
The US/Mexico Borderlands in the Mennonite Imagination

Felipe Hinojosa

My quest to research and write on Latina/o religious politics began in the Mennonite church. While that might seem like a stretch to some, for me it was an easy choice. I grew up in that church, visiting and getting to know white Mennonites throughout the Great Plains and the Midwest in countless church conferences during the summers. I knew where the archives were, where to find the best Amish bakeries, and which books I should be reading.

It also helped that back in 2006 when I started working on my book, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture*,¹ no one had written a book on Latina/o activists and preachers in the Mennonite church. Sure, I was familiar with Rafael Falcón's *The Hispanic Mennonite Church in North America*² and José Ortiz and David Graybill's *Reflections of an Hispanic Mennonite*.³ But Falcón's book is an encyclopedic review of Hispanic leadership in the (Old) Mennonite Church, and Ortiz and Graybill's is a more personal narrative on the life and work of the Rev. José Ortiz. While both books delve into the marginalization that Latina/os have faced in the Mennonite Church, they leave out the details of the moments when religious faith clashed with civil rights politics—moments that are so central to the Latina/o religious experience, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.

In addition, very little had been written on white Mennonites' attitudes about and perceptions of Latina/os as a nonwhite minority. In fact, more had

Felipe Hinojosa is an associate professor in the Department of History at Texas A&M University and the director of the Carlos H. Cantú Education and Opportunity Endowment. He is the author of Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) and Apostles of Change: Latino Radical Politics, Church Occupations, and the Fight to Save the Barrio (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2021).

1 Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014)—written first as a dissertation in graduate school.

2 Rafael Falcón, *The Hispanic Mennonite Church in North America: 1932–1982* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1986).

3 José Ortiz and David Graybill, *Reflections of an Hispanic Mennonite* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1989).

been written and published on Mennonites in Latin America—from Mexico to Puerto Rico to Argentina—than on Latina/o Mennonite communities in Chicago, South Texas, and New York City. Sadly, that continues to be the case. Just walk into any Mennonite history library and you'll know what I am talking about.

My book, *Latino Mennonites*, addresses this oversight by focusing on the Latina/o communities in the United States, specifically in Chicago, South Texas, Puerto Rico, and New York. I organized the book in this way for two reasons: (1) In each instance, white Mennonites crossed urban and rural borders that were foreign to them; whether they traveled from Elkhart, Indiana, to the streets of Chicago or the cotton fields of Texas, in each case Mennonites were out of their element. (2) From each of these communities emerged many of the Latina/o preachers and activists who rose to leadership in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴

This essay is not as much a recap of these two pieces as it is personal reflections on how these missionary border crossers—white Mennonites—imagined the US/Mexico borderlands and how they reflected those images and perceptions back onto an eager audience. The years since the publication of *Latino Mennonites* have only confirmed for me just how important the US/Mexico borderlands and the people who reside there are to the continued development of Mennonite and Anabaptist studies.

To understand the history of (Old) Mennonite missions with Latina/os in the United States and Latin America, we can begin with Mennonite missionaries T. K. Hershey⁵ and William G. Detweiler. In the spring of 1936, Hershey and Detweiler loaded their Ford V-8 and drove from their homes in Pennsylvania to the US/Mexico borderlands. There they surveyed the Southwest from Texas to California in hopes of beginning a mission to the Mexican population.

The two missionaries documented their journey well, creating a goldmine of information that still sits at the Mennonite Church USA archives in Elkhart, Indiana, untouched for the most part by Mennonite historians.⁶ In small notebooks, they wrote down their impressions, places they stopped to eat, obser-

⁴ *Latino Mennonites* does not go in-depth to cover the work of more conservative Latina/o Mennonites in Lancaster Conference, for example, nor does the book cover communities in Florida. The book also stops in 1982, right at the moment when a new wave of leadership—more Latin American in orientation—began to take on important leadership positions in the United States. Some saw this new wave as a progressive step forward, but others viewed it as a move away from the more radical politics of Latina/o Mennonites from the United States.

⁵ The work of T. K. Hershey in Argentina and (later) of his son Lester in Puerto Rico was a significant part of the mission to Latinos across the Americas.

⁶ See the T. K. Hershey collection at the Mennonite Church Archives in Elkhart, Indiana. I should note that before Hershey and Detweiler set out on their journey, mis-

vations about the landscape, and notes about the abundance of agriculture in Texas.

After traveling more than seven thousand miles, Hershey and Detweiler decided that the South Texas region (just south of San Antonio), where a “good class of Mexicans”⁷ resided, represented the ideal spot for their mission work. The two men never elaborated on what exactly they meant by a “good class of Mexicans,” but I suspect they saw this population of mostly poor Mexican farm workers as quiet and docile—in other words, easy targets for religious conversion.

The South Texas region where Hershey and Detweiler began their missionary work had a violent and contested history, including routine killings and displacement of Mexicans.⁸ The Mexicans’ main source of oppression had come from the state itself and the law enforcement under its direction—the Texas Rangers and later the US Border Patrol (established in 1924). When the US war of aggression against Mexico began in the South Texas borderlands in 1846, land theft became a central part of white identity, and the Texas Rangers lynched and killed Mexicans.

Hershey and Detweiler, without any sense of where they were or the history of the region, started small mission churches there, supposedly meeting a passive Mexican population who surrounded them with love. Their observations were typical of white populations encountering Mexicans in the West and Southwest. Curious, they tried to make sense of this new race of people who were neither fully Black nor fully Indian but a mixed race, a “brown race.” The lack of clarity over Mexicans’ racial identity frustrated the missionaries.⁹ At the annual Mennonite Board of Missions and Charity meeting in 1943, missionary Amsa Kaufman reported that “as a class they [Mexicans] are more or less ignorant and given to vices, shooting and cutting affairs.”¹⁰ Kauffman was simply reading off of racial scripts that described Mexicans as violent—scripts whose

sionaries D. H. Bender and S. E. Allgyer conducted their own trip to the borderlands sixteen years earlier in March 1920.

7 Thirtieth Annual Report, Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities Annual Meeting, Belleville, PA, May 10–12, 1936, box 2, file 1, IV-6-3, Mennonite Church Archives, Elkhart, IN.

8 For more on anti-Mexican violence in Texas, see Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

9 Thirty-Seventh Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities Annual Meeting, Mission Board Report, 1943, box 4, file 7, IV-6-3, Mennonite Church Archives, Elkhart, IN.

10 Thirty-Seventh Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities Annual Meeting, Mission Board Report, 1943, box 4, file 7, IV-6-3. Mennonite Church Archives, Elkhart, IN.

histories were born out of colonialism, land theft, and state-sanctioned racial violence in Texas.

Concerns and questions about Mexicans as a racial group—as a brown race—extended into all areas of life. The flexibility and openness of the religious practices of Mexicans, for example, was seen as an extension of their mixed race and thus their confused sense of peoplehood. One minute Mennonites were baptizing the new believers they had welcomed into their small mission churches—very proud of their new converts—and the next, they were frustrated with those same converts attending Catholic mass or continuing to make their usual visits to the *curanderas* or *curanderos* (spiritual healers) in the community. Not sure what to think, Mennonites surmised that just as Mexicans are a mixed race people unable to govern themselves, they are also a deeply religiously confused people: “Many of these people do not know where they stand when it comes to religion,” they reported to their brethren in the north.¹¹

Around that same time, in the late 1930s, Mennonite Brethren (MB) missionaries arrived in the border communities of the western end of the Rio Grande Valley, in the small town of Los Ebanos, Texas. The MBs, never ones to be left behind, embarked on their own trek to the US/Mexico border. When missionary couple Harry and Sarah Neufeld arrived in the border town of Edinburg, Texas, they did what every white family did upon arriving in South Texas—they started looking for other white people. The Neufelds liked Edinburg, but they wanted to go more rural, deeper into the *ranchos* of the border region. When they stopped at the parsonage of the First Baptist Church, they were relieved to find the white pastor, who welcomed them and advised that if they dared to go to the rural border towns and villages, they would appear to the Mexican population as “foreign devils.”¹²

Nothing could have been further from the truth, however; the Neufelds were welcomed and treated like royalty by the Mexican population in Los Ebanos. During the first half of the twentieth century, the town had fluid borders that allowed people to cross freely. During prohibition, it was an important crossing for bootleggers and tequileros. During the Neufelds’ nearly twenty years in Los Ebanos, they lived in a two-story home that looked a lot like “little house on the prairie.”

11 David Alwine, “Mexican Border Mission,” *Gospel Herald* (March 9, 1939), accessed at the Mennonite Church Archives, Elkhart, IN.

12 Harry Neufeld, *Eight Years among the Latin Americans* (Hillsboro, KS: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Tabor College, 1945), 10–11. See also my master’s thesis: Felipe Hinojosa, “Yours for the Salvation of Mexican People: Race, Identity, and the Growth/Decline of Mennonite Brethren Missionary Efforts in South Texas, 1937–1971” (master’s thesis, University of Texas–Pan American, 2004).

At the height of their success, in the 1960s, they left South Texas. The Neufelds had planted a number of promising churches in the Rio Grande Valley and helped start a private Christian school that became popular among the Mexican American population. Their sudden departure prompted many in the community to believe it had everything to do with the love interest of their son, Gordon. The rumor was that Gordon had fallen in love with a Mexican girl, and, well, that was simply not acceptable. Shortly after the Neufelds found out about their son's love interest, they reported to the people of Los Ebanos that God had called them to another mission. They left and never returned.

I'll never forget the night I interviewed several *bermanas* (women elders in the MB church in South Texas) after a Wednesday night church service. The pastor informed me that my best chance at interviewing these women would be to join him in the van as he dropped them off at their homes after the service. I did just that. When I posed the question about Gordon's love interest, they knew exactly what I was referring to. Some argued that the Neufelds would never allow their son to marry a Mexican girl. Other women in the van scoffed at that notion; they did not believe that the Neufelds harbored any anti-Mexican sentiment. The conversation went back and forth without much consensus. I got the sense that these *bermanas* had not settled the issue and that would be just fine with them. At the end of the day, they simply wanted me to know how much they loved the Neufelds and the churches they had planted.¹³

Eight years after being in South Texas, Harry Neufeld collected his journal entries into a small book he titled *Eight Years among the Latin Americans*.¹⁴ The book serves as a window into Neufeld's thoughts, his sense of himself, and the kind of religious and racial superiority he believed in. A large portion of its pages are devoted to the work of *curanderos/as* (folk healers) in the small ranching communities of Los Ebanos, Chihuahua, Cuevitas, and La Grulla.¹⁵

13 In one interview, the MB pastor, Alfredo Tagle, shared with me: "He [Neufeld] told us one thing, but we all knew that the reason he left was because his son Gordon had fallen in love with a Mexican girl, and Neufeld did not believe in the mixing of the races" (Alfredo Tagle, Interview by author, tape recording, Mission, TX, September 2003). This comment by Rev. Tagle was confirmed in another conversation I had with the Rev. Ricardo Peña.

14 Harry M. Neufeld, *Eight Years among the Latin Americans* (Hillsboro, KS: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Tabor College, 1945).

15 For more on Mennonite Brethren missions in South Texas, see Felipe Hinojosa, "Race, Gender, and Mennonite Brethren Religious Identity Along the Texas-Mexico Border, Part 1," *Direction* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 145–58 and "Race, Gender, and Mennonite Brethren Religious Identity Along the Texas-Mexico Border, Part 2," *Direction* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 162–75.

To say that Harry Neufeld was an interesting character is an understatement. A somewhat charismatic man—or at least that’s the way he came across in his writings and in the documents inside the Tabor College archives—Neufeld wrote himself into the center of what reads like a superhero comic book, where Mexicans on the border were a primitive people and he was their savior. Below is a short excerpt:

One day when the missionary made his rounds to this home to visit the patient, the mother met him with a peculiar smile and twinkle in her eye and stated in Spanish: “Now we know what is the matter with our daughter.”

“Is that so?” asked the missionary rather surprised, “and what might that be?”

“Well,” the mother said, “she has ‘Susto.’”

“Susto, what is that?” asked the missionary.

“Don’t you know what ‘Susto’ is?” the mother asked in wonderment.

The missionary, not being very well versed in the language at the time, returned to his home two miles away, got a dictionary, and found the word ‘Susto’ to mean fear. He then drove back to the sick child’s home and announced that now he knew what ‘Susto’ meant.

“But why do you think that the child has ‘Susto?’” was his inquiry.

“Well, I know, because a lady came here and said so,” was her quick and triumphant reply.

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Who was the lady?”

“I don’t know that.”

“Have you ever seen her before?”

“No, I have not.”

“Well, how does the lady know she has ‘Susto?’”

“Well,” and with the typical shrug of the shoulders and protruding of the underlip of the mouth she answered, “I don’t know.”

“And after the girl has been taken to the doctor and the missionaries money has been spent on the medicine and for gas and oil on the car to take her there, and after the missionary has been kind to you and to watch over your girl and you are going to disregard all that and believe a perfectly strange woman that she has ‘Susto’? . . . I am going to ask you a favor. When that strange woman comes here to cure your daughter, don’t you let her touch

this girl. Keep her out of this home and you believe what I am telling you. I will guarantee you that your daughter will get well,” replied the missionary, grasping the “shield of faith.”¹⁶

Neufeld decried traditional *curanderismo* as a false belief system but had no objections to placing himself as the new “faith healer” in the community. He loved it so much he kept writing about it. Neufeld shared many of his healing stories in reports via the *Christian Leader*, the MB church magazine.

There is much crying in the village; a child is dying in the home of a staunch hostile Roman Catholic. Should we go there? Yes, we must! We go! We ask permission to pray. The medic has pronounced the child beyond recovery. But God hears our plea and immediately the child rallies and gets well. Rejoicing in the village? Surprise and wonderment? Yes, and not a little bit.¹⁷

The girl is bleeding from the nose. Nothing will stop it. The missionary is called. Prayer is made, but the girl bleeds on. A call to the doctor is urged, but it is too far to go to one . . . What shall be done? All eyes are upon the missionary . . . all the cotton is pulled out of the nostrils and washed out . . . the bleeding recedes and the girl is better.¹⁸

Neufeld (MB) and T. K. Hershey (Old Mennonite) were part of a constellation of Mennonite missionaries making their way through the US/Mexico borderlands, Latin America, Africa, and India. Theirs was an emerging white Mennonite generation—still tied to their ethnic roots but more Americanized—that stitched evangelism to their increasing awareness of being white. In the process, they demonized these regions, positioned themselves as saviors, and wrote back about their experiences to an eager public across the Great Plains and Midwest that had funded this exoticism. Through their letters and magazine articles and annual conference reports, they shaped an entire generation’s views on the borderlands in general and the Mexican population in particular.

I genuinely believe that the Neufelds and Hersheys of the world wrote about and interacted with people from the borderlands believing they were doing the right thing. Racism, after all, can operate as common sense—as a normal way for white people, especially missionaries, to define their relationships with nonwhite people. They believed in their paternalism and they believed in their racial superiority as a sociohistorical fact. And yet it is in that process, in living with and among Mexicans in the borderlands (and in urban missionary centers

16 Neufeld, 41–42.

17 Harry Neufeld, “God Works in Los Ebanos,” *Christian Leader* 9, no. 5 (April 1945).

18 Neufeld, “God Works in Los Ebanos.”

with Latino and African American populations), that Mennonites first began to see and live into their whiteness.

I would not have been able to grasp this without spending countless hours in Mennonite archives reading primary documents such as their missionary reports. I write more about this in my book, but suffice it to say here that while much has been written about how peace activism and nonresistance shaped Mennonite identity throughout the twentieth century, we still know little about the role of evangelical missions in shaping that same identity. The two—peace work and missionary work—cannot be separated.

What really stood out for me in those documents—from conference meeting minutes to magazine articles to missionary reports—was the manner in which a people whose own journey had created beautiful and deep connections to the land and to place, people whose own migration experiences had been traumatic and difficult, began to parrot racist discourses about the borderlands and the people who lived there. In the mission field, far from their Midwestern homes, ethnic Mennonites became white Mennonites.

The South Texas region where the Mennonites first arrived remains contested land. A land with a history of violence and resistance. It is a region where Texas Rangers lynched Mexicans, killing them at random, and also where the oldest Latino civil rights organization—the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)—started in 1929. Here, Mennonites arrived like every other missionary group—unaware of the region’s history, the violence, the dispossession. Few of the MB leaders, for example, understood the significance for a border community of having a church building with bullet holes from battles tied to the Mexican revolution.

Relation to place has been a critical point in much of the Mennonite and Anabaptist history. That focus makes sense given that many of the Mennonite immigrants to the United States settled in defined locations across the East and Midwest, and later the West. The cities and towns in which they ended up—Hillsboro and Newton, Kansas; Reedley and Fresno, California; and Goshen and Elkhart, Indiana—historian Paul Toews called “holy places.”¹⁹ But as I think about things now, it is clear to me that studying Mennonite missions outside of these holy places can reveal as much or more, perhaps, about Mennonite identity and history. Perhaps that is the value of studying the missionary projects of Mennonites in the twentieth century: they turn us inward, to study a group of people whose ethnic and racial transitions are seen most clearly when observed from the outside in. I tried to do this in *Latino Mennonites*—to show that by studying the origins and development of Latina/os, and other nonwhite

¹⁹ Paul Toews, “The Quest for the Mennonite Holy Grail: Reflections on ‘The Mennonite Experience in America’ Project,” *Direction Journal* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 43.

Mennonite populations in the Mennonite Church, we can gain a deep and significant knowledge about Mennonite and Anabaptist history.

For those of us working on rewriting the Mennonite story in the United States, deterritorializing Mennonite studies—moving the story away from its current ethnic and place-based trappings—has the potential to open new avenues that take us to the various locations where Mennonite history occurred: in the West, the South, the Pacific Northwest, the US/Mexico borderlands, and beyond. Doing so can help us better understand how racism and oppression take place, how people of color have redefined the Mennonite experience, and what the range of Mennonite and Anabaptist history can teach us about religious experiences in the United States and across the globe. I know that in my corner of the world, in the *barrios* of the US/Mexico borderlands, there are many stories yet to be told.