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### The Gulf of Mexico, the Academy, and Me

Fran Ansley

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Spring 1995

# The Gulf of Mexico, the Academy, and Me

Frances L Ansley



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THE GULF OF MEXICO, THE ACADEMY, AND ME: Hazards of Boundary Crossing

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# THE GULF OF MEXICO, THE ACADEMY, AND ME: Hazards of Boundary Crossing

*Fran Ansley*

IN ADDITION TO BEING articulate, brave, and seasoned organizers for the rights of working people, Luvernel Clark and Shirley Reinhardt are my research collaborators. We are involved in a multidisciplinary effort to investigate and evaluate the patterns of deindustrialization and globalization that are currently transforming the U.S. economy. The chance to work with them and others on these issues has proved to be a real adventure in boundary crossing. At each stage it has seemed that the natural unfolding of the project itself has demanded that I move beyond the confines of my academic “home” in traditional legal scholarship, with its emphasis on the reading and interpretation of appellate legal opinions and other legal documents and specialized commentary. I have found myself needing to search out a kind of expertise that is based outside the world of the academy, and to move and work across divisions of nation, language, class, culture, legal doctrine, and academic discipline.

The economic transformation we are living through is a matter of tremendous importance. It is deeply affecting the lives of people in this country and around the world. It poses dramatic challenges for environmental policy, for the just structuring of labor markets, and for the meaning of development itself. I will be telling some stories about workers in the United States and Mexico, and the ways their lives have been affected by increased economic integration between their two countries.

I also want to tell some stories about my own vocation and about some of the challenges this work has opened up for me. I

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am not entirely comfortable about adopting this second prong. Compared to the dilemmas faced by a fifty-five-year-old high school graduate just laid off, despite twenty years of seniority, from her \$8.00-per-hour job in Tennessee, or compared to the challenges faced by a twenty-one-year-old single mother in northern Mexico in a squatter camp without running water or electricity, trying to raise her two children to healthy adulthood, my concerns about a career may look paltry. But I want to engage *Soundings* readers with questions related not only to exotic Others, but to ourselves. Some of these questions I suspect and hope are shared by many scholars who undertake transdisciplinary projects.

So I will undertake to play both themes, weave both sets of stories, in the text that follows. You must judge for yourself whether this juxtaposition proves productive.

#### THE INITIAL PROJECT

The project began five years ago when I first came to teaching law after almost a decade in legal practice. It dawned on me early on that there was much more to being an academic than I had managed to perceive from the other side of the lectern. In addition to the unexpected rigors of teaching, I learned that I needed a research agenda and some sense of how to pursue it.

I wanted the research to be something I cared about; I wanted my values and my work-for-hire to be congruent. In fact, the yearning for such integration had been one of my primary motives for leaving law practice and coming to the university in the first place. I wanted to feel less powerless and shamefully disconnected when I was reading the newspaper or watching the evening news.

These were powerful yearnings, but they didn't come with blueprints attached. Mainly what I had were some intuitions. I knew, for instance, that I wanted my research to be informed by the fact that too many people in American society and around the world are without even the most basic of resources, and are pushed to the margins of political and economic and cultural power. I also carried a strong sense that in order for my research to address such disparities in an effective way, it would need to call upon information and insight from those who were themselves relegated to the margins. I myself wasn't educated

enough—given the limits of my own class, and my national and racial background—to speak with much authority about these people’s experiences, perspectives, or priorities. I hoped that my own perceptions would be sharpened by this contact.

There was a personal element to this desire. I knew from my years as an occupational-disease litigator that contact with working people and poor people can function as a source of energy and inspiration for overworked professionals. It can recharge batteries and put certain things in perspective. Finally, I feared the isolation of the academy, whose rarefied atmosphere was still palpable to me as a newcomer who had spent a good part of her adult life away from the ivy.

So my journey began with a search for local roots. I wanted to find an issue that was being probed and acted on by some organization or movement that had a presence in the city where I worked and that would have enough of its own agenda and its own internal coherence to hold me accountable in some way, to provide some tension on the line between the world “out there” and the world of my academic and career agenda. There were, of course, a number of possibilities, even in these often cynical and apathetic times and in the often quiescent region in which I live. After some investigation, I decided to start work on the issue of plant closings.

There were several reasons for this choice. I had learned about the newly-forming Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN), and believed that it might well provide me with the life-line I wanted. The organization is a coalition of labor, community, and religious groups, focused on the problem of plant closings in the state and on deindustrialization generally.

A common assumption in the public debates about plant closings at the time was that a strong contrast existed between the “Rust Belt” and the “Sun Belt.” And certainly the scale of disruption in the Rust Belt was huge (Craypo and Hissen 1993). Whole midwestern steel towns, for instance, dominated by an industry where the workforce at a single site often numbered in the thousands, were devastated when the wave of shut-downs struck. One observer recounted:

The collapse of the steel industry in Youngstown, Pittsburgh and other communities of the industrial heartland disrupted the implicit social contract that had existed in these towns for a genera-

tion . . . The [union] vice-president . . . said: "Most people couldn't believe it. It was so huge and had operated so long and so many people depended on it for their livelihood." More than one steelworker in Youngstown indicated that the only thing they had experienced like it was Pearl Harbor (Lynd 1987, 16-17).

Many people were under the impression that southern states were in a qualitatively different position. Perhaps this assumption sprang in part from the long history of industrial "runaways" from North to South. Perhaps it was related to the aggressive, highly visible industrial recruitment strategies adopted by many Southern states, strategies which were subjected to vigorous criticism (Bishop 1993; Cobb 1993) but nevertheless remained in wide use in the South, gaining new infusions of energy from the occasional well-publicized "catches" for which industrial recruiters claimed credit (Protzman 1992). Or perhaps the assumption that Southern states were not feeling the pain of deindustrialization sprang from the fact that much of the job loss happening in the South was taking place on a more decentralized and therefore less immediately visible model than in the Midwest. Further, many analysts were failing to look beyond aggregate data that frequently masked more than it revealed, especially about the fate of low-wage segments of the workforce.

In the face of this set of much too rosy assumptions about the economic health of the southern U.S., a number of industrial labor unions and grassroots groups like TIRN were attempting to show another side of the story. They pointed to the numbers of plant closings in Southern towns, which were there for the counting if one chose to look. They argued that the erosion of the manufacturing base was as serious a concern in the South as it was elsewhere.

In this context, I saw TIRN's activities as making a real contribution to the national debate about economic policy and economic justice. Also, I *liked* the people who were taking leadership in the organization. (I am convinced that this element was particularly important. In developing work plans, I think we should ask ourselves more often what will give us personal pleasure. For me, a compatible group of collaborators is a prime source.) In all these ways, my perception that TIRN would make a good partner fed into my decision to take up the topic of plant closings.

Having decided to link my research with the efforts of a situated and partisan group meant, of course, that I had to take the bitter with the sweet. I had to be prepared to develop ways of checking myself for the blindnesses that come with compatibility and friendship. I had to be prepared to disagree with people whose respect I valued. On the other hand, I believed that the absence (or careful masking) of partisanship and compatibility do not translate to objectivity; I was convinced that a “perspectiveless perspective” is simply not affordable. (I need hardly remark that this problem is connected to a much larger and often heated epistemological and jurisprudential controversy over objectivity. For my purposes here, however, I do no more than invoke and recognize the problem.)

In addition to my feeling that TIRN would make a good collaborator, I had a second reason for choosing plant closings as a focus. I thought it *mattered*: deindustrialization appeared to be an important social problem with widespread consequences (Bluestone and Harrison 1982).

The human costs attendant on industrial shutdowns are substantial and have been well documented. Although some workers in the current climate land on their feet and may even improve their situation after a plant closing, more of them do not. Some are simply unable to find any other work, first entering the ranks of the long-term unemployed, and then slipping off the unemployment rolls altogether into the ranks of the “discouraged.” Others find new jobs, but at drastically lower wages and with drastically fewer benefits (Bureau of Labor Statistics 1993; Flessner 1988; Gaventa 1990; Institute for Southern Studies 1990; Yeoman 1990).

Losing health insurance coverage is often the most serious immediate blow for a displaced worker, but the loss of planned retirement benefits is a common financial shock as well. People take steps, of course, but often find them ineffective. They cut back on eating out, withdraw the kids from piano lessons and day camp, sell boats, lose cars, then houses, watching helplessly as life plans and investments unravel before their eyes. The stress makes itself felt on family budgets, but also on the self-esteem and personal relationships of family members. The impact on affected communities includes increased incidence of eviction,



repossession, bankruptcy, domestic violence, divorce, depression, and suicide.

After a plant closing people often wake up to find that their individual and family investment in their own “human capital,” an investment that is often “firm-specific” and non-transferrable, is suddenly valueless. Under our present legal system, the managers of large industrial enterprises are given the unilateral right to liquidate such investments without liability.

The damage from a large plant closing extends beyond human capital to “social capital.” By social capital I mean the multi-layered networks of family and neighbors, formal and informal mutual assistance arrangements, citizens’ organizations, churches, small locally-owned retail centers, informal credit arrangements, schools, clubs, and a myriad of other community practices that people create, often over the course of generations, in a given community. Social capital can be a key factor in enhancing quality of life. It can vastly if unofficially strengthen the available safety net for those in trouble of various kinds. Research suggests that social capital is also crucial to the success of economic development. It appears that development schemes imported into communities bereft of social capital are recipes for failure (Putnam 1993).

When a large factory shuts down in a community heavily dependent on it, the result is often *de facto* destruction of most of the community’s social capital. The uncompensated condemnation of this valuable and hard-to-replace resource can thus have far-reaching consequences.

The impact of such closings is not evenly distributed across the workforce of a closing plant, nor across the population of the factory’s home community. The severity of the effect varies with age, race, gender, and educational level (Weiss, 1989).

I was interested in researching and writing about deindustrialization on both axes: the common interests it might expose between different sectors of the American work force, and also the differences. After all, the whole point of giving up my law practice had been to give myself a chance to address “important” questions related to social justice.

A third reason for focusing on the issue of plant closings was its connection to a rare but wonderful “Ahah!” moment from my own legal education. I could still vividly recall sitting in Bob Mo-

berly's labor law class and discussing the fact that an American employer had the legal prerogative to shut down its entire operation for whatever reason it wanted, even blatant anti-union animus. After all, so the Supreme Court and all the vocal members of the class opined, who could legitimately tell a company that it couldn't close its "own" business? Despite my staunchly pro-worker stance toward labor law, this principle seemed well nigh unassailable to me.

So I sat there in the class open-mouthed when the professor remarked casually that of course in Belgium and most of Western Europe, such was not the case: before a large, settled industrial concern could shut its doors in those countries, it might well be obligated to bargain about the closing with its workers, to articulate a rationale for its decision to the local and perhaps national government, to support that rationale with concrete information, to provide lengthy notice to affected employees, to pay the local community to defray social costs of the closing, to come up with substantial severance benefits, explore alternatives seriously, etc. I was astonished.

That moment in class revealed to me how deeply our own legal regime and its accompanying ideology had affected my ideas of the possible, the legitimate, and the just. I also realized how liberating and mind-expanding a glance at comparative law could be. To learn that the United States was, in fact, the deviant among Western democracies in this regard had been amazing. The memory of that moment, and a passing familiarity with related scholarship that had appeared in the meantime, made me think that the issue of plant closings might provide fertile ground for challenging my own and other people's assumptions about economic policy and about the best legal regime for assuring long-term economic equity and prosperity.

So far, so good. I expected to develop a list of legal tools that had been tried by workers and local communities faced with plant closings, and to offer reflections on the outcome of their efforts. I anticipated developing a critique of the limits of current U.S. law and a description of the thinness of the legal recourse available to workers and communities whose accumulated human (and often physical) capital is threatened with destruction by the actions of corporate decisionmakers. I planned to hit my readers with unsettling and liberating news of the law in

other countries. I thought I would propose some suggestions for reform. This all seemed like a large but feasible project.

As things turned out, my topic got seriously out of hand. From what had seemed like a manageable focus, the project began to spread, step by seemingly inexorable step, toward what appeared to be a limitless horizon. Each incremental expansion took in vast new areas of subject matter with which, apparently, I needed to be familiar.

The expansion was partially driven by reports "from the field." As I spoke with dislocated workers, they began telling me about new issues that they felt were indissolubly linked with the process of deindustrialization and restructuring. Those issues were many.

One problem was the precipitous growth in "temporary" or contingent jobs (Belous 1989). TIRN had not originally identified this problem as particularly relevant for its chosen focus on plant closings and deindustrialization, but the organization was soon forced to educate itself.

A group of displaced, non-union workers in a nearby town spontaneously formed an organization whose sole purpose was to protest the shift toward involuntary temporary employment. The workers who formed this organization had been laid off in a partial shut-down. When they went to the local unemployment office to sign up for benefits and to seek other employment, they were told that the office had no jobs to suggest to them. They were referred instead to several of the new, burgeoning temporary agencies in their town, and were assured that there they could learn about whatever blue collar jobs now might exist for people like them.

These factory hands were learning, in a painful and unexpected way, that the world of work had changed since they had hired on with their previous employer. "Temp" jobs were no longer restricted to the stereotypical Kelly Girl receptionist types, to workers who for a variety of reasons might seek transitional or short-term positions. In fact, the only manufacturing employment widely available in their county now was "temporary," at least in a legal sense. TIRN staffers began probing the issue and learned that contingent work arrangements (including permanent part-time, employee leasing, contracting out in various forms, and temporary employment) were growing everywhere in

America, and were a highly salient feature of the restructuring economy.

Such jobs were not necessarily short-term. The “temporary” designation connoted instead that the employee in question was legally employed by an off-site entity, was perpetually in a kind of *de facto* probationary status, and was not entitled to the same bundle of rights and rewards enjoyed by his or her otherwise virtually identical fellow workers in the plant.

I learned that personnel practices sometimes took strange turns to support and legitimate these new arrangements. Wages and benefits (health insurance, retirement benefits, and seniority-related protections) were drastically different from those of permanent employees. But workers reported various non-monetary indignities as well. At some facilities, for instance, “temporary” employees, many of whom had been on the job for as long as five years, were excluded from the annual company picnic. At other plants management had begun designating separate entrances for permanent and temporary workers in an effort to differentiate the two classes of workers in some physical way, although after entering the plant, temporary and permanent employees usually worked side by side and performed identical work.

In sum, the growth of contingent manufacturing employment and the concomitant shrinkage in the availability of “regular” industrial jobs came as an unexpected issue from the field. The trend was fascinating to me as a legal scholar, since it appeared to represent a *de facto* repeal of many statutory and common law labor rights that had been gradually achieved through decades of social and political struggle.

Another topic began to emerge from the stories of people who were losing their jobs. Displaced workers were highly critical of most of the retraining programs to which they were exposed (Kilborn 1993).

First, there was confusing and contradictory red tape that made it difficult to navigate programs that were often overlapping in various ways. A worker laid off because of a plant closing demonstrably related to foreign trade might have three or more separate bureaucracies to deal with. Similarly, completion of many training programs funded with federal dollars required a longer time commitment than the allowable period for receipt of

state unemployment benefits. Those who were sole support of their families could seldom afford to undertake such training programs.

Second, workers in the throes of a mass lay-off were rarely afforded an opportunity for the one-on-one job counseling that has been shown to be a crucial ingredient in successful retraining programs. In the crisis atmosphere of a plant shutdown, harried state programs were themselves oftentimes understaffed and overwhelmed.

One displaced garment worker, for example, an expert seamstress in her early fifties, described to me what it had been like to sit in a mass meeting just on the heels of learning that her plant was closed. (This closing came with no advance warning, as did so many prior to passage of the federal WARN Act which now mandates sixty days' notice to employees and to local governments.) The company had arranged for the workers to be addressed by state employees who could offer various kinds of help.

At first, the worker said, all she could sense was a kind of roaring in her ears. She was probably still numb from shock. Then she began to feel a lump in her throat and had to begin fighting tears. In this condition, she soon found herself being asked to make on-the-spot irreversible decisions as a legal pad was circulated among the assembly, and while some man talking rapidly at the front of the room explained about something called the fiscal year, which apparently required immediate action on the part of any worker who wanted to take retraining opportunities.

The woman reported that as best she could remember she chose computer processing over truck driving. Or something like that. It didn't work out. She ended up working two jobs, one at a laundromat and the other at a nursing home. Both were at minimum wage, and neither had benefits.

That woman's story suggests not only problems with staffing, bureaucracy, and reasonable administrative practice. It also suggests one of the fundamental criticisms that many workers, displaced and chronically unemployed alike, repeatedly articulate regarding most of the training programs now in place: they don't seem to be able to deliver decent jobs. They do not succeed at linking blue-collar workers in significant numbers with jobs that pay a living wage. Retraining alone simply cannot solve

the problems of an economy that is restructuring in the ways that ours is.

So the news from the front about training programs raised another issue that seemed to mandate an expanded research agenda. Apparently, I needed to find out about existing job training and retraining programs, and also about the kinds of jobs that were going to be available after such training.

I learned also that there was controversy over the lack of attention devoted to “older” industries by economic development professionals at a state and local level. Critics claimed that local communities could often get more for their money by retaining and preserving existing industries than for the extravagant resources spent so readily and lavishly—especially in the South—on “smokestack-chasing,” or “buffalo hunting” (Cobb 1993). It was frustrating for workers to watch newcomer businesses reaping all kinds of public incentives while older industries with significant roots in the local community faltered.

There was a large and conflict-ridden literature on the subject of industrial recruitment, sustainable development, and the like. Traditional gospels were being challenged and defended, new paradigms were being proffered. This was apparently another major topic inescapably on my agenda. Great.

As if the horizon were not already wide enough, workers began telling me about the international nature of the dynamics we were witnessing: many plants that had closed in our area were not going out of business, but were going to other countries, especially and most recurrently to the maquiladora region of Mexico. (“Maquiladoras” are foreign-owned factories that produce or partially produce goods in Mexico for export back into the U.S., using low-wage Mexican labor. They are mostly U.S.-owned and mostly located along the U.S.-Mexican border. Their presence and expansion has been encouraged by a series of interlocking legal arrangements between Mexico and the United States.)

It looked as though I had yet another research imperative. So I began reading about the increasing international movement of industrial capital to low-wage locations, and learned that there was a fierce debate in progress about this trend and about appropriate development policies for the third world. One side argued that low-wage production for export was the best strategy for

those countries, while others maintained that such an approach added up to global “recolonization.”

In short, with each report from the field, it seemed that I was impelled to open a new set of files and to expand the list of law review topics and statutory provisions I should be scanning in order to stay minimally abreast of relevant developments. Not only did the number of social topics clearly relevant to plant closings seem to be expanding, but so did the list of relevant legal topics. The plant closing problem I had originally chosen did not fit neatly into the existing doctrinal categories of the law. As my boxes of material grew in size and number, I began to notice that many of the statutes and rules I was studying were rooted in areas of the law that are traditionally thought of as separate fields of legal theory and practice. They fell into multiple conventional areas of expertise, ranging from constitutional law to contracts to torts to property to labor law to anti-discrimination law to environmental law to anti-trust law to the laws of municipal revenue bonds and international trade.

On the one hand, I thought this shouldn’t bother me. After all, if I was serious about addressing a concrete social problem, I had to take on the actual breadth of the process as it was playing itself out in real people’s lives. But from a professional point of view, it seemed that such a course might be suicidal. How could I hope to achieve minimal competency in so many different areas? How could I avoid being perceived as a dilettante?

My work seemed to have uncomfortably positioned itself in a kind of limbo region in which neither I nor anyone else I knew was a reliable expert. I was convinced that in order even to think in helpful ways about reasonable legal responses to plant closings and deindustrialization, it would be necessary for me to negotiate multiple border crossings: borders between different countries, continents, and languages, and borders between different doctrinal categories. But I was far from secure about how to do it.

Despite my misgivings, it seemed wrong to call an artificial halt to my expanding horizon of interest when the stretched circumference seemed so undeniably and directly *relevant*. So I plunged ahead. Sometimes when I felt the most stuck about the doctrinal difficulties, I found that a return to my collaborators in the field was the best medicine.

### WORKER-TO-WORKER EXCHANGE

About a year into my project, I was sitting in a restaurant in a little town north of my city, having breakfast with a group of dislocated women workers. They had agreed to help me entertain a visiting feminist dignitary who had a Saturday stay-over on her hands after delivering a lecture at our law school.

One of the women began describing how a supervisor at the electronics factory where she used to work had actually traveled to Mexico during the previous year. He had stayed for several months, training the Mexican women workers to do the jobs that had been done in Tennessee. She reported that this supervisor had been visibly shaken by the experience. Despite his previous loyalty to the company, despite the fact that during his sojourn he had lived on the U.S. side of the border, despite the fact that he had not had the benefit of any contact with the workers outside the plant, the man had returned from his experience at the border with a new view of his company and its priorities. Within a short time after his return, he had unexpectedly left the company altogether for a different job.

"He just couldn't get over it," my friend recalled. "He said the place was full of teenage girls. And the pay was something he couldn't even conceive of, it was so low. He said on Fridays the company used to give out a bonus: it was a piece of hard candy. A piece of candy!"

A silence fell on our table after the woman finished telling this story. After a minute or so, someone said, "I wish that we could go down there on our own. I wish we could go and visit, not where the company says for us to go, but where the people live. I wish we could see for ourselves."

Out of that small conversation grew the next stage of our project. Eventually, we *did* go to Mexico. TIRN was able to secure a grant to fund a worker-to-worker exchange between women in the maquiladora zone in Mexico and women in Tennessee. I myself got help from the Fund for Labor Relations Studies to accompany and document the trip. And miraculously, in 1991, we planned and carried out a two-phase exchange.

First, two maquiladora workers from Reynosa and Matamoros came to visit Tennessee (Simmons 1991). They met with labor union locals and with community groups, telling of their experiences as employees for large multinational firms. They also de-



scribed the living conditions of many workers and other community residents on the border, and explained some of the environmental problems that exist in the maquiladora region. They related some of their own efforts at organization, and their desire to be independent of the employers and independent of the official government-controlled, and often repressive, trade unions that dominate the labor scene in Mexico.

The Mexican women's visit proved to be of tremendous interest to the Tennessee blue collar workers whom they met. People were curious to see these visitors in the flesh, to put a human face on the threatening specter of "those people" south of the border who seemed to them so ready to snatch away American jobs on the slightest excuse, who were apparently and inexplicably so eager to work for nothing.

Both women had worked for subsidiaries of major U.S. corporations. They told of pay scales that we listeners almost couldn't register. (Surely there had been some error in converting pesos to dollars? Surely it couldn't be that after working a forty-eight hour week for a Fortune 500 company, a person might bring home less than thirty dollars?) They explained that wages in the maquilas at the border were usually slightly above minimum wage, and significantly lower than prevailing industrial wages in the interior of Mexico.

When members of the audience asked about cost of living in Mexico, assuming that it must be low enough to offset or at least moderate the impact of the wage levels we had just been told of, the two visitors shared with us some charts. The charts had been prepared by a U.S. church group from ads in a Reynosa newspaper. On them were listed a number of food items and other products, with costs specified in pesos and then converted to costs in hours worked at the Reynosa minimum wage. We learned that it would take a woman working for minimum wage in Reynosa an hour and a half to earn enough money to pay for a can of corn, 5.6 hours for 7 ounces of instant coffee, 13.3 hours for 2.2 pounds of ham, 151 hours for a new mattress.

The women also told us about environmental conditions in some of the neighborhoods or "colonias" where poor and working people live in Matamoros and Reynosa. They described open drainage ditches carrying hazardous waste that ran straight and unguarded from factories through residential areas where chil-



dren and livestock roamed freely. They told of chemical plants that were built immediately adjacent to long-standing residential areas, plants where accidental releases had led to repeated evacuations and even government destruction of livestock that was feared contaminated. They told of communal farms whose crop yields were radically reduced after the opening of other chemical factories adjacent to their fields. All the chemical plants they mentioned were owned in substantial part by U.S. investors.

One of the women told of being fired by the U.S. subsidiary where she had worked assembling automotive accessories. She said that she had been a fast and productive worker and was treated as a valued employee until she began to question some of the practices of the union that was supposed to represent the workers in the plant. She described the union as top-down and thoroughly corrupt, working in concert with the company to maintain a controlled and docile work force. After she stood up at a union meeting one day and openly questioned the union's use of the dues it collected from the membership, the union leaders spoke to the company and had her fired. Both women reported that this kind of union-management relationship was typical in their experience, that internal democracy was absent in the official government unions which dominate the labor scene in Mexico, and that freedom of association and the right to or-



ganize were seldom more than paper rights. (In fact, they later reflected that one of the highlights of their trip had been the opportunity to meet with U.S. workers who were active participants in their unions. The possibility of labor unions that were radically more democratic and responsive to the rank and file had been an eye-opener for them.)

The various groupings of Tennesseans to whom these women spoke seemed genuinely moved at the opportunity to explore in a concrete way their commonalities and differences with TIRN's two new Mexican friends. The ritual acts of showing each other pictures of family, the shock of comparing such disparate pay stubs, the traded (and eerily familiar) stories of management tactics in the face of worker discontent, all made for a memorable experience. After the women's successful mini-tour of East Tennessee, we ended up with many applicants for the limited slots we could offer for the return trip, when a group of Tennessee workers would visit Mexico.

In July of 1991 our delegation set forth for Matamoros, an industrial city across the border from Brownsville, on the Gulf of

Mexico. Seven factory workers (some still employed and others displaced), a TIRN staff person, and I constituted the delegation.

Once over the border, we were met by representatives of our two host organizations: a U.S.-based group made up of labor, church, and community organizations called the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, and a Mexican group made up of women workers from maquiladora factories, called the “Comite Fronterizo de Obreras” or Border Committee of Women Workers. Our first stop was a well-groomed industrial park whose large and spanking new factories were surrounded by chain-link fences and green, generously watered lawns.

After presenting ourselves at a General Motors facility, we were invited in for a brief tour and an interview with the plant manager. We saw hundreds of young people (85% female, with an average age of twenty, according to the manager) working on car radios in a huge new barn-like space that seemed to go on forever. Members of our group were accustomed to factories at home that were being allowed to deteriorate over time; they were accustomed to workforces where the most junior employees in the cohort had well over a decade of seniority. It was sobering for them to see with their own eyes the scale of the investment resources being shifted to Mexico, and the armies of young, quick workers being marshalled for the tasks at hand.

Leaving the industrial park, we climbed back into our vans and went in search of where the workers lived. We were within minutes of a neighborhood, or “colonia,” that was essentially a squatter camp. It looked like nothing so much as an aerial bomb site. The landscape was barren and rubble-strewn. We saw sparsely-scattered water taps shared by hundreds of people in a community with no electricity, nor any organized system for solid waste disposal. We were graciously invited into a one-room home where a single mother and her two children slept on a short bed wedged between thin plywood walls. It occupied close to half the floor space of the house, while a block of ice in a cooler served as the only refrigeration in the rank and fly-blown heat. We saw workers wearing the shirts and logos of familiar U.S. companies as they made their way home from work, delicately skirting stagnant pools of fetid water that had stood, we were told, since the heavy rains of the preceding spring.



I revisited members of a family I had met the summer before and could see that in the intervening thirteen months they had been able to complete perhaps a third of the small cinder-block room whose walls they had already begun to raise when I was there before. (The pace of construction, they explained, was dictated primarily by the number of cinder blocks that could be purchased from what margin they were able to put aside at the end of each week from the pooled paychecks of their *four* daughters, all of whom lived at home and all of whom worked for large multinational corporations in the maquilas.)

In short, it was a hard trip. We saw patterns that left us convinced that more job losses for U.S. industrial workers were still to come. We were confronted by living conditions that were so shocking as to leave us dazed and numb. (I should point out that this reaction came in spite of the fact that our group was hardly a squeamish or privileged bunch. Several had lived periods of their own lives without indoor plumbing; they had supported families on the kinds of wages paid to Southern blue collar women in textile, garment, and electronic assembly plants, or on unemployment benefits when that work was lost. But the extremity of the situation in which large numbers of maquila workers at the border found themselves was of another magnitude. And it was an extremity that was not born of unemployment or stagnation, but went with a life of productive employment on the payrolls of highly profitable transnational businesses and in a region experiencing an economic boom of unprecedented proportions.)

In addition to the stark conditions and the resilience of the people, there was another factor that may have contributed to the forceful impact of what we saw. East Tennessee is located in the Appalachian end of our state, and is still quite culturally homogeneous. For people in this region, exposure even to different ethnic groups, different religions or different languages is still for the most part a rare occurrence. It may be that the newness of *any* cross-cultural exchange for most of the people in our group intensified the energy, excitement, and disorientation that hit our delegation as we made our way.

Whatever its roots, the impact we felt was strong and two-edged. On the one hand, we experienced a kind of horrified distance from what we were seeing. It hardly seemed conceivable

or real. On the other hand, we were struck by the possibilities of connection. We were deeply moved by the friendliness, the intelligence, the pride, the determination, the beauty, and the sense of humor of the organizers and residents we met. The dignity of the people, and the implicit challenge they put to us, were themes that members of our group returned to again and again as we reflected on what we had seen and learned.

#### PROFESSIONAL QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

There is much more I could tell about our visit, but I want to move on to talk about what has happened since the trip, and to ask some broader questions about the rewards and challenges of cross-boundary work.

I suppose you could say the trip and its aftermath have been successful beyond our wildest dreams. We all learned, in an unusually immediate and visceral way, a tremendous amount about a subject we believe to be of great importance to ourselves and to others. That is hardly an everyday occurrence, and I do not believe it is hyperbole or romanticization to say that for all of us who participated in the trip, it will remain one of the highlight events of our lives. So, Lesson Number One: cross-boundary scholarly projects can offer significant opportunities for personal growth and satisfaction. What an astounding privilege to be *paid* to dream up and carry out an investigation of this kind!

Further, participants in the trip have not stopped at the station of personal growth and edification, but have searched for ways of telling others about what we learned. We have formed an ongoing committee since our return and have secured speaking engagements before numerous audiences about what we saw and the conclusions we have drawn. We have spoken to church groups, labor unions, academic conferences, and university classes. I was asked to give the banquet speech at a gathering on Women and Economic Development in West Virginia because conference organizers thought I could effectively remind participants about the global context in which economic policies for Appalachia are being forged. Four of us offered testimony before the Trade Staff Policy Committee of the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative at public hearings conducted in the fall of 1991, including the remarks with which this article began.

In addition to personal appearances, we have succeeded in reaching out through various media. The *Texas Journal of Women and the Law* published a one-act play that our group had written and performed for the women workers who hosted us in Mexico (Ansley 1992b). The *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law* published the testimony of four members of our trip before the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, along with a brief introduction by me, and a varied selection of other testimony presented at those hearings (Ansley 1992a). The *Georgetown Law Journal* published an article of mine which focuses primarily on plant closings but also makes a number of references to our trip and to the problems of the maquiladoras and the globalization of the U.S. economy (Ansley 1993b). The Midwest Center for Labor Research edited and published an interview I conducted with one of the participants on the trip in a special issue of *Labor Research Review* called "Saving Manufacturing." Feature articles about the trip appeared in several non-academic publications: *Beyond Borders* (Tong 1993), *Labor Unity* (Mora 1991), and the newsletter of *Rural Southern Voice for Peace* (Williams 1992). The trip provided the basis for an op-ed piece on NAFTA I wrote for the local newspaper (Ansley 1993a) and a television news interview I gave prior to the NAFTA vote in Congress. A television crew accompanied us during part of our travels, and some of the resulting footage was included in a May 1992 PBS special narrated by Robert Reich, now Secretary of Labor (*Made in America*).

In all of this, it has been quite clear to me that working with my blue-collar collaborators on this phase of the project has greatly improved the quality of and enlarged the audience for my own efforts. Every time I have spoken to an audience with one of the worker members of our trip, there were insights and observations she was able to offer which moved and challenged people in ways that I could never have done alone. Bridging the gap between academia and communities of people with little formal education but with their own worlds of expertise and their own sources of eloquence and insight has helped my work.

All of these outlets for our experience have been gratifying and have convinced me that there are multiple scholarly and popular audiences for work growing out of this kind of endeavor. I should also mention with gratitude the fact that my college has



provided steady support to the project by way of summer research stipends, the university funded my travel and a research assistant at an early stage of the project, I was awarded an outside grant from the Fund for Labor Relations Studies for work connected to the maquiladora part of the story, and my colleagues here at the law school have been supportive and encouraging at each step of the way. In sum, Lesson Number Two: cross-boundary work can increase the quality of professional research. It can lead to better data and can enhance the ability of the researcher to communicate that data effectively to a wide circle and to secure financial support for the work.

Finally, the effort has been a success in the sense that it has opened new projects for the future, both for TIRN as an organization and for me as a scholar. TIRN has decided to pursue more cross-border exchanges in the future. The organization has ideas of how the exchange trip could have been better planned and executed. There are many new people who want an opportunity to participate. TIRN has received a foundation grant to run two additional two-way exchanges between U.S. and Mexican workers over the next two years. The exchange project promises to continue to grow and evolve. In addition, the issues that emerged around Congressional consideration of NAFTA continue to offer many avenues of investigation and advocacy.

Overall, then, the project should surely be characterized as a gratifying success. Things have worked out better than I possibly could have hoped when I first decided to embark on plant closing research five years ago.

Nevertheless, there are some major frustrations and dilemmas that have accompanied this project. If I thought the problem of an expanding horizon of interest was bad *before* the trip to Mexico, that problem has done nothing but worsen. Since the time of my initial interest in maquiladoras, the governments of the U.S., Mexico, and Canada announced and negotiated a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). A surprisingly broad popular movement in opposition to major features of that treaty emerged in the United States. Despite its inability to win renegotiation of the deal, that movement was successful beyond its own initial expectations in bringing a number of important issues into public view, and it has begun to develop ties to similar movements in Canada and Mexico. Meanwhile, the Uruguay

Round of GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) has at last produced a signed document, and its proposed World Trade Organization raises many of the same issues that were ignited by the NAFTA debates, but on an even larger scale.

So the worker-to-worker exchange and my deepening appreciation for the importance of global economic integration to my original topic both worked to exacerbate the problem of my expanding horizon. Even in order to understand the existing legal structure of transnational investment (and transnational investment is actually a much more salient feature of NAFTA than is transnational "trade") there were whole new areas of law with which I would have to become acquainted. In addition to investment issues, a number of other questions were now suggesting themselves as well: questions of international environmental regulation, jurisdiction of various kinds over transnational corporations, the existing structure of international trade law, the international rights of indigenous peoples, existing legal regimes for the support and regulation of agriculture, and the world of international human rights.

Each of these areas of law has a vocabulary of its own, particularized rules and institutions, a set of rights and remedies with a specific history and logic.

Globalization also raised the problem of "foreign" materials. Our law library, to mention one mundane example, does not contain Mexican legal materials in any but the spottiest way. The collection has begun to improve since the passage of NAFTA but is still slender and unpredictable. How am I to learn what I arguably need to know about Mexican law?

Even if we had such a collection and it were in English (or even were I to take the preferable but daunting and time-consuming step of improving my Spanish), how could I gain enough knowledge of the legal and social context in Mexico to be able reasonably to interpret the meaning of the relevant documents? (As a lawyer I am painfully aware that reading the text of a statute yields only the most superficial of starting points for grasping its meaning in the real world. This awareness produces queasiness in the extreme about my ability to gain much of anything from reading the bare text of some Mexican statute or constitutional provision.)

Further, it is clear that Mexico is not the only foreign place that this inquiry logically leads. U.S. companies are pursuing investment all over Latin American, the Caribbean, and the world. NAFTA is explicitly discussed as only one building block in the projected "Enterprise for the Americas Initiative" that would extend from the Bering Straits to the tip of South America. And as a regional trade and investment bloc, North America and the Western Hemisphere themselves are only part of a larger global story. Major restructuring of the world market and the world economy is taking place through the activities of transnational corporations, the successive negotiating rounds of the GATT, and the structural adjustment programs pressed upon debtor nations through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Therefore it is not just the law of Mexico that might prove relevant, but the laws of many other countries and international law as well.

The expanding horizon involves not only additional areas of U.S. legal doctrine, and not only the laws of additional countries, but other disciplines beyond the law altogether. Economic questions, especially, crop up again and again. For instance, criticisms of the human suffering and social chaos engendered by sudden capital flight from the U.S. or by sudden capital infusion into Mexico are repeatedly met with a nested set of economic arguments.

On one side, some economists are convinced that what is best for international business is (eventually) best for everyone. They argue that an expanding pie of traditionally measured and defined wealth and economic activity is the only practicable way to provide for human needs and to pay for environmental enforcement and remediation. The best way to achieve the expanding pie, they say, is to give multinational corporations maximum freedom to "do what they do best," that is, to make the profits that fuel societal good.

On the other hand, there is a small but articulate group of economists who question the fairness and efficiency of existing arrangements and challenge the notion that present disparities of wealth and well-being are either benign in the long run or the closest thing to benign-in-the-long-run we can reasonably hope to achieve. These economists argue that the meeting of basic human needs and environmental sustainability are the touch-

stones of a good economic policy. They take the position that the “free market” as classically conceived is both a wildly inaccurate characterization of the actual system and in any case an inadequate program for human well-being (Korten 1993).

What is a law professor to do in the face of a debate largely outside her area of expertise that is yet so fundamental to and so pervasive of her topic? Should she beat a judicious retreat and leave it to the economic “experts”? (By the way who *are* the economic experts and how did they achieve their status?) Should she get a Ph.D. in economics? Find a trustworthy economist to work with?

Ironically, there has been quite a substantial bridge constructed in recent years between the disciplines of law and economics, but for me at least, it is a bridge of limited utility. The brand of economics that has been so powerfully brought to bear upon the law has been largely neo-classical and microeconomic. A common ground for bi-disciplinary discourse and policy formation has indeed been created, in part through the cross-fertilization of legal and economic ideas and in part through lavishly funded promotional programs offered to law schools, scholars, and students around the country (Aron 1983).

But that common ground displays little promise for my own concerns and aims. It is devoted almost exclusively to proving through the manipulation of highly artificial models that various redistributionist legal and policy options would harm the efficiency of the (model) market and therefore human well-being everywhere. For one interested in conversations and collaborations that question these models and the assumptions behind them, the discourse of the existing law and economics school is therefore of limited value. It goes only a short way toward answering the difficult discipline-bridging questions that my research has raised for me.

And of course economics is only one of the foreign disciplines relevant to this expanding topic. What of *other* fields fairly implicated in the research I have described: sociology, geography, history, anthropology, and so on? What of the prolific and uneven and relevant cross-cutting, cross-disciplinary work being done by scholars who are focusing on categories of race or class or gender or some modern or post-modern mixture or compound thereof?

For instance, I am quite interested in using oral history and narrative both in my research and in the products flowing from it. I am dimly aware of a challenging critique of traditional ethnographic practice by feminist scholars and scholars of color. Surely I should be better acquainted with that critique and with the efforts of those scholars to develop alternative ethnographic methods in their work. Should I take a semester off to study anthropology? A year off to do supervised field work? Have lunch with a friendly anthropologist once a month? Read a book?

Such questions could obviously keep spilling on and on. However, I believe the kinds of dilemmas I describe are not unique to my project, and I hope that more of us interested in social justice and in the uses to which our talents and productions are put will search for ways of exploring these and similar questions, comparing notes and consulting on new approaches.

There are two different sets of somewhat contradictory impulses that I seem to be carrying with me on this subject.

First, I am aware that in moving across seldom-traveled gaps, whether of geography, culture, class, or discipline, a scholar may move so far or so fast that she is simply unequipped to make helpful observations. This danger is acute. Consider first a gap that is geographic, economic, and cultural. How can one even tell what she is *seeing* when she is taken for an afternoon's visit to one colonia in one town on a little-known border? What else is she *not* seeing, what voices is she not hearing? What context might be important for fuller (or even minimal) understanding? What cognitive interference might be at work, given her own histories and sensibilities?

Journeys across the boundaries of academic disciplines entail similar dangers. Surely my readers can easily imagine the land mines and bogs that might surprise an innocent in their own fields. If one is not familiar with the history of a discipline, its shifting canonical texts, its sequence of controversies, its fads adopted and abandoned, how can she competently evaluate the texts and controversies she herself encounters there, or apply the tools of the field to the topic whose logic has led her to perceive a need for those tools in the first place?

These questions are, of course, relevant and difficult for *any* investigation, whether next door or halfway around the world, whether right in the center of one's academic training or in

some neighboring field where the investigator is in part an autodidact. Further, I am not so naive as to think that familiarity with the subject matter of one discipline always breeds acumen or truth in any event: sometimes clarity of vision can come precisely and most startlingly through the eyes of a "stranger." So I do not want to overstate the difficulties of interdisciplinary work as opposed to the challenges of staying closer to home.

Nevertheless, I believe one undertaking a cross-boundary trip must ask questions about competence with particular force. She must try to develop cross-checking practices and advisory networks that provide at least some level of assurance that her perceptions and conclusions have been tested by encounters with other knowers who are well-informed, according to criteria which may not be "objective," but which the researcher has at least carefully considered and can cogently articulate and defend.

I have a second set of convictions about the difficulties of cross-boundary work that is in some tension with the first. If boundaries can serve to mark the outlines of "the known," and to signal to travelers who choose to cross them that they enter a territory where their existing knowledge may be more than usually limited and where special caution may be in order, boundaries can also serve to restrict vision artificially, to divide what should be joined, to monopolize important information, and to prevent effective challenges to existing arrangements. In such cases travelers should strive to protect and expand their right to free movement.

The negative side to geopolitical boundaries, for instance, is all too evident in my own research topic. Workers in the United States and Mexico are in many instances prevented from learning important facts about their respective situations by the cultural, linguistic, and legal borders that separate them. Present boundaries tend to reinforce traditional notions, conventional wisdoms, unexamined prejudices, and existing relations of power. Ability to cross the U.S.-Mexico border legally and without molestation is not evenly distributed across the populations involved, but varies radically by race, nation, and class. Crossing over may be easy for some people. But transgressing these boundaries can get others into serious trouble. Sizeable social resources are expended to prevent such transgressions.

One maddening example of this phenomenon is that groups who challenged the wisdom of the North American Free Trade Agreement have encountered trouble obtaining visas for ordinary Mexican workers to come to the U.S. to speak with trade unionists and others. Conversely, a group of U.S. machinists who were visiting Mexico's border region were detained for several hours by Mexican immigration officials. (They had stopped their bus in a maquiladora park in Tijuana and were speaking with workers who claimed to have been fired for anti-union activity. The machinists were released only after higher authorities realized the potential repercussions from the event, given the delicate nature of the NAFTA deliberations soon to take place in the U.S. Congress (Gross 1993; Rotella 1993).

For those of us in higher education, the boundaries between academic fields may be of more immediate personal concern than geopolitical boundaries. In more cases than we might like to imagine, our disciplinary boundaries serve to police rather than to enlighten us. Punishment for academic trespass may seem light to people who risk sometimes even their lives to cross, say, the Rio Grande. But professional humiliation is serious business to people in academic positions, and the threat of it can do much to control behavior and limit horizons.

In my own discipline, quite casual reading in the periodical literature has exposed me to cases where writers attempted to go "over the wall," only to be gunned down by guards who apparently believed that their superior vistas afforded them not only a better perspective but also a clear shot. Some such acts of discipline are no doubt justified. But I think we should be deeply wary of them.

In a recent issue of the interdisciplinary *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, Brian Leiter observes:

Arguably, the most important general development in legal scholarship over the past two decades has been the remarkable flourishing of interdisciplinary work bringing together law and the humanities and social sciences . . . Yet these new developments in legal scholarship have placed unprecedented demands on the legal scholar, for each of the disciplines on which the legal scholar might draw has its own history, tradition, training, and standards. The legal scholar is now called upon to participate in other academic discourses with practitioners who have completed five or

more years of graduate study and whose professional lives are devoted to that piece of the intellectual universe.

. . . [T]he dramatic rise in interdisciplinary work has witnessed a considerable amount of sub-standard scholarship. This work likely would not find a home in the professional journals of the associated discipline, but appears all too often in leading law journals (1992, 79).

Leiter goes on to examine in some detail an essay in the *Stanford Law Review* (Frug 1988), whose author he accuses of badly mangling and misrepresenting the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Readers of Leiter's article (readers who, one must assume, are people interested in "law and the humanities") are then given a demonstration of what can happen to insufficiently cautious boundary crossers if they don't watch out. Leiter accuses the author of the Stanford essay of "intellectual voyeurism," of "cocktail party affectation," of "superficial and ill-informed treatment of serious ideas, apparently done for intellectual 'titillation' or to advertise, in a pretentious way, the 'sophistication' of the writer," of "misunderstanding . . . the philosophical ideas at issue," of lacking "critical knowledge of the relevant secondary literature," and of having "misunderstood, misappropriated, and vulgarized" Nietzsche (1992, 80).

Now Mr. Leiter may be perfectly right about the article he attacks. (As to the general possibility, I have no doubt that an author could be guilty of all the sins Leiter attributes to the targeted essayist.) Whether or not someone has mangled Nietzsche is not a subject on which I am equipped to venture an opinion. Further, many of his points are well-nigh unassailable: *of course* interdisciplinary work places new demands on people who would practice it, *of course* there will be instances of sub-standard work among interdisciplinarians (as among any other group of scholars), and *of course* interdisciplinary work should be subjected to searching criticism.

Nevertheless, both the tone of the article and a number of its underlying assumptions illustrate, I believe, a real threat to people attempting to do interdisciplinary work. Readers must resist being cowed by commentary that too easily scorns and punishes boundary crossers on the basis of their inadequate expertise in new territory.

For instance, Leiter's reminder to would-be interdisciplinarians that the "discourse" they will be entering if they traverse an



academic boundary will be peopled by “practitioners who have completed five or more years of graduate study and whose professional lives are devoted to that piece of the intellectual universe” strikes me as highly problematic. Many boundary crossers should be hoping for and working toward a different goal altogether. They should aim not at some performance before an elite circle of highly trained specialists, but rather at an inclusive and expanding conversation carried on among a diverse group of people with formal graduate and undergraduate training in *many* different disciplines—perhaps even in none at all.

In my own case, I hope that some of my boundary crossing will allow me to enter into varying discourses with people who have not completed high school, let alone five or more years of graduate training. My aspiration in this regard is no doubt fed by my own (now dim) history as a community organizer and by my links to institutions and organizing efforts that seek to work collaboratively with many kinds of people.

The Highlander Center, for instance, which helped develop and support the plan for our exchange trip to Mexico, is a long-lived gathering place in East Tennessee committed to an inclusive type of popular education for social change (Horton & Freire 1990). Martin Luther King is said to have praised Highlander for the fact that its sessions brought together and valued “everybody from a Ph.D. to a No-D” (*You Got to Move* 1985).

A workshop conversation at Highlander might include college professors, civil rights activists, rank and file labor unionists, locally elected officials, artists, housewives, members of grassroots community organizations, elementary school teachers, musicians, students, and others.<sup>1</sup> I aspire to interdisciplinary work that seeks out and helps to enable conversations of this kind of breadth. When I undertake cross-disciplinary work I am not interested in orienting myself entirely or even primarily to a dialogue where extensive graduate training or its self-taught shadow is the price of admission or respect.

Similarly, Leiter’s suggestion that an important test of the quality of an interdisciplinary work is whether or not it would likely be accepted for publication “in the professional journals of the home discipline” is much too narrow. He makes an analogous point in his conclusion: “At present law schools and law journals are too often the refuge for people who could not teach in com-

parable departments of philosophy, let alone publish in comparable philosophical journals" (1992, 104). Leiter apparently believes that this last remark strikes a telling blow. This is questionable at best.

In a world changing as rapidly as ours, more scholars should begin reading and investigating and writing across boundaries and in *multiple* territories. But it is hardly practicable or desirable for more and more scholars to set themselves the task of earning three or four advanced degrees, or becoming fully credentialed to teach university graduate students in three, four, many fields, before presuming to speak or write publicly about what they are seeing and hearing.

Nor is it helpful to voice ominous warnings to interdisciplinarians that they must somehow "earn" the right to speak across boundaries through long and sober labor. Nevertheless, that notion informs Leiter's stance. He writes: "Critical exposures of the suspect quality of some of the work which passes for interdisciplinary scholarship in law journals may persuade legal scholars to engage in deeper study of other disciplines before rushing into print" (Leiter 1992, 80).

Perhaps if I knew Nietzsche better, I would agree with Leiter about the article he targets. What little I do know about Nietzsche scholarship leads me to doubt it.

But Nietzsche is not the point. Leiter's piece has a chilling effect on me, not as an aspiring philosopher, but as a novice and non-philosophical boundary crosser and unwashed reader of the *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*. I am being warned not only about the substantive failings of one essay, but about the dangers of the interdisciplinary enterprise in general. I am shown what might happen to *me* if I stepped outside the lines of Law. It is as if I were being allowed—perhaps sternly instructed—to watch the punishment visited upon another.

It is this latter kind of pressure that I want to resist, even though I want also to be wary of my own ignorance when I venture beyond my relatively familiar sphere. So I am left with two opposing sets of insights. Boundary crossers need to recall and suspect their own ignorance and naivete, need to work to overcome their lack of experience and training, need to second-guess themselves and seek help, all with great care and in an appropriate spirit of humility.

However, boundary crossers also need to recall the failings of the existing authorities, need to bring the freshness of their unconditioned vision to new terrain, need to play as well as work with ideas, all with daring and in an appropriate spirit of adventure. We need to be suspicious of the border police we are likely to encounter and ready to resist the varying disciplinary moves of those guards if we conclude that they serve more to hinder than to advance the good.

The trouble is that these exhortations are easier to voice than to practice. The hard work and heady play of making the choices, checking the procedures, finding the connections, taking the risks, is not finally something that can be achieved by resort to rhetoric or by setting out nicely balanced oppositions and cutting them ever so carefully and reasonably down the middle.

I remember and keep returning to what one of the maquiladora women said who hosted our delegation in 1991. Her advice was hardly aimed at academics, nor was she particularly concerned with the kinds of questions I have tried to raise here.

Toward the end of our brief stay in Mexico, our hosts treated us and themselves to an evening meal on a beach near Matamoros. We drove out past a tattered beach pavilion, past swimmers and picnickers, past the huts and nets and beached boats of local fishermen, to a place where our friends thought it would be less crowded and where, if we were lucky, we could find abundant sand dollars.

It was a magic evening, full of the shining and luminous pastels that I already knew from summer nights on the other side of the Gulf of Mexico, on the west coast of Florida, where my father had grown up, and where I had spent much time in my own childhood. We bought a huge fresh fish from one of the boats we passed and ate it grilled over a fire, with guacamole and *pico de gallo* homemade by our friends.

The sun was setting behind the dunes at our backs. Everything looked clean and calm and peaceful in a way that seemed almost unimaginable after the filth and chaos and toxicity through which we had been struggling for the past few days.

I walked down the beach for a while with one of our hosts and an interpreter. We picked up shells and talked and were silent.

I kept looking out over the Gulf. Gradually it dawned on me that the Gulf was a border too. In fact, I had spent many long moments in my own childhood looking and wondering about Mexico—not across the Rio Grande, but across this warm, salt sea.

I thought of all the times that I had stared across from the other side, dreaming in those days of an imaginary Yucatan. Once upon a time my brothers and I had wondered how tall a tower we would have to build if we truly wanted to *see* all the way to Mexico, up and over the intervening curve of the planet's surface. Now standing in Matamoros, here I was, "over there" at last, all grown up, same and different feet buried in same and different sand, my father dying at home of cancer, a charismatic new friend and stranger at my elbow. I was looking back the other way, struck dumb.

After our return to Tennessee, I tried to write down as best I could some of the conversations and images from our trip, including what I recalled of my beach companion's translated reflections, and the words to the song she taught us later that night. Here is my inadequate reconstruction:

So now you have seen something of the lives of the people who work here in the maquilas. And the people in your group shed tears at our meeting. Your tears tell me that seeing these things is upsetting for you. And we on our side, we shed tears too. You saw us. All of us, our hearts are full.

Tears are good. They tell us that we are alive. They bind us together.

For us here in Mexico, your tears help us also to see that there are people on the other side who care about what is happening to the little people in our country. It is good for us to remember that not all the people in the United States are big managers who drive fancy cars and live in fine houses. Sometimes I used to think that the people in the United States must be monsters. How else could their greed for more money allow them to treat people in the way that these workers are treated? How else could they be so blind and selfish? Meeting other kinds of people from the United States reminds me that everyone in your country is not the same.

Can it be that the tears of another can wash your own eyes clear? I think that tears are good.

But tears are not enough. They can be too easy, if they are all there is. We need more than tears from you. We need hard work and courage. We need you to go back to your country and speak and push and organize for us. We workers here in Mexico in the

maquilas, we need the help of people in the United States to make our voices heard.

In the end, we must remember what the factory owners forgot: we must remember what we have in common. That we are all children of God. Here sometimes we sing a song about the sun. It says that the sun rises for everyone, for all the people, and it sets for everyone. It does not distinguish borders, or races, or colors. The sun rises for everyone.

We waded then into the sighing of the Gulf's calm surf to join the others in our group, and Maria Guadalupe taught us her song. The water was shifting: smooth and warm and mother-of-pearl, sliding fields of pink and turquoise and gold and purple and green washing around us, gilding our shoulders and arms, lifting and swaying us as we repeated after her.

I thought about the complex consequences of distinguishing or not distinguishing borders, races, colors. I thought about the dangers of cheap universalism urged from above. I thought about the hard questions of justice posed by the dilemmas of difference that have so gripped progressives in the U.S. in recent years. But the words of Maria Guadalupe's song, at that particular time and place, from that particular throat, within shouting distance of that particular murderous border, spoke powerful truth. We were glad we had crossed over the boundary.

El sol nace para todos,  
Para todos nace el sol.  
No distingue las fronteras,  
Ni raza ni el color.

El sol sale para todos,  
Para todos sale el sol.  
No distingue las fronteras,  
Ni raza ni el color.

## NOTES

1. In fact, Ph.D.s are in a distinct minority or absent altogether at a typical Highlander workshop. Those Ph.D.s who occasionally get invited usually need to have shown a capacity to work in a respectful and collaborative fashion with people who lack extensive formal education, but who bring their own ways of knowing and their own specialized knowledge base with them.

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