

Jadwiga Maszewska

University of Łódź

Mexican Village: Josefina Niggli's
Border Crossing Narrative

ABSTRACT

The paper presents Josefina Niggli (1910–83), an American mid-twentieth-century writer who was born and grew up in Mexico, and her novel *Mexican Village* (1945). A connoisseur of Mexican culture and tradition, and at the same time conscious of the stereotypical perceptions of Mexico in the United States, Niggli saw it as her literary goal to “reveal” the “true” Mexico as she remembered it to her American readers. Somewhat forgotten for several decades, Niggli, preoccupied with issues of marginalization, hybridization, and ambiguity, is now becoming of interest to literary critics as a forerunner of Chicano/a literature. In her novel *Mexican Village*, set in the times of the Mexican Revolution, she creates a prototypical bicultural and bilingual Chicano protagonist, who becomes witness to the rise of Mexico’s modern national identity.

Keywords: Josefina Niggli, U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Chicano/a literature, Mexican folk traditions, biculturalism.

Josefina Niggli (1910–83), an American writer of the mid-twentieth century, who was born and grew up in northern Mexico, lived both literally and figuratively on the border between the United States and Mexico, epitomizing this borderland's syncretic spirit. Her literary works concerned issues of diversity, marginalization, hybridization, biculturalism and bilingualism in the context of relations between the two neighboring countries. After her death, Niggli was forgotten for a few decades but since the 1990s, literary scholars on both sides of the national border again became interested in her writing. Chicana/o authors in the U.S. want to recognize her as their forerunner, while critics in Mexico see in her a “precursor of literature by *regiomontana* women writers” from the area around Monterrey.

Josefina (or Josephina, both spellings appear in critical texts, which in itself can be regarded as a sign of her unstable national and cultural identity) Niggli was born in the city of Monterrey in northern Mexico at the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, an oppressive civil war that lasted over a decade, until 1920, in the course of which time Mexico “was remaking itself” (Coonrod Martinez 3). According to *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, Josephina Niggli's father, Frederick Ferdinand Niggli “came from a family of the Swiss and Alsatians who had emigrated to Texas in 1836. Her mother, Goldie (Morgan) Niggli, was a violinist well known in the Southwest, with ancestors from Ireland, France, and Germany” (565). However, in an interview the writer gave to Maria Herrera-Sobek, she claimed that her parents were Scandinavian. Frederick Niggli, an American businessman, was involved in the development of cement industry in northern Mexico, and he built a family home in the small town of Hidalgo, close to Monterrey. During the turbulent years of the Mexican Revolution, American entrepreneurs, as well as Mexican social elites, felt endangered by the rebelling masses. Therefore, Josefina, an only child, and her mother moved to San Antonio, Texas, where eventually Josefina went to school and later on to the College of the Incarnate Word. The Niggli's, who considered themselves an American family emotionally connected with Mexico as a result of their long residence there, in the United States identified with the large group of Mexican immigrants, referred to as *Mexico de afuera*, the “lost ones to be gathered home” (Gruesz 10). The immigrants escaped to the United States from Mexico to avoid the violence of the war but insisted on preserving their national identity and traditional Mexican values; it was their intention to go back home as soon as the revolution was over. In an effort to maintain the purity of the Spanish language, they published a daily newspaper, *El Paso del Norte*, the cities El Paso and San Antonio having become *Mexico de afuera*'s cultural centers.

Living and studying in the United States, Josefina Niggli grew increasingly aware of “the place of Mexico in the U.S. imaginary” (Gruesz

10), of the stereotypical opinions Americans had about Mexico, the Mexican people and their culture. It became “her lifetime goal [as a writer] to capture [what she considered to be] genuine Mexico, the Mexico she knew and to relate it to an English-language public” (Coonrod Martinez 21). As Kirsten Silva Gruesz points out in her brief but revealing essay “Mexico in America,” included in *A New Literary History of America*, at the beginning of the twentieth-century American perceptions of Mexico were “conspicuously partial.” The years between the two world wars were referred to in the U.S. as “the moment of romantic Mexicophilia,” with an “enormous vogue for things Mexican” (9). The pre-Columbian ruins and pyramids discovered (or perhaps rediscovered by the American tourist industry) in Mexico were compared to the ancient monuments of Egypt, which had been intriguing the Europeans since the Napoleonic wars. Unexpectedly, Americans, concerned primarily with progress and the future, found antiquity at their own doorstep. On the other hand, with its poverty, primitivism, conservative Catholicism, and the Spanish language, Mexico was perceived in political, economic and cultural terms as the opposite and inferior to the United States. In American popular opinion, Mexicans loved music, dance, and the pleasures associated with the human body, whereas Americans felt emotionally restrained by the Protestant religion and the Puritan tradition.

The United States’ closest neighbor across the country’s long southern border has traditionally been perceived by Americans as distant, strange and exotic. In order to better understand the fundamental differences between Mexico and the United States, it is necessary to go back in history to the sixteenth and seventeenth century, to the beginnings of the New World’s colonization by the two most important European colonial powers at the time, Great Britain and Spain. The Spanish colonists not only brought with them to America a language and a religion different from those of the Anglo-Saxon Protestants but they also arrived in the New World with very different attitudes from the British. Whereas the British immigrants came in entire families, intending to settle down and take advantage of what they believed was the second chance God was giving His chosen people (to build “a City Upon a Hill”), the ambitious young men from Spain, many of them from what was then the most impoverished region of the country, Extremadura, usually came alone, leaving their wives or fiancées behind to spare them the hardships of the ocean voyage. They hoped to get rich quickly and return home. Once they got to America and realized that they would not be able to go back as soon as they had planned, the Spanish conquistadors had no choice but to make contacts with the local Indians, their institutions, and their traditions. Kirsten Silva Gruesz writes: “In building the civic spiritual heart of New Spain over grounds

already sanctified by tradition, the Spanish practiced selective *adaptation* of indigenous institutions rather than their wholesale eradication—which is not to say the process occurred without violence” (9). The living presence of the past in Mexico, according to the critic, is “the antithesis of the American cult of progress and forward movement” (10).

The first military conflict between the U.S. and Mexico, the war of 1846–48, was viewed by some American intellectuals of the nineteenth century, such as Henry David Thoreau or the “patriotic poets,” Joel Barlow and Philip Freneau, as an unjust aggression on the part of the United States. Distancing themselves from what they saw as colonialist practices of their government, the critics of this war traced connections between the pre-Columbian past in America and nineteenth-century democracy in the United States. “Aztec virtue” was opposed to “Spanish vice,” while the American invaders of Mexico, such as General Winfield Scott, were compared to the Spanish conquistadors. In 1846 General Scott marched with his army through Mexico along the same route, from Veracruz to Mexico City that Hernan Cortéz had taken three hundred years earlier. In the 1920s, when Niggli’s literary career was beginning, memories of another war, the 1898 American war with Spain, were still fresh in the minds of many Americans. The Spanish American War, initiated in Cuba, had made American colonialism even more evident than the war with Mexico. It became illegal to speak Spanish in public places along the U.S.-Mexican border, and the rules concerning discrimination of Mexican people were similar to the Jim Crow laws in the South. Clearly, violence marked the language of communication between the two countries.

The Spanish and British colonies in the New World developed in very different directions. Whereas the British settlements flourished, offering economic opportunities to their inhabitants who enjoyed relatively equal social status, the Spanish colonial societies developed deep class divisions and were devoted to maintaining them. The colonial proceeds landed for the most part in the hands of the Spaniards or their direct descendants often seeking connections with, as well as protection from their European allies, whereas the indigenous “Inditos,” the cheap labor force of the Spanish colonies, remained poor and uneducated, slaves in their own homelands. The only spiritual comfort they were offered was religious instruction by Jesuit or Franciscan missionaries and eventual conversion to Catholicism, since, once the prospect of quick enrichment proved a mirage, gaining new followers for the Roman Catholic Church (which also supported colonization in the Americas) was regarded as the main goal of Spanish colonization of the Americas.

Unlike the Spanish colonizers, the British settlers, guided by the principles of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, had little contact with

the local Indians. Apart from the mythologized Thanksgiving feast, encounters between white settlers and red Indians were for the most part limited to conflicts over the possession of land and marked by violence, leaving behind a trail of wars and captivity narratives. The aim of the British colonists was to eradicate the indigenous population and occupy the American land in the name of the superior civilization they believed they were bringing from Europe. The purity of the white race was a significant element of British ideology of colonization in North America.

People living in the Spanish colonies were differentiated by both race and class, as well as by the intricate relations between the two. In his book *The Southwest*, David Lavender writes about “the rigid ladder of caste [already] taking form in New Spain”:

356

At the top were the [arrogant] *gachupines*, or *peninsulares*, men born in Spain. Only they could hold the principle offices available in the New World. The *criollos*, those born outside the mother country, were socially inferior, even though the purest Spanish blood flowed in their veins. Still lower were the *castas*, showing the stigma of various mixtures of white, Indian, and Negro blood. (47)

Even though people of mixed race were regarded as inferior in Mexico, they belonged to the Spanish colonial society, and some were given the opportunity to occupy more significant social positions. “An exceptional *indio*,” Lavender writes, “could become a mounted herdsman, a *vaquero*, rather than a facelesstoiler in the field; and a *mestizo* (part *indio* and part white) could acquire a few head of livestock, possibly a small mine. *Criollos* capable of managing extensive properties sometimes achieved greater wealth than most *gachupines* possessed” (48).

Issues concerning race and racial mixing—*indigenismo* and *mestizaje*—came to the forefront again during the Mexican revolution of 1910–20, when the Mexican lower classes, for the most part racially mixed, rebelled against being exploited by the predominantly white upper class descendants of Spanish conquistadors. *Mestizaje* became an important aspect of Mexico’s search for a modern, twentieth-century national identity. Concepts of class and race, characteristic for the Mexican society of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society permeated the border between Mexico and the United States, delaying the Americanization of the Southwest, a region acquired by the United States from Mexico after the war of 1846–48. New Mexico and Arizona, inhabited mostly by Spanish-speaking descendants of peninsular colonists and indigenous Mexicans, did not achieve statehood until 1912. However, when in 1880 the American railroads reached Santa Fe, making the city accessible both

from the east and the west, the Southwest became open to tourists, meeting the demands of the growing American leisure class who sought new travel destination, eager to explore exotic regions of their own expanding homeland. The Santa Fe Railway and the renowned travel agency, Fred Harvey Company, made it possible to tour the Southwest in luxurious conditions. Fascinated by American military defeats of the Navajos (1863) and the Apaches, together with their ferocious leader Geronimo (1886), most tourists were drawn to the Southwest by the prospect of meeting Indians. In popular perception, Indian culture evoked thrill and suspense. It was also, however, the romance of the Spanish heritage—architecture, music, dance, cuisine—that drew the tourists' attention and, as a result, brought American visitors closer to the border between the United States and Mexico, as well as to Mexico's otherness.

In the late nineteenth century, a period of intense technological and industrial development, Mexico, with its cheap land and labor force, began to attract American entrepreneurs. In the Preface to his historical novel *El Paso* (2016), Winston Groom explains:

Beginning in the late nineteenth century the Mexican government—in eternal social and financial turmoil—started selling off vast tracts of land in its desolate northern provinces on the notion that wealthy American entrepreneurs would exploit the land by building infrastructure that the government in Mexico City could not afford. Accordingly, the Guggenheims began to develop large mining operations in Northern Mexico, Harrimans built railroads, Morgans, Hearsts, and Whitneys developed enormous livestock ranches, and so on, employing thousands of Mexican citizens until, inevitably, the revolution moved northward. (xi)

The protagonist of Groom's novel, Colonel John Shaughnessy, "a thrill-seeking Bostonian railroad tycoon," owner of the New England & Pacific Railroad Company, has a "colossal ranch in Chihuahua" (32). His gigantic cattle herd extends over twenty miles.

Josefina Niggli's father, not nearly as wealthy as the fictional Colonel, owned a cement plant near Monterrey, close to the American border. Whereas in the south of Mexico the Revolution primarily involved poor indigenous peasants commanded by Emiliano Zapata (the Zapatistas), in the north General Pancho Villa became the leader of cheap laborers protesting against the working condition imposed on them by the greedy American businessmen. Because fighting was at times violent, Frederick Niggli, concerned about the safety of his family, like many other American industrialists in Mexico, sent his wife and daughter to live in the United States.

Before she published her first and only novel, *Mexican Village*, Josefina Niggli wrote and published poems and plays based on Mexican folklore. Her public literary career, dedicated to creating better understanding between Americans and Mexicans, began in 1931, with *Mexican Silhouettes*, a volume of poetry which her father financed. Following in the footsteps of several other American writers of the time, Niggli worked anonymously for Hollywood film studios: Twentieth Century Fox and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Among others, she took part in the production of Rouben Mamoulian's *The Mark of Zorro* (1940), a romantic story set in California's colonial past, another significant addition in the development of popular culture.

358

Mexican Village, Niggli's only novel, was published in 1945 by the University of North Carolina Press. Just as her other literary works, it is written in English, with American readers in mind. Evoking associations with modernist American novels such as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* or William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, *Mexican Village* is made up of ten interrelated stories. It presents life in Hidalgo, a remote Mexican community in the Sabina Mountains during the years 1920–30. The stories, connected by the figure of Bob Webster, the son of an American businessman and his Mexican maid, introduce a variety of village characters: poor men eager to make some money, domineering patriarchal fathers, womanizers, submissive women, strong women, unhappy lovers and outcasts. Niggli's imaginary village is a microcosm reflecting current cultural, social and national Mexican problems. The novel is set in the decade following the Mexican Revolution, with the outcome of the long civil war still uncertain. The question Josefina Niggli is asking herself and confronting her readers with is whether Mexico would remain in the hands of its conservative elites, the colonial aristocracy of Spanish ancestry, supported by the neocolonial forces in the United States and European colonial powers or if it would follow a more liberal and democratic route, granting civil rights to its indigenous population. Bob Webster has just returned to America from Europe, where he fought in World War I. In Hidalgo he found a job as a manager of the local quarry. The fact that a Texas Mexican (*Tejano*) becomes the new boss at the quarry seems to suggest that radical changes in Mexican society may be possible. Webster is different from the previous foreign quarry managers, Frenchmen or Italians; not only is he a *mestizo* but he speaks Spanish and respects the local people. Familiar with the past and traditions of Hidalgo, Webster has childhood memories of the village where he used to spend time with his Mexican grandmother.

The most powerful people in Hidalgo are the owners of the hacienda, the "family Castillo." Their ancestors came from Spain over three hundred years earlier. Local people say that the *casa Castillo* has the power of life

and death in Hidalgo and the entire surrounding valley. As a family, they can be seen as representative of the nation, of Mexico. Don Saturnino, the head of the family, is the father of two sons: a good one, Alejandro, who died young, and the bad Joaquin, always in conflict with his father, who disappeared for a long time but has recently returned to claim the inheritance and the position of the aging Don Saturnino. According to a family legend, Isabela Castillo, daughter of Don Diego Castillo, who inherited the "Castillo title and estate" after her father's death in 1842, was kidnapped by Huachichil Indians. In reality, it was Isabela's dishonest and greedy brother Fausto who sold her to the Indians, so that he could inherit the Castillo fortune. Fausto died but Isabela, who lived happily among the Indians and married to an Indian named *El Caballo Blanco*, recorded the events of her life in a letter, which after many years mysteriously reached Robert Webster. The closing sentences of the long letter read: "My brother Fausto (may he eat his hands in eternal agony) has the Castillo pride of the pure strain within him, even as I have, and this is my revenge: that an Indian shall be true heir to the Castillo title and estate" (Niggli 475). In her letter, Isabela is ceding the Mexican heritage to an Indian, or actually to a half-Indian. Robert is given the opportunity to inherit what belongs to the *casa Castillo*. If, by extension, the family can be a symbol of the nation, Robert, a half-Indian, a *mestizo*, can claim or, in a sense, "inherit" all of Mexico. However, such a possibility is not entertained for long in Niggli's text. The cruel Joaquin, who now considers himself the rightful heir of the Castillo family, threatens to kill Robert. Although in the last scene of the novel they call one another brother and *compadre*, Webster decides to leave Hidalgo, the primitive village in isolated mountains. A modern man, torn by characteristic human anxieties symptomatic of the cultural changes in the twentieth century, he is summoned back to the modern technological world by a telephone call, and to get there fast, he takes the train, although the people of Hidalgo offer him an excellent horse.

In the context of the post-revolutionary political scene in Mexico, which Niggli aims to delineate in her book, Robert represents the liberal spectrum of people open to social changes, and ready to accept the indigenous Indians and *mestizos* in their ranks. He is the ideal citizen of post-revolutionary Mexico, and a proper potential partner of the democratic republic of the United States. However, Mexico is not yet ready for him. Joaquin makes Robert leave Hidalgo, so that the rule of the Castillo family over the area can continue. The "bad" son remains in the village, and in the end he and his father are "fighting their private revolution." Although Bob Webster changes his name to Roberto Ortega, taking his mother's name and announcing his identification with the "Inditos," before he leaves Hidalgo he realizes that in spite of the honor Saturnino wished to bestow

upon him, he could not accept either the Castillo title or the estate because as a half-Indian, he is at the same time a half-foreigner. Foreign rule, while good for Mexico's elites, was never beneficial for the Mexican people:

Don Saturnino prefers to form an alliance with a foreigner than admit defeat. For all his Spanish pride, he is now being truly Mexican. Here is a microcosmic bit of Mexican history being played out in terms of family rather than a nation. By begging me to stay here and help him he is merely repeating the monarchists' appeal to Austria's Maximilian to protect them from the liberal [Benito] Juarez. (Niggli 453)

360 Constantly searching for an identity, which is both a curse and an opportunity for the modern man, and rejected by his father ("Are you suggesting that I admit an Indian son of mine? Damn it, I am a white man!") (56), Robert does not find acceptance in Europe where he fought in World War II; neither does he find his own place in the peripheral Mexican village. When he decides to leave Hidalgo, he is uncertain where to go. Robert's indecision about his ethnic and national identity illustrates the unstable character of these categories (Niggli xxii). Like Josephina Niggli herself, her protagonist is a bilingual and bicultural "border crosser," always in motion.

Although Niggli demonstrates in *Mexican Village* that Mexico's political or social situation did not change much as a result of the Revolution, she feels quite strongly about the improving position of Mexican women in the first decades of the twentieth century. Her female characters are no longer in the grips of the traditional Mexican stereotypes imposed upon women by the Spanish colonizers: the suffering but passive La Virgen de Guadalupe, the helpless and desperate mother La Llorona and La Malinche, the translator and mistress of Hernan Cortéz, accused of betraying her nation. Unlike the powerful female Aztec goddesses of the pre-Columbian times, Coatlicue and her daughter (whom Gloria Anzaldúa writes about in *Borderland/La Frontera*), La Virgen, La Malinche and La Llorona are weak and wholly dependent on men, who can easily manipulate them. In *Mexican Village*, Niggli undermines the stereotype of a submissive woman, freeing her from the limiting colonial bonds. The women Niggli creates attempt to subvert the male-dominated social order of Hidalgo. Nena Santos from the story "The Chicken Coop," who has gone barefoot throughout her life, demands shoes for her wedding day, defying her husband who would rather spend money on a new goat. Sarita Calderon from "The Street of the Cañon" wants to bring peace to the neighboring villages of Hidalgo and San Juan Iglesias. The villagers are feuding over which village has the right to bury the relics of a famous historian, Don Romolo Balderas. Sarita

insists on settling the issue before she, an inhabitant of Hidalgo, and Pepe Gonzalez, who is from the other village, get married. Lolita, the Gypsy from "The Plaza of Viceroys," struggles to liberate herself from a promise she had given to her brother Gitanillo, a male patriarch.

One of Niggli's best developed women characters is Maria from "The River Road," which is, according to Herrera-Sobek, "[t]he best story in the collection" (xxii). Maria is portrayed as powerful and independent. Although she is the town's most beautiful girl, she is rejected by the community because she lives in extreme poverty. Maria is "the long-suffering and secret mistress" of Alejandro Castillo, considered to be the "scion" and heir of the family wealth and social position. She can never marry him. As an outcast, she cannot even enter a beauty contest with the other girls from Hidalgo. Yet, Maria feels privileged to be Alejandro's lover. She wants to "*gozar la vida*" ("enjoy life") with him. Without Alejandro life has no meaning for her. In the last conversation with Evita, Alejandro's lawful but rejected wife, Maria expresses her deepest feelings in a very emotional way: "Don't you understand? He was like a god to me. I worshipped him like I worship the Blessed Infant. He was all my life. We were lovers, yes. . . . If you think I am ashamed, you are wrong. I am proud of it. Prouder than any bride that stands in the church" (Niggli 217).

Niggli's gallery of female characters would not be complete without a *curandera*, a healer, who knows well the local herbs and other natural medications, and who traditionally assisted at births and at deathbeds. A *curandera* is a "border crosser" with insight into the "other world" and connections with the indigenous Indians. As there were few medical doctors in the Spanish colonies, people's health was often in the hands of healers. Her unique abilities made a *curandera* woman to be afraid of and, at the same time, to be respected. In Niggli's novel the part of the *curandera* is assigned to Tia Magdalena, Bob Webster's house-keeper, knowledgeable "in red, black, white and green magic." This is how she introduces herself to him: "Me, I am different. I am a witch—an eagle witch. Remember that. I do not belong to the stupid clan of town witches. In me there is power, not simple spells to win a lover or kill an unwanted husband" (33).

Niggli's women characters attempt to undermine the patriarchal communal order. Although none of them has a job to support herself financially, they are self-conscious and proud. They manage to make independent decisions, sometimes not only about their own lives but about the life of the community as well. In the introduction to Niggli's novel Maria Herrera-Sobek observes: "Most of the women in *Mexican Village* are strong in personality though stubborn and petulant at times. They generally subvert the male-dominated system in order to satisfy their personal but sometimes also communal desires" (xxiv).

One of the artistic goals Niggli set before herself in writing the novel was recreating the atmosphere of Hidalgo in order to make her readers feel they are actually there, experiencing life and culture of a Mexican village first-handedly. She wanted readers to see Mexico with their own eyes, looking beyond the stereotypes they were accustomed to. Niggli has often been praised for being a dedicated observer of Mexican tradition and its rich and varied folklore. In *Mexican Village* she incorporates several folklore genres: primitivist graphic illustrations, proverbs (*dichos*), popular folk songs and legends. Each story is framed by folk motifs. Each title page is decorated with a simple black and white drawing, in its suggestive simplicity resembling a woodcut print intended to be colored by a child. These drawings introduce the stories' central characters and the objects which will later make their appearance in the text. Palm trees, saguaro cacti, marvelous butterflies and vines of flowers in bloom fill the pages, richly decorated by elaborate designs along the edges. Additionally, every story is preceded by a folk proverb, such as "Love is action, not kisses and hugs" or "Rivers rise in flood and destroy; brooks water the land and sing." In *Mexican-American Folklore* (1989) John O. West writes that proverbs function as "bits of wisdom, short traditional guides to conduct" and "the wisdom of many, the wit of one" (15). As used by Niggli, proverbs announce the events to be described in the stories and "encapsulate" their message.

The legend of *El Caballo Blanco* is woven into the plot of *Mexican Village*. *El Caballo Blanco*, the already mentioned frontier bandit Daniel Menendez, is Isabela Castillo's husband, whom she married out of great love. Isabela's long lost letter, written more than half a century ago and appointing an Indian as heir to "the title and the estate" of the Castillo family, was finally, and no doubt magically, delivered to Bob Webster. The legend enters into the story not only for "decorative" purposes, or to add to its "quaintness," but to develop the plot and to enhance the meaning of the narrative. Together with Niggli's novel, the legend assumes national dimensions. Bob Webster, a *mestizo*, as the heir of Mexico's national history and cultural tradition, appeals to and represents the political views of the Mexican liberals, who wanted Mexico to become a democratic republic. Those are also the views that Niggli herself identified with and wanted to introduce to her American readers. Maria Herrera-Sobek would like to see Josefina Niggli as a forerunner of the strategy of including folklore in the structure of Latino narratives. She points out that in this respect, Niggli was ahead of her time, since folklore and magical realism became an integral part of Hispanic narratives only during the "Latino boom" of the nineteen sixties and seventies.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, Chicana writers, whose literature was gaining increasing recognition in the United States, dedicated a lot of effort to finding precursors in order to extend their tradition in

history and thus strengthen their position on the contemporary American literary scene. Political and social activists themselves, they looked as far back as the seventeenth century, and in the figure of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz (1651–95), a nun, a writer, and a scholar, also found an activist for women's rights in colonial Mexico. Josefina Niggli was credited with a position on their list as well. When she talked about her ethnic identity in an interview with Maria Herrera-Sobek shortly before she died, Niggli, however, did not consider herself a Chicana author. Chicano/a identity assumes a person's mixed Spanish and indigenous Indian ancestry, with Aztlan as the imaginary homeland. Niggli definitely recognized Mexico as her birthplace and her country of childhood. However, feeling emotionally deeply bound with Mexico, she also recognized her familial and cultural roots in the United States and Europe. Her parents came from Europe, and she spent her adult life in the United States. It was her literary ambition to secure a position for herself on the American literary scene. Nonetheless, like Chicano and Chicana writers, the author of *Mexican Village* can be seen as a border crosser in several respects. In the words of Herrera-Sobek, a critic who has devoted much scholarly attention to Josefina Niggli, "[b]eing bilingual, bicultural and biconceptual she sought to cross the cultural boundaries between Mexico and Anglo American culture" (xxii).

WORKS CITED

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.
- Coonrod Martinez, Elizabeth. *Josefina Niggli, Mexican American Writer. A Critical Biography*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2007. Print.
- Groom, Winston. *El Paso*. New York and London: Liveright, 2016. Print.
- Gruesz, Kirsten Silva. "Mexico in America." *A New Literary History of America*. Ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2009. 6–11. Print.
- Herrera-Sobek, Maria. Introduction. *Mexican Village*. By Josefina Niggli. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1994. i–xxv. Print.
- Lavender, David. *The Southwest*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1984. Print.
- Niggli, Josefina. *Mexican Village*. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1994. Print.
- Stavans, Ilan, ed. *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*. New York and London: Norton, 2011. Print.
- West, John O. *Mexican-American Folklore*. Little Rock: August, 1989. Print.

Jadwiga Maszewska teaches in the Department of American Literature at the University of Łódź. Her main area of research is contemporary American ethnic literature. She is the author of *Between Center and Margin. Native American Women Writers: Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich*. Maszewska has also published articles on writers of the American South.

jadwigamasz@gmail.com