U.S. citizens. Maintaining Mexican citizenship required a declaration at a Mexican consulate; otherwise, these people became U.S. citizens by default. South Texas Mexicans faced innumerable challenges, not least of which was "choosing" citizenship in a foreign nation in order to maintain the lives that they had always known.

Another straightforward challenge was the language barrier. Most of the region's prime land, especially that which abutted the Rio Grande, was held by individuals who owned land grants dating back to the Spanish colonial period. Not having connections with Anglo powerbrokers, nor skills in the English language, made some of the basic elements of U.S. landownership more difficult. Tax-delinquent lands that fell into the hands of local sheriffs' departments for auction almost always went to Anglos. As such, a process began after 1848 whereby South Texas Mexicans became dispossessed of their land and reliant upon manual wage labor—what might be described as the region's top exploitable "natural resource" for U.S. farmers and later, corporations—in order to survive. Legal land loss does not include processes of outright fraud.


21 Griswold del Castillo, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.
intimidation, or theft that some Anglos utilized to increase their land holdings, such as numerous cases involving Richard King of the now famous King Ranch of South Texas. Notably, this process was not confined to South Texas. According to historian María E. Montoya, “historical instances from south Texas to Hawai'i to northern New Mexico tell the story of invasion, and, eventually, dispossession.” Montoya notes striking similarities between controversies surrounding land claims and dispossession in the Maxwell Land Grant in northern New Mexico and Hawai'i's so-called Great Mahele, both during the mid- to late nineteenth century. As Montoya's work indicates, the process of colonization and displacement in the burgeoning U.S. empire was a similar one on all fronts, whether internal or external to the nation's borders.\footnote{Johnson, Revolution in Texas, 7–37 and María E. Montoya, Translating Property: The Maxwell Land Grand and the Conflict over Land in the American West, 1840–1900 (Berkeley, 2002), 119–20.}

Although some Americans and ethnic Mexicans cooperated in making South Texas an American space after 1848, the ugly process of racial othering was well underway in the wake of the U.S.-Mexican War. Well established in the literature on Texas history is that an explosion of anti-Mexican sentiment among Anglos stemmed from the Texas Revolution of 1835–1836 and its immediate aftermath. The famous 1836 massacres at the Alamo and Goliad, combined with postwar fears of a Mexican reinvasion of the then-Texas Republic, popularized ideas among Anglo-Texans that Mexicans were treacherous. Preexistent racism against ethnic Mexicans and the dominant racial ethos of Manifest Destiny created a peculiarly noxious combination that would gain expression in former Mexican spaces across the U.S. Southwest. Nevertheless, some Mexican elites did maintain economic, political, and social power in pockets of South Texas. This was the case in areas like Starr and Webb Counties, where Anglo settlers failed to penetrate and cattle ranching remained the primary economic concern.\footnote{Raul A. Ramos, Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Ethnicity in San Antonio, 1821–1861 (Chapel Hill, 2008), 168–204; James E. Crisp, Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution (New York, 2005), 43; and William D. Carrigan, The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836–1916 (Urbana, 2006), 24–9.}

As in colonial situations the world over, the region's natives fought back against dispossession and racial oppression almost immediately. Numerous rebellions broke out in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and gained support from the poor and marginalized. Juan Cortina became Public Enemy No. 1 among Anglos with his now well-documented rebellion in 1859. Cortina's subsequent position as a transborder cattle thief and his later career as an officer in the Mexican Army who opposed the Confederacy during the U.S. Civil War also served to antagonize Anglos in South Texas. Runaway African American slaves effectively utilized the Texas-Mexico border to gain freedom from institutional oppression and the colonial experience. Catarino Garza's rebellion in 1891 also reenergized dispossessed natives against elite Anglo-Americans and their South Texas Mexican “coconspirators.” Finally, and perhaps most notably, the Plan de San Diego revolt from 1915–1916,
particularly the heavy-handed response of the Texas Rangers against the local ethnic Mexican population, only served to drive a wedge between ethnic Mexicans and Anglo-Americans throughout the region.24

But truthfully, the colonization of South Texas took a long time to unfold. Despite the displacement and marginalization of the native population in the years immediately following 1848, the process accelerated quickly only after the turn of the twentieth century. This is due in part to the fact that the railroad did not penetrate the Lower Rio Grande Valley until 1904. On the Fourth of July that year, the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway arrived in the town of Brownsville. The mostly Anglo landowners in South Texas’s ranching communities immediately saw the new opportunities brought by the railroad, and ranch land that abutted the tracks jumped in value. Ranch owners sectioned off portions of their land to sell as farms to people from outside the region. The value of land that sold from $10 to $25 per acre in 1904 skyrocketed to more than $500 per acre as early as 1912. Thus, although the region saw Anglo newcomers arriving as early as 1848, the colonization that had begun over a half century before accelerated at an exponential pace.25

Demographic statistics bear witness to the fact that Anglo-Americans colonized South Texas in the early 1900s. First, the colonizers founded new “Anglo” towns in droves. Many became principal centers in the region’s burgeoning commercial-agricultural economic sector, which pushed the ranching industry to the economic margins.26 Of equal importance to the urban makeover of this Mexican space was the increasing demographic prominence of Anglo-Americans. According to historical sociologist David Montejano, in 1930, after the rise of commercial farming, 216,822 people lived in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the farming communities of Nueces County. Both Anglo newcomers and Mexican nationals overran the region. Three-quarters of the valley’s population lived in towns of over 2,500 people. While ethnic Mexicans had once made up 98 percent of Hidalgo County’s population (the epicenter of commercial

24 Informe de la Comisión Pesquisidora de la Frontera del Norte. . . . (Mexico City, 1873); Report of the United States Commissioners to Texas, Appointed under Joint Resolution of Congress. . . . (Washington, DC: GPO, 1872); Jerry Thompson, Cortina: Defending the Mexican Name in Texas (College Station, TX, 2007); Elliott Young, Catarino Garza’s Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border (Durham, 2004); Johnson, Revolution in Texas; and James David Nichols, “the Line of Liberty: Runaway Slaves and Fugitive Peons in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands,” Western Historical Quarterly 44 (Winter 2013): 413–33.


26 Principal South Texas towns founded between 1904 and 1907 include Kingsville, Raymondville, Harlingen, San Benito, La Feria, Mercedes, San Juan, Edinburg, and Mission. Populations of these towns ranged from quite small (about 500) to rather large (about 3,000) by the time of U.S. entry into World War I. Frank C. Pierce, A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (Menasha, WI, 1917), 128–32. For more on the land and town-founding boom in the valley, see Emilio Zamora, The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas (College Station, TX, 1993), 30–40; David Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986 (Austin, 1987), 126–28; and Evan Anders, Boss Rule in South Texas: The Progressive Era (Austin, 1982), 139–70.
farming in the valley), by 1929 that figure had fallen to 54 percent. Similarly, the ethnic Mexican population of Cameron County, once 88 percent, had dropped to 50 percent.27

Ultimately, many ethnic Mexicans negotiated the region’s colonization by finding jobs in South Texas that paid better than what could be found south of the border. The new colonizing class immediately sought to use this to its advantage. As in situations of formal colonialism, colonizers boosted and “sold” visions of their new land to recruits, who they hoped to bring in from the outside. Such boosting was common in colonial situations throughout the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The French, for example, published a veritable bombardment of paradisiacal images to encourage people to buy land in French Algeria.28 South Texas booster literature firmly affixed the proscribed roles of ethnic Mexicans in the “new” South Texas: they were to serve as manual laborers and servants only. The development of a vibrant agricultural sector relied on the indispensable asset of human capital. Depicting nonwhites as laborers was not just the stuff of old-fashioned American racism. Matthew Frye Jacobson refers to a phenomenon called “imperialist extraction” that took place during the well-documented expansion of the U.S. empire during the late nineteenth century, whereby the United States colonized foreign lands and engaged in an “extraction of natural resources . . . [and] of cheap labor.” The availability of such labor was a central selling point for many South Texas boosters.

A pamphlet published by the American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company (ARGLIC) to promote its irrigated citrus and vegetable lands around Mercedes in Hidalgo County declared, “Mexicans make ideal farm hands . . . [and] are industrious and law-abiding.” The pamphlet reported accurately that wages for a twelve-hour day averaged $1, whereas “women and children work for from 50c to 75c per day.” Furthermore, ARGLIC assured its readers that the racial stratification of Middle America would remain in place: “The Mexican women make excellent servants and many are good cooks. One of the pleasing features to the farmer and his wife is that there are no farm hands to board. Practically all labor on the American system is performed by Mexicans, there being few negro residents.”29

These characterizations of ethnic Mexican workers were common booster fare. One promoter of the Rio Grande Land Corporation wrote extensively about labor in 1913. His long description of Mexican and Mexican American workers is worth quoting at length:


In the Rio Grande Valley the farmers do not have to hang around the railway stations looking for laborers. The Mexicans are always available. The Mexican stays right on the farm in his own little bungalow of brush or of gunnysack over a mesquite bush ready on a day’s notice to go to work at from 50 cents to one dollar per day and board himself, and prepared to lay off at a moment’s notice. A great many Valley farmers are now providing their Mexicans with a one or two-room shed house, which is inexpensive. The Mexican laborer is not only a good worker, but he will neither steal you blind nor stab you in the back. He would protect your property or your family with his life. He is the best farmhand in America today, and there is an inexhaustible supply of these farm laborers just across the Rio Grande, ready to come at your call.30

This iteration of racist stereotypes led many colonizers to believe in the distinct possibility of living in segregated enclaves on Mexico’s doorstep. Notably, the now well-documented system of labor controls that the new South Texas farmers used to immobilize ethnic Mexican workers—be they vagrancy laws, pass systems, manipulation of labor contracts, debt peonage, or simply threatening workers with bodily harm if they attempted to leave—all bear a striking resemblance to the system of labor controls employed by Mexican hacendados and American agribusinesses south of the border, who colonized northern Mexico to extract cheap labor. The desire for cheap labor drove the uptick in colonization in South Texas during the early twentieth century, but it rested on older practices in the borderlands.31

Many boosters relied on negative stereotypes to justify the exploitation of ethnic Mexican workers. A booster for the La Feria Land Syndicate in Hidalgo County argued that Mexican workers were preferable to U.S. farmhands “because they never heard of an eight-hour system or labor unions.” Furthermore, in Mexico, the average wage for farm work was 12.5 cents U.S. per day. If workers make 50 or 75 cents per day on the U.S. side of the border, “they think they have struck it rich.” “Thus,” this author continued, “the opening of the Rio Grande Valley is a great blessing both to the people buying the land who need help and the Mexican who needs the work.”32

Interestingly, recent studies have shown that these booster trends crossed the border. In a study of women peasants in the northern Mexico borderlands, Sonia Hernández writes that boosters sought to encourage American investment in Porfian Mexico by portraying Mexican nationals as “primitive, exploitable, disposable, and cheap to hire

31 Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans, 197–219.
as laborers.” The fact that these common tropes did not stop at the border bespeaks a Mexican social and cultural space bisected by a newly founded borderline at the Rio Grande and invaded by Americans in multitudinous ways. South Texas colonists thus exploited Mexican space for the same reasons that capitalists invested in Mexican land south of the border: to capitalize on labor, the region’s most valuable asset.

Exploitive Anglo farmers north of the border marginalized ethnic Mexicans in part to placate the vociferous cries of immigration exclusionists during the World War I era. Debates between “restrictionists” and “anti-restrictionists” over the issue of Mexican immigration culminated during the late 1920s and early 1930s with the large-scale deportation of Mexicans in places such as South Texas. Marginalizing ethnic Mexicans was but one way the so-called anti-restrictionist grower-colonizer class in deep South Texas could attempt to placate its critics. One form of marginalizing the new South Texas polity was to institute Jim Crow–style racism. As one Wisconsin transplant to the area noted, Don’t get to pitying the Mexican and depreciating the white people, holding him in subjection. He wouldn’t have it any other way. The white man will cuss the Mexican, and then in the evening, on the cattle ranches, he’s down by the fire with him, with the frying pan, and eating tortillas with his coffee.

I put [one worker] over my transient Mexicans in cotton picking. He knows them and I don’t. He protects my interests. The Mexican is a most honest man; and the damndest thief. But he figures “I’m his, and so what is his, is mine.” It’s just like the nigger: “Massa’s nigger, Massa’s watermelon,” so it can’t be stealing. Once he’s attached to you, you never need worry; he’ll defend you against all his kin.

Other sources support the existence of these types of attitudes. Mark Wyman notes that “many longtime residents [of Texas] were critical of newcomers from the North,” as the long-established Anglo-Texans “had generally mixed amicably with Tejanos.” South Texas Mexicans also commented on these changes: “since the coming of the ‘white trash’ from the North and Middle West we felt the change. They made us feel for the first time that we were Mexicans and that they considered themselves our superiors.”

33 Sonia Hernández, Working Women into the Borderlands (College Station, TX, 2014), 24.
34 For an interesting discussion of exclusionism and the different ways in which Americans responded to Mexican immigration during this period, see Linda C. Noel, Debating American Identity: Southwestern Statehood and Mexican Immigration (Tucson, 2014). For more on Mexican deportation in South Texas and the debates between restrictionists and anti-restrictionists, see John Weber, “Homing Pigeons, Cheap Labor, and Frustrated Nativists: Immigration Reform and the Deportation of Mexicans from South Texas in the 1920s,” Western Historical Quarterly 44 (Summer 2013): 167–86.
The stringency of regional racism became far more widespread during the twentieth-century colonization.36

Growers like Felix Wirick self-consciously participated in this new system of colonization. About his workers Wirick said,

They were here before we were and they’re working for us. They’re durable and they keep their place better than negroes. We’ll always need someone to do the menial work. They’ll not be landowners. They don’t save. Fifty percent draw money in advance of payday. They’ll not rule our children. Our little boy bosses the Mexican children. Intermarry? Our children won’t.37

Wirick clearly recognized Mexicans’ native status: “they were here before we were.” His wife added that she “couldn’t stay in a place alone” if blacks were present but that Mexicans were “ok.” And Wirick’s argument that he preferred Mexicans to blacks because they “don’t seek to mix” indicates the type of racially stratified class system that the new white South Texans hoped to maintain.38

Colonizers—the so-called white trash mentioned above—made clear that geographical boundaries within South Texas spaces were meant to keep Anglos and Mexicans apart. In one incident in an unnamed town during the 1920s, a Mexican man inadvertently laughed at a group of Anglos playing horseshoes. In response, the players abandoned their game, attacked the man, threw him in the back of a wagon, and dumped him on his family’s doorstep. To be a Mexican on the wrong side of the tracks in colonized South Texas was not unlike an African American crossing the lines of Jim Crow in states like Mississippi during the same period.39 The difference, of course, is that Mexicans could once move about freely in this quickly changing borderlands space.

Other aspects of the labor system in the new South Texas bespeak the colonized status of the region’s native population. The exploitation of cheap Mexican labor began with the laying of railroad tracks in the region before commercial farming was even a proposition. Railroad official J. L. Allhands remembered the excitement of a wealthy businessman and high-ranking employee of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway in 1904:

38 Ibid.
Along the old military trail in the Rio Grande Valley the native population were living alongside the road in wretched hackals [sic], small dwellings made of sticks, mud and grass. A few goats, chickens, [and] small garden[s] comprised their earthly possessions. Cooking was done in a few pots and pans over a fire on the ground. Children ran around with scarcely any clothing. The family slept on the floor, and yet in and around the dwelling there would be a profusion of bright flowers, showing the native love for bright colors. The women could and did make beautiful drawn work, showing an innate artistic sense. I well recall a remark of Colonel Lott’s as we were making one of these journeys and talking about the new era to follow the railroad. He said, “Jonah, we must get these people up off the ground.”

While Allhands, Lott, and their contemporaries saw their workers as oddities with strange customs and habits, belonging to the category of an Other encountered in a foreign land, natives also allegedly benefited from the newer, modern, and benevolent arrivals to the region:

Our axemen and teamsters were receiving what at that time was a fabulous wage for Mexicans in that section of the country, $1.00 per day and board. As we reached the Mexican border we found difficulty in holding our men, they had received a pay day and were anxious to spend it among their friends in Matamoros [sic]. We found that the more they made the less they worked. A couple of days a week sufficed for all their wants, but there was no trouble in recruiting others to take their places and they would follow the same routine. The provisions in our camp were plentiful and good, and when a new bunch of Mexicans came in they ate so much the first few days that they invariably made themselves sick, but we worked long hours and hard, and it was not long until the Mexicans could assimilate [sic] their strange dishes and thrive on it.

South Texas farming and building companies left behind records that put their exclusionary tendencies on full display. One ledger book, which reveals wages paid to one English-surnamed carpenter alongside his Spanish-surnamed counterparts, reveals that the Anglo received $1.00 per day more than his colleagues for what appears to have been the same work for the same duration of time. A dual wage system, then, existed among the working class. Notably, the same English-surnamed carpenter is the only person listed on the register as having been charged room and board. Typically, growers expected Mexican and Mexican American workers to board themselves. Often,


41 Ibid.
when representatives for the farmer or land company either did not know the workers’ names or were unable to spell them intelligibly, the bookkeeper would simply use the abbreviation “Mex.” or “3 Mex. Laborers” to represent workers and their corresponding wages on the ledger sheets. Conversely, the individual mentioned above received the dignity of at least having his initials listed.\textsuperscript{42}

When it came to voting in South Texas, the new Anglos argued that Mexicans should not be given the franchise. But like Jim Crow, disenfranchisement only became common after 1900.\textsuperscript{43} One grower outside of Carrizo Springs noted that political bosses had once rounded up ethnic Mexicans to vote but that such practices had come to an end with the recent colonization. Simply put, ethnic Mexicans knew they were not “expected to vote [and they did not] care to vote. . . . [N]o it’s not legal, and they could if they insisted, but they know they’re not supposed to.” The implication as to how local Mexicans knew that voting was frowned upon was not left to the imagination: “to say ‘Texas Ranger’ to a Mexican is like saying ‘Ku Klux Klan’ to a nigger,” noted one grower. Segregation, according to this man, was necessary because it kept whites and ethnic Mexicans from intermarrying, which would allegedly ruin white South Texas society. Moreover, it would directly challenge the supremacy of the Anglo farming system.\textsuperscript{44}

Not only did colonizers exert control over South Texas’s native population, but the state pitched in where it could, especially to strengthen the internal colony’s reach across the border during the interwar years. The U.S. Border Patrol, founded in 1924, was less of a “border-closing” agency and more of a labor control for the region’s workforce. Farmers often used the threat of deportations to keep their workers malleable or immobile. Of course, the situation worsened during the Great Depression. The well-studied deportation campaigns of the 1930s against Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans further exhibited the stark violation of human rights committed against countless people across the U.S. Southwest.\textsuperscript{45} The Emergency Farm Labor Program—more commonly referred to as the Bracero Program—came into existence in 1942. Growers utilized braceros to

\textsuperscript{42} Account Ledger Book, 9–15 October 1915, Correspondence 2486-n006 and Carpenters’ Bard Weekly Time Book, Correspondence 2486-n008p8, both box 8, Ledger Books, Scrapbooks, and Sound Recordings, Shary Collection.

\textsuperscript{43} Voting restrictions were also stringent in places like South Africa, where the majority of native black Africans struggled as an internally colonized majority under Afrikaner rule when South Africa gained Dominion status in 1910 (especially after apartheid became the official law of the land in 1948). As in the case of colonial South Texas, such restrictions could be official or informally reinforced. For more information on South Africa during this period, see William Beinart, Twentieth-Century South Africa, 2nd ed. (New York, 2001).

\textsuperscript{44} Mr. Baylor quoted in Taylor, “Field Notes—Del Rio to Brownsville, Texas, Dec. 10, 1928,” folder 12:13, Taylor Papers.

drive wages down for South Texas Mexicans, and the generally poor treatment of ethnic
Mexicans in Texas led to the initial refusal by the Mexican government to allow Texas
any bracero workers at all. Access to cheap labor had driven colonization and remained
the top concern among Anglos in the region.

Unsurprisingly, the area where such stark marginalization and mistreatment
occurred was one of the epicenters of the Chicano movement of the late 1960s.
Previous civil rights campaigns in South Texas, whereby the small number of middle-
class Mexican Americans had attempted to protect their rights as American citizens
under the auspices of such organizations like LULAC, had largely failed to improve
the lives of the vast majority of impoverished ethnic Mexicans. José Angel Gutiérrez,
who led the famous Crystal City uprising during the 1960s and helped found La Raza
Unida Party, argued, “South Texas is a colonial situation. The middle and upper class
is almost all white, Anglo, and Protestant. The lower-middle and lower classes, eco-
nomically speaking, are Chicanos. The middle class in South Texas will hardly raise
a whisper in support of revolution. They have too much to lose. The Chicano, on the
other hand, has little to lose and a great deal to gain.”

Gutiérrez also aimed his fiery vitriol at the United States in general. According
to him, the U.S. government had tricked “minorities into believing that violence is
acceptable and good depending on who employs it. For this reason, American violence
in Southeast Asia is holy. Violence by Chicanos in the name of liberation is evil.” Also,
the media had failed South Texas Mexicans by failing to cover the long-established
discrimination that ethnic Mexicans faced on a daily basis. To Gutiérrez, the situation
in South Texas stemmed from much more than simple racism against ethnic Mexicans
and the establishment of Jim Crow.

Closely related to the Chicano movement in South Texas were the farmworker
strikes in Starr County in 1966 and 1967, an offshoot of the larger and better-known
United Farm Workers (UFW) struggles in California. The Texas branch of the union
struck against a number of prominent melon growers in the county—perhaps most
importantly La Casita Farms—a corporate agribusiness that had adopted the earlier
regional model of colonized Mexican and Mexican American labor. Once the strike
commenced, local UFW leader Antonio Orendain attacked the local growers’ use
of Mexican immigrants to break their picket lines. In order to do so, he attacked the very
mechanism that allowed the system of colonized labor to function: the U.S.-Mexico
borderline. Orendain led a high-profile protest in the fall of 1966 at the international
bridge at Roma in Starr County in order to try to keep Mexican strikebreakers out of
the country. The UFW protest drew the attention of Mexican and American authorities

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46 José Angel Gutiérrez, “La Raza and Revolution,” manuscript, n.d., box 104, Written
Works, José Angel Gutiérrez Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at
Austin (hereafter Gutiérrez Papers). For more on LULAC, see Orozco, No Mexicans.

47 Gutiérrez, “La Raza and Revolution.”
Although the so-called Starr County Strike eventually ended in the growers’ favor, more significantly, the Chicano movement and the farmworkers’ strikes eventually ushered in new levels of opportunities for ethnic Mexicans as well as an increased tolerance of ethnic and racial diversity in the region through the early twenty-first century. But the basic structure of endemic poverty and predatory labor relations that the early 1900s colonization brought with it did not disappear. Importantly, however, South Texas Mexicans negotiated colonialism through armed uprisings, becoming wage laborers, acclimating to life as American citizens, or by participating in labor or civil rights organizing. Colonialism still loomed large in the region after the 1960s, despite Mexicans’ continued assertions of their independence and self-determination throughout the twentieth century.

Aside from internal colonialism’s indispensability to understanding 1900s South Texas, there is also much that borderlands historians can learn from the role of the U.S.-Mexico border in establishing this internally colonized space. The so-called new borderlands history holds as one of its premises that some people in marginal spaces like South Texas have shared experiences that transcend the nation-state. Some scholars might argue that internal colonialism and racial oppression, due to a previous decline in popularity, highlight nothing more than the victimization of ethnic Mexicans by Anglo-Americans. Further, some would suggest that colonialism and colonization no longer matter in an area where nationalist history breaks down in the face of transnational and transcultural experiences.

The notion that internal colonialism is only instructive within the narrow context of victimization dismisses the utility of the model in promoting a general understanding of major historical instances of colonialism. South Texas Mexicans negotiated their colonization in a borderlands space where national and transnational histories overlap. The shared experiences brought on by South Texas’s colonization also transcend the nation-state. Additionally, the movement of large populations of farmers from the greater United States to South Texas in the early 1900s in order to take advantage of cheap labor mirrors, in fact, such processes as modern U.S. multinational corporations moving to places like Ciudad Juárez to take advantage of cheap Mexican labor and pay their employees less than what American workers would accept. Furthermore, millions of Mexicans crossed the border in search of a better life on these very same farms that would not have employed a more expensive Anglo-American workforce. South Texas became a colonized space that was politically nationalized yet socially, culturally, and economically international at the same time. Because globalizing corporations represent what some theorists would refer to as neocolonial entities, multinationals and farmers who moved to South Texas in the early part of the twentieth century crossed cultural and international borders for the same reasons: to exploit ethnic Mexican workers.49

48 Antonio Orendain, interview by Charles Carr Winn, 20 July 1971, transcript, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington.
49 For more on theories related to the intersection of capitalism and colonialism, see,
Hence, their commonality as colonial entities; both expected to exploit the native inhabitants of foreign spaces.

Internal colonialism also played an integral part in shaping the people who inhabited South Texas over the course of the twentieth century. The rejection of the Anglo-dominated colonial authority by labor and Chicano movement activists ushered in a new era of identity politics—the reassertion of historical agency among the long-suffering poor of the region and a demand for equal treatment—as well as a new era in which Anglos and Mexicans were forced to deal with one another by new sets of rules. Internal colonialism defined the reassertion of social, political, and economic strength by the mass of the region's native population.50

Although one could argue that the main period of South Texas's colonization ended long ago, the term postcolonial—which implies that a native population's domination by an outside colonizing power has ended—does not apply to those at the bottom of the South Texas colonial hierarchy. Poverty remains rampant in a region where many individuals live on the economic and geographic margins of the nation-state. This, of course, stems from the region's acquisition as a colony just inside of U.S. national borders. Proponents of this view can thus conclude that many of the region's contemporary poor toil in conditions not dissimilar to the countless dispossessed and marginalized who came before them.

Ultimately, seeing the historical development of South Texas as an example of internal colonialism helps to bridge gaps between some of the most important phenomena in modern South Texas borderlands history, enhancing our understanding of them while in turn not displacing the possibility of other forms of analysis. These phenomena include but are not limited to the rise of commercial farming; land sales, loss, and theft; the marginalization and disenfranchisement of ethnic Mexicans without access to racial capital along with the daily challenges and opportunities they faced; racial violence; the vagaries of business and the local economy; Jim Crow and the rise of identity politics; and the greater acceptance of multiculturalism during the second half of the twentieth century.

More significantly, internal colonialism in South Texas sheds light upon how South Texas Mexicans constantly negotiated better lives for themselves after the border crossed them in 1848. This is a global story, but it is also a very American one. The colonized people of South Texas shared much in their lived experiences with people in formal colonial settings the world over during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but over time, they fought for a brighter future and improved their lives on American soil, much as countless other social groups have done throughout the larger narrative of U.S. history. Internal colonialism thus leads to a greater appreciation for

Loomba, Colonialism/Postcolonialism, 111–3.

50 For an interesting recent analysis of how the Chicano movement unfolded in South Texas's largest city, San Antonio, see David Montejano, Quixote's Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966–1981 (Austin, 2010).
the larger narratives of people’s lives after they find themselves and their communities crossed by an international borderline. As such, it is imperative that other historians consider whether or not the internal colonial model is applicable to other social groups in the larger history of North American borderlands as well as in the histories of conquests and expanding borders in other parts of the world.

South Texas history during the twentieth century constitutes one small chapter in the larger narrative of colonialism’s history. Anglo-American colonists’ conscious manipulation of the U.S.-Mexico border in establishing the South Texas internal colony thus bridges the history of this isolated borderlands space with histories of U.S. imperialism and the larger story of colonialism throughout the world. It is high time for historians to revisit histories of race and colonization in other borderlands spaces like South Texas. These shared histories are far too important to ignore and beg for further analysis in borderlands settings in North America as well as across the globe.