

INTRODUCTION

They Did Not Come to My Mexico

My great-grandmother and six great-aunts and uncles and their children emigrated from Canada to northern Mexico, along with several thousand other Canadian Mennonites, between the 1920s and the 1940s.¹ These immigrants lived on individual farms in the states of Chihuahua and Durango. These farms were grouped into villages, which were then grouped into colonies. To this day, some of my relatives live in colonies. They and their descendants aim to pursue their own educational systems and religious practices, preserve their Low German language and farm in tight-knit communities.²

They did not come to the Mexico I had learned about through my previous academic work on twentieth-century Mexican literature. When I traveled to visit them, I did not know what to say. There was often a language barrier. So, I listened and I watched. I noticed that the land, their land, the land I almost could have come from, shaped them. I was impressed with how they used their comparative isolation to preserve their religion, language, and family structures and carefully monitored their interaction with the world beyond their communities.

My work in Mexican studies has given me the remarkable privilege of meeting many Mormons belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church). I learned that there is a group of LDS people with roots in nineteenth-century Utah who live very close to several Mennonite colonies. In spite of theological differences between Mennonites and Mormons, the Mexican press and archives have confused the two groups; moreover, several academics have studied them alongside of one another.

This book, *Liminal Sovereignty: Mennonites and Mormons in Mexican Culture*, explores the question of belonging as it relates to these minority religious groups and Mexican nationhood: were they inside or where they outside

of the understanding of Mexico after the 1910 Revolution?³ When? Under which circumstances? It answers these questions by examining the ways that visual and print culture, here confined to photography, film, television, comics, and archival documents, represent the relationship between these Mennonites and the outside world, or Mexican society. It will compare them to understandings of the groups of Mormons who live in Chihuahua, represented in similar sources. I argue throughout this book that the perception of these two groups, who theoretically occupy a space at the edges of the nation, aligns with ideas of the Mexican nation, from *mestizaje* [racial mixture] at the beginning of the twentieth century to violence and death in the early twenty-first.

The book argues that these groups at the edges are an integral part of the nation. This emphasis on the state of exception comes out of Carl Schmitt's foundational work on the state of exception and Giorgio Agamben's recent interpretation of it. Schmitt famously stated that the "Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception" (5).⁴ That is, the entity in charge of the state is the one who is allowed to decide how, and under which circumstances, to enforce the constitution and the law that comes out of it. As political scientist Gabriella Slomp explains, for Agamben, "under normal circumstances, the state was still the primary entity . . . but under exceptional circumstances groups or parties that did not see the state as protecting their own way of life developed into political units" (59). These units could then threaten the sovereign, and challenge the application of the law. Agamben notes that the exception does not necessarily mean a dictatorship. Instead, it is "a space devoid of law . . . in which all legal determinations—and above all the very distinction between public and private—are deactivated" but that remains connected to the law and the legal system (50). The minority religious groups, who have developed agreements for exceptions to Mexican law, are exceptional in a different way—their communities temporarily suspend the rule of the law; in a context of a widespread suspension of the law, they are no more or less likely to be attacked or ignored than others.

This book focuses on Mennonites and Mormons from 1920 to the early twenty-first century in Mexican history and culture. In so doing, it will show how these groups fit into the Mexican exception and how Mexican concepts of nationhood have been flexible enough to accommodate them. Mexican visual and print culture presents two schools of thought about these religious

minorities. One idealizes both groups, stating that they are hardworking contributors who better their regional and national economies. The other is that they are bad for the nation because they refuse to integrate with its schools, its language, or the entirety of its laws. The idealistic tendencies tend to surge in periods of economic growth or revolutionary optimism, while the critical tendency approaches in times of economic downturn and uncertainty. It also rises among concerns about the rights of indigenous people, which are often in conflict with the comparatively privileged positions of the Mennonites and the Mormons.

The Mormons this book discusses descendants from those who emigrated from the US to Mexico in the 1880s and eventually set up colonies in the states of Chihuahua and Sonora. It is important to note, however, that other Mormons in Mexico vastly outnumber these US-descendant Mormons. According to official LDS church statistics, there are 1.3 million LDS Mormons in Mexico (“Facts and Statistics”). Mormon colonies were and are the size of a small town surrounded by extensive landholdings used for cattle ranching, fruit trees, and crop farming. The vast majority of these Mormons left their homes in Mexico in 1912, and some of them returned to Mexico in the 1920s.⁵ The Mennonites, for their part, emigrated from Canada to Mexico en masse mostly between 1922 and 1926. Today there are some Mennonites in Mexico who do not live in colonies, but they are in the minority. Both groups’ migration patterns, then, and commitment to a level of separation from society mean that the surrounding government has had to expand some of its ideas to accommodate them. These groups have also had to change their understanding of their separation in order to remain in their host country.

EXCEPTIONALITY IN MEXICO

The two religious groups suggest that Mexico’s status as a state of exception is not new.⁶ Indeed, the religious groups settled in Mexico in order to live out their particular beliefs, and only came to Mexico upon agreements with the Mexican government that they would have freedom to do so. The LDS Mormons who live in what are today Colonias Juárez and Dublán are primarily descendants of people who bought land there as part of colonization companies in the 1880s and 1890s. A contract printed in the October 12,

1893, *Diario Oficial de la Federación* provides us with details of their settlement.⁷ It allowed the Mormon-owned Mexican Colonization Company in the states of Chihuahua and Sonora to act as a land broker in those states as long as the land they purchased was not in a border zone (Secretaría de Fomento 3).⁸ The agreement provided a flexible definition of the term family. It could be any group with one or two parents and their children; it could also be a group of siblings, as long as one has reached the age of maturity. This flexibility, which we see in other agreements from the time period, was likely meant to account for different constructions of family that resulted from illness and death. Conveniently for the Mormons, it allowed for polygamous families to register as independent family units without falsifying legal documents. According to Mormon historian B. Carmon Hardy's *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (1992), early Mormons struggled in Mexico. He explains that bigamy has always been forbidden in Mexico, and private polygamous marriages have also fallen outside of the intent of Mexican law (Hardy 173). Hardy adds that Mexican legal "intent" also allowed for adultery in the case of men; so, polygamy in Mexico was tolerable (174).⁹

In addition to this semblance of permission for an alternative family formation, the agreement does not force Mormons into a concept of Mexican identity. It acknowledges that the Mormons are not from Mexico and so it allows for exemption from military service and from federal and state taxes. They are only to pay municipal taxes and *impuestos de timbres y estampillas* [taxes on property loans or other forms of credit]. The agreement gives the Mormons a strong economic incentive for their agricultural pursuits. They will be allowed to import without restriction and will be rewarded for their economic contributions. It also gives them a tacit recognition for their own state; they are allowed to sign their own passports and avoid Mexican consular services (Secretaría de Fomento 3). The Mormons were expected to contribute to the region and would be rewarded by being able to act essentially as their own mini-state, pay limited taxes and have their own family formation. The LDS church officially abandoned polygamy in the late nineteenth century. Other religious groups that also claim the name Mormon continue to practice it, and I deal with them in chapters two and four, calling them non-LDS Mormons. These people continue to be granted unofficial exemptions from Mexican polygamy laws.¹⁰

The Mennonites, who primarily belong to the Old Colony Mennonite Church, today are spread out over the states of Chihuahua, Durango, Zacatecas,

Tamaulipas, Campeche, and others, were also granted their own exceptions that satisfied their particular religious beliefs. A letter signed by then-president Álvaro Obregón (1920–24), tells Mennonite leaders:

1. You will not be forced to accept military service.
2. In no case will you be compelled to swear oaths.
3. You will be completely free to exercise your religious principles and to observe the regulations of your church, without being in any manner molested or restricted in any way.
4. You are fully authorized to establish your own schools, with your own teachers, without any hindrance from the government. Concerning this point, our laws are exceedingly liberal.
5. You may dispose of your property in any way you desire. The government will raise no objections to the establishment among the members of your sect of any economic system which they may voluntarily want to adopt.

It is the most ardent desire of this government to provide favorable conditions to colonists such as Mennonites who love order, lead moral lives, and are industrious. Therefore, we would deem it a pleasure if this answer would satisfy you. The aforementioned privileges being guaranteed by our laws, we hope that you will take advantage of them positively and permanently. (Redekop 251)

This preserved the Mennonites' freedom of religion and reassured them that they could come to Mexico.¹¹

HISTORY AND CURRENT PRACTICES OF THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Mennonites and Mormons, as religious groups, both arrived in Mexico seeking religious freedom. The beliefs highlighted in these agreements with the Mexican government have led to misunderstanding by broader society.

Some scholars have already compared the two groups and highlights their unique features and similarities.¹² These scholars tend to focus on how the religious minorities protect themselves from the world. Glenda Miller's superb MA thesis in anthropology, *A Comparison of the Mennonite and Mormon*

Colonies in Northern Mexico (1990), situates both groups in their historical context. She conducted a range of interviews and observed community members, to argue that:

both groups [are] products of utopian movements, of persecutions, of religious identities, and of migrations. To the extent that both groups see themselves as chosen people similar to the Israelites of the Old Testament, we can safely say their respective religions establish their world views and determine their social structures and social systems which allow them to pursue their religious goals in an increasingly secular world. (42)

Miller concludes that the Mennonites are an insular group with a survivalist mentality, and that Mormons, while maintaining strict boundaries, are more open to integration and self-improvement. I contest these assertions of separation and boundaries throughout my work.

These Mennonites are part of the Anabaptist religious movement and began during the Radical Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe. Some men felt that others who were reforming the Catholic Church, such as Martin Luther, were not going far enough. They reformed the Reformation by rebaptizing one another. Eventually, groups of rebaptizers began to be called Mennonites, after one of their early leaders, Menno Simons. In Mexico, the Mennonites trace their history to the Netherlands and to the migrations from there to Poland, part of which was later taken over by Prussia, and the migrations from there to Russia late in the eighteenth century, and from Russia to Manitoba, Canada, late in the nineteenth. At the time in the 1870s when about 8,000 moved from Russia to Manitoba, another 11,000 Mennonites from Russia moved to Kansas and Nebraska in the US. Unlike most Amish, Brethren, or Mennonites in the eastern part of the United States, they do not trace their history to Switzerland or southern Germany.

The Mennonites who moved from Russia to Manitoba in the 1870s belonged to three groups: the *Bergthaler*, the *Kleine Gemeinde*, and what became known as the Old Colony church. The official name of this last group was *Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde* but they were commonly known as Old Colonists because they originated from the oldest colony in Russia. Of the three groups that settled in Manitoba, the Old Colonists were the most conservative. This meant that they were the most determined to follow a separate and more communal way of life: they wanted to live in street villages on a block

of land by themselves and run their own affairs; they were firm in resisting all governmental overtures about teaching English in their schools; and they had strict dress codes and rules about the use of technology.

This separate lifestyle was not to last. Shortly after World War I (1914–18) the provincial governments in Manitoba and Saskatchewan passed laws making attendance at English-language public schools compulsory. Old Colony people paid heavy fines and sent delegations abroad to look for a new homeland. In 1921, they found what they were looking for in Mexico. Thus, starting in 1922, 6,000 Low German Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan moved to Mexico. They settled in exclusive colonies on the large blocks of land that they had purchased. They built villages and constructed houses, barns, schools, and churches. The first Mennonites left Manitoba for Chihuahua in March 1922, a movement that ended in 1926. The movement to Durango started in June 1924; there were seven more trains that took people from Saskatchewan to Mexico until 1926, and several small groups continued to migrate to Mexico until 1934 (Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country* 62).

Historians contextualize the Mennonite arrival in significant historical developments in the 1920s in northern Mexico. Martina E. Will's "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua: Reflections of Competing Visions" (1997) provides a balanced explanation of the relationship between Mexico and its Mennonite minority. She explains that the Mexican government, under President Álvaro Obregón (1920–24), granted Mennonites multiple exceptions to various laws because of ongoing post-Revolutionary conflict in the state of Chihuahua and the desire to repopulate the north with subjects who would be loyal to the new president (Will 353–54). This implies that the Mexican government was hoping to integrate these people after some time had passed. Historian Daniel Nugent's *Spent Cartridges of Revolution: An Anthropological History of Namiquipa, Chihuahua* (1993) complicates this implication by pointing out an alliance between the government and wealthy landowners vulnerable to having their land redistributed through agrarian reform laws. Nugent explains that the Mennonites bought land at ten times the going rate in Chihuahua and that this large land purchase may have benefited the previous landowners, the Zuloaga family, and the government.

From the 1920s to the 1940s, Mennonites found it hard to live in Mexico. Some became very poor; crops that had worked well in Canada did not work so well in Mexico. At the same time, everyone in a given colony belonged to

the same church; the church was led by a Bishop and a council of ministers; they regulated many aspects of life in the colony—farm tractors with rubber tires were prohibited, and the village schools were carefully controlled. Martha Chávez Quezada’s 1948 undergraduate thesis—the earliest I am aware of—notes that Mennonites contribute economically to Mexico, and she praises the way the community cares for widows and orphans (80–81). At the same time, she observes that: “sería conveniente que a cambio de estas concesiones ellos aceptaran incluir en sus programas escolares el aprendizaje del idioma” [“it would be convenient that in return for these concessions they would include (Spanish) language learning as part of their educational programming”] (91). This wish is ongoing and represents one popular opinion about Mennonites in Mexico. Similarly, Santiago Fierro Martínez’s detailed 1989 study about Mennonites in the Mexican state of Durango explains some of the Mennonite social fabric. He establishes that not all Mennonites are wealthy, the way their communities allow for some wealth redistribution, by leaving some land for cultivation by poorer people, and low-interest loans from the church, should be an example for other campesinos (Fierro Martínez 66).¹³

Over the next several decades, Old Colony churches in a majority of the colonies in Mexico changed. They began to allow rubber tires on farm tractors; they also allowed cars and trucks and telephones; after NAFTA, almost all colonies connected to the national electricity grid. Jason H. Dormady’s “Mennonite Colonization in Mexico and the Pendulum of Modernization, 1920–2013” (2014) even suggests that Mennonite privileges in education and exemption from military service no longer officially exist due to recent secularization laws. This has not yet affected the Mennonites’ lives. Dormady also presents significant concerns about the Mennonites as they interact with the government, and for their future, particularly regarding water use (Dormady “Mennonite Colonization” 190).¹⁴ Velia Patricia Barragán Cisneros’ *Los menonitas* [sic] *en la historia del derecho: Un estatuto jurídico particular* [*Mennonites in the History of the Law: A Particular Judicial Status*] (2006) reflects on these more recent changes, and she expresses concern that Mennonites are losing their distinctiveness. She worries that their morals are straying, and is somewhat mollified by her incorrect assumption that Mennonites have their own police force (Barragán Cisneros 167, 170).¹⁵

These historical accounts relate to the way that Mennonites live in Mexico today. Recently, Liliana Salomán Meraz’s *Historia de los menonitas radicados en*

Durango [History of Mennonites in Durango] (2010), has presented a more complete portrayal of the community. After several years of working in the Nuevo Ideal colony as a teacher in a school for less traditional Mennonites, she wrote this book. In addition to immense respect for her subjects, she describes the history of Mennonites in Durango by analyzing newspapers from the 1920s to the present and interviewing community leaders. Her work, and that of historian Royden Loewen and sociologist Luann Good Gingrich, provides an idea of typical Mennonite life in Mexico.

Calvin Redekop's *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (1969) details some religious practices that continue into the present.¹⁶ These sources and my own experience of visiting Mennonites in Mexico suggests that Old Colony worship services are unique. They begin as early as 8:00 a.m., the men and women sit on opposite sides of the church. These services include prayers, songs, and a sermon. There are several men who, under the authority of their local Bishop, are ordained by the congregation. One will preach on a given Sunday, either his own words or a sermon of another minister. They also have two silent prayers for which the people kneel. The most distinct part of an Old Colony service is the singing. *Vorsinger*, a group of men, lead the church in singing; people bring their own *Gesangbuecher* [hymnbooks] with them. The more conservative Old Colony churches will sing *Langewiese*, or *Aulewiese* [a slower melody], called, that some have compared to Gregorian chanting; other Old Colony churches, sing a still slow *Kurzewiese* [short melody]. Old Colony people join the church upon baptism, usually a few weeks before marriage. They will celebrate communion twice a year. Old Colony women typically wear dresses in darker colors that go to mid-calf, with stockings for church. The way a woman wears a kerchief, and the embroidery on it, may indicate the colony she comes from. More traditional men wear homemade overalls and shirts, and the less traditional ones would wear jeans and button-down shirts. To work they wear Mexican or Southwestern style cowboy hats, or baseball caps. Young men who have not yet been baptized might have flashy belts. Most men are clean shaven with short hair.¹⁷

The other Mennonites in Mexico belong to a variety of churches, which follow the Mennonite beliefs of adult baptism, nonresistance, by avoiding the military draft, and various understandings of separation from society. Some belong to groups like the *Kleine Gemeinde* that have plain dress, an evangelical approach to their religious beliefs, and a less restricted understanding of

technology. Children who attend their schools learn how to read and write in German and Spanish. Others belong to churches that partner with Spanish-speaking Mennonites in Mexico, such as the *Conferencia Menonita de México* [Conference Church in Mexico], or the *Conferencia Misionera Evangélica* [Evangelical Missionary Conference]. These groups sponsor schools that follow the government's guidelines and do not follow strict guidelines regarding clothing (Kraybill 232–34).¹⁸ The Mexican government, and Mexican culture, do not distinguish between these groups. They typically assume that all Mennonites are somewhat like members of the Old Colony church. Those who live closer to the Mennonite communities in Chihuahua are somewhat aware of subtle differences between these groups.

Mormonism began several centuries later than the Anabaptism that led to the Mennonites. It began in the United States, during the Second Great Awakening (1790–1840), which was a period of intense religious revival. In 1820, a young man called Joseph Smith received a vision in the woods near his parents' home in Palmyra, New York. He believed that he saw Jesus Christ, who he understood to be the son of God, and learned that Jesus' message was one of atonement for sin. Joseph Smith received a second, more significant revelation in 1823, which showed him what he understood to be additional scriptures, that is, additional writings from God. Thanks to these visions, he began a religious movement that moved from New York to Ohio, Illinois, and Utah. In each state, the early Mormons faced persecution for their unusual beliefs.

Persecution grew more intense once the US public began to suspect that this new religious movement was practicing polygamy. Joseph received two revelations regarding polygamy, specifically, polygyny. First, in 1831, that polygamy was acceptable to God. Then, in 1834 that it was commanded by God (Hales "The Beginnings of Mormon Polygamy"). Then, in 1852, Brigham Young reiterated Joseph's earlier quieter proclamations regarding polygamy. He officially announced it, and in 1862, the United States government criminalized polygamy for the first time. In the 1880s, the federal government increased legislation against polygamy, and many families left the United States for Mexico and Canada. In 1890, an LDS president, or highest level of leadership, proclaimed that plural marriage, which is what the church called polygamy, was no longer commanded. In 1904, another president proclaimed that these marriages are no longer *permitted*. During this time period, in Mexico and the US, many families continue to live as they had been living. Some men sought to

continue polygamous lifestyles and performed multiple marriages. Eventually these men organize into a group that continues to believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and that polygamy is a way that they can show their religious devotion. Over time, this group divides into multiple other groups. Today, there were more than four hundred groups that call themselves Mormon and believe that they are the Restored Church. In other words, each group believes that they are following Joseph Smith's interpretation of how to return to the message of Jesus as relayed by the New Testament (Hales "Chronology").¹⁹

In Mexico, as in the United States, the largest and longest-standing of these groups is the LDS church. Members of the LDS church with roots in Utah have reflected on their experience. Some, like Thomas C. Romney's *The Mormons in Mexico* (1938), represent earlier points of view about the relationship between Mormons and Mexican society. He predicted that the Mormon colonies will have a positive influence on the "highly emotional" Mexicans (T. Romney 310). His work forms a background for other scholars, such as F. LaMond Tullis. Tullis' *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture* (1987) reflects on the Mormons' difficult return to Mexico in the 1920s (Tullis 95).²⁰ Today, the LDS church believes that Joseph Smith was a prophet who invited them to return to what they understand as Christian tenets, where Jesus Christ is a savior who atones from sins. In the view of the LDS church, the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants enhance, rather than detract from, the story of Jesus in the Bible. It also includes the Pearl of Great Price, the writings of Joseph Smith, in its holy books. The LDS church places significant emphasis on the family, as for them, families can continue to be bonded to one another after death.²¹

In practice, the LDS church requires that its members commit to their beliefs with significant time, as it has a primarily lay leadership. Each member contributes to their individual congregations; men are priests, bishops, and church leaders. Most members have specific duties in their churches, such as working with children, adolescents, music, or visiting people. Families commit to spending at least one evening each week together in religious devotion and a fun activity. The vast majority of young men, and many young women, also serve the LDS church as missionaries. In addition to this time commitment during the week, the LDS church meets on Sundays, for three hours. The first hour is called sacrament meeting, and is much like other Protestant churches, with hymns, preaching, and a communion, which they call sacrament, of bread

and water. The first Sunday of every month, they fast from two meals and share testimonies. During the second hour of church, people attend Sunday School and then for the third hour, older adolescents and adults attend meetings, either of priests, for men, or relief society, for women. Members keep what they term the Word of Wisdom, that is, life without smoking, alcohol, coffee, and, depending on interpretation, caffeinated soft drinks or hot drinks. Children are baptized when they are eight, which the LDS Church understands as the age of accountability. Older members of the LDS church in good standing may also go to temples, buildings that are different from the places where they meet on Sundays. These temples, which are open to the public only before they have been consecrated, are places for church members to meet other spiritual needs, to celebrate religious wedding services, and for other rituals important in their lives.

A few chapters in this book also discuss the lives and perceptions of the LeBaron polygamous group.²² Social scientists and historians have already compared the LeBarons to Mennonites and to LDS Mormons. Anthropologist Janet Bennion's *Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahua Valley* (2004) compares the three groups. Bennion asserts that the desert fosters patriarchy in each of these religious groups and concludes that this isolated environment allows Mennonites and Mormons to preserve their ways of life. This is useful only in so far as it places the lived experiences of Mennonites, LDS Mormons, and non-LDS Mormons alongside of one another (*Desert Patriarchy* 6–7).²³ Historian Philip R. Stover also mentions these three groups in his work *Religion and Revolution in Mexico's North* (2014). He focuses on the changing influence of the Catholic Church in Mexico and part of this change, he observes, is the result of the influence of minority religious groups (Stover 301–30). Moreover, historian Jason Dormady's *Primitive Revolution: Restorationist Religion and the Idea of the Mexican Revolution, 1940–1968* (2011) places this group alongside of multiple polygamous groups in Mexico. He describes the divisions among Mormons in the US and their influence on Mexico, including polygamous groups that have existed since Mormonism's inception as well as smaller polygamous groups that emerged when some Mormons left Mexico for the US in the 1910s.

The LeBarons are a spiritual descendant of the group of men who believed that polygamy was God's commandment, and who disagreed with LDS church

leadership over ending this way of life. The LeBarons, like other polygamists, calls themselves Mormon and believe that the LDS church is not the true church. This group, like other fundamentalist Mormon groups, ties their genealogy and authority to continue polygamous marriages, directly to Joseph Smith (Bennion *Polygamy in Primetime* 60). Its first leader, Alma “Dayer” LeBaron, had grown up in Colonia Dublán, in Mexico and was educated in Colonia Juárez. In 1904, he married Barbara Johnson (Hansen Park “Episode 76: The LeBarons”). At that time, he would have been acquainted with polygamous families but would not have seen new polygamous marriages taking place.²⁴ He then received a revelation that he should have a second wife. Revelations are important to Mormons, because they understand that Joseph Smith had a personal revelation that led to a new way of understanding.²⁵ After this revelation, Barbara leaves Alma LeBaron and returns to the US. During the revolution, Alma moved back to Utah, like many Mormons in the early 1900s. There, in 1910, he married Maude McDonald and then in 1923, he married Onie Jones (Hansen Park “Episode 76: The LeBarons”). They returned to Mexico in 1924 and lived briefly in Colonia Juárez, where Alma LeBaron, like many others in the area, had fruit orchards in Colonia Pacheco. The LDS church asked the three, now in a polygamous situation, to leave the LDS church. The LeBarons moved to a nearby municipality, Galeana, and developed an affiliation with other then-preeminent polygamous Mormon leaders of the church in the US (Hales). These ties were furthered when a leader of the “Allred Group,” now called the Apostolic United Brethren (AUB), lived with the LeBarons in the 1940s (Hales). In spite of this affiliation with polygamists, two of Alma Dayer LeBaron’s sons, Joel and Ervil, served missions with the LDS church (Bennion *Desert Patriarchy* 57). Joel, Ervil, and their brother Ross, continued to receive revelations that they were the true leaders, and so they ended the affiliation with the Allreds in 1955. Joel LeBaron establishes the Church of the Firstborn of the Fulness [sic] of Times in Mexico; another brother, Ross LeBaron, starts a related church in Utah. Eventually, Ervil LeBaron splits from Joel’s movement, again regaining authority, establishing the Church of the Lamb of God in 1971. He orchestrates Joel’s murder in 1972, and the murder of Rulon Allred, the leader of the Allred group, in 1977. Ervil attempts to have another brother, Verlan, murdered at Rulon Allred’s funeral, but this plan fails, and he dies in prison in 1981. That same year, Verlan died

in a car crash in what some say were suspicious circumstances (Hales; Bennion *Polygamy in Primetime* 50).

Today, this group, as Bennion explains, shares many practices with other fundamentalist Mormon groups. It is based on a united order, or shared economy, and polygamous families, which they call celestial marriage. The economy largely relies on migrant labor in the United States and small businesses in Mexico. In terms of family structure, it is patriarchal, where women and children defer to the male head of the household (Bennion *Desert Patriarchy* 60; *Polygamy in Primetime* 49). The LeBarons add what they would call “kingdom building.” Unlike some polygamous groups, the LeBarons have a long history of actively proselytizing.²⁶ This means that in Mexico their community has US and Mexican roots, although those with US roots lead the community. For this reason, they sponsor a bilingual school in the same building as their church, with English as the dominant language. There, children attend school to the equivalent of a fifth or sixth grade. Janet Bennion, who displays a remarkable understanding of their community even though she is an outsider, has not been able to explore their religious services. Former members of this community, such as Anna LeBaron, do not discuss this aspect of their community either (Hansen Park “Episode 121”). Other former members, such as Ruth Wariner, simply explain that there was preaching in church and that they had to memorize scripture at home (134, 319). This group, while sharing some historical contact with the LDS Mormons in Colonias Juárez and Dublán, has a distinct lifestyle. For this reason, I present the groups as distinct from one another.

MENNONITES AND MORMONS IN MEXICAN AND IN US POPULAR CULTURE

Popular culture reflects some of the more unusual aspects of each group; in Mexico, these typically include plain dress and relationship to criminality, either as criminals or innocent victims. This book focuses on the representations in visual and print culture. Visual culture is defined here as those examples of culture meant for visual pleasure, consumption, or meaning. In this case it includes photographs, television shows, webcomics, and film. Print culture refers to the culture surrounding printed or written documents, and, here, refers to legal documents and narrative histories. This vocabulary choice is deliberate as it emphasizes that these cultural artifacts are products of a specific time, from a

specific group, for a specific audience. It also, following the work of scholars like Nicholas Mirzoeff, notes that an artifact's cultural significance includes its production, circulation, and reception, and that the consumption of visual culture is central to the postmodern period (1–13). This approach thus highlights the role of interpretation and contextualization. For this reason, the book places the representations of both religious groups in their historical context because it believes that an identity is created, and so should be understood, in its context. From this perspective, then, studying Mennonites and Mormons in visual and print culture sheds light on the Mexican society that produced it.

This approach is well documented in Mexican cultural studies, with the work of Emily Hind, Pedro Ángel Palou, and others. It has also been used to explore religious and cultural minorities. Scholars of education have examined Mormon education in the US to understand broader educational trends in the United States (Esplin et al. 388). Literary and cultural critics who focus on tropes relating to the representation of African-American and Jewish people are also informative for my study. Critic Eugenia DeLamotte, for instance, has drawn parallels between representations of African-Americans in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and American literature and emerging scientific discourse around race (17–18). More recently, Sara R. Horowitz deals with the representation of Jews and Judaism in US culture. She observes that representations can oscillate between adoration and hatred. Horowitz states that: “Real and imagined Jewish economic successes in America contribute to the perception of Jews as a privileged rather than oppressed minority, not only ‘white’ but ‘elite’ . . . Jews are victimized by their own positive stereotypes” (123). This development or imposition of another identity on a religious and ethnic minority group is similar to the way that Mennonites and Mormons are understood in Mexico.

The book does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of the representation of these groups in Mexico; rather, its chapters are like discrete windows on that interaction. The windows reveal the views of government officials, ejidos, novelists, and television producers toward these groups. They show that Mennonites and Mormons have been viewed in different ways: with hostility, uneasy acceptance, and, on occasion, with admiration. Theirs has never been an entirely comfortable fit within Mexico but they have enjoyed enough support, particularly because of their economic contributions, that they have weathered the crises and survived.

The first of these windows is the “birth” of these groups in Mexico. In other words, examples of culture that deal with the Mennonite arrival in early twentieth-century Mexico and to the Mormons’ post-Revolutionary return. The Revolution was a loose coalition, which, by 1940, solidified under the control of a single political party that was beginning to develop the notion of a single mixed race as Mexico’s future. The first chapter focuses on how the Mennonites and Mormons are represented in migration documents’ (1926–59) photographs and accompanying descriptions in light of the desire for a single race. Following this initial period, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* [Institutional Revolutionary Party] (PRI) built society through alliances with other players, including with campesinos invested in reforming landholding patterns in Mexico. The second and third chapters deal with both groups’ relationships with one of these revolutionary emphases, landholding patterns, in particular, to *ejido* [land redistributed through agrarian reform] conflicts from 1927 to the present.²⁷ Economic crises in the 1980s, NAFTA in 1993 changed Mexico, and the US’ antidrug campaigns marked Mexico and, given these geopolitical changes and shifting global markets, it became known for drug-trafficking. The fourth chapter explores how the religious minorities fit into this stage of Mexican history. I contrast the representation of the Mennonites’ supposed criminality with the Mormons’ perfect victimhood. To do, I analyze a webcomic, *MacBurro* [*McDonkey* or *McStupid*] (2013–15), and two television shows, *The Bridge* (2012–13) and *Los héroes del norte* [*The Heroes of the North*] (2010–15) and a narrative history of the kidnapping of a boy from a small polygamous Mormon group. The final chapter reflects on the present, and considers ways to develop mutual understanding, with images of love, technology, and death in the Mennonite community in Eunice Adorno’s photography collection *Las mujeres flores* [*The Flower Women*] (2011) and Carlos Reygadas’ film, *Stellet Licht* [*Silent Light*] (2007). Mennonites and Mormons are represented as outliers—a closer study shows us that the representation of these minorities follows trends in the understanding of Mexican nationhood.

Liminal Sovereignty also dialogues with critics of the ways both religious minorities have been represented in the United States’ visual culture, particularly popular television and books. This is because no scholar has explicitly studied how Mormons or Mennonites are represented in popular culture in any Latin American country.²⁸ So, I engage with David Weaver-Zercher’s

The Amish in the American Imagination (2001), which analyzes how the Amish, a group related to the Mennonites, are represented in music, film, and narrative fiction (5–10).²⁹ He concludes that this presence suggests that the Amish are integrated in the United States (D. Weaver-Zercher 196). I suggest that the experience and representation of Mormons and Mennonites is similar—they may advocate for separation but are firmly embedded in the surrounding culture. I also ground my work in the circulation and consumption of popular culture. This influences the way I analyze the circulation of legal documents, letters, and memos as well as television shows and films. For this reason, I draw on Valerie Weaver-Zercher’s *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels* (2013), which surveys Amish-themed romance fiction and situates its immense popularity in commodity theory. She interviews the genre’s readers and writers, including Amish people. She suggests that the popularity relates to US nostalgia for the past and for its (often mistaken) belief that life is simpler in that community (V. Weaver-Zercher 179–80). This also lends itself to the Mexican audience’s recent interest in Mennonite and Mormon stories on screen and in photography.

This book also engages, in several chapters, with the portrayal of women as criminals, as beautiful corpses, and as members of polygamous Mormon communities. For this reason, I turn to contemporary feminist approaches to the study of Mormonism, particularly those that suggest the representation of Mormons on screen facilitates their integration into the US.³⁰ Critic Tanya Zuk’s “‘Proud Mormon Polygamist’: Assimilation, Popular Memory, and the Mormon Churches in *Big Love*” (2014), which deals with the ways that different Mormon churches are portrayed on television, argues that the portrayal of suburban polygamists on *Big Love* will encourage their acceptance (94–95). Bennion’s *Polygamy in Primetime* also discusses this television show, and uses it to encourage advocacy for better legal recognition of polygamous family arrangements (139–58). She believes that such legal recognition will allow for better prosecution of abuse within the community (Bennion *Polygamy in Primetime* 160–61). Similarly, the narrative history and interviews with Mexican polygamous Mormons, which I analyze in chapter 4, paint an encouraging image of this group. In my view, their reception in the cultural and literary realms as exceptional, then, points to an overall climate of exceptionality.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1. Mennonites, Mormons, and the Registration of Foreigners in the 1930s and 1940s: A Rare Attempt to Promote Integration

The first chapter examines the migration documents that foreigners used to identify themselves to the Mexican government. It situates these documents in then-current understandings of race and gender, and in relation to the post-Revolutionary government's desire to physically re-create the nation. The chapter argues that during this period, when Mormons returned to their colonies and the Mexican government granted legal exceptions to Mennonites, officials profiled both groups in unexpected ways that would cast some members of both groups as carriers of national ideals and would reject others. It pays special attention to the identification photographs on the documents and the ways that they confirm or challenge the written profiles. The differences between text and image facilitate my reading of the ways some people were represented as outliers. These include women married at young ages without children, women wearing "risqué" clothing, and people with unusual levels of Spanish language proficiency (cf. "Turley Wilson Tenna Augusta" and "Bergen Friesen, Helena"). They disrupt monolithic understandings of both communities. The chapter suggests that these documents portray Mennonites as Mormons as almost part of then-prevailing ideas about Mexico.

Chapter 2. Whose Land Is It: Mormons, Ejidos, and Agrarian Reform

This chapter studies situations where Mormons are understood as foreign, as American, and as invaders, and are only tentatively allowed into understandings of the nation because of their economic prowess. This chapter investigates these varying opinions by reading documents that represent agrarian conflict between Mormon colonies and ejidos [collectively owned land]. It contextualizes these representations within Mexican agrarian reform law, enshrined in the constitution. It focuses on three conflicts between Mormons and the ejido system: the LDS Mormon Colonia Pacheco and the ejido with the same name, which introduces us to legal terminology and archival discrepancies. These are exacerbated in another conflict between the LDS Mormons in Colonia Dublán and Colonia Juárez and the Casas Grandes ejido, which continues in the present

day. A third conflict, between the LeBaron colony, who also claim the word Mormon but do not belong to the LDS church, in Galeana, Chihuahua, and the bordering Galeana ejido, was similar, but was resolved in the 1980s.

Chapter 3. Mennonites and Agrarian Reform: Can Mennonites be Mexican?

The next chapter looks at representations of Mennonites as foreigners who benefit the nation's economy and in documents that portray agrarian/related conflicts. This chapter analyzes two conflicts—between La Batea colony and the Niño Artillero ejido and La Honda colony and the J. Santos Bañuelos ejido, all in the state of Zacatecas. *Liminal Sovereignty* focuses on the letters, maps, and population surveys that Mennonites and *ejidatarios* [people living on *ejidos*] submitted to the Land Claims Bureau (cf. Antonio Herrera Bocardo's "Carta a Joel Luevanos Ponce y Arturo Medrano Cabral") and documents that report on dispute resolution and "Acuerdos sobre inafectabilidad agrícola" ["Agreements about Land Ineligible for Agrarian Reform"] in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* [*Mexican Federal Register*].³¹ The representation of Mennonites in these documents shows a heterogeneous group, with divisions along class and gender lines. It also suggests that the government favored the Mennonites because of their economic power, at the expense of the ejidos. This perception allowed the Mennonites to join the nation, albeit conditionally.

Chapter 4. Mennonites and Mormons in Mexico's Drug Wars: Criminals and Victims on Screen and in Literature

This chapter shifts from representations of Mennonites and Mormons in relation to the post-Revolutionary goal of land redistribution to their representation in relation to crime, which has become almost a synonym for Mexico or representations of Mexico in recent years. The chapter focuses on Mennonite mobsters in Tijuana in Giancarlo Ruiz and Charles Glaubitz's webcomic *MacBurro* (2013–15), Mennonite musicians in Gustavo Loza's television series *Los héroes del norte* and Mennonite cartel members in Elwood Reid's television show *The Bridge*. These criminal or deviant Mennonites are now integrated in dominant culture even as they are marked by the Mennonite religion. In contrast, polygamous Mormons are portrayed as victims of senseless crime.

Sixteen-year-old Eric LeBaron Ray was kidnapped in 2009. Javier Ortega Urquidi's *Los güeros del norte* [*The White People of the North*] (2010) describes how Eric was eventually released; then, the cartel retaliated by killing two of Eric's relatives. In response, his older brother Julián became a peace activist. Julián's experience is included in Lolita Bosch's *México: 45 voces contra la barbarie* [*Mexico: 45 Voices Against Barbarity*] (2014). These representations integrate Mennonites and Mormons in networks of violence in Mexico.

Chapter 5. Contact Zones in *Stellet Licht* [*Silent Light*] and in *Las Mujeres Flores*/*The Flower Women*

This chapter concludes the study of representations of the lives of religious Mennonite and Mormon minorities in Mexico by dealing with the representation of contact zones between Mennonites and the surrounding community, focusing on death, music, and technology. It examines Carlos Reygadas' film *Stellet Licht* [*Silent Light*] (2007) and Eunice Adorno's collection of photographs, *Las mujeres flores* [*The Flower Women*] (2011). It considers several scenes that relate to songs in the film, radio, camera, and telephone use in both works. This chapter, and, indeed, the entirety of *Liminal Sovereignty*, focus on portrayals of the minority religious communities by majority culture. It does so because I believe that the best way to build bridges between the minority communities and majority culture is through mutual understanding grounded in its historical context.